

SHEPPARDS IN LOVE BOOK 3

Selling Out



MARTHA KEYES

*Selling
Out*

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PARADIGM
P R E S S

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1

MIA

“HONEY, I’M HOME,” I mutter, hanging my crossbody bag on the hook inside the door. I miss, and it falls in a heap on the floor. Ignoring it, I shuffle to the loveseat in the living room and slump into it, staring ahead like the soulless zombie I am. Telemarketing is the career version of a dementor, sucking the joy out of life and obliterating your faith in mankind. And yourself.

A head of brown hair peeks around the corner, and my sister Gemma’s gaze lands on me. “Thought I heard you come in.” She sucks in a breath through clenched teeth. “Ooo. Bad day at work?”

I point at my head with a floppy finger. “This is my normal-day-of-work face.”

She’s wearing a blazer, collared shirt, and slacks, looking as fresh as she did when she left this morning. I’m wearing a similar getup—hazards of working for a company that thinks telemarketing isn’t enough punishment and adds a strict dress code on top of it—but I look like a crumpled-up paper towel. I feel like one, too.

Gemma takes a seat on the nearby couch, her brows pulling together sympathetically. “It’s a means to an end, Mia.”

I let my gaze shift to her without moving my head. “But it feels like the end.”

She gives me a teasing grimace, then stands and pulls me up. “Come on. Get out of those clothes. You’ll feel better.”

“Then why do *you* wear them every day?”

She smooths the fabric of her blazer. “Because we’re different.”

She can say that again. The main thing Gemma and I have in common is motivation... and about fifty percent of our genetic makeup. Gemma’s a career woman, while I’m your garden variety struggling artist.

“Weren’t you planning on busking today?” she asks. “And playing that new song of yours?”

I perk up slightly, like a droopy plant that just got watered. It’s not that I love busking. Ideally, people would offer their credit card numbers on Ticketmaster for my music instead of tossing dirty old change in my guitar case while staring at me like I’m a zoo exhibit. *Extra* ideally, there’d be a bigger buffer between me and the sketchy passersby. But I’m excited about this new song.

“See?” Gemma says, guiding me to my half of our two-room apartment. “You’re already looking more like yourself.”

Once I’ve got on my t-shirt and overalls, I *feel* more like myself. When I add in all my rings, bracelets, and necklaces, I’ve almost forgotten about my soul-sucking day job.

I drive my beat-up Honda Civic to Huntington Beach, doing vocal warmups as I search for the ever-elusive free parking spot. Twenty minutes later, I tune my guitar, the case open and ready to receive whatever filthy coinage is currently jingling around people’s pockets. Next to it is a paper people can scan to follow me on my social media accounts or pay me on Venmo. I get a couple wolf-whistles and some funny looks as I tweak the keys until the guitar is perfectly in tune. I try to ignore them.

But when I start singing?

It all goes away. It’s me and my music—almost.

While my real-life audience is an ever-changing crowd of passersby, I also have an audience of unpaid bills that sticks around for all my songs and stares me down, reminding me

how many times I have to fill that guitar case to afford living in my apartment without my day job.

The black velvet of my case starts to get speckled with change and a few crinkled dollar bills. One guy even sticks around for an entire song.

“Can you play *Euphoria Avenue*?” he asks afterward. “Do you know it?”

Unfortunately, I want to say. It’s sung by one of the cockiest up-and-coming pop singers in the industry, Austin Sheppard. Most of my social media content is music-related, which means I have the doubtful pleasure of seeing his stuff on the regular. The man is as arrogant as they come. I hate that guys like him can sing generic garbage and make it big, while I’m treasuring up every couple of followers like a kid with a piggy bank.

I smile apologetically at the guy requesting *Euphoria Avenue*. “I play all my own original songs, actually.” And there’s no way in Hades I’d play that sad excuse for music or sing those awful lyrics, even if I *didn’t* have a strict policy about playing only my own stuff.

The kid grimaces and walks away.

I suppress a sigh and start into the next song. Halfway through, a man stops and listens. He takes out a ten-dollar bill, and I give the bridge everything I’ve got, hoping to show him how much I appreciate it.

He drops the bill in the case, then crouches down, picks up a bunch of ones, counting them until he has ten.

I stop my song. “Hey!”

“Thanks for the change.” He holds it up, waves a hand, and continues on his way.

“Jerk,” I mumble. I take a sip from my water bottle and pull my phone out of my pocket. A quick check of my social media channels tells me what I already suspected: the numbers are the same as they were yesterday. Which is to say, dismal.

They tell you that posting frequently will naturally bring more followers. Well, guess what? I post every single day, and at this rate, my follower count will reach 5000 just in time for my 80th birthday. Won't that be nice? I can celebrate by buying a new package of adult diapers.



“HOW'D IT GO?” Gemma asks when I walk in the door a couple hours later. She's got her laptop at the kitchen counter, hair tied up as it is 99% of the time. She's working, no doubt.

“I got a ten-dollar bill today,” I say.

Gemma's brows go up, but before she can congratulate me, I add, “Because a guy thought my case was a convenient way to break his bill for change.”

Gemma's hand flies to her mouth, covering a little snort.

“It's not funny, Gem.” But my lips pull up at the edges.

She drops her hand and clears her throat, doing a decent-but-not-great job of controlling the twitch at the corner of her mouth.

“He listened so intently to half of a song,” I say. “But I realize now he was probably making sure I had enough ones.”

Gemma slings her arm around my shoulders. “Don't worry, sis. These are the stories you'll tell to inspire other young artists when you've made it big in five years.”

I shake my head and set my guitar case against the wall. “Or maybe I should call it quits. At what point do I throw in the towel and admit it's not going to happen for me?”

She pulls her arm from around my shoulders so she can face me. “Listen to me, Mia.” She takes my cheeks in her hands and looks me in the eye. “You were born to do music. Do. Not. Give. Up. Okay? Promise me.”

I swallow, then nod. I don't *want* to give up on music. With everything in me, I want this to be what I do. I want to make music. I want to create. I want to sing the words people are too afraid to say. The things I feel when I write a new song

and when I belt it at the top of my lungs? I want people to feel those same things when they listen to it.

“I promise,” I say.

She lets go of my face and turns to her computer, the screen reflecting in her eyes. I wish I could be like Gemma—content with spreadsheets and stability and stretch goals.

But I’m not. Some fundamental part of me gravitates toward chaos and messiness and never having enough to pay the bills.

“I think I’ll go to the pool,” I say.

Gemma’s eyes stay on the screen, but she reaches over and pets my hair from my crown to where it ends below my neck. “Don’t drown.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Gemma and I were basically raised in a pool. We were those infants whose parents—Dad, specifically—tossed them into the deep end so they’d learn to float. I could do a full lap without coming up for air by the time I was seven and a solid butterfly stroke when I was nine.

I credit those breathing skills for helping me with my singing. It’s why I like going there late some nights, after the pool is officially closed—perks of being the owner’s daughter. Doing a few laps calms me down; I get to practice my breathing, *and* the acoustics in the women’s locker room are amazing.

After a day of being yelled at on the phone and then passed by as I offered my soul via busking, I’m so ready for some alone time.

2

AUSTIN

“ALL I’M ASKING IS a couple of songs, Paul.” I slip my wireless earbud in and toss the phone on the bed, freeing my hands to rifle through my suitcase.

“I know.” He sighs. “And I promise I’ll do my best, but... I want to be straight with you, Austin. It’s not looking likely. They want the setlist to be full of what your fans already know and love.”

Which are not the songs you write. I’m well aware of this, and so is Paul. He’s been my manager for years now, and I know it’s not his fault. He goes to bat for me with my label, Fusion Records, but they have a very specific image they’re trying to portray with my brand, and apparently, my slow ballads don’t scream *sex icon* loudly enough—or lend themselves to ripping my shirt off, which has become inextricably tied to my reputation.

“The good news,” Paul continues, sounding a lot more chipper, “is that, if the tour goes well...” He pauses for dramatic effect, a smile in his voice.

I pull out my swim trunks and hold them in front of me, considering them. I haven’t been for a swim in a while, and it’s sounding kind of nice at the moment.

“...there’s the possibility of extending it and adding a U.S. leg.”

I go still, swimsuit hovering in the air. “Wait. Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

I drop the swimsuit and do a silent victory dance, involving a sequence of fist pumps and the running man—not easy on carpet.

“Austin?”

I straighten and clear my throat. “Yep. I’m here. That’s... great news. Thanks, man.”

“Don’t thank me just yet,” he says. “We’ve got a lot of work to do to knock this thing out of the park. We have to prove we can make it worth Fusion’s time and money.”

“We will,” I say. “Whatever it takes.”

“Which reminds me...we’re down a backup vocalist.”

“What?”

“Diana has to have vocal surgery—polyps. She’ll be on vocal rest for a long time.”

I swear softly. We worked hard to find three amazing backup vocalists for this Europe tour, and Diana is the best of them. Even more importantly, we only have a couple of weeks and a few rehearsals before we push off for Prague.

“Don’t sweat it,” Paul says. “I’m working on it.”

“Okay. Just make sure she’s *actually* good, for the love of all that’s holy.” If it’d been up to Fusion, they would’ve chosen Maxim models who couldn’t hold a tune for backups. It’s part of why I know Paul can’t push too hard for my original stuff to be part of the setlist. He’s constantly having to fight the label on these smaller but still-important things.

I hang up and put my hands on my hips, staring at nothing in particular for a couple of minutes. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t disappointed about not being able to play my own stuff. I’ve been busting my butt the last couple of years to prove myself to my label, hoping they’ll give me a little more creative control. So far, no dice.

It’s only a matter of time, though. My biggest fanbase is in Europe—a result of opening for James TW on his tour there a couple of years ago—but it’s slowly shifting so that soon, a majority of my listeners will be in the States. Once I have

enough of a following here at home, Fusion will loosen up a bit and start trusting me more. For now, all I can do is shake off the frustrations and be grateful they agreed to a Europe tour at all.

I'm living my dream—or pretty dang close to it. Let's call it *dream-adjacent*.

I go to my closet and feel along the top shelf with my hand, smiling when it settles on something small and metal. It's the key to the local swimming pool where I used to lifeguard during summers in high school. One of the swim coaches is a huge fan of mine, and she gave me a key a while back so I can work out and take a dip after hours when I'm in town without worrying I'll be bothered by people who recognize me. I haven't taken her up on it for a while, but tonight, it's just what the doctor ordered.

I grab the swimsuit, stuff it in my gym bag, and head out. It's only a ten-minute drive, and the almost-empty parking lot and dark building reinforce my choice to come when I pull in. It's rare for me to get alone time these days. Paul works hard to make sure my schedule is full of events and promotion opportunities, plus the required time in the studio.

I head for the side door. It's the only door that's not armed—a secret I promised to take to the grave when Selena gave me the key.

I shut the door quietly and put the key back in to lock it, pausing at the sound of music. It's faint—too faint to be coming from the speakers on the ceiling in this hallway. We always had music playing when I lifeguarded here. Maybe someone forgot to turn it off when they left for the night, or maybe it's the janitorial team.

I slip the key into the pocket of my gym bag and make my way toward the locker rooms. The singing grows louder as I near, which confirms what I suspected: it's a cappella. And completely angelic. It's not a song I know, but the riffs and vocal control of the artist are impressive, to say the least. It's not the type of stuff we played over the speakers as kids screamed and splashed around in the pool. We had about forty

tracks that played on repeat, and to this day, I can't listen to any of them.

The singing fades, and I frown.

I head into the locker room, using my phone flashlight as I shed my joggers in favor of my swimsuit, then pull my shirt over my head. I work hard on my physique—having a shirtless body inspected at 1000% zoom will do that to a person—but I'm not the Hulk, and I'd have an easier time ripping open the time-space continuum than this dense 100% cotton. My performance shirts are specially manufactured for easy tearing, and they're very much part of the image Fusion is promoting. I'm trying to laugh about it rather than fight it. I've accepted it's part of the gig.

I'd planned on doing a solid workout, but now that I'm here, I'm anxious to get in the pool, so I settle for some burpees, which is enough to get me sweating.

I head into the big dome that houses the indoor pool. The luminous turquoise of the water reflects off the walls and ceiling, the perfectly still surface beckoning me to dive in.

As I walk to the deep end, my gaze catches on a towel and a phone sitting on the nearest bench. I frown and look around, but you could hear a pin drop in here. I walk over to the bench and tap on the phone screen. It lights up, showing a picture of a woman in overalls holding a guitar. She's pretty—shoulder-length dark hair and a nice smile. She's probably kicking herself for leaving her phone here.

My eyes fix on the guitar for a second, and I feel a flash of jealousy. When I imagined my career in music, I'd always thought *that* was the image people would associate with me: a guy with his guitar. I never get to play instruments when I perform, though. A guitar would be in the way of ripping off my shirt, not to mention the choreography they have me doing, like I'm some early 00s boy band without any bandmates.

The phone goes dark, and I make my way to the edge of the pool, glancing at the painted sign indicating the depth: ten feet. Plenty for a dive.

My gaze catches on something red under the water, and my brows pull together, then shoot up. That red is a swimsuit. With a person wearing it. A person who's sitting at the bottom of the pool.

My heart bolts to max speed, and I don't hesitate for even a second, diving in the way I was always prepared to do but never had to when I was a lifeguard. I open my eyes, and they fix on my target. She looks so peaceful, so relaxed, her brown hair floating around her head, her face expressionless. It's hauntingly beautiful.

And I'm terrified.

I kick my feet until she's within reach, then grab her around the waist and shift my direction to take us to the top, trying not to think how long she's been sitting under there.

Suddenly, she pushes off me, fighting as I kick us toward the surface. It's a miracle! She's alive, and I hold her tightly as I work harder to get to air. We were taught about this in lifeguarding—sometimes people being saved from drowning will struggle and fight in an effort to get to the top.

She's strong, but I'm stronger, and we break the surface. I gulp in air and grab the side of the pool, pulling her toward it.

"Get *off*," she says breathlessly.

"It's okay," I reassure her as I pull her to the side. "I've got you."

A sudden kick to my gut knocks out the little air left in my lungs, and I release her as I grab for my stomach.

"Get away from me," she says, putting more distance between us and looking at me like I'm a crazy person.

"I just saved your life!" I say, trying to catch my breath.

"You assaulted me," she says with a quick glance at her watch. She presses a button on the side with an annoyed expression, breathing hard.

"*Assaulted you?* You were drowning. I thought you were dead." I can't believe this woman right now. I save her life, and she accuses me of assault?

“Well, I wasn’t. Obviously.”

“What the hell were you doing, then?”

She shows me her watch face. It says 2:32. “Trying to beat my best time—which I *would* have if you hadn’t decided to play superhero.”

I scoff, unable to help an incredulous laugh because of the sheer inconceivability of this situation.

She pushes up on the side and climbs out.

“You know,” I say, getting out after her, “a simple *thank you* would do.”

She stops, towel in hand, and turns to me. Her gaze flicks to my body, then back up to my face. Recognition dawns, and her mouth pulls into a knowing smile.

“Ah. Okay. I get it now.” She tosses her towel on the bench and clasps her hands together, feigning desperation. “Thank you! Thank you, Austin Sheppard. My hero! God’s gift to womankind! Thank you for saving my life!” She drops her hands, deadpanning. “Was that better?”

My mouth twitches, but I control it. I wrinkle my nose and grimace. “Meh. It could use a little work.”

She scoffs, but there’s a hint of a smile there. She wasn’t expecting that response, and that sends a little surge of victory through me.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’m new to this whole damsel-in-distress gig. Should I have let you pull me out and give me CPR?”

I raise my brows. If what she wants is a cocky blowhard, I’ve got a lot of practice with that. “Is that what *you* wanted? We can still give it a go.”

She turns away and grabs her towel again. “Is this how you pick up women? *Saving* them”—she does air quotes—“when they’re perfectly fine? Seems a little desperate. Aren’t there enough screaming fans to satisfy you?”

My laugh is genuine as I grab my towel and face her. “Oh, there are plenty of those, but I prefer a challenge, you know? You sure you don’t need a little mouth-to-mouth?” I can’t believe I’m saying this stuff, but it’s what she expects of me, and I’ve gotten really good at living up to my image.

“Tempting,” she says, wrapping a towel under her arms and across her chest. “Really tempting. If you could wait until I’ve beaten my record before coming to rescue me next time, that would be ideal.”

I remember the time on her watch—2:32. “You were trying to break your record for holding your breath?” I wrap my towel around my waist and roll the top over to keep it in place.

“*Trying* being the operative word.”

“You can really hold your breath for two and a half minutes?”

“Two minutes and forty-eight seconds,” she responds, drying her legs with her towel. “You know, I could call the cops on you. The pool closes at eight. How did you even get in?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

“My dad owns it.”

“My friend teaches swim.” My brain puts puzzle pieces together—the music, the guitar, the breath-holding. “Was that you singing?”

She doesn’t answer, but her expression tells me I’ve got it right. The cogs in my head turn. I scan her face. This woman is clearly—*clearly*—no fan of mine, but she’s got an incredible voice, and I’ve got a need for talent like that.

“I’ve got a proposal,” I say.

She grabs her phone. “Not interested.” She starts walking away, and I hurry to catch up with her.

“You haven’t heard what it is.”

“I can guess.”

Wow. She *really* doesn't like me. I speed up, cut in front of her, and block her way. "Try me."

She lets out a sigh. "Look, Austin. I'm new to this whole stroking male egos thing, and I'm finding it a bit exhausting, to be honest. Can you proposition the next damsel in distress?"

"Well, that's a given," I say with a wide grin I hope will infuriate her. "My proposal for *you* is different."

She raises a brow, so skeptical it could belong to the Rock himself.

Part of me knows what I'm about to say is a little crazy, but I say it anyway. "I want you to come on tour with me."

3

MIA

“HA!”

That’s all I’ve got. That weird, bursty laugh.

Water droplets trickle down Austin’s shoulders, over his pecs, and through the numerous ridges and grooves of his abs. Why doesn’t he dry off like a normal person?

Scratch that. I know why. The man is obsessed with himself. He’s Narcissus’s apprentice. Possibly his mentor. He said he likes a challenge, right? He can’t handle the rejection I’m offering him, so he’s showing off what he thinks will reel me in. And it probably works for him most of the time. Stupid sexy body.

I smile, keeping my eyes fixed firmly on his face. “Listen, Austin. I’m going to save your time *and* pride. That stuff isn’t going to work on me.”

“What stuff?”

“All”—I gesture vaguely at his dripping body—“*that.*”

He looks down like he’s forgotten he’s got the body of Adonis. Apparently, I have Greek mythology on the mind tonight.

Chin still tipped, his gaze shifts up to me, and a smile curls his lip. “I asked you to come on tour with me. Is there a reason you’re bringing my body into it?”

I lift a shoulder. “Seems like that’s the main attraction of your tour, right?”

He lets out a breathy laugh and glances away. “She’s got claws. I know it’s not easy, but try to focus up here.” He points to his eyes. “I’m offering you a position as a backup vocalist on my tour.”

I cock a brow. “Based on thirty seconds of me singing?”

He shrugs. “I know talent when I hear it.”

“Right...” I wouldn’t describe Austin Sheppard as the pinnacle of musical talent. “You don’t even know my name.” He’s probably waiting for me to say yes so he can invite me to his place to “practice.” And if I agree, he’ll bust a bunch of moves on me, and then tomorrow, he’ll disappear into the ether, lying in wait for his next *challenge*.

“Why don’t you tell it to me, then?”

I hesitate, and he smiles.

“Hence why I didn’t ask,” he says.

I tighten my jaw. I hate being predictable. “It’s Mia. Mia Sawyer.”

He puts out a hand. I want to deprive him of mine—for some reason, I want to deprive him of *everything* he wants. But the way he’s looking at me tells me he expects me to choose the petulant way, so I shake his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Mia Sawyer,” he says with a friendly smile. “Would you like to come on tour with me? To Europe?”

I shift, pulling my towel tighter around me. *Europe*. I’ve never been to Europe. Definitely haven’t ever *sung* in Europe.

His dark eyes watch me carefully. “Czechia, Germany, Italy, France, England... You’d get paid well too.”

Dang him. It’s like he knows me and how broke I am.

Scratch that. Any person with a brain would be tempted by what he’s offering. And he knows it.

My brain is conjuring images of singing my music in front of the Eiffel Tower or the Vatican. Okay, maybe not the Vatican. Trevy Fountain, then.

But even assuming he's legitimately offering me a place on his tour, which I'm not at all convinced of, it's as a backup vocalist. Which means I'd be singing *his* lyrics to *his* songs. And that's not something I can do. I don't sing other people's music, and I definitely don't do it when their biggest hits have lines like *she's a tough one with that attitude, but deep inside, she's in the mood.*

"Thanks," I say. "But I'm good." I head for the locker room, but he catches my arm.

"Wait."

I look at him expectantly. What too-good-to-be-true offer will he pull out of the hat this time?

"You should take some time to think about it, Mia."

"I took as much time as *you* did before offering it, Austin."

He laughs. "Touché." He looks at me for a second, then grabs my phone.

"Hey!" I try to get it back, but he turns away from me. I reach over him and around him, and my towel falls to the floor. I hurry to pick it up, then renew my attempts. It's useless, though. He's too broad. Too strong. And enjoying this too much.

"What are you doing?" But I already know. He's putting his number in my phone. I slip my hand in the space under his arm to take him by surprise.

He snatches his arm toward his body, trapping my hand between his bicep and his side.

"Saving you a future of regret," he says. "There." He turns the screen off, releases my arm, and hands the phone to me.

I yank it away, and he meets my gaze, his own serious for the first time. "It's a real offer, Mia. Your voice is exactly what I'm looking for. It'll be the opportunity of a lifetime, and I think you should take a day or two to consider it."

"Sure thing," I say, wrapping my towel around myself again and vowing to delete his number the second I'm far

enough away, he can't steal my phone back. "Bye." I take a few steps toward the locker room.

"Hey, Mia."

I let out an annoyed sigh. He's got that smile on his face that says *I'm a danger to females everywhere*. "Try to focus on the offer itself and not on this aspect." He looks at his body and flexes his abs. His gaze meets mine again. "I wouldn't want you to have... expectations." His brow cocks, and his eyes twinkle.

I smile and retrace my steps, trying to decide what I'll do once I'm in front of him. One thing I know, and it's that he's enjoying this.

I lean back and look him over. Channeling the thoroughness of someone evaluating a racehorse, I check him out from the wavy, wet brown hair that's falling over his forehead, to the broad shoulders, past the peaks and valleys of his abs, over the towel wrapped around his waist, and all the way to the puddle of water he stands in.

Austin doesn't flinch. In fact, he almost seems to be reveling in my uncomfortably slow perusal of his body, like he dares me to find something to critique.

And I come up short. Dang him.

I wrinkle my nose. "Eh. I could take it or leave it."

"Yeah?" He steps toward me so we're just inches apart. My stomach clenches, and my pulse is on high-alert. It's a normal reaction to being so close to someone I hardly know, no matter how attractive he is. So is the fact that, in my peripheral vision, I'm aware of every last droplet of water above his waist.

"So, what'll it be? Take it?" He leans closer, and I grit my teeth when my eyes drop to his mouth without my permission. I force them back up, praying he can't hear the speed of my heart rate. "Or leave it?"

The arrogance of the man is astounding. *Definitely leave it*. Those are the words I want to say. But somehow, they're not

enough. The man is unfazed by whatever digs I take at him. He has an invincible ego.

I have to respond somehow, though.

I meet his eye, then reach a hand toward his chest. It's a dangerous game I'm playing here, but I'm all in, and if I have to have the feel of Austin Sheppard's pecs forever emblazoned on my memory to put him in his place, so be it.

The cocky glint in his eye wavers, and his expression becomes more intent, like I've caught him off guard. He didn't expect me to call his bluff.

I'm not just calling. I'm raising, baby.

I drop my gaze to his bare chest and trace the path of a drop of water with my finger as it travels down his sternum. I have no idea what's gotten into me. Never in my life have I been this daring. Or crazy.

I watch with satisfaction as chills erupt on his skin and his Adam's apple bobs ever so slightly. Despite my best intentions, my own body is reacting, too, planting that little seed of thought that says, "*What now?*"

Worse still, I can feel the dreaded hiccups coming, ready to humiliate me now that I have the upper hand. It's now or never.

I press my hand flush against his chest, let it sit for two seconds, then shove him as hard as I can.

There's a big splash, and I don't even wait for him to resurface. I walk toward the locker room, a huge smile on my face and the taste of victory like sugar on my tongue.

"Wow, Mia," Austin calls from the pool. I swear I can hear the amusement in his voice, but I refuse to look.

"You pulled me *out* of the water without my permission," I call out, "so I pushed you *in*."

He chuckles as I turn into the locker room, my whole body shaking with my own audacity.

"Think about my offer!" he yells.

And that's when the hiccups come.



“UH OH,” Gemma says from her place at the counter when I walk in the door.

I'd been hoping to sneak to my room undetected, but these stupid hiccups are a dead giveaway. They come on when I get nervous, and they're *really* hard to get rid of. None of this holding your breath or swallowing sugar or drinking upside down.

So far, I've only found one method to kick them: the element of surprise. Which isn't something I can do for myself.

“What happened?” Gemma asks.

“Nothing.” *Hic!*

She turns to face me on the barstool, one brow hitched.

I sigh, take a seat, and tell her what happened at the pool, punctuated by hiccups.

Gemma doesn't say anything when I finish. She just stares. For so long.

“The end,” I say after five seconds pass.

She blinks. “I don't even know where to start—with the fact that Austin Sheppard asked you to come on tour with him, the fact that you said *no*, or the fact you tried to drown him.”

“I pushed him into the pool—*hic!* He was fine.” I conveniently leave out the part when I came onto him before shoving him in. Let's call it *editing out extraneous details for the sake of brevity*.

“Okay, sure. Let's set that bit of crazy person behavior to the side for a second. I just want to clarify one thing real quick.” She folds her arms across her chest and squints. “*Why* exactly did you say no to him?”

I scoff. “Come on, Gem. It's not like I got asked by Taylor Swift or something. This is Austin Sheppard.”

“AKA one of the hottest emerging artists.”

“I’d hardly call him an artist. He’s a playboy masquerading as a musician. You have no idea how cocky he is, Gemma.” That dang smile flickers in my mind. Even if I were looking for a leg up in the industry, it wouldn’t be from *him*. I want to make it on my own merits. People who peg their success on others put their dreams at risk. I’m not doing that.

“Who cares? This is about you, Mia. About your dream! Do you have any idea what this could do for you? I mean, aside from the fact that it’s a tour of Europe—*freaking Europe*, Mia—you’d be getting experience in the industry, gaining exposure, making all sorts of connections... need I go on?”

“At what cost? *Hic!* I mean, do I *want* my exposure to be singing lyrics like, ‘*Girl, that bod makes me wanna applaud?*’” I stick my finger in my mouth and pretend to gag, but a hiccup makes me spasm, and my finger pokes me in the throat.

I start coughing, and Gemma rubs my back, trying not to smile.

“Please tell me you weren’t hiccupping like this in front of him,” she says.

“I got out just in time.” I stand up and sigh. “I’m going to bed.” Austin Sheppard tired me right out.

“Wait,” she says. “Hold on.” She leans over, reaching under her barstool. “Let me just grab—HA!” She whips up, her hands out to scare me, and I jump back. She looks at me expectantly.

I wait. And wait.

“Like a charm,” she says when no hiccups puncture the silence.

“Thanks,” I say, my heart still slowing. “It’ll be a lot easier to get to sleep now.”



AT ELEVEN THE next morning when I'm getting yelled at by someone over the phone at work, Europe with Austin Sheppard is looking like a pretty good option.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," I say.

"Never call this number again, you hear?"

"I hear you, sir." So does everyone in the surrounding cubicles. "Have a nice day."

I press the button to hang up, then let my head hang over my crappy, creaky swivel chair as I stare at the asbestos ceiling tiles. How long can I possibly do this? My soul shrinks two sizes every day I come into this job. I'm not sure I even possess a soul anymore, honestly. What I do have is sympathy for the Grinch. I'd bet good money—which I don't have—that his origin story involves a job in telemarketing.

There's a *clap clap clap* right by my ear, and I jump.

"No snoozing on the job!" says my manager, Kevin. "There should be no more than fifteen seconds between the end of one call and the beginning of the next one."

I sit up straight and get back to work just as a text comes in.

GEMMA

Still can't believe you tried to drown this person in the local pool.

The next message has a YouTube link, and I tap on it. It's Austin on stage, holding a vintage silver mic in hand as he sings to a crowd of flailing hands trying to reach for him. It's not a professional video, so you can barely hear him over the sound of shrieking young girls.

I've seen video footage of him before, but it's weird now that I've met him. He's a good performer, I'll give him that. Obviously comfortable being on stage. He also has a decent voice—I think? It's hard to tell. What he's singing isn't really

meant to showcase vocal agility. Add all the fanatical screaming on top, and it's a miracle I can hear any of it.

There's an instrumental break in the song, and the shrieking builds, as if in expectation of something.

Austin smiles widely and points to his chest, bringing the deafening yells to a climax.

He grabs his shirt with his hand and yanks on it, tearing it right off.

All I can do is shake my head. And realize why my lack of reaction—external, at least—to his body came as such a shock to him.

He tosses his shirt into the crowd, and I turn off the video. I'm not in the mood for seeing humans shred each other to bits for a sweaty piece of fabric.

MIA

I'd have thought that video would make the reasoning perfectly clear.

I set down my phone and reluctantly get back to my calls. I'd almost rather watch Austin rip his shirt off ten more times than dial this next number, but I dial it anyway.

The time ticks by agonizingly slowly until lunch, then somehow accelerates, so I barely have time to wolf down my sandwich before I have to head to my seat.

A text comes in just as I put my headset on, and I frown at the unfamiliar name.

BABE

Have you given it any thought?

Frowning, I scroll to the previous message, which is from me.

MIA

kiss emoji

I shake my head, but I can't help but smile just a *teeny* bit. I should've known Austin would put his name under something ridiculous—and send himself a text I would never in my life choose to send him.

Part of me is also flattered he texted me at all. It makes it seem like his invitation to come on tour *wasn't* just a dramatic pickup line. Maybe.

MIA

Love the contact name you chose. Babe is my favorite pig of all time. After Peppa, of course. And Piglet. And Pumbaa. And Porky. And Miss Piggy. Miss Piggy was probably a more fitting option for you, given the whole diva connection you share. And the pig thing, obviously.

BABE

Is this your way of saying yes to coming on tour? PS Pumbaa is a warthog.

MIA

Warthogs are pigs too.

I don't answer his question about the tour. I can't bring myself to say yes, but I'm afraid if I say no, he'll accept my answer, and I may end up regretting it.

There's no answer on the line I've dialed, so I hang up and dial the next one, then watch the text thread on my cell phone for the three dots.

They don't appear.

My stomach clenches. Is that it? Did I go too far?

Someone picks up on the line I'm on, and I set my phone down, reading from the script on my computer screen.

The call only lasts two minutes—they're not interested. Shocking, I know.

After I end the call, I tap my phone screen, and my heart races at the sight of a text from Austin.

BABE

What are your plans tonight?

Wow. He's asking me on a date. Is it possible to feel flattered and disappointed at the same time?

BABE

I thought you and I could chat about what the tour would be like. Having some details—dates and pay and all that—might make things a little clearer for you.

So...not a date. I think?

I hesitate, my fingers hovering over the keyboard. It couldn't hurt to learn a bit more, right? Make an informed decision. It's not like going means I have to say yes.

And yet, something in me wants to turn Austin down so badly.

"Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one."

I glance up and find Kevin with a stopwatch in his hand, his hard gaze on me.

I set my phone down and dial the next number with quick fingers. Once Kevin has gone to terrorize someone else, I pick up my phone and respond to Austin.

DOTS.

No dots.

More dots.

This girl is keeping me in suspense with her text response. On purpose, of course. She's probably composing an essay to tear me to shreds and let me know she'd rather go on tour with a howler monkey quartet than with me.

"So is that a yes?" My sister, Tori, glances at me as she rifles through my cupboards. It takes a second for me to register that her question isn't referring to my texts with Mia. "I'd ask Mom, but that feels more humiliating."

"If you really want to come, yes, I'll buy you a plane ticket."

She scrunches her nose. "Of course I want to come."

I assume the *of course* refers to the fact that the tour is in Europe. I'm not under any illusion that my family listens to my music on repeat. My sister, Siena, doesn't seem to plan on coming, either, and neither does my brother, Troy. They're all occupied with jobs and marital bliss. "I'll get you a ticket for the last leg. That way, you can see Madi and Rémy. They're coming to Paris for the show."

She comes over and bear hugs me, her bush of curly blonde hair attacking me. "I'm sorry I'm too poor to pay for it myself. I promise to leave you everything in my will when I die."

“Can’t wait,” I say.

My phone buzzes.

MIA

When and where?

It takes me a second to process her unexpectedly short—and positive—response.

AUSTIN

Mama Choo’s. I can pick you up at 7.

More dancing dots. Maybe I should’ve taken a few minutes instead of sending my overeager response. I’m just so relieved she’s willing to discuss the option at all. After the recon I did last night—looking at her social media accounts and watching her videos—I’m eager for Mia to agree to this. She’s crazy talented.

Am I also a little miffed she seems to hate me so badly when she doesn’t even know me? And did I find our interaction last night refreshing in a weird and confusing way?

Maybe. But that’s secondary to everything else. I need this tour to be a success, and I’m confident Mia would be an enormous asset.

MIA

I’ll be there at 7.

I chuckle. She doesn’t want me picking her up. I get it. I leaned into the whole cocky sleazeball persona last night, but that’s because it’s what she clearly expected of me. Who wants to spend their energy trying to convince someone to like them? It’s humiliating.

Tonight is about more than Mia liking me, though. It's about the success of my tour—and her future success, I'm guessing. I'm shocked at how small her following is given her talent.

In any case, tonight I don't intend on taking no for an answer.



I PULL into a parking space at Mama Choo's, glance at my reflection in the rearview mirror, then head inside.

I open the door and pause on the threshold as I catch sight of Mia standing just in front of the hostess's podium. Her brown hair is pulled half-up in a messy bun, and she's wearing loose, light jean overalls with a white, high-neck t-shirt underneath. A dozen bracelets cover her wrists and forearms, and almost none of her fingers are without a ring.

I know from watching some of her videos that this is her style. It suits her, even if it's a bit out of place here, where classical music plays gently on the speakers and each table setting has multiple forks and spoons.

"You know what?" Mia says to the hostess, her smile wide and overbright. "I think I'll just go."

"Yeeeah," the bleached blonde hostess says with a condescending smile. "Maybe your friend meant Jimmy's Stews about a mile down the road."

"Maybe so." Mia turns toward the door, her cheeks red and her head down as her smile disappears completely.

"Hey." I catch her by the arm as she tries to brush past me, and a few of her bracelets clink.

She looks up, eyes wide, gaze stricken. It's such a different expression than the one she wore last night, and it makes my chest tighten.

"Where you going?" I ask.

She pulls on her arm until I let it go. "You didn't tell me we were going to a Michelin star restaurant," she hisses.

“It’s not.”

“Maybe inform the hostess of that,” she mutters, tugging on the leg of her overalls. Her gaze flits to my outfit: a blazer, a t-shirt, and slacks. “You could’ve at least told me to dress up.”

“I thought you’d have heard of Mama Choo’s—or that you’d Google it.”

“I didn’t think I needed to. What sort of fine dining place names their establishment Mama Choo’s? It sounds like a hole-in-the-wall diner. I don’t think the hostess will let me in.”

“Who cares what she thinks? You look beautiful.”

She shoots me a look, and I put my palms up to declare my innocence. “I’m just stating objective fact. Come on. I’m hungry. Aren’t you?”

“Starving.” She shoots a sidelong glance at the hostess, who’s talking with one of the waiters. “I don’t trust her, though. She’ll probably have them tow my car while we’re eating.”

I chuckle and tug on her arm, and she reluctantly follows.

The waiter walks away, and the hostess looks up at me. “Mr. Sheppard,” she says, blinking quickly. Her eyes dart to Mia, then back to me.

“Table for two, please,” I say.

“Right away.” She smiles at me just before pulling a passing waitress aside and speaking to her in a low voice. Their gazes both flick to me, and the waitress’s eyes widen as she gives me the once-over.

The hostess turns to us. “Jennifer will take you to your table.”

Jennifer flashes me a smile. “Follow me, Mr. Sheppard.”

“And Miss Sawyer,” Mia says as we follow her.

Jennifer stops in front of a table—one of the least private ones in the restaurant. “Will this work for you, Mr. Sheppard?”

I turn to Mia. “What do you think?”

“My opinion is invalid,” she says.

I chuckle and turn to the waitress. “This works great. Thanks.”

“Ugh,” Mia says softly once Jennifer leaves.

“What?”

“She looked like she was waiting for you to tear your shirt off...or tempted to do it herself. You could’ve warned me you were going to be late, you know. And that there was no reservation. The hostess didn’t hesitate to let me know they’re booked out for two months. Not for you, I guess.”

I put my napkin on my lap. “Sorry. I didn’t plan to be late. It’s genetic.”

Mia raises her brows at me. “Genetic...”

I nod and pass her a menu. “You know how some people run hot?”

“Yeah...”

“I run late.”

She laughs, pushing her bracelets back, then opening her menu. “That’s not a thing.”

“Then there’s a worldwide clock conspiracy against me.”

She stares at me over the top of her menu.

“What? It’s true. It doesn’t matter how early I start getting ready. I’m always late.”

“Uh-huh. I think your problem has another name.” Her eyes scan the menu items.

“And what’s that?”

Her gaze flicks to me. There’s a pause before they return to the menu. “Never mind.”

I chuckle and reach a hand over, pulling the menu down to the table. “You know I can’t just let that go. Come on, Mia. What were you going to say?”

She meets my gaze. “It’s bad manners to insult the person paying for your dinner. For the record, I came fully intending to pay for myself, but the fact that there are no prices on here tells me my card will probably be declined, and call me crazy, but I’d love to leave this place with at least a smidgen of my pride intact.”

“And *I’d* love to hear what you were going to say my problem is.”

She hesitates.

“Bring it on,” I say, grinning. “I can handle it.” You don’t get where I am without hearing just about every insult in the book.

“Fine,” she says. “Narcissism.”

I tip my head back and laugh.

Unamused, she pulls her menu out of my hand and raises it again. “Case in point.”

Jennifer returns to take our orders, and I wait curiously to hear what Mia’s going to get, fully anticipating it’ll be the most expensive thing on the menu just to spite me.

“I’ll have the side salad,” she says, folding her menu and smiling politely at the waitress.

I stare, but Mia’s busy rearranging—very unnecessarily, I might add—the utensils next to her plate. She ordered arguably the cheapest item on the menu. It’s not even an entrée. It’s an afterthought.

No, worse. It’s one of those things you order to make you feel healthy, and then it gets cleared from the table, untouched.

The waitress clears her throat, and I pull my gaze from Mia. “And for you, sir?” she asks.

I pause. “I’ll have the beef Wellington. And the Wagyu ribeye. Oh, and the cheese platter.”

Mia glances at me as the waitress takes my menu and leaves. “You weren’t lying about being hungry.”

“Shall we talk business?” I ask.

“By all means.” Mia leans her elbows on the table, resting her chin on her hands and looking at me expectantly. “Let’s hear the sales pitch.”

I mimic her so our faces are a foot apart. “The tour is three weeks. First performance is March 21st. It starts in Prague and ends in London, with stops in between in Germany, Italy, and France.”

Her eyelids flutter. “Mmhmm.” She’s trying to keep a poker face, but I can see the reflection of the Spanish Steps and Trafalgar Square in her brown eyes. She takes her water glass and brings it to her lips.

“I’ve got two other backup vocalists you’d share a bus with,” I continue. “Kelly and Rose. They’re both great. I think you’d get along just fine. As far as pay, you’d get a flat rate for the tour, plus a small percentage of profits, but since I’m not sure how those profits will look, that’s not a solid enough selling point for me to focus on. The flat rate for the three weeks would be twenty grand.”

She sputters, then starts coughing, drawing the eyes of the tables around us.

Suppressing a smile, I take the glass from her and set it down while she regains control.

“You okay?” I ask.

She nods, her face tomato red as she clears her throat. “Yep,” she croaks. “Wrong pipe.” She glances at the table nearest us and gives an awkward, reassuring wave, then pulls the strap of her overalls back into place.

“Did you catch all that?” I ask. “I can repeat it if—”

“No, no. I got it all, thanks.”

I continue with a few more details while Mia listens. She sits straight, clasps her hands, and rests them on the table. Her expression is totally sober. I think she’s trying to channel her inner businesswoman, but the effect is slightly ruined by the fact that she’s wearing oversized overalls and enough bracelets to stock a small jewelry store. “I need to think about it a little. I can get back to you.”

“Aha,” I say slowly. “Can I ask what reservations you have? Maybe we can talk through them together.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so.”

I smile, my curiosity roused again. “Mia, we haven’t even gotten our food yet. We’re going to be here a while. Besides, if we’re going to be on tour together for almost a month, we’ll get to know each other *pretty* well. You may as well talk to me.”

She searches my face, like she’s wondering if I really mean what I’m saying.

“I promise I won’t hold your honesty against you.” I hold up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

She cracks a smile. “Were you a Boy Scout?”

“Eagle Scout, thank you very much.”

Her brows shoot up. “Did they add a Public Disrobing merit badge?”

“I think it’s in the works,” I say with a twitch at the corner of my lips. “Now stop deflecting. What’s keeping you from saying yes?”

She sits back and lets out a sigh.

“I’m not trying to rush you, Mia, but the tour is coming up soon. There’s music to learn, rehearsals, plane tickets to buy. So, if you don’t want the job, we need time to find someone else.” I hope I’m not pushing too hard. I don’t *want* to find someone else. I want Mia.

On the tour, I mean.

“Okay,” she says, relenting. “It’s just...” More hesitation.

I raise my brows to show her I’m waiting.

She squares her jaw. “Your music isn’t really my style.”

It takes me a second to process that. I was expecting something about a prior commitment or getting time off work or even some dig at my personality. “Top hits aren’t your style?”

“Yeah, if by *top hits*, you mean shallow, generic pop songs.”

Ouch. That hurts. Probably because it’s true. “Okay. And what kind of music *is* your style?”

“I don’t know. Stuff with a little more feeling... and a little less objectification.”

I keep a smile on my face, but inside I feel a little sick. “For instance, the music of...?”

“Noah Hayes,” she says without hesitation.

I laugh. It’s all I *can* do. Noah freaking Hayes.

“What?” she says defensively. “His music has soul, and his lyrics are meaningful.”

I twist my goblet of water around and around. The irony doesn’t escape me. Mia thinks I’m a shallow, vapid narcissist, while she admires Noah Hayes. I could obliterate her idea of him in thirty seconds flat.

But I’m not going to. I’m not here to crush dreams. I’m here to make hers come true.

Besides, much as I hate it, Noah is a fellow Fusion artist, so I need to watch myself when talking about him.

“Okay,” I say, leaning forward again. “So, you don’t like my music. That’s fine.” *I don’t either*, I want to say. But I can’t. I think it’s actually written into my contract, which I get. Who’s going to believe in my music if I don’t? Not that it’s really *my* music, but we’re getting into semantics there, and there’s really no point. It is what it is. “If you can’t stomach coming on tour because of that, there’s nothing I can do about it. You wouldn’t be able to bad-mouth it if you agreed to join the team, either. But I want to make it clear that I want you on this tour. I think you’d be an amazing asset to the team. I’ve listened to your stuff, and you have an incredible voice, Mia.”

Her lashes flutter, and she looks down. Does she not realize just how amazing her talent is? I could fall asleep to her voice every night.

“We haven’t been given the funds to take an actual band on this tour,” I continue. “We’ll be using backing tracks, which makes the backup vocalists that much more important.”

Mia glances up at me just as Jennifer arrives with our food. We both go quiet as she sets the plates down. Once she’s gone, I shuffle the plates and drinks around so that the Wagyu is in front of Mia and the cheese platter is in the middle.

“Oh,” she says, pushing the Wagyu toward me. “I got the salad.”

I put a hand on hers to stop her. “Mia.”

She meets my gaze.

“I ordered it *for* you. Does it not look good?”

She swallows, salivating. “It looks... good.”

“Great.” I take up my knife and fork, pleased I guessed right. “I think you’ll really like it.”

“Thanks,” she mutters as she picks up her utensils and starts carefully cutting into the juicy steak.

“Look,” I say, dipping my first bite into the sauce. “It’s not going to be a European holiday. It’ll be long hours and hard work. But we’ve built in some time to enjoy the cities we’ll be stopping in, and it could be a really great move for your career—if you’re interested in pursuing music in that way, I mean.”

“I am.” The response comes fast, and I can hear the want in her voice. She seems to realize how overeager she came off, since she clears her throat and cuts another piece without even eating the first one. “I *am* interested in it,” she says in a more measured tone.

I like that Mia’s passionate, even if I kind of wish she didn’t dislike me with so much of it.

“Good,” I say. “You should be.” It would be a shame if Mia’s talent went underappreciated. It certainly is right now.

She takes her first bite of steak, chewing a couple of times. Her chewing slows and her eyes widen.

I smile. “Taste okay?”

“Pretty okay,” she says, trying to chew in a slow, refined way.

I chuckle and take a bite of my own food. This is why I come to Mama Choo’s. Their steak can’t be beat. “You can eat normally, Mia.”

I take a drink and set down the glass as Mia goes to town on her steak, the salad forgotten. I smile and work on cutting more of mine. “I can give you two days to think about the tour, okay? But after th—”

“I’m in.”

My head whips up.

Mia’s looking at me, her gaze clear and determined. “I’m in,” she repeats.

I search her face, then nod and stick out my hand, hoping my expression successfully conceals how relieved and happy I am. “Welcome to the tour, then, Mia.”

5

MIA

FOUR WEEKS LATER, I hang up my last telemarketing call—technically, I got hung up on, but potato, potahto—and walk out of the building a free, unemployed woman. I asked Kevin if I could take the three weeks off and return after the tour, but he put his foot down. That’s what happens when you work at a place where you’re totally expendable. And to be honest, I’m not mad he said no. Odds are high I’ll end up working an equally awful job in a few weeks, but I’m going to enjoy this little respite.

The last couple weeks have been wild, working all day, then spending my evenings learning music and going to rehearsals. Austin was right about me getting along with Kelly and Rose. They’re nice and fun—way more fun than I am—and, obviously, crazy talented. Rooming with them for three weeks will be easy peasy.

As for Austin... I can’t decide what to think of him. Sometimes, I roll my eyes at his cocky antics. Other times, like some moments at Mama Choo’s, I find him likable. Maybe too likable.

Which is why I’m a bit relieved anytime his Casanova side comes out and reminds me who I’m dealing with: a man with women of all ages ready to shred their vocal chords to bits at the mere sight of him.

When I walk in the door at home, Gemma’s at the sink, rinsing out her cup. She hurries to set it down, then picks up two pot lids on the counter and bangs them together again and

again. “You did it!” she yells, walking over to me. “You’re all done!”

I take a sweeping bow, but I cut it short to stop the clanging pots. “Thank you. Really. But I need my hearing intact for the tour.”

She sets down the lids. “Get used to the noise. Those concert audiences don’t mess around.”

A bundle of nerves bubbles in my stomach. I don’t know why. It’s not like they’ll be cheering for *me*.

“I can’t believe how soon you’re leaving,” Gemma says. “I’m trying to figure out if I can come see at least one of your shows while you’re there, but the airfare is crazy expensive.”

“Save your money,” I say. “I’m just a backup singer, Gem.” A text comes through from Kelly, and I squeeze Gemma’s shoulder. “Okay, I’ve got to run! I’ve got a fitting tonight.”



ROSE AND KELLY are already changing when I get to the nondescript building where our fitting is happening. There are multiple clothing racks in the room and a man and a woman standing near them. The woman is scribbling on a clipboard while the man Kelly tells me is named Victor fiddles with the measuring tape draped around his neck.

Rose shimmies into a silver sequin mini dress, pulling it over her bare torso and bra. My stomach tightens. Do I have to wear that? I don’t do tight. I’m very much a flowy linen, loose-fit girl.

She smiles widely at me. “There you are!” Her gaze flits to my outfit—wide leg pants and a tucked graphic tee. She gives me a significant look, a little twinkle of amusement in her eye. The second time she saw me, she asked when I was going to introduce her to my (non-existent) brother. She thought I liked to borrow his clothes. “Get ready to shed *those*.”

I give a nervous laugh as the woman pulls a matching sequin dress from the rack and brings it over to me. “Go ahead

and put that on,” she says, barely sparing me a glance.

I take in a big breath and look around for a place with a bit of privacy.

“We have forty-five minutes and ten outfits,” Victor says.

“Gotcha,” I say. “Is there somewhere I can change?” Or *not*? I really don’t want to put on this skin-tight disco ball.

Victor tilts his head, as if to say *are you serious right now*? He walks over to a space a few feet away from Rose and Kelly, plants his feet there, and stares at me. “How about right here?”

I smile but hesitate. I’m not a total prude, but I’m also not used to stripping in front of strangers. Especially of the male variety.

“Better get used to it,” the clipboard woman says unapologetically. “You’ll have quick costume changes just off-stage at every performance.”

“Right.” I move to the spot on the floor assigned to me.

“Zip me up?” Kelly asks, taking a few steps toward me.

I pull up on the zipper, which sticks in the middle until Kelly sucks in.

Yikes. I’m not used to sucking in. And definitely not when I need all my lung capacity for singing.

They took our measurements a couple of weeks ago, so I know these dresses were tailored to us, but they look like they were intentionally sewn a size too small. Or for Barbie dolls.

I hold up my dress and instinctively suck in, then glance at the costume designer, who’s watching me without a sliver of amusement or sympathy.

“This doesn’t come in, like, a pantsuit, does it?” I ask with a smile full of clenched teeth. I know it’s a useless question even before Victor’s brow cocks.

“Come on, Mia,” Kelly says. “You’ll look amazing in it.”

“I’m more worried about being able to breathe.” Just wearing that thing is likely to trigger my hiccups.

Victor puts a hand on his hip. “These are the costumes, Miss Sawyer. Wearing them is part of your contract. Please tell me we didn’t hire a diva.”

Kelly widens her eyes. I can’t tell if it’s sympathy or a warning.

“Of course not,” I say. “I’m just going to run to the bathroom real quick.” I turn, my gaze on the floor, and my heart racing as I make my way out of the room. I need a minute to breathe. And think. And possibly cry? Who knew the prospect of wearing a beautiful sequin dress could elicit tears?

Maybe this was all a bad idea. Why did I think this tour was a good fit for me? Austin Sheppard is known for capitalizing on his amazing body to market his music. It should have occurred to me that as one of his backup vocalists, something similar would be expected of me.

“Whoa, whoa.”

A hand on my arm stops me at the edge of the room, and I glance at Austin, who looks at me with a furrowed brow over brown eyes. I’m genuinely worried those eyes might have had something to do with my decision to come on this tour. Which is more evidence that it was a bad idea.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I don’t want to wear the clothes your label paid to have made specifically for me because I like to dress in my imaginary older brother’s big, comfy clothes.

“Miss Sawyer seems to have an issue with the costumes,” Victor says in the tone he might use with a five-year-old refusing to eat vegetables.

“Yeah, I got that part,” Austin says, his eyes still on me.

Oh gosh. He was listening. He’s regretting asking me to join this tour. Or if he’s not now, he will be soon.

He takes the sequin dress I'm holding, then looks at me. "You don't want to wear this?"

I swallow, willing the tears to resorb into wherever they came from. Who cries over a sexy dress? "Maybe I'm not the best fit for this dress," I say around the lump in my throat. "Or this tour."

Part of me believes that, but the other part wants to be reassured I do belong here, that my value doesn't hinge on what clothes I wear.

Austin's response is just as quiet. "It's just a dress, Mia."

My brows pull together. He thinks I'm being ridiculous. Granted, so did I until five seconds ago, but having him confirm it is different, and it makes my pride flare.

He tosses the dress toward the designer. "Let's find her something else to wear, Victor." He looks at me again. "I want you to be comfortable."

Victor holds the dress in his hands like a sacred offering. "But, but—"

"I know," Austin says. "But you're a master at this. I know you'll figure something out. I'll make sure you're compensated accordingly, okay?"

Victor nods, but the man is crushed.

"Austin," I say, without really knowing how to continue. I hate that I'm causing problems.

He puts a hand on my shoulder. "You're more important than a dress, Mia."

The woman with the clipboard brings him a hanger with his clothes on it, and he takes it and walks away.

6

AUSTIN

“WE SCHEDULED this first part really tight,” Paul says, looking through the itinerary as we walk off the plane in Prague. “We’ve really only got time to put our stuff at the hotel before we head to the venue for dress rehearsal.”

“That’s fine,” I say, watching Mia, Rose, and Kelly walking in front of us. The three of them get along well. Even though Mia and I ended up with seats together on the plane, she traded Paul to take the one next to them.

Pouring acid on my ego, basically.

Mia’s an enigma to me. I’ve come to think of her like those Warhead candies—sour on the surface, but sweet to the core. Notably, her sour side is mostly present with me. I can’t help but say and do things that bring out that sassy side of her. I prefer it to the apathy I get from her most of the time.

It shouldn’t bug me she doesn’t seem to like me all that much. It’s not like I’m hurting for attention or admiration. It can be overwhelming how desperate some of my fans are for a piece of me.

It comes with the territory, and I’ve tried to embrace that. I don’t harbor any illusions about what these girls want. If I was just some guy they bumped into at the grocery store, they wouldn’t look twice. It’s the whole fame and celebrity thing, and as long as I remember that, I get along just fine.

Since the problem at the fitting, there have been no other issues with Mia. She worked hard at rehearsals. If I hadn’t been watching for it, I wouldn’t have even noticed the little

spasm she has every time she has to sing *Girl, that bod makes me wanna applaud*. Despite a concern she might cop out at the last minute, she's here.

The three girls are sharing the hotel room next to mine, and as we get unpacked, I can hear their laughter through the walls. I'm glad they've become fast friends, and I'm not at all lonely in my room with an extra bed.

I hop in the shower to wash off the travel grime, pulling on my shirt just as Paul knocks on the door.

"Wheels up in three," he says.

These particular wheels happen to belong to a white Eurovan. We're not classy enough for a stretch limo, and honestly, those things have no business being in the tiny streets of Europe, anyway.

The girls pile in, followed by the audio guys, Paul, and me. Another Eurovan full of equipment and more people waits behind. In a couple of days, we'll have our tour buses to take us all over Western Europe, but for now, this van is what we've got.

We've got two shows in Prague, both at the same venue: a medium-sized concert hall in the city. I've actually played here, but it's different being the headliner.

We spend the next couple of hours blocking things out and running through the setlist while the sound guys do tests and go over the tech rider.

Everyone is jetlagged and a little glassy-eyed by the time we wrap up. Kelly and Rose are lying on the stage floor while Mia sits cross-legged next to them. We'll have to do more tomorrow during the day, but we're in decent shape given how quickly this is coming together.

"Van's waiting out front," Paul says as he strides onto the stage. "Sound guys need another half hour or so, but you guys are done for the night."

Mia gets up, tightens the sweater around her waist, then puts out her hands to help both Kelly and Rose. She seems a lot less on the verge of keeling over than they do.

“Please say we have fourteen hours of sleep blocked out tonight,” Rose says to Paul.

He grimaces, and her shoulders sag as she shuffles toward the door.

Kelly slings a lifeless arm through Mia’s and starts walking, but Mia doesn’t follow.

“I think I’ll walk, actually,” she says.

Kelly stares at her like she just stated her intention to visit Mars.

“I want to see a little of the city,” Mia explains.

Paul looks thoughtful but ultimately nods, then looks at me expectantly.

“I’ll come back with the sound guys,” I say. “I want to talk to them about that first transition.” I’m feeling weirdly nervous. The sense of responsibility for the show is settling in. There are a lot of people involved in bringing everything together, but at the end of the day, my name is the one on the posters and tickets. In people’s minds, the buck stops with me, even if that’s not the reality.

Paul heads out with the others, leaving Mia and me on stage. Part of me is slightly uncomfortable with the thought of Mia walking to the hotel at this time of night. But she’s also a grown woman who can make those choices for herself.

Except she’s not leaving. She’s looking out over the empty seats.

I come up beside her. “What do you think?”

She blows out a long breath through rounded lips, and I chuckle.

“This is nothing to you, huh?” she says with a wry smile.

“No.” I look around the venue at all the seats that’ll be filled tomorrow night. *Hopefully* filled. “Definitely not nothing. I’m nervous too.”

She shoots me a look of skepticism. “You don’t have to pretend just to make me feel better.”

“I’m not. I mean, I’ve played in front of crowds bigger than this, but never as the main act. And I don’t think I’ll ever get over worrying something embarrassing will happen. No one will show up, I’ll fall on my face, my pants will fall down... Stuff like that.”

She narrows her eyes. “So, your pants falling down would be embarrassing, but your shirt coming off...”

I smile, happy to see a little sass coming out despite her nerves. “One’s a costume malfunction. The other’s part of the show.”

She looks straight ahead again. “It’s a terrifying thought, I’ll give you that.”

“What is?”

“The pants falling down thing.”

“You worried about yours too? Should’ve worn the dress.”

She scoffs. “First of all, there are plenty of wardrobe malfunctions just waiting to happen with a dress that short and tight. Second, I’m worried about *your* pants falling down, not mine.”

I turn to her, crossing my arms over my chest and smiling. “You’ve got to stop thinking about my clothes coming off, Mia. I need you focused out there tomorrow.” I’m being a total and complete tool, but if it distracts her from her nerves *and* gets a little reaction out of her...

She turns and stares me down. “Here’s a novel idea: try selling your music instead of your body.”

“Hmm.” I squint, pretending to give it some thought, then I wrinkle my nose. “Nah.”

She shakes her head and turns toward the empty arena again. “Will it be full?”

“Pretty close to it, I think.” Oddly, Mia’s nerves are helping me relax.

She takes in a deep breath.

“Mia.” I wait until she looks at me. “We’ve got this.”

She holds my gaze for a second. “My audience is usually invisible. They’re just numbers on a screen—likes, comments, views. This? This is different.” She stares at the room, taking in a long, slow breath. A sudden hiccup bursts out of her, and she slaps a hand over her mouth, her eyes shifting to me.

I raise my brows. “You okay?”

“You’re scared of your pants falling down,” she says behind her hand. “*This* is what I’m afraid of.”

I frown. “Hiccups?”

Hic! “I get them when I’m really nervous.”

“Huh. Okay.” I’m not about to say it to her, but her fear is a lot more valid than mine. It’s not like my pants fall down whenever I’m nervous. “Let’s get you some water.” I move, but she stops me with a hand.

She waits for the next *hic* before responding. “That doesn’t work for me. Trust me. This has been a thing for as long as I can remember. I’ve tried everything. Gosh, I wish Gemma was here.”

“Your sister?”

She nods.

“So, you just have to ride it out? How long do they last?”

“Hours sometimes. I’ve only found one thing that can consistently get rid of them.”

I wait expectantly.

“Surprise.”

“Surprise,” I repeat.

She nods.

I rub a hand over the bottom half of my face. I find this little quirk of Mia’s fascinating. And really inconvenient for her and this tour. I turn my head, thinking. “You mean surprise as in *this*?” I whirl around toward her.

Hic! She grimaces apologetically. “I figured you’d do that. It’s what most people do when they find out the trick.”

“Dang.” I sigh.

“Yeah”—*hic!*—“it gets harder and harder to shock me, unfortunately.”

My mouth pulls into a smile. Those words hold an implicit challenge, and I’m a sucker for a challenge.

She looks at me warily. “What?”

I shake my head and grin. “Nothing. Just logging information away in my—” I grab her mid-sentence and throw her over my shoulder as she sucks in a breath of surprise.

“Austin!” she cries out.

“Surprise!”

“Let me down.” I can hear the smile in her voice, but she pummels my back with her hands and wriggles in my arms. She’s strong. And she smells amazing.

“Fine,” I say, letting her slide through my arms until her feet touch the ground.

I keep my arm around her waist as she regains her balance, her arms pressing against my chest. Once she’s steady, her eyes lock on mine, and her breath hitches.

It’s a split-second that lasts an hour—or at least long enough for her eyes to flit down to my mouth, then right back up.

Whoa.

She thought about it. Mia Sawyer thought about kissing me. Even if the thought only lasted a fraction of a fraction of a second. She *doesn’t* hate me. Somewhere down—really, really, really deep down, maybe—she’s attracted enough to have paused in my arms.

She pushes off me, but my arm around her waist stops her.

“Wait,” I say.

She stops, eyes on me.

I let the seconds pass by with our gazes locked, hers searching and uncertain.

Finally, I release her and step back, putting out my hands like a showman. “Hiccup free.”

She lets out a disbelieving laugh.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?” I wish I knew whether it was picking her up or that split-second when her breath stopped that did the trick.

“See what happens next time you try to pull something like that,” she says.

I want to.

I know what she means, though. It’s a threat to punch me in the face or something. But part of me wonders if that’s actually how it would end. Is there a slight possibility we’d end up kissing? How would that feel? Could she channel some of that passionate dislike into something different?

“I’m gonna get going,” she says, shaking me from my speculation. She reties her sweater around her waist—a nervous tick, I think.

“It’s too late for you to walk back alone,” I say. “You’ll have time to see some of the city tomorrow. I promise. Just ride in the van with us. It’ll only be like fifteen more minutes.”

I can see the cogs turning in her head as she considers what to do. If she insists on walking home, I’ll go with her. Prague is a safe city, but bad things happen in safe cities too, and I need Mia.

As a backup vocalist.

She glances at her watch, then sighs. “Fine.”

7

MIA

AUSTIN IS A LIAR. A big, fat, muscular, toned, extremely attractive liar. Pants on fire, too, which is just as bad as them falling down.

There *isn't* time to see the city the next day. There are press interviews—watching Austin at those is something else, I tell ya—more rehearsing, moving our stuff from the hotel to the tour bus, and final costume fittings.

Dinner is catered to the venue, where we all eat early enough that our stomachs won't be full of Czech food when we go on stage.

The opening act is an unknown-to-me but apparently well-known-in-Europe artist named Fireflight. I try not to let the sound of the cheering crowd trigger my nerves. Kelly and Rose are immune to it, and they keep a constant flow of chatter about everything and nothing that's oddly settling to my nerves, like we're just hanging out on a random Thursday night with takeout instead of preparing to go on stage in front of a couple thousand people.

So far, my hiccups haven't made an appearance. Part of me wonders if the move Austin pulled yesterday jammed my diaphragm for good. Maybe I'm permanently hiccup-free.

All it cost me was a continuous, all-night flow of dreams about him. Not sure whether I came out ahead on that whole trade.

Eventually, the time comes for wardrobe and makeup. They put the finishing touches on my makeup, and I get up

and head to the costume rack. Victor is handing Rose her costume. He glances at me after, and his lips pinch together. He'll never forgive me for asking for a pantsuit. I've insulted his life's work. It doesn't escape me that Victor brought the dress I was supposed to wear—probably to shame me into feeling bad. Well, it's working a little.

He pushes the pantsuit into my hands and turns away before I can squeak out a “thank you.”

I sigh and look at the hanger. Rose and Kelly will both be wearing dresses, so I'll be the odd one out. The diva who wouldn't take one for the team.

I bite the inside of my lip, look where Victor is, then grab the hanger with my dress on it. Maybe I've blown things out of proportion. It can't hurt to try it on.

I sneak behind a couple stacks of boxes on one side of the room and rearrange them into a makeshift dressing room. Once I'm in my underwear, I grab the hanger with the dress and hold it up.

“Here we go,” I say.

I own some dresses at home—nice, flowy ones that allow for healthy ventilation. I can pull those over my head.

Not this one. I step into it and pull it up, wriggling to get it over my hips and butt. I slip my arms through the holes and shrug it over my torso and chest.

Hey, that's not too bad.

That's when I remember it has a zipper. I reach behind me and fiddle with it, trying to channel my inner contortionist to zip it to the top, but my face is the main thing contorting.

Whew! Got it.

It's much tighter now, that's for sure.

I run my hands over the rough sequins, sparkling and catching the light like a freshly cleaned princess cut diamond. The lighting isn't great in here, so I can only imagine how it'll look with the stage lights on.

I grab my phone from the pile of discarded clothes and turn on the selfie camera, holding it out to try to get an idea of how I look.

I stare at the screen, trying to recognize myself in the image there. It's so much more makeup than I ever wear, and this dress...

I suppress a smile. I actually look... good. I look like a performer, and that's what I have to be tonight. Beyoncé has her alter ego, Sasha Fierce, for when she performs. Maybe that's what I need too. And maybe this dress is the ticket.

I bend to pick up my clothes, but my dress stops me. It has opinions about what things I'm allowed to do, and casual bending is not on the list. It takes some maneuvering, but I manage to pick up the clothes and fold them. Grabbing the hanger with the pantsuit, I take in a deep breath and step out from behind the boxes, jostling a couple in the process.

Kelly turns at the sound, then freezes. Her jaw slips open, and my cheeks fill with heat. Eyes still on me, she reaches blindly for Rose, who's got a monologue going as she surveys her makeup.

"...I don't think this shade of lipstick quite goes with—*what?*" She reluctantly turns to Kelly, then follows her gaze to me. Her brows inch up. "Okaaay."

I shift uncomfortably. "I should wear the pantsuit." I turn toward my cardboard box shelter, but hands on both my arms stop me.

Kelly pulls the pantsuit hanger from my grasp and runs away, which looks completely ridiculous since she can barely move her legs in the tight dress.

"You are *not* taking that dress off," Rose says, pulling me away from the boxes and toward the mirror.

I pull in a shaky breath as she smiles over my shoulder at our reflection. Those hiccups should appear any second now. Or maybe this dress is too tight to allow for spasms of the diaphragm. That's something, right?

Having safely hidden the pantsuit, Kelly takes her quick baby steps to us, coming on the other side of me.

“Victor!” Rose calls.

Victor turns and goes still. “Oh, *yes*,” he says, striding toward us slowly. “Even better than my vision.”

He says *vision* like it’s a religious experience rather than a simple mental image he had when designing these. He comes up behind me and turns me toward him with a hand on each shoulder. His mouth draws into a huge smile. “You. Look. Fabulous.”

I glance away, uncomfortable with the praise. But I’m not immune to it. I *want* to look good. I don’t want to stick out like a sore thumb on stage.

Paul walks in and claps a few times in quick succession. “Fifteen minutes and counting. You should be warming up.”

Welp, that’s that. This is what I’m wearing.

We head to the warmup room, all of us doing our usual practices on the way—things that would make us sound like crazy people in any other setting.

With every minute that ticks by, my heart beat skips to a pace that would trigger a *code blue* in a hospital. It’s a modern miracle I haven’t hiccupped yet. I also haven’t seen Austin, and we’re five minutes from going on.

“*Mi mi mi mi mi*,” Rose sings beside me as we wait in the wings of the stage. A section of the crowd is barely visible from where I’m standing. In that area, at least, not a seat is empty.

Kelly grabs a water bottle, unscrews the cap, and takes a little sip while I fiddle with the sequins within reach of my shaking fingertips.

“Boo!” Austin grabs me around the shoulders, making me jump and Kelly spill her water.

“Austin!” Kelly cries out as brushes water off her dress.

“Sorry,” he says. “Just trying to help Mia.”

“By giving her a heart attack?” Rose asks.

“By getting rid of the hiccups,” he says like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“Hiccups?” Rose asks.

But Austin doesn’t respond. His eyes are on me—on my dress, specifically. I suppress the urge to smooth it over my body while heat creeps into my cheeks. It shouldn’t matter to me whether Austin approves of how I look in this. But it does.

It so does.

His gaze returns to my face, and there’s no mistaking the admiration there. “Wow.”

Body blazing, I glance at Kelly and Rose, whose eyebrows raise as they stare at Austin.

“I get the hiccups when I get nervous.” The words tumble out of my mouth, desperate to draw their attention to anything other than Austin’s reaction, even as there’s a little victory dance going on in my heart.

Why my body thinks it’s a victory to get the approval of a womanizer like him, I’ll never know.

“Did it work?” he asks.

“I haven’t had them yet,” I say. “This dress doesn’t allow much space for them.” *Or they got chased away forever yesterday when your arms were around me.*

Never saying *that* to him.

“Everyone ready?” Paul asks, appearing out of nowhere.

Everyone nods, and I do too, even though it’s not true and probably never will be. I haven’t been this scared since I posted my first singing video. Maybe that should be a lesson to me. I was so nervous, and for no reason. It got a hundred views instead of going viral like I hadn’t been willing to admit to myself I was hoping for.

Tonight will probably be the same. An anti-climax.

Before I know it, we're shuffled onstage amidst deafening cheers. For Austin. They're all for Austin.

I can't help being a bit jealous as he flashes his stupid, sexy smile and waves to the thousands of people who paid money to see him.

It's hard to see much with the audience in darkness and the stage lights shining on us, but I spot posterboard throughout the crowd. The one nearest says *Marry Me, Austin! I'll have your babies!*

Good gravy. No wonder his head is the size of the sun. These people would genuinely revolve around him if given the chance. But I'm not stupid. You stare at the sun too long, and bad things happen. And if you try to touch it? You're toast.

So, memo to my unconscious brain, no more dreams about kissing Austin.

The crowd may not be cheering for me, but the exhilaration of their energy can't help but get to me. The music starts, and it's go time. Rehearsals with Rose and Kelly were fun, but this? It's like nothing else I've ever done. We're moving and singing in tandem, and hearing and seeing everything come together is an experience I want to bottle up so I can have it forever. I almost forget how much I dislike the lyrics.

The only time I experience a momentary glitch is when the crowd chants, "Shirt! Shirt!"

Still singing, Austin points to his shirt and cheers erupt. He grabs the part covering his chest, then yanks it forward. It rips right off, putting on full display, thanks to the stage lights, his glistening, well-formed physique.

He wads up the shirt, then tosses it into the crowd. A sea of hands reaches to catch it, a vicious pack of wolves fighting over a piece of meat.

Austin turns and looks straight at me, gives a little tug at the waistband of his pants, then winks.

Rose nudges me with an elbow, and I realize I've stopped singing.

I rush back in with them, and Austin turns away as quickly as he turned toward me.

My skin is tacky with sweat by the time we sing the last song on the set list. The crowd claps, whistles, and cheers when the song finishes.

“Thank you all,” he says breathlessly. “Thank you for coming and for singing along with me. Let’s give it up for my backup vocalists over here!” He points toward us, and there’s a crescendo of cheers. “Rose Johnson, Mia Sawyer, and Kelly Clyde. Aren’t they incredible?”

More cheering breaks out as we all wave, my cheeks aching from smiling.

To be fair, Austin probably could have asked them to give it up for a shriveled bunch of grapes, and they’d cheer, but still. This feels *really* good.

Hopefully, my dreams tonight will be full of this instead of Austin.

8

AUSTIN

I RUN off stage to an entire venue of cheering, my heart pounding with adrenaline. I can't believe all these people showed up for *me*. Last time, I was the act they had to sit through to get to the real reason they were there. Now I *am* that reason.

I just wish it was my actual songs they were cheering for.

But I'm not going to dwell on that right now. Tonight has been a win.

Rose, Kelly, and Mia are all hugging each other as I make it to where the crowd can't see me anymore. Mia's the first one to break off, and she turns to me with a huge grin.

I don't even hesitate, pulling her into my arms. I'm on a post-concert high. These things must be forgiven under the circumstances.

She's momentarily stunned but recovers enough to return it. "You were amazing!"

I tighten my hold. That's a huge compliment coming from her.

"And your pants stayed up," she adds, pulling back to look at me.

"It was a close call. But hey, you didn't get the hiccups, either. Double victory."

I glance at Rose and Kelly, who are both watching this interaction. The high that led to the impulsive hug with Mia

has diminished slightly, but if I don't hug the others, it'll be weird.

Not like I mind hugging them. I really like Kelly and Rose. But it's different with Mia. Maybe because she shoved me into a pool the first time we met.

I hug Kelly, then Rose, thanking them for making the performance as smooth as it was, particularly for being the tour opener.

"Crushed it," Paul says, gripping my shoulder and smiling. "Quick bathroom break and a drink. People are already lining up for the meet-and-greet."

Mia looks at Rose. "Do we go to the meet-and-greet?"

Rose shakes her head right as I say, "Yeah."

Mia's gaze shifts between us, unsure who to listen to.

"I mean, you don't *have* to come," I say, "but I think you should. Oh, and there's a party in my bus afterward."

Rose and Kelly high-five each other. The three of them confer for a minute and ultimately decide to join the meet-and-greet, if only for the food.

When I get to the room where it's taking place, my arrival is heralded with cheers and Paul handing me a shirt—which elicits a chorus of boos—and a Sharpie from amongst the collection he's holding.

The line wraps around the room and disappears out the door. Most of the fans are Czech, but there are some from Germany and Poland too. A lot of them are wearing shirts with lyrics or even my face. There's something about coming face-to-face with your own head—or head-to-head with your own face?—especially when it's five times as big as your real one that I'm not sure I'll ever get used to. It's flattering and surreal and slightly disturbing, like the time my brother, Troy, slipped a cardboard cutout of me next to my bed. I nearly died of fright when I woke up.

The hands of everyone in the line are full of posters and phone cases and tickets for me to sign. Rose and Kelly post up

near the refreshment table, and Mia follows, but she keeps darting curious glances in my direction. Rose and Kelly have both gone on tour before, but Mia's never done an event like this.

Our gazes meet, and I jerk my head to signal to her to come over.

She hesitates, but I repeat my gesture, and she walks toward me, tugging on the bottom of her dress so that it covers more of her thighs. I force my gaze away from her legs and back to her face, which, honestly, is just as dangerous a focal point. Mia looks incredible tonight. It's not just that she's been styled and made up by a professional. She's glowing from the same high I'm riding.

Paul invites the fan at the front of the line to come through. She's visibly shaking as she approaches with that deer-in-the-headlights look and then puts her arms around me in a painfully slow and deliberate way. They're just supposed to shake my hand, but that rarely happens. People want hugs, and I'm too much of a sucker to say no. These are the people who make music a career option for me. I want to please them.

Mia shows me raised brows as I work to free myself from a hug that's feeling like it could go on as long as the *Lord of the Rings* extended edition. You'd think I was this girl's long-lost husband or something.

I wriggle free and thank the girl for coming. She hands me her ticket, which I slash and dash the Sharpie across, then she takes out her phone.

"Selfie?" I ask.

She looks around, and her eyes land on Mia. She holds out the phone in a pleading gesture that means "Would you mind?" in both Czech and English.

"This is one of my amazing backup vocalists," I say to the fan. "Mia Sawyer."

The fan just holds her phone out, waiting. Mia's identity is apparently not a point of curiosity for her.

Mia takes the phone with a polite smile, and the girl slips her arm around me. Mia's gaze flits to the hand gripping my waist as she gets the camera ready, then takes a couple shots.

The next fans come up—a group of three young women—and they immediately hand their phones to Mia.

“Oh,” I say. “I don't think—”

“It's okay,” Mia says, juggling the devices. “May as well make myself useful.”

The three girls are going off in Czech, and I have no idea if they're talking to each other or me, but there seems to be some dispute about which two get to stand next to me for the picture.

The problem is solved by taking a group picture and then three individuals after. The last girl—the one who didn't get to stand by me in the group shot—turns her body toward me and places one of her hands on my chest.

Mia looks at the hand, then at me.

I twist my mouth to the side, admittedly not loving the contact, but also amused by Mia's reaction to it.

“Here,” Mia says, stepping toward us. With a smile on her face, she gently takes the fan's hand and relocates it to my arm, then pats it.

The girl says something in Czech that sounds annoyed, but she leaves her hand on my arm for the picture. Once it's taken, she gives my bicep a little squeeze for good measure.

Mia opens her mouth to say something, then apparently decides against it and hands the girl her phone.

Her dodgy glances and brow-furrowing escalate as the line moves, and before you know it, she's embraced her role as meet-and-greet photographer slash personal bodyguard.

“Hey, hands where I can see them,” she says as two girls' hands migrate toward my butt.

“Ever heard of #metoo?” she says to another girl, who goes in for a kiss on my cheek.

I don't know if this is a completely charitable gig she's taken on, protecting me from overzealous fans, or if maybe, just maybe, she doesn't like seeing other women with their hands all over me.

Either way, I kind of like it. Paul's always let me handle fan interactions the way I want to, but sometimes I wish he would play the bad guy a bit more.

When one fan undoes the top button of her shirt for me to sign her chest, I can't help glancing at Mia to see how she'll quash this one.

"Oh, for the love of Pete," she says. But she doesn't move. I half-expected her to come do up the button herself.

But nope. I'm on my own for this one.

I hate signing skin. It doesn't stay still like paper, and I'm always worried about positioning my hand in a way that will lead to an accidental boob graze—and a potential lawsuit. I keep my wrist up as I do the worst signature of my entire life under the woman's clavicle. For her picture, she pulls her shirt to the side so it's visible in the shot.

A lot of the fans are normal, thankfully, and have a proper sense of boundaries. Mia is especially helpful with them, offering both portrait and landscape orientation shots, and saying goodbye to them in Czech.

She draws a hard line, though, when a fan grabs my shirt and pulls like she's trying to rip it off. Mia intervenes, kind but firm, as she helps the fan keep her hands to herself. Or at least a little more to herself—her arms are still around me. The fan doesn't speak English except for a few lines she was kind enough to sing to me, and she gives Mia the stink eye.

"I know, right?" I say to the girl. "She gets pretty jealous."

"So jealous," Mia says mockingly as she snaps the shot and hands the fan her phone.

I grab Mia's arm before she can step away again, and I pull her toward me as I take the phone out of my back pocket with my other hand.

“What’re you doing?” she asks.

“You’ve been waiting so patiently.” I flip the camera and hold it out for a selfie. I press the side of my head against Mia’s, smile, and snap a shot before she can compose her expression—or hit me.

“Sorry, that’s all I’ve got time for,” I say, feigning sympathy. I jab my thumb behind me toward the fans. “Got this whole line to get through.”

“Behold me in despair,” she says flatly as the next fan steps up and hands her a phone. “You didn’t even give me time to physically assault you like the rest of the fans got to do.”

“We can arrange for that later,” I say with a wink.

I’m not sure what my problem is and why I have to act like such an idiot around Mia. Her disdain for me makes me do weird and dumb things that reinforce her reasons to think badly of me.

I feel guilty she’s been stuck on photographer duty for so long, so I call Paul over and ask him to relieve her.

When I look around for her a couple minutes later, she’s gone, and so are Kelly and Rose. By the time the meet-and-greet’s over, I’m ready to hang out in my bus with people less eager to grope me. Mia is the CEO of that group.

But when Rose and Kelly step inside the bus, joining the rest of the crew and a couple of girls the audio guys invited, Mia’s not with them.

“Where’s Mia?” I ask, trying to ignore my disappointment.

They shoot each other a glance.

“She changed the second we got back and headed out to see the city,” Rose says.

I swear under my breath. I promised her she’d get to see the city today, but things got so crazy, there wasn’t time for it.

“Think she’ll be okay by herself?” I ask.

“Um, did you *see* her with the fans?” Kelly asks. “She’ll be fine. She won’t take crap from anyone.”

I chuckle. I, of all people, know this. I can't help sending her a text, though.

AUSTIN

Where are you?

MIA

In Prague.

Okay, so she doesn't want to tell me where she is. Maybe she's worried I'll join her. I wouldn't put it past myself. I was looking forward to hanging out in the bus with everyone, but walking around Prague with Mia is tempting.

AUSTIN

It's not nice to bail on someone's party without letting them know first.

MIA

I would've RSVP'd if I thought you'd miss me.

You're the one person I really wanted to come.

I'm not about to say that. Or even acknowledge it. Yeah, I'm attracted to Mia.

Really attracted to her.

But all her signals say, "*Back off,*" and even if they didn't, it's not like I have time for a relationship. The life I lead isn't conducive to anything but short-lived connections with women, and making things weird with Mia would *not* help this tour.

So far, I've been giving extra padding to her reasons for disliking me. It's probably the safest way forward.

AUSTIN

I was more worried about you missing me *wink emoji*

MIA

Never stop dreaming, Austin.

Smiling slightly, I stick my phone in my back pocket and focus on having fun with everyone present, including the friend of one of the sound guys who's been staring at me through her lashes since she got here.

9

MIA

PRAGUE IS PARADISE. I'm convinced of that by the time I've walked across Charles Bridge toward Malá Strana and the castle. It's 11 p.m., but the city is bustling with tourists. The charm factor is off the charts, and I shoot off a couple of picture texts to Gemma, even though they can't do it justice.

I pull out my phone to take a video of the adorable street I'm standing at the bottom of. It slopes upward, the buildings lining it pretty pastel colors. The entire scene is full of so much cheer and energy.

The video gets cut short by a text message from Austin.

BABE

So you can order 20x30 prints for your bedroom.

Underneath is the photo of us from the meet-and-greet. Austin looks, of course, picture perfect, his cheek pressed against mine while I look half-confused, half-annoyed.

In the background, a few of the fans waiting in line are visible. One in particular looks like she wants to make a grab for the Sharpie in Austin's hand and gouge my eyes out.

MIA

If the girl in the background doesn't kill me first.

BABE

Oh, wow. Yeah. She's...not happy.

MIA

To be fair, neither am I.

BABE

Why? You missing me?

MIA

I mean not happy in the picture. I'm completely happy right now, thanks.

“Texting a lover?”

I glance at the accented waiter addressing me. He's holding a menu and wearing a white-collared shirt with a napkin thrown over his shoulder. Definitely out looking for tourists to lure into dinner.

“That smile,” he says with a heavy accent, pointing to my mouth. “I know it.”

I slip my phone in my back pocket and rearrange my expression into something more neutral. But he's right. I *was* smiling.

I politely wish him a goodnight and purposely don't check the text message when it buzzes in my pocket, focusing on enjoying the sights until the crowds start to thin out and I remember we have a 7:00 rehearsal in the morning.

I don't look at my phone until I get to the tour buses.

BABE

Sorry we didn't get out to see the city earlier today. If I'd known you were going tonight, I would've come with you.

My eyes hone in on the word *we*. Did he really think the plan was to go out together? And would he really have come with me if I'd let him know?

More importantly, why does part of me wish he *had* come?



THE SECOND NIGHT of the concert is every bit the rush the first night was. The energy is unlike anything I've experienced. Hearing my voice—blended with Rose's and Kelly's, of course—piped all around the venue as fans cheer and sing along?

Chills.

I'm so glad I said yes to the tour, but now the bug has bitten, and I can't help feeling the tiniest bit jealous—okay, a lot more than a tiny bit—of Austin. He's the star of this show. It's his music we're all singing along to. This whole vibe is his creation, and to know that strangers across the world who don't even speak the same language paid money to hear and watch him?

He has everything I want.

Professionally, I mean.

Fine. If I'm being honest with myself, there's a lot about Austin I'd want in a man. He's funny, attractive, and I think he's even thoughtful? His publicly thanking the girls and me both nights of the concert, his introducing me to his fans at the meet-and-greet—kind of promoting me to them—those were thoughtful actions.

But call me old-fashioned, I want a man whose eyes aren't wandering and who isn't comfortable being groped by strangers the way Austin seems to be. I want to be flirted with,

but I want to be the *only* one he's flirting with. And that's not the case with Austin. Not by a long shot.

So, when he looked me straight in the eyes on stage tonight after pulling off his shirt to shrieks and screams and winked, I didn't think anything of it.

At least not anything beyond it being him trying to embarrass me.

We head to the buses with the bittersweet knowledge that tomorrow we leave Prague for Munich. Which means I'm going out again. I will see Old Town Square if it's the last thing I do.

Austin's bus already has a steady flow of traffic. I'm not sure if it's because it's the beginning of the tour or if this is how it always is. I'm admittedly curious about the goings-on there, but given what I saw at the meet-and-greet, I don't think I'd come out of that situation feeling inspired. I'm not walking in on a Doctors Without Borders planning session or anything. This is a celebrity-on-tour-partying-with-his-groupies scenario.

In a way, it's maddening to see all these people encouraging and reinforcing Austin's high opinion of himself.

"Mia!" Austin yells from the door of his bus as Kelly, Rose, and I reach our own. "You're coming, right?"

I feel Rose's and Kelly's eyes on me, but I keep mine on Austin, well-aware my cheeks are pink at being singled out. Probably because he already knows Kelly and Rose are an auto-yes. "Um, I think so?"

He looks at me for a sec, then points a finger at Kelly and Rose. "Make sure she comes, okay?"

"You've got it!" Kelly says with a big smile as Rose nods.

He flashes them a smile. "You ladies are the best."

They erupt in an unintelligible chorus of *aww shucks*-like responses, and he winks at me, then disappears into his bus.

I go up the stairs and open the bus door like nothing just happened, but I know Rose and Kelly well enough by now.

“Um, what was that?” Rose asks the second the door closes behind us.

“What?” I shed my heels and keep my eyes away from hers.

Rose and Kelly share a glance.

“The part where Austin invited you personally to come to his bus.”

I roll my eyes and reach behind me to get to my zipper. “Because I didn’t go last night.”

“Uh huh.” Rose smirks and cocks a brow. “You know what they say about Austin’s bus, right?”

I shimmy out of my dress. “He’s had it for a day. It already has a reputation?”

“From the tour he opened,” Rose clarifies, unamused by my sass.

“They say you go inside a girl,” Kelly says, “and come out a woman.”

I cringe. “Ew. What does that even mean? Are these prepubescent girls he’s inviting inside, because that’s not only creepy but illegal.” I was actually considering going, but nope. My name will not be appearing on a Victims of Austin Sheppard list.

“Don’t play stupid, Mia,” Rose says, sliding a tube of red lipstick over her lips.

Kelly’s staring at me, though.

“What?” I pull the sleeve of my jumpsuit overalls over my shoulder.

“You’re wearing *that* to the after-party?”

“Yeah. If by after-party, you mean my stroll around the city.”

“N-n-no,” Kelly says.

“Y-y-yes,” I reply, putting my phone inside my crossbody bag.

“We promised him we’d bring you.”

I shrug. “Shouldn’t have done that. Besides, he can’t expect you to force me there.”

“Come on, Mia,” Rose says, running a powder brush over her face. “Do you know how many women would die to have Austin Sheppard beg them to come to his after-party?”

“First of all,” I reply, “yes. I happened to be at the concert tonight to see a small but representative sample of those women screaming and crying and throwing pieces of clothing at him. Second, he did not *beg*.”

Rose zips up her makeup bag and looks at me. “That’s because Austin Sheppard *doesn’t* beg. He doesn’t need to. But he got as close as he’ll ever get.”

“You guys are reading into things,” I say. “He’s messing with me. It’s what he does. Besides”—I pull a couple of tampons out of a box in the cupboard and wave them in the air—“I’m already a woman.” I stuff them in my bag.

“Just come for a little bit,” Kelly says. “Then you can go off and play tourist.”

They’re not going to give up. I realize this, and every minute I spend arguing with them is a minute I’m not seeing this lovably pastel city.

“Fine,” I say, pulling on my sneakers.

Rose and Kelly high-five each other, and a couple of minutes later, we’re out the door. They link their arms through mine, and we head for Austin’s bus. The door is closed, but the sound of muffled music speaks clearly to the vibe inside.

I’m not a party person, and I’ve had enough loud music for the day—with plenty more to come for the next three weeks.

“Hold on. My shoelace.” We all stop, and I unlink our arms and squat. I put my fingers to my laces, then make a run for it like Usain Bolt.

“Hey!”

“Mia!”

Still running, I raise my hand and wave. “Don’t hate me!”

I feel a little bad. But not too bad. I’m not dumb enough to think Austin actually cares whether I’m there. He has plenty of other people to distract him. And if he *does* care? Well, there are plenty of groupies who’d be more than happy to lend a shoulder—and more—for him to cry on.

I slow down as I reach the end of the street, then pull out my phone to open my map app. It takes it a second to figure out where I am amidst the tall, stone buildings surrounding me. My blue dot jumps around, then finally settles in one place. I bring the phone closer to my face and squint, trying to read the Czech street names and compare them to the ones the streetlamps illuminate.

“Boo!”

I startle at the hands squeezing my shoulders, then whip around to find Austin grinning at me.

“Glanced out the window and saw you ditch Rose and Kelly,” he explains.

My heart thinks I just got mugged by a stranger in a foreign city, and I smack Austin’s chest. Hard. But his chest is *also* hard. It feels like it smacked me back, but I suppress the urge to nurse my hand.

He wrinkles his nose and rubs his chest. “Violence is not the answer, Mia.”

“Oh, and sneaking up on a defenseless woman in a strange city is?” I say as my heart slows. “What are you doing?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not. You can’t leave your own party. Besides, you don’t even know where I’m going.”

He points to my map. “Neither do you. Anyway, I’m just along for the ride, so it doesn’t matter where you’re going.”

“I wanted to check out the city dump,” I lie.

One of his brows goes up. “At”—he checks his watch—“11 o’clock at night?”

“I hear that’s the best time.”

“Gotcha,” he says, that little smirk making his eyes twinkle. “And I take it the dump is located in”—he peers at my phone, and I hurry to turn off the screen—“Old Town Square?”

Dang. He saw.

He jerks his head and starts walking, hands in his pockets. “Come on.”

“Austin.” I don’t budge. He looks very boy-next-door right now in his jeans and t-shirt, and the fact that I’m flattered he came after me is setting off warning sirens in my head. “You really don’t need to come with me. I’m fine. Look, I even have pepper spray.” I show it to him as evidence.

He stops and eyes it warily. “Is that reassurance or a threat?”

I don’t dignify that with a response.

“Do you really not want me to come?”

“I don’t need security,” I say, avoiding his question.

“If I thought you needed security, I would’ve sent someone else. I’m here because I want to see the city with you.”

And suddenly my goal for the night has changed. It’s no longer to see Old Town Square. It’s to urgently find some sort of device that can keep my heart from listening to anything Austin Sheppard says.

“If you don’t want me to join you, though, I’ll go,” he says.

I don’t answer right away. Again, I’m trying to find a way to get rid of him that’s diplomatic. Or maybe I just want him to convince me he genuinely would rather walk around Prague than party with the people in his bus. What’ll Rose and Kelly think if they know he came with me instead?

“I think you should go back to your party,” I say slowly.

He holds my gaze for a second, then gives a quick nod. “All right, then. Have fun at the dump.” He winks as he

brushes past me.

I shut my eyes and clench my teeth. I don't want him to go. I guess I wanted him to fight to stay, which is dumb. Besides, his little surprise stunt did make me realize how vulnerable I am. *Dang you, Austin Sheppard.*

“Wait,” I say.

AUSTIN FACES AWAY FROM ME, but he's stopped. If I had to guess, he's smirking biggly right now.

"Fine," I say. "You can come."

He turns on his heels like an eleven-year-old wearing Heelys and faces me. "But do you *want* me to come?"

I stay silent. My pride will absolutely not allow me to utter those words.

He walks toward me, his mouth drawing into a smile until he's standing right in front of me. "You are one stubborn woman, Mia. Just say it. You want me to come."

I'm quiet as the grave. I'm Ariel after her run-in with Ursula.

"Here, I'll help you." He reaches for my cheeks and smooshes my lips together. "*Oh, Austin,*" he says in a high-pitched, swoony voice, "*please come with me. I desperately want you to.*"

He gives a big, fake sigh. "Okaaaay, Mia. Jeez. Twist my arm."

I reach for his mouth, squishing his lips just like he did to me and keeping my voice high and nasal. "*Mia, please validate me. I desperately want you to want me.*"

His cheeks resist my efforts, pulling into a smile. "Is that so bad? Wanting you to like me?"

I let my hand drop and start walking. "Why do you care?"

“Because I like *you*.”

The lines this one has. I look at my map. “Right.”

“I’m serious,” he says, coming up beside me.

“No, I mean we *turn right* here.” It’s better if I just ignore his attempts to charm me. It’s like the kid’s book *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*, but this edition is called *If You Give a Player the Time of Day*.

We head into the subway station on a long escalator going down. It’s a lot more crowded than I would’ve expected for the time of night, and the people hurrying down the stairs force us against the right side and much closer than I had planned on getting to Austin tonight.

I’m new to the whole subway thing, but I pretend like I know what I’m doing. Unfortunately, Austin has to intervene twice to keep me from wandering in the wrong direction. Probably toward the actual city dump.

We make it to our stop, and I reluctantly surrender to Austin’s superior knowledge of all things Europe and let him lead the way. With him guiding, I can admire my surroundings a lot better anyway. Surroundings not including him.

The city is alive, with signs for hot wine, streetlights illuminating the gray cobbled sidewalks, and people lined up for a midnight snack. The city reminds me of Easter, with its pastel yellows, greens, pinks, and blues.

I glance over at Austin, who’s looking at me with the hint of a smile.

“What?”

He shakes his head and looks forward again. “Just remembering how I felt when I first saw Prague. It’s about to get even better. Come here.” He jerks his head toward a shop with a big Czech word over it. We get in line behind two people, and I try to peer inside.

There are a couple of workers standing over an array of spits. But they’re not roasting meat.

“You can’t come to Prague without having *trdelník*,” Austin says.

“Having what now?”

“Chimney cakes.” We step forward, and Austin orders two. They’re spiral-shaped pastries, cooked to golden-brown perfection over the spits, then filled with any number of options.

I pull out my credit card, but Austin stiff-arms me and gives the lady his instead. Sixty seconds later, we’re both armed with toasted, sugar-covered cylinders full of Nutella and cream.

I strategize for a second before going in for my first bite. Melted Nutella and whipped cream are a standout combination on their own, but with this sugar donut-like thing? My heart is officially off the market.

“Good?” Austin asks.

I lick my lips and nod, feeling slightly sheepish about my enthusiastic dive in.

“Glad you’re enjoying it,” he says, reaching for my face.

I swat it away.

He puts both hands up and laughs. “Whoa. Simmer down. You’ve got a giant daub of Nutella on your nose, but hey, you do you.”

I swipe my fingers across my nose, and sure enough, they come back covered in hazelnut cream. “Did I get it?”

He tries to suppress a smile and clears his throat. “Sure. Yeah.”

“Austin...”

“Would you like my help, Mia? Do you need help saying the words?” He lifts a threatening hand toward my mouth.

I pull away and sigh. “Would you please help me get the Nutella off my nose, Austin?”

He grins. “Why, of course, Mia. I will gladly do that for you.” He steps toward me and uses his thumb to wipe the tip of my nose. It takes more than one try, and I feel like a four-year-old. “You really got in there, didn’t you?” He finishes and takes a step back.

“Do you have a better way, oh Master of the Chimney Cakes?” We start walking again, and he holds his *trdelník* out, then tears a piece off his, using his fingers.

Why did that option not cross my mind? I just *had* to go in like a ravenous pig.

“But hey,” he says, tipping his head back and dropping the piece in his mouth, “there’s no wrong way to eat a chimney cake. And I like a girl who goes after what she wants.”

“I’m sure you do,” I mutter under my breath, pulling off a section of mine.

“Hey now,” he says, rushing ahead and blocking my way by standing in front of me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

But my eyes are locked on the view behind him.

MY HEART KICKS into high gear. Mia's staring at me like I dropped out of her dreams.

Wait, no. It's something behind me. I turn.

Ah, right. Old Town Square. Understandable. It's a pretty amazing place.

But still... dang. Got my hopes up there for a second.

I take the opportunity of Mia's focus on the square to look at her. She keeps her guard up around me, but right now, she's all wonder and amazement. I'm not on her mind at all. If she was an emoji, she'd be star eyes.

I love her quirky sense of style, especially in contrast to what she wore for the concert. She's all about loose and comfortable clothes. Both of us might be able to fit inside those overalls she's wearing. It'd be a tight fit, but I wouldn't mind being nice and cozy with her. Until she slapped me.

I can't really blame her for thinking I'm nothing but a cocky bro. It's my image in the media, and it's been easier to live up—or down—to those expectations than to swim against the tide by countering them. Like most people, Mia doesn't take me seriously. It's why it's been easier to go for flings with fans every now and then than to try for anything long-term. But Mia's got me thinking farther ahead, and that's scary.

I TURN and look at the bustling square in front of us. Multiple church spires, the iconic turreted towers, a huge statue, and a bunch of colorful buildings envelop an enormous, cobbled plaza. People sit on benches, zip around on segways, and stroll

through the lamplit square. It's even prettier than I remember it.

Using my finger, I tip Mia's chimney cake to stop it from spilling warm Nutella all over the cobblestones.

She blinks and readjusts the dessert. "Sorry."

"Don't be. Want to walk around?"

She nods, still distracted by everything there is to look at in a place like this. We head for the center of the square, then toward the clock tower, eating our chimney cakes and talking about the concerts as we pause at the dials and rings, then continue along the perimeter of the square.

"This way isn't all that much less messy than my way, you know," she says, grabbing one of the last pieces of her chimney cake as we come to a bench under a group of trees. Her fingers are covered in Nutella and melted whipped cream.

"By all means, do it your way," I say, tossing the wrapper of my *trdelník* into the nearby garbage can.

She looks at me for a second, then swipes my cheek with her chocolatey fingers, her expression full of satisfaction. She looks like she just recited the first fifty numbers of pi correctly.

Before she can run away, I snatch her wrist and pull her against me. She's still smiling, her eyes shifting to my cheek, where I can feel the Nutella. "You sure you want to play this game?" I ask.

"Play nice now."

I can see the little that's left of her chimney cake in my peripheral vision. It's the dregs, which means it's where all the Nutella has pooled. Bingo.

She anticipates my next move, stretching it as far away as she possibly can given the hold I have on her other hand. But she's at a disadvantage, and any thought of playing fairly is long gone. I'm a man on a mission, and that mission is revenge. Or keeping Mia close.

Let's go with the first option.

Still holding her wrist, I pin it behind her back and pull her against me, then reach for her chimney cake with my other hand.

She struggles, but she's laughing—a laugh I've only heard from a distance, usually when she's with Kelly and Rose. It's close now, though. So close I'm tempted to pretend I can't reach the *trdelník* just so I can keep hearing it.

I hook my fingers into the wrapper holding the last of her chimney cake, vaguely aware of the glob of Nutella I manage to snag, since my mind is hyper-focused on the feel of Mia against me.

But the game's up now. I have no excuse to detain her any longer. I keep her against me, though, as I take my Nutella-covered fingers and hold them up threateningly between our faces.

Her eyes are alight with energy as she watches my hand. Maybe I'm imagining it, but I could swear something in them says, "*Do it. I dare you.*"

"Hmm," I say, letting my eyes wander all over her face. "Where shall I begin my masterpiece? Ah. I know."

I press two Nutella-soaked fingers to her lips, following their line like I'm putting lipstick on her. Surprisingly, she stays still, but those eyes... they promise revenge—revenge for *my* revenge, which was revenge for *her* revenge. This is getting complicated.

My fingers trace the cupid's bow, stop at the edge, then continue down the slope of her full bottom lip, which looks even more deliciously kissable than usual. Maybe this wasn't my wisest idea...

I finish up and pull my hand away, tilting my head to the side to admire my work.

Mia's brows go up, waiting for my verdict while also communicating *vengeance is mine*. That message shouldn't excite me, but it does. *Mia* excites me. And even though I just ate an entire chimney cake full of Nutella, my imagination is

running wild with the thought of kissing off every last bit of what I just put on her lips.

My gaze flicks to hers as I realize I've been staring at her lips for... minutes? Hours?

Her eyes are on mine, and I'm positive she knows what I'm thinking. What I'm not sure of is what *she's* thinking. She's not struggling. She's not shooting daggers at me with her eyes. She's just... watchful. Waiting to see what I'll do.

She didn't try to break free when I ran my finger along her lips. Would she let me kiss her too? Something in her eyes tells me she just might.

Suddenly, she drops her gaze, turning her head to the side and licking the Nutella off her lips inconspicuously.

Moment passed.

I shake my thoughts away. "Not bad, if I say so myself."

She raises her head again, her lips still almost completely brown. "Yeah?" She makes a sudden movement, but I'm onto her.

I knock the wrapper out of her hand before she can smear it on my face, like I'm sure she meant to do. It tumbles to the ground, along with the last bit of *trdelník*.

Eyes wide, she looks me straight in the eye. "You owe me a chimney cake."

"No," I say. "I owe you a *fraction* of a chimney cake, and not even that. I bought it for you in the first place." I know. I've still got her against me. I'm just waiting for her to tell me to let her go—to struggle again or show any sign she doesn't want to be this close.

What is it with me and Mia? She does something to me. Not to sound like an arrogant blowhard, but I have girls throwing themselves at me on the regular. So, why is it Mia I want? Is it just because she doesn't want *me*?

"Any chance you'll let me go anytime soon?" she asks conversationally.

“Do you *want* me to?” Could I be any more desperate? Or annoying? Definitely not.

“What do you need, a notarized statement? Yes, Austin, I want you to let go of me.”

I release her immediately and take a step back, hoping my face doesn't show how stupid I feel. Did I read her wrong? Was she really wanting me to let go of her that whole time?

Maybe she's less wrong about me than I thought. Maybe I'm too quick to assume women want attention like that from me.

“Hold on,” I say. “I'll grab some napkins.”

I run to a nearby booth selling *halušky* and snag a handful of napkins. My embarrassment is morphing into guilt as I watch Mia sitting on a bench, using her phone as a mirror to wipe the Nutella from her lips.

“Here.” I hand her some napkins and sit next to her.

“Thanks,” she says, dabbing it on her lips until she's satisfied it's gone. She turns off her phone and glances at me. “You've still got it on your cheek.”

Right. Forgot about that. I use a napkin to wipe it clean, my brow furrowed. “Mia?”

She crumples up the napkins she used. “Hm?”

“I'm sorry.”

“For what? Wasting a perfectly good chimney cake? Holding me hostage? Finger painting my face with chocolate and hazelnut?”

“Um, yeah. Mostly the second part. But all of it, I guess. I just thought... It doesn't matter. I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

She chuckles softly and takes the dirty napkin from my hand, adding it to hers. “Do you even *have* physical boundaries?”

“Sheesh, Mia. Tell me how you *really* feel.”

“I’m not trying to be rude. It just seems like you don’t mind having everyone all over you. Like at the meet-and-greet.”

I sit against the bench and stretch out my legs, staring at my sneakers. “Not everything is as it seems.”

“So, you *don’t* like it?”

I laugh.

“So you *do*?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“How is it not that simple? Either you enjoy it, or you don’t, right? I personally don’t like having strangers all up in my space like that.”

I cross my ankles. “I’ve gotten used to it I guess. But no, I don’t always like it—especially when people are really aggressive and treat me like I’m some piece of meat. But it’s part of the gig.”

“It doesn’t *have* to be. You can draw boundaries, you know.”

“Yeah? And how do you propose I do that? Someplace like last night—a meet-and-greet—do I make an announcement telling people where they can touch me? Do I have a life-size model of myself showing where they can stand, where their hands go, and what parts of me are off-limits?”

She shrugs. “Sure.”

“And when a fan violates the rules?”

“Send ‘em packing.”

I cross my arms and shake my head. She doesn’t understand.

“What? You’re shaking your head. Tell me why.” She turns toward me, resting one knee on the bench.

I mirror her so we’re facing each other. “These people pay my bills, Mia. I can’t exist without them.”

“Yeah, they pay your bills. That doesn’t mean they can do whatever they want to you.”

“Fine.” I stand up. “Show me, then.”

She looks at me, bemused. “Show you what?”

“Show me what you’d do in my position. Let’s see how you’d handle it, Boundary Boss.” I put out my hand, and even though she rolls her eyes, she lets me pull her up. I face her. “First, a bit of context. You’re Mia Sawyer, superstar musician.”

She laughs. “Good to know how you’d describe yourself. Go on.”

“You’re known by your fans as being charming and likable, flirtatious, fun.”

She cocks a brow. “Their words, not yours?”

I ignore her and take a step closer. “I’m one of your biggest fans. I’ve paid hard-earned money and picked up extra shifts to come see you perform, scraping together pennies and going without my morning Starbucks for the last month so I could pay for the meet-and-greet add-on.”

I step closer, and her playful expression flickers slightly. “I bought a special outfit for tonight, knowing I’d see you. I have every single one of your songs memorized and a poster of you on my ceiling that I look at every night before I go to sleep.”

I take another step, and our knees brush. Mia’s eyelids flicker, and her smile disappears. “I dream about you sometimes. About what it would feel like to be with you.”

Her eyes are fixed on me, unblinking. She swallows as I brush my fingers lightly down her arm, my eyes still locked on hers. “I fantasize about what it would be like to be yours.” Heart beating like horse hooves, I slip my hand around her waist and keep my voice low. “I’d marry you in a heartbeat if you’d have me, but if not, I’ll take whatever you’ll give me.” She takes in a shaky breath, and I lean in to whisper in her ear. “And now I finally have my moment with you.”

I DON'T KNOW who I am, where I am, or what's happening to me. All I know is Austin's hand is on my waist, his warm breath is grazing my ear, and my heart rate is through the roof. He's saying words in my ear that make my blood feel like fire in my veins.

Austin's voice is barely a whisper. "Where are those boundaries now?"

I step back, and he drops his hand from my waist. I glance at our surroundings, grounding myself. We're still at Old Town Square, and even though the number of people has diminished, there are still a couple hundred people around. None of them are looking at us.

"Okay, I get it," I say, happy my voice doesn't sound as wobbly as my knees. "You've proven your point. But I still maintain that boundaries are possible."

"Fine," he says. "I mean, you failed the test, but let's pretend you didn't."

I shoot him an unamused look. I feel like a complete idiot knowing how affected I was by his *test*—and how unaffected *he* was. It shouldn't surprise me. This is Austin Sheppard we're talking about. He autographs women's bodies, for crying out loud.

He claps his hands and rubs them together. "Give me some strategies, Mia. I'm ready for 'em."

"Great."

I can do this. I can be just as nonchalant about it as he is. Easy peasy.

“For example,” I say, “let’s say a girl comes up to you for her picture and...” I hesitate. Do I have to show him?

He raises his brows, waiting. He doesn’t think I can do this.

But I totally can. I want him to know I don’t melt into a puddle of useless swoon-goo whenever he’s near me.

“Let’s say she puts an arm around your waist.” I demonstrate. “And one on your chest.” I put my palm on his chest, clenching my teeth to ignore the feel of his pec under my hand. It’s just a pec. A firm, shapely pec under a thin shirt I could easily rip off.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

“Okay,” he says. “What now?”

I keep my hand light on his chest, which is dumb because I’m supposed to be playing the part of an overaggressive fan. “Now you draw the line. Are you comfortable with the hand around your waist?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. That’s normal for pictures.”

Yep, this is all entirely normal.

“What about the one on your chest?” I ask.

He looks down at me, and there’s the slightest hesitation as he meets my eye. The air in my lungs evaporates.

“Um,” he says, “not with a stranger, no.”

Does that mean he *is* comfortable with *my* hand on his chest? *Not important, Mia.* “Totally normal. So, what should you do?”

“I don’t know. If I push her hand away, she’ll feel stupid.”

“Not if you do it while saying something to make sure she knows you appreciate her—just not her grabby hands. *Thanks so much for coming to my concert.* Something like that.”

He nods, then pulls my hand away from his chest. “Thank you for coming to my concert,” he repeats. “What do I do with her hand now?”

He’s still holding mine awkwardly, and I can’t help but laugh. “Just let go of it. What other options do you have?”

He threads his fingers through mine. “I could do *that*.”

I shoot him a look. “Yeah, *if* you want her to think you’re into her. Are you?”

His brow hitches, and his lip pulls up at one side. “Are we talking about a random fan or about you?”

I pull my hand and roll my eyes, but he tightens his hold.

“Okay, okay. No, of course I’m not into her.” He lets go of my hand.

“See? Not that hard.”

“Not that easy, either.”

I have no clue if he’s talking about letting go of my hand specifically or about drawing boundaries. I’m going to go with the second one because it keeps my heart rate steadier.

“Look,” I say. “You claim you’re known for being charming and fun—”

“I am.”

“Sure. So, use those things to your benefit when you’re drawing a boundary. Distract the fan from taking offense by saying something to let them know you’re not being rude.”

He looks at me, then chucks me under the chin. “You’re a smart cookie, Mia.”

I grab his hand and pull it away, gently but firmly. “Thanks for coming to my concert.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “Very smooth.”

I smile, but I secretly hope he doesn’t think I hate that kind of contact from him. That’s not the problem. The problem is how much I like it... me and every one of his fans.

He takes a seat on the bench and sighs. “This stuff is hard for me. I hate disappointing people. And as a performer, I don’t feel like I fully belong to myself.”

I take a seat next to him. “What do you mean?”

He stares out at the square, where two people are playing a game of tag on segways. “People are paying for an experience when they come to a concert, and Fusion has gone to a lot of trouble to set up expectations for that experience.”

I steal a glance at his face. This is the most real I’ve seen Austin, and I don’t know what to do with it. I’ve been looking at him like this vapid pretty boy, willing to do anything for fame and admiration. I hadn’t really considered what sort of stuff he faces along with that fame—or that he might not love every part of it.

“It’s your career, though, right?” I say. “And your music.”

“Is it?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

He shakes his head and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Nothing. How are you liking the tour?”

I don’t respond immediately, not ready to move on from what he said. But clearly, he doesn’t want to talk about it. “It’s been incredible. I mean, are there things I’d rather sing on stage than, ‘*Hot mama, look at those curves?*’”

He mumbles something under his breath.

“What?” I ask, sure I misheard.

“I didn’t say anything.”

I narrow my eyes, but he just looks at me, waiting for me to continue. “Despite that, it’s an experience I’ll never forget. A dream.” How many times have I pictured myself in the center of that stage like Austin gets to be?

“Not a dream,” he says. “A peek into your future.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

“Why not?” He fixes his gaze on me.

“So many reasons.”

“Name one.”

I arch a brow. “Have you *seen* my social media following?”

“So what? I bet it’s growing faster now, right?”

It is. Just in the past couple of days, I’ve gotten more new followers than in the past few months combined. I’m positive it’s a result of Austin announcing my name both nights.

“Yeah, at this rate, I’ll celebrate hitting 100,000 followers with my fellow elderly care center residents.”

“Now, *that* would be a party,” he says. “I’m invited, right?”

“Definitely not. You’d steal the show, not to mention scandalize all the old ladies by ripping your shirt off.”

“Hey, I’m just giving people what they want.”

“Exactly,” I say. “I’m not like you. I’m not going to take off my shirt on stage—”

“That would definitely cause a stir.”

“—or let random fans kiss me. I want to be successful for my talent.”

His smile flickers. “Right.”

My eyes widen. “I didn’t mean—”

He puts up a hand and smiles. “Don’t apologize. I get it.”

I swallow, feeling sick to my stomach. I *did* mean that. It’s exactly what I meant. And that makes me feel terrible.

He checks his phone and stands up. “We should probably get back.”

I shut my eyes and push myself up. “Yeah.”

I’m the worst human on this planet. Austin was finally getting a little more real with me, and how do I repay him? Insulting his talent.

We start the walk to the buses, and Austin keeps up a steady flow of small talk until I can't stand it.

"Hey." I stop walking.

Austin turns, brows raised.

"About back there..."

"Mia, it's fine. Really. Forget about it, okay?"

I bite my lip, wishing I could read this guy and whether he really doesn't care. He *shouldn't*. Clearly, he's doing things right. He's the rising star. I'm the backup singer with fewer followers than the neighbor kid who posts five times a day about his pet mouse.

"At least let me say thank you," I say, "for asking me to come on tour. You could've asked a hundred other people."

He takes a step toward me. "Why *do* you think I asked you to come on tour, Mia?"

I meet his gaze without responding. I don't know what to say when Austin's full and undivided attention is on me.

"You weren't some charity case," he says. "I asked you to come because you're incredibly talented. It was a selfish business decision."

I nod. Austin and I are in a business relationship. That's a very useful thing for me to be reminded of tonight.

And every night.

I OPEN the door to my bus and step inside to find Paul lying on one of the two couches.

He sits up, rubbing his eyes like he's been sleeping. "Where've you been?"

"Out." I don't feel like chatting. Pretending I felt like it on the walk back with Mia took it out of me.

Paul peers out the window while I slump on the couch across from him.

"Were you with Mia?" he asks.

"Yeah."

The silence following my response lasts so long, I glance at him and find he's watching me.

"What?"

He shrugs. "It's just not like you—skipping out on a party to wander around the city with a girl."

I don't respond. It *is* like me. I had a much better time with Mia than I would've had back here. Tonight I realized just how much I like Mia. Which is why it sucked so badly when she reminded me what she really thinks. To her, I'm a talentless musician with no boundaries whatsoever.

And maybe she's right. I've always taken the attitude that I'd do whatever it took to be successful. It's gotten me this far, so I guess I can't totally regret it, but it does leave me

wondering whether I actually have any talent. If I did, would my label reject song after song from me?

“You two seem to get along well,” Paul says in the least subtle way imaginable.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He tosses a pillow at me. “Come on, man. Talk to me. Is there something going on there?”

“What? No.” *But I wish there was.* I don’t want to wish that. Women only spell trouble. I’ve discovered and rediscovered and rerecovered it. They come for the fame, and I let myself get attached at my own peril.

“Good,” Paul says.

I look over at him, frowning. “What does that mean?”

He sits up and runs a hand through his hair, then grabs his jacket. “It just makes things a lot simpler. For both of you.”

I sit up too, watching him. “Simpler how?”

“Those kinds of things—*entanglements*, according to Jada Pinkett-Smith—tend to backfire and cause problems we don’t need on tour. Fusion is watching, and any problems make a U.S. leg less likely. Besides... Austin.” He quirks a brow at me. “Come on, man. You’re becoming an icon. You think all these young ladies want to see you off the market? It’d crush their dreams... and spur a slew of ticket returns.” He grabs his phone, scrolling through his notifications. “Mia doesn’t need that kind of hate directed her way when she’s just starting out, and neither do you.”

I clench my teeth. Paul isn’t even thinking about what he’s saying, which is why I’m not mad at him. But it’s insult to injury. Clearly, Mia isn’t the only one who thinks my fans are here for something other than my music.

“Well,” I say, lying down, “like I said. Not something you need to worry about.”

He turns off his phone and smiles at me. “Great. You should get some sleep. We head out early tomorrow. It’s a

four-hour ride to Munich, and we've got to get settled in and check out the venue."

I salute him, and he disappears into the back of the bus where our beds are.

I pull out my phone and open my text messages, scrolling to the ones with Mia. I saved my number in her phone as *Babe*, but there's no way she hasn't changed it yet. The last text in the thread is from me, apologizing about her not getting to see the city when I promised her she would.

She didn't even respond.

I scroll to the photo I sent her. If Paul needs evidence there's nothing between us, this photo would serve as Exhibit A. She doesn't want to be anywhere close to me.

Of course not. She probably has a higher opinion of Dolores Umbridge than of me.

It's not like it was a total surprise. She's teased me a lot about my songs and my way of going about my career.

But this was different. She *wasn't* teasing. It just slipped out, as the truth often does.

I stare at her in the picture—the way she's pulling away and looking annoyed.

I'm envious of her. She's got crazy talent, but she's also got integrity. I tossed that second thing out the window the minute it became a roadblock to getting where I wanted to go. I can't blame anyone else for agreeing to the ridiculously tight contract I signed. I was desperate to have a label behind me, and Paul was new enough to managing he didn't push me hard to ask for changes to the contract. We've both come to regret that. Mightily.

But I didn't come this far just to give up or mess things up. My contract with Fusion lasts another year and a half, and then I'll be able to find someone who will let me do my music my way.

I've just got to make it until then. In the meantime, I can rein in whatever I'm feeling for Mia. For her sake and mine,

like Paul said.



I BOUNCE up and down on my heels, blowing a breath through rounded lips as I stand in the wings of the stage in Munich. For whatever reason, Germans really like me, and tonight is set to be our second-biggest venue.

Paul grips my shoulder. “Big night.”

“Yep.” I rub my hands together, feeling more nervous than usual.

“You’ve got a rabid fanbase here, Austin, and they are *ready* for you.”

The screaming intensifies as the opening act finishes up.

“We’ve got a meet-and-greet after,” Paul continues, “and it’d go a long way with some of these fans to get some extra special treatment.”

I frown as I tug on the bottom of my shirt. It takes a gentle hand. These shirts are made to rip at the slightest touch. “Meaning...?”

Paul shrugs. “Whatever. Tickets to your next performance. An invitation to hang out after the meet-and-greet. Something to show them your appreciation. They really came through for you.”

Voices sound, and I glance behind me, where Kelly, Rose, and Mia appear. Mia’s eyes dart to me, and I smile.

It’s been three days since our outing in Prague, and we haven’t talked much. Well, we’ve talked, but not much beyond what’s been necessary for the tour. I’m trying to be satisfied with that.

Guess what? I suck at it. I’m trying not to ignore her entirely, because she didn’t do anything wrong. I should be old enough to have a platonic, business-focused relationship with a really attractive, funny, intriguing woman, right?

“You ready?” Mia asks.

“Never.” I glance at her outfit—silver, wide-leg sequin pants instead of the usual dress. On top, she’s wearing a matching blazer, with a silky white shirt beneath. “Nice pants.”

She looks down and smooths the sequins, making them glint in the light. “Thanks. Victor decided he likes them, so he made some for Rose and Kelly too. But I think you’ve ruined them for me.”

I raise my brows. “How’d I manage that?”

She slides her hands around the waistband, where a thin white belt is threaded through the loops. “I had to ask him for a belt because I was having nightmares last night about them falling down.”

I chuckle. “Like I said, you’re a smart cookie.”

Her eyes dart to mine, and I know she’s thinking of Old Town Square, just like I am. Has she thought about it as much as I have? Not sure that’s even possible, but a guy can dream.

“But hey,” I say. “No hiccups.”

She smiles, puts out her hands, and takes in a deep, even breath to demonstrate. “I think I’m getting used to the nerves.” She crosses her fingers. “At least I hope so.”

Paul pops over, his gaze darting to Mia for a split-second before returning to me. “You’re on in thirty seconds.”

I nod, and Mia smiles as he leaves again. “Keep those pants up,” she says. “I’d ask you to keep your shirt on, but”—she grimaces—“I’m not crazy.”

“Watch out, or I’ll throw it straight at you at peak sweatiness.”

She cringes, then disappears to join Kelly and Rose again. I suppress a sigh as I watch her.

And *that*, my friends, is exactly why I’ve had to keep my distance. Mia’s turning into a weakness for me. A distraction I can’t afford.

I shut my eyes and envision the stage I'm about to walk on, the audience who's been waiting to see me, to hear me sing.

And take your shirt off.

I clench my teeth. They're *not* just here for that. They're here because they recognize my talent, and they like my voice. There's nothing wrong with giving them a great concert. What does Mia want me to do? Sit with a guitar on a barstool the whole time?

Success requires more than that, and I'm willing to do what it takes, even if she isn't.

LYING on the couch of our tour bus, I swipe through the photos I've been tagged in over the past few days. I'm in the background of all but one. Austin is the main feature, which gives me plenty of opportunity to admire his infamous shirtless body. Not like I'm hurting for that chance. I have a front-row seat to his performances, and that image is forever and very unhelpfully emblazoned in my mind. Despite that, my eyes dwell on him like an art student studying the David.

The fans from Munich really came through with the love and follows. Austin did his usual acknowledgement and call-out of Kelly, Rose, and me, which is the only reason I'm up a hundred followers today. I haven't posted new content since leaving on tour, yet I'm gaining way more followers than I did when I posted daily.

That's the power Austin Sheppard wields, and it frustrates me to no end. Once again, it's not my talent that matters; it's who I'm associated with.

You know what Austin *didn't* do the last two nights? Look at me. Or throw his torn shirt at me like he threatened to do.

Not like I wanted him to. I just really hate empty threats. And people ignoring me.

So what if I was just one of a couple thousand people in the room? It seemed like we had established a kind of tradition: after he ripped off his shirt, he'd look back at me.

Two times in a row is considered a tradition, right?

Either way, he didn't do it in Munich.

He also didn't offer to see the city with me when I expressed my intent *and* stated the exact time I'd be doing it, well within earshot of him.

"It wasn't my fault, right?" Rose says.

I lower my phone and glance at Rose and Kelly sitting at our bus table with face cards in hand.

"No," Kelly says, choosing from amongst her cards. "He definitely got the lyrics wrong."

I set my phone down, my brows pulling together. "Yeah, what was that about? How do you forget your own lyrics?" Personally, I fall asleep with lines I'm working on repeating in my head until I want to stuff my face in a pillow. And Austin didn't just slip up a little; he got them *really* wrong.

Rose shrugs and slaps a card down. "Hazard of not writing your own stuff, I guess."

I sit up. "He doesn't write his own music?"

Rose lays down her cards. "Or lyrics."

Kelly glances at the cards, slumps, and tosses hers on the table. "How do you *always* win?"

"Gimme gimme gimme," Rose says, motioning with both hands for Kelly to hand over the five-euro bill she's pulling out of her pocket.

But I'm still staring at Rose. Austin doesn't write his own music *or* lyrics? I don't even know what to do with that.

On the one hand, it's kind of nice to know he's not the one coming up with lyrics like, "*Cherry lips, icy eyes, she's a temptress in disguise. Got me hypnotized, I'll make her mine.*"

On the other hand... I'm disappointed. Does he just show up and take what's given to him? Pass off someone else's work as his?

"How did he get noticed if he doesn't write his own stuff?" I ask, my curiosity taking over.

Rose cocks an eyebrow at me. "You've seen the guy, right? Some faces are just made for fame."

“He has a great voice,” Kelly says, shooting Rose a chastising look. “And just because he doesn’t write his own stuff doesn’t mean he *can’t*. I saw a video of him one time. Really different vibe than he has now, though.”

The bus slows, and I glance out the window as we pull into a gas station.

“Where are we?” Kelly asks, glaring at Rose as she admires her money with a satisfied smile.

“Outside of Innsbruck,” I say. “About halfway to Venice.” Up until fifteen minutes ago, I had my nose pressed against the glass. The views of the Alps were jaw-dropping.

I’m excited for Venice, though. Nervous and excited. We’ll be performing at a festival this time, which feels different from a dedicated Austin Sheppard concert.

Then, obviously, there’s the whole romantic, canal-filled city thing. I plan on spending every spare moment exploring the floating city.

“I’m hungry,” Rose says. “Want to grab a snack?”

“I’m starving,” I say.

Kelly scoots from the booth, nudging Rose with her foot. “You’re treating, Miss Moneybags.”

I follow them out of the bus, eager to stretch my legs. We’re at a pit stop, so it’s missing some of that old-timey European charm, but I won’t say no to trying a couple of Austrian snacks and looking around a bit.

“Innsbruck is still Germany, right?” Kelly asks.

“It’s Austria, Magellan,” Rose says.

“Which is next to Switzerland, right?”

“A-plus,” Rose says as we make our way to the gas station entrance.

“Noah Hayes is in Switzerland right now,” Kelly says with a couple of eyebrow wags.

“Wait, really?” I skip up to come even with them.

Kelly smirks as she pulls open the door. “Do we need to keep an eye on you so you don’t hitchhike to Switzerland?”

“What? No, I just... I like his music.” Understatement of the year right there. The man is a lyrical genius—not to mention wildly handsome in those brooding music videos.

Austin’s browsing the snack shelves, but his gaze flicks to mine, then away again. Still being weird, apparently.

“That face doesn’t hurt either, though, does it?” Kelly winks.

“I admire him as a *musician*,” I say, annoyed my cheeks are getting warm... and that she pegged my exact thoughts.

“Mmhmm.” They both head for the bathrooms while I make my way to the candy bars.

Noah Hayes *is* an attractive man, but it’s the fact that his style matches mine so well that draws me to him. He’s a ballad sort of guy, and all his lyrics are just... perfect. I love how unafraid he is of singing about love. Only someone with deep personal experience can manage that type of music.

“Those are good.”

I glance over at Austin, who’s a few feet away, pointing to the candy bars I’m standing in front of.

“Oh, thanks,” I say.

He grabs a package, his arm brushing against mine in the process. I glance at him from the corner of my eye. How much of my conversation with the girls did he hear? I get the feeling he’s not a Noah Hayes fan. Makes sense. The two of them have really different styles. Then again, what *is* Austin’s style if it’s not the stuff he sings?

Austin grabs my arm, pulling me close until I’m worried I might fall.

“What’re you doing?” I ask, my heart racing.

He looks behind me and offers a smile and nod.

I follow his gaze and find a man in a wheelchair rolling toward us. The aisle is barely wide enough for him, and I scoot

my feet as far forward as I can. My elbow hits the end-cap next to me, and Austin uses his free hand to steady it.

I shift closer to avoid a repeat, wishing I'd thought to step out of the aisle entirely. Now, I'm right up against him as the man in the wheelchair takes his time to make sure he's not riding over our feet. I appreciate his thoughtfulness, but I'd also take a couple hundred pounds over my toes if it meant my nose wasn't almost touching Austin's neck, filling me with unwelcome memories of the other night.

"I fantasize about what it would be like to be yours."

That's what he said the other night, and I haven't been able to get it out of my head since. I haven't been able to get *him* out of my head since. Which makes no sense. It was a hypothetical scenario. He was proving a point, not confessing a secret.

Well, guess what? Point proven. I have no boundaries around Austin Sheppard. He can whisper sweet, hypothetical nothings in my ear, and I will apparently melt into his arms like a chocolate chip on the surface of the sun.

Austin lets go of my arm and steps back. The wheelchair has cleared our feet, and I reaffirm that it would have been better to break a few toes than experience what just happened in my brain.

I grab the candy bar Austin recommended, hold it up with a smile, and make my way to the checkout—as far away from him as possible. Maybe I *should* hitchhike to Switzerland.

The lady at the checkout tells me the amount in German, and I pull out my card. Before I can put it on the reader, a different card appears, tapping the contactless area on the reader.

"Consider it penance for the chimney cake," Austin says, already walking away.

I watch him head toward the refrigerated drinks, then shake my head and grab my candy bar just as two girls walk into the gas station.

They go up on their toes, looking around the store for something in particular.

Someone in particular. One spots Austin, and she grabs her friend and points to him as he pulls a drink from the refrigerator and heads toward the checkout.

They hurry to him, speaking fast German as he stops short, blinking at the suddenness of it all. One of them swipes her phone to open her camera, then looks around.

Her eyes fix on me. She hurries over and starts speaking what sounds like rapid gibberish to my uncultured ears. But I get the gist.

I take the phone, and she smiles and thanks me.

“You going to start paying me extra as your official tour photographer?” I ask Austin as the girls cozy up on either side of him.

“I just bought you a candy bar,” he says.

Through the phone screen, I watch as one of the girls places her hand on Austin’s chest.

My gaze shoots to his face, but he doesn’t do anything.

“One, two, three.” I press the button a few times, then hand the phone to the girl.

Once they’ve left, Austin meets my gaze. “What?” he asks.

I open my eyes, wide and innocent. “Nothing.”

He chuckles and starts walking toward me—no, toward the checkout. “Come on, Mia. Just say it.”

“Hey...” I put up my hands and move toward the doors. “It’s none of my business.” Austin Sheppard can have as many strangers’ hands on his chest or as many strangers’ lips on his as he wants. He can declare himself the next Blarney Stone for all I care.

I push open the door and wave over my shoulder. “See you in Venice.”

A text comes in as I reach the tour bus.

GEMMA

How's the tour?

Just kidding. I've been stalking you on social media like the good, protective older sister I am, so I already know how it's going.

MIA

And what's your assessment?

GEMMA

You're the next big thing.

MIA

What a lovely, unbiased report.

GEMMA

How's it been, though, really? Are you glad you said yes? How have your hiccups been? Is Austin as bad as you thought he'd be?

MIA

Amazing. Yes. Annoying. No comment.

GEMMA

You're the worst. I demand comment. Is that a falling-in-love-with-him no comment? Or an I'm-about-to-strangle-him no comment?

A pause.

MIA

Yes?

As I close the bus door behind me, Gemma calls. Keeping an eye out the window for Rose and Kelly, I answer and give her the Spark Notes version of the last few days, but even that version isn't finished by the time they come out, armed with two bags of snacks. Probably because Gemma can't help interjecting every five seconds.

"Gotta go," I say. "We'll catch up more later."

"Mia, you better not hang u—"

The door opens, and Kelly and Rose walk inside as I mercilessly hang up on my sister.

"That's all you got?" Rose asks at the sight of my sole candy bar.

"I thought you were starving," Kelly says.

I try to come up with a reasonable response, but Kelly saves me. "Don't worry. We got plenty."

Half an hour later, we're all stuffed, lazing around the common area as the buses ramble closer to Venice.

Rose and Kelly slump next to each other in a snack-induced half-coma and watch videos on Kelly's phone. I have my headphones in, listening to Noah Hayes's newest album as I watch the scenery through the window. The album is almost two years old, and I've been waiting for him to announce the next one for a few months.

Movement catches my eye, and I glance at Kelly and Rose, who are suddenly talking animatedly about whatever they're watching.

I pull out one of my earphones, and music fills the bus. It's a slow song, one I don't recognize. My earphone hovers in the air as I listen, trying to identify the familiar voice.

“Wow,” Rose says, staring at the screen. “Hubba hubba. How old is this?”

There’s a pause as Kelly does a bit of recon. “Five years.”

My idle curiosity has officially passed the threshold into I-need-to-know-who-that-is territory, and I take out my other earphone and stand behind them.

It’s a YouTube video, and my jaw slips open when my eyes register who I’m looking at.

Austin’s definitely a few years younger, sitting in a nondescript room, strumming his guitar and singing with his eyes closed. His hair is short enough that you might not know it’s wavy, and his face isn’t quite so sculpted.

“What song is this?” I don’t think I’ve ever heard Austin sing a ballad, which, now that I’m confronted with it, has definitely been for my own good. Rose’s *hubba hubba* doesn’t even begin to cut it. That voice... Merciful heavens.

“I don’t know,” Kelly says. “One of his own, I’d guess.”

My eyes are starting to dry out, but I can’t blink, or what I’m seeing might disappear. All I can think is, *If Austin can write and sing songs like that, why in the world isn’t he doing it?*

“How did you find this?” I ask. *And who is this stranger I’m watching?*

“My friend sent me the link,” Kelly says. “She stumbled on it while watching every Austin Sheppard YouTube video she could get her hands on.”

The song comes to a close, and my eyes drop to the information about the account that posted it. I commit the username to memory just as a call comes through and Kelly answers.

“The man can really do it all, can’t he?” Rose says through a yawn as Kelly slips past her and heads to the back for privacy.

“Guess so,” I say, making my way to my perch at the window. With a stealthy glance at Rose to make sure she’s

falling asleep like I thought she would be, I navigate to YouTube and search for *songstrider842*.

My heart skips as his account pops up at the top, and I tap on it. There are about twenty videos uploaded, all at least four years old, some as many as eight. I can hardly stand how young he looks in the oldest of them—or how different his voice sounds.

Making sure my earphones are connected to my phone, I tap the oldest video and stare, totally and completely transfixed, as twenty-year-old Austin serenades me.

It's dark, and I'm on my fourth round through the videos when the bus finally comes to a stop. I blink and turn off my screen, hardly registering where I am. I have two questions zooming around in my mind. What happened to the Austin from these videos, and did I just fall in love with a historical figure?

“EVERYONE READY?” Paul asks.

A mixture of nods and *yeps* greets his question as the seven of us circle up next to my tour bus. Aside from Paul and me, there’s Kelly, Rose, Mia, and our two sound guys. Mia’s hair is pushed back with a headband, and she’s got a purse slung over her overalls. I’ve always thought overalls were kind of childish, but every time I see her wearing them, I want to grab the straps and pull her in for a kiss.

“Okay,” Paul says, “obviously, you’re free to do whatever you want today. We’re all adults. No need to stay with the group if you make other plans, but I’d prefer no one go off on their own for safety reasons. Since it sounds like people want to stick together for now, here’s the plan. We’ve got a few hours to wander around the city before our dinner reservations. That’ll be on a boat in St. Mark’s Basin. I basically had to sacrifice my firstborn to get us a spot on the busiest day of the year, so keep that in mind, okay? You can thank me later. It’ll be a very nice dinner, and we can watch the fireworks from there. Best seats in the house, in my opinion.”

Mia holds up her phone screen. “It says 30% chance of rain this evening. Will they cancel the fireworks if it does?”

It’d be great if she could be a lot less beautiful all the time.

Paul chuckles. “A little rain won’t stop these fireworks. Believe me. This is one of the biggest shows in Europe. Anyway, I figure we can make our way toward the piazza from here. It’s a lot of walking, but it’s scenic.”

He's right. It's also incredibly crowded. Tonight kicks off the *Festa del Redentore*, which is the whole reason we're here—to perform at the big multi-artist festival concert tomorrow. It also means half of Italy and a high percentage of all the tourists in the world are in Venice along with us.

It's tough to keep a group of seven together in these circumstances. Every few minutes, foot traffic slows as we come to yet another bridge. Keeping my distance from Mia is a goal for the day, but I don't even have to try, which starts to become annoying after a couple of hours. I couldn't get next to her if my life depended upon it.

Instead, I settle for glimpses of her admiring, wide eyes as she tries to see over the heads of the crowds to the canals and colorful buildings. It makes me want to offer to put her on my shoulders... or take her to a deserted rooftop.

If it was just for my own good, I don't know how much power I'd have to resist Mia. But like Paul said, this is for her too.

A few months back, I started seeing this girl I met at a show I did in L.A. When the media got hold of the story, people went crazy. They dug up every bit of dirt they could find on Trish. She got hate mail and death threats. It was insanity, and it completely killed things. Not that things were ever serious. I've learned not to do serious.

When we get to Rialto Bridge, the crowds are thicker than ever. I finally find myself next to Mia as we take shuffling baby steps with the awkward pace of the crowd. We aren't individuals with free will anymore. We are each two legs on a massive millipede of tourists.

I've got strangers' shoulders and hands and feet bumping into mine, but it's the distance between Mia and me I'm most aware of. Either she's a lot better at navigating this crowd than I am or she's intentionally avoiding contact with me.

It takes longer to make our way through the city than Paul had planned. That's partly the fault of the crowds, partly the fault of the members of our group—cough, Mia, cough—who

want to stop at every dinky corner shop to check out souvenirs and art and what-have-you.

We're a few minutes from the boat when Mia spots a jewelry stand.

"Come on, Mia," Kelly says. "You've looked at a zillion rings today."

"I know, but I can already see some I like."

"We're going to be late," Paul says, his face red and his voice verging on testy.

"Go on ahead," Mia says. "I'll catch up in two minutes."

"Girl," Rose says, "if we miss dinner because you're choosing between amazonite and labradoodle, so help me—"

"Labradorite," Mia says, already heading for the shop owner.

"I'll stay with her," I say. "You guys go."

Paul hesitates, but he's too worried about missing the reservation to do anything but agree, and the five of them walk on, Paul's long legs leading the way.

I come up next to Mia and point to a random stone. "That's the one."

She looks at me skeptically. "Black onyx?"

"Yep. Super sleek."

"And amplifies negative emotion."

I scrunch my nose. "Never mind. You've already got plenty of that."

She punches my arm. "You're distracting me, and I'm trying to be fast."

I put my hands up and step away, watching her discuss the merits of opal and moonstone with the jeweler. Aware I'm not only staring at Mia but smiling while I do it, I stroll to the next closest stand, which is full of sunglasses.

"Not a great day for sales, I'm guessing," I say to the guy sitting on the stool by the credit card machine.

“A day is as great as the person living it,” he replies like he’s an ancient Greek philosopher.

I give a thoughtful nod. “Who said that?”

He grins, showing a smile with three missing teeth. “Me.”

I glance at Mia, who says goodbye to the shopkeeper and slips the ring into her purse along with her wallet. Just as she starts in my direction, a lanky kid in a baseball hat and sunglasses swipes the purse strap over her shoulder.

“Hey!” Mia locks her elbow, and they struggle over the purse.

I race over just as he yanks it free of her grasp and makes off with it.

I sprint after him, twisting my shoulders to slip through the crowds. I have to keep my eyes pinned on him, so I don’t lose him when I blink. His hat is the only thing preventing that from happening, even with how firmly I’m focused.

The crowds thin out the farther we get from the shops, but the kid is fast. He takes the steps of each bridge two at a time, and I channel every ounce of energy I have to gain on him.

“Austin!” Mia’s voice calls from behind.

“Stay there!” I yell.

“Just let it go!” she yells right back.

But I can’t. The race is on, and this kid is toast. I’m not returning to Mia empty-handed.

He’s scrappy, but I’m determined, and I start to gain on him at the fifth bridge, ignoring the sweat forming on my brow or the strange looks on the faces of every tourist I pass.

The kid leaves the main drag, opting for the narrow alleys and thinner crowds. My lungs are burning, and I don’t know how long I’ve been chasing him, but I can’t stop when I’m getting closer every few seconds.

He takes a sudden left, and I follow.

Stopping and panting, I search the alley for him, my ears cocked for any sound. But it's empty and silent. Where in the world did he go?

Quickly approaching footsteps sound around the corner I just turned, and I whirl around.

MIA COLLIDES WITH ME. Grabbing her by the arms, I stumble back, but I can't quite manage to regain my balance. I fall backward, and she tumbles along with me.

We grunt as we hit the stone, one of my hands bracing me, the other holding her.

She rolls off me before I'm even aware she's *on* me.

"Are you crazy?" she asks breathlessly, hurrying to her feet. "What are you doing?"

I scramble to stand, looking up and down the alley. But it's no use. The guy's halfway to Rome by now. I let out a huge sigh and lean over, resting my hands on my knees as I try to catch my breath. "Trying to get your stuff back."

"You don't run after a thief. What if he had a knife or a gun or something?"

"He was just a kid, Mia."

"Um, hi. Ever heard of juvie? Not all kids are angels. And clearly, he wasn't such a little kid that you actually caught him."

"He was scrappy!" I narrow my eyes and stand up straight. "You were worried about me."

She scoffs.

I step toward her, my smile growing. "You actually came after me." I put a hand to my chest. "I'm touched, Mia."

“I followed because I didn’t want to be left alone with no phone in a strange city.”

“You could’ve gone to dinner. You knew where it was. But you didn’t. You came after me instead.”

She folds her arms, making her bracelets clink as she searches my face like I’m a modern marvel. “What’s it like?”

“What, having you so worried about my safety you run a half-marathon across Venice? Feels pretty good.”

“Going through life assuming everyone’s obsessed with you?”

“Probably more fun than going through life assuming the worst of people.”

“I don’t assume the worst of people,” she says, but the tiniest wrinkle on her brow tells me I may have hit close to home.

“I didn’t say you did. It was a casual comparison.”

“Right.” She looks around us at the tall buildings, laundry lines draping across a couple stories above. “Where are we?”

“No idea.” I take my phone from my pocket and pull up the map, typing in Piazzo San Marco. “We’re a twenty-minute walk away from the group. Not too bad.”

“We better get moving, then. I’m hungry.” She starts walking, and I skip to catch up with her just as she touches a hand to her furrowed brow and looks up. “Was that a raindrop?”

I glance at the pavement and see a few dark spots. Leading Mia to a random part of the city and having it rain on our way back is not on my bucket list. Well, I don’t mind the rain or being with Mia, but I get the sense *she’ll* mind it a lot. “What? No. Probably just some of that laundry dripping.”

“Ew.”

The drops come more frequently as we follow my map, and Mia shoots an unamused glance at me like I’m the one in control of the weather.

“Lots of wet laundry in Venice,” I say, dodging her attempt to hit me. “Come on! Walk faster. You’re holding us back, and I’m hungry.”

If looks could kill... I died the first time I met Mia.

After a few minutes and a few hundred raindrops, the crowds start to thicken again. A lot. Every few seconds, I look over my shoulder to make sure Mia’s still there, right behind me.

Until suddenly... she’s not.

I stop, shoulders bumping mine as I search the crowd. In the more logical part of my brain, I realize Mia’s somewhere amongst these people, probably just a few heads away. But the other part of my brain is engaging Liam Neeson Mode and making my heart go a million beats per minute.

A hand grabs mine, and my gaze finally finds Mia.

“Miss me?” she says like she can see the relief on my face.

“Yes, actually.”

She doesn’t let go of my hand as we keep trekking against the tide.

“We’ve just got to cross that bridge up there,” I say over my shoulder, pretending it’s no biggie I’m holding Mia’s hand in one of the most romantic cities on the planet. Not just that I’m holding her hand. *She* initiated it and hasn’t jerked away in disgust.

“Huh,” I say, coming to a stop behind a long line of people blocking our way. They’re all stopped and facing... something. I go up on my tiptoes to see over the crowd, which isn’t easy, given how many of them have popped up umbrellas.

“What is it?” Mia asks.

I clench my teeth. “You don’t want to know.”

“Just tell me.”

I dip back onto my heels. “A parade. Or a procession or something. The bridge is blocked off.”

“Of course it is,” she says.

I search the area, and my gaze lands on a little shop with souvenir displays under a canopy. “Can you let the others know we’ll be late while I grab an umbrella over there?”

“I’d love to, Austin. I really would. But you may remember how my phone got stolen recently?”

I pull cash out of my phone case and hand the phone to her, wishing I got to see her reaction when she sees my lockscreen is the photo of us at the Prague meet-and-greet. “Right. Use that. Passcode is 111111.” I jog over to the closest souvenir shop and grab a cheap umbrella. “How much?”

“Eleven euros,” the shop owner responds.

He’s absolutely scamming me, but I don’t even care right now. I hand him a twenty and run back to Mia, who’s poring over the map app.

“I’d like to speak with the city planners,” she says. “How can there be so many bridges, yet we have to walk an extra ten minutes when this particular one happens to be closed?” She hands me the phone, and I switch her for the umbrella.

“Hey,” I say. “I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to mess things up.”

She shakes her head. “I know. You were trying to help, and I appreciate it.”

“I got outrun by a teenager.”

She wrinkles her nose and uses the umbrella to shield us. “Probably the wind resistance from that thick shirt. And hey, on the bright side, I’m seeing more of Venice than I expected. As long as we make it for dessert and fireworks, I’m good.”

I put out my pinky. “I promise we’ll make it for dessert and fireworks.”

She meets my gaze for a second, then hooks her pinky around mine.

The rhythm of rain on the umbrella quickens significantly, and we share a look that says *just our luck*. But I promised

Mia dessert and fireworks, and I'm a man of my word.

"This way," I say, and we shuffle out of the crowd, Mia holding the umbrella high enough not to put anyone's eye out.

Even once the crowds lighten up, we're shoulder to shoulder to stay under the protection of the umbrella. I consider wrapping my arm around Mia's waist—to conserve space, you know?—but I don't. I value my life too much.

We reach a short bridge over one of the smaller canals we've seen. On the other side, a few people take shelter under a colonnade, and I guide us toward them.

"Let's see if the rain dies down," I say.

She hesitates. She's skeptical, which I get. This doesn't look like rain that's considering lightening up. But I've seen this sort of thing pass in a matter of minutes, leading to clear skies and a rainbow.

I duck out from under the umbrella, which isn't necessary now that we're under a covered walkway, and walk over to the two guys chatting with each other in quick Italian. They're both wearing black and white striped shirts and flat-brim straw hats. Gondoliers, which means they probably speak decent English.

"Excuse me," I say, and they both turn toward me. "Does the rain usually last long?" I point to the downpour a few feet away.

They both shake their heads.

One holds up five fingers. "Five minutes."

"Great, thanks." I hurry to Mia and report on the new forecast.

"What does the weather app say?" she asks.

"What?" I say loudly, pointing to my ears. "I can't hear you over the 30% chance of rain."

She laughs reluctantly.

"We'll just wait a few minutes," I say. "Don't worry. You'll have your dessert and fireworks."

“Okay,” she says, collapsing the umbrella. “But you realize I’m stealing your phone to take video, right?”

“You act like it’s *my* fault your purse was stolen. I tried to get it back, remember? I also distinctly remember telling you to stay put.”

“Well excuse *me* for not knowing you planned on chasing down my purse over half the city when you’ve been ignoring me for days.”

I scoff, but inside, I squirm. I kind of hoped I’d done a decent job of not making it obvious I was keeping my distance. But does this mean she noticed enough to miss me? “Ignoring you? We’ve talked every single day.”

She faces me, eyes full of skepticism. “You’re telling me you *haven’t* been avoiding me since Prague?”

“No.” It comes out lame, and she raises her brows.

“Okay, fine,” I say. “A little. But not for the reasons you think.”

“What reasons, then?”

I hesitate, trying to decide how to go about this conversation.

“See?” the gondolier interrupts. “Five minutes only.”

Mia and I look out from the colonnade, and all that’s there is the musical *drip drip drip* of after-rain.

“Perhaps you would like to take your lover on a nice boat ride?” The gondolier quirks one thick brow at us.

“We’re actually just trying to get back to San Marco the quickest way possible,” I say. “Any tips?”

“Today? No quick way to the *piazza, signore.*”

Mia leans into me. “He’s just saying that so we’ll take a boat ride with him,” she mutters.

“Maybe we should,” I respond. I direct my gaze at him. “Can you get us close to the *piazza*?”

“Of course,” he says as if I just asked him whether bears poop in the woods.

“What do you say?” I ask Mia. “Want to see Venice by water?”

The gondolier skips up the first two steps of the bridge and points down at the canal. “That is my boat. See for yourself. Very beautiful. Very comfortable.”

I glance at Mia, who’s torn between curiosity and wariness. The former wins out, and I follow her to the bridge. Peeking out from beneath the bridge in the milky green waters sit two gondolas. The gondolier indicates the one on the left. It’s sleek black, with plush velvety red seats and gold detail work.

Mia rubs her lips, and I suppress a smile.

“We’ll take it,” I say.

“I don’t have money,” Mia whispers, her cheeks tinged with red.

“Don’t worry about it,” I whisper right back.

The gondolier grins and puts his hands out like a showman. “Welcome, my friends, to the best way to experience *Venezia*.”

We follow him to the little steps that lead down to his gondola and wait while he pulls the boat toward us. I hand Mia in first.

The pitter patter of drops from the rooftops into the canal is becoming less frequent, and I glance at the sky after taking my place on the throne—because that’s absolutely what the seats are—next to Mia. The clouds aren’t quite as dark, but rainbows aren’t about to pop up anywhere. It’d be nice if they did. Mia would like that, and today, I feel entirely responsible for Venice’s weather.

Giuseppe starts his rowing, humming a song with an obscene amount of vibrato. Mia shifts in her seat, then starts messing with the cushion, and I join in to try to help.

“I’ve got it,” she says.

I pull my hands back and watch her with a hint of amusement. “Is there anything you hate more than being helped?”

“What?” She frowns, then returns to... whatever she’s trying to do. “I don’t hate being helped.”

“So, when I saved you from drowning, and you kicked me in the stomach, that was—”

“Self-preservation. And I wasn’t drowning.”

“Agree to disagree. Anyway, that’s just one example.”

She lets the cushion be and meets my gaze. “And the others?”

“When I tried to help get Nutella off your face. When I chased after the kid who pickpocketed you and now you hate me a—”

“I don’t hate you,” she interrupts as Giuseppe moves from humming to singing. “I’m grateful you were willing to help. It was unexpected. And yes, I was a little worried about you. So sue me. Having to find a hospital in Venice and communicate to them you’d been stabbed for trying to get my purse would’ve put a damper on the tour, I think. Anyway, I don’t hate help, I just—”

“Hate *me*?” I repeat, smiling even though I’m nervous inside. Why do I want her to like me so much? And why do I like *her* so much?

“Why do you keep saying that? You’re the one who’s been weird the past few days.”

I tip my head back and laugh incredulously. “I didn’t know you *wanted* me talking to you, Mia. You don’t seem to like me all that much.”

“I *do* like you. I—”

“What?”

She shrugs. “I’m a little... scared of you, I guess.”

I go still, then shift in my seat to face her better. “Scared of me?” I have no clue what she means.

“Not scared,” she says, not meeting my eye. “Just... wary.”

I search her profile. There are no raindrops on her lashes anymore, but some of them are stuck together. The shoulders of her shirt are dark from before the umbrella. It reminds me a tiny bit of the first night I met her. “Wary of me why?”

She gives a scoffing laugh, her gaze still fixed ahead on the narrow canal and the tall buildings we’re passing between. It’s pretty, yeah, but every sliver of attention I have is on Mia. It feels like I’m on the cusp of understanding her better, and that’s more enticing than these beautiful domed windows and ochre building fronts.

She meets my gaze. “You’re a rockstar, Austin.”

“So?”

“So,” she repeats, “I’m nobody. I don’t party. I don’t sleep around. I don’t even know how to flirt. I come off as rude when I try.”

I’m pretty sure she insulted me, but I don’t care. I’m too busy wondering if I’m registering this right. Has Mia’s rudeness been her trying to flirt with me?

She stares ahead again. “I know not to read into it when you tease and flirt. I’m not *totally* stupid. But it’s not something I’m used to. I’m learning how to protect myself, I guess. So... if you could just *not*, that would be great.”

It takes me a while to find words. Maybe I’m crazy, but I think Mia’s saying that she’s trying not to like me because she thinks I’m playing games. *And*—this is the kicker—it’s hard enough *not* to like me and *not* to read into things that she’d rather I stop confusing her.

Giuseppe comes to the end of his warbling song, and it’s silent for a few seconds. Long enough that Mia finally looks at me. There’s vulnerability in her eyes, but she’s trying to mask it with her chin held high.

I can’t stop staring at her. This is Mia in a nutshell. She talks a big game and seems like she bites, but really, she’s scared of getting hurt. And that, I totally understand.

No. I don't just understand it; I feel like I've found someone who might *get* me. It's been so much easier for me to stick with surface-level, short-lived attachments. If I talk a big game and embrace the whole player identity, people don't get the chance to get to know me... and reject me.

“Want to know why I've been avoiding you, Mia?”

I DON'T RESPOND IMMEDIATELY. I don't know if I want to know the answer to his question.

Never mind. I do. I 100% want—nay *need*—to know it.

So I nod and try to look like all he's offering is the answer to a mundane question.

“For you,” he says.

“For me,” I repeat. Is it because he knows how dangerous he's become to me? He's had enough experience with rabid fans, he can probably see the signs of a girl falling for him a hundred miles away. And now that I've spent more time with him one-on-one? Now that I've seen those dumb old videos of him strumming the guitar and singing with that buttery voice?

He can see I'm in huge trouble. This is him trying to spare me a lot of potential pain.

It's nice and chivalrous, but I also hate it.

“You know what happened to the last girl my name was even *attached to*?” Austin asks.

I shake my head.

“She got death threats, Mia.”

I say nothing, but the insane part of my brain is calculating whether being with Austin might be worth some death threats. As long as they stayed threats, obviously. I'm not trying to be a martyr.

But that's not what he's talking about. He's worried about our names even being *associated*. Associated does not mean the things my brain is jumping to.

"I love my fans," he says, "but they can be—"

"Psycho?"

"I like to call it protective."

"Possessive."

He chuckles. "The point is, I like you, Mia. And *because* I like you, I don't want to hurt your career by starting things out that way for you. You deserve so much better than that. You've got incredible talent."

I'm fine. My heart is beating at a totally regular rate. This conversation is boring. Austin is ugly and terrible.

These are the lies I'm telling myself.

Austin said he *likes* me. Is there a more ambiguous word? He could mean he likes me the way people like the background music at a restaurant, the way someone likes a dish towel or their Amazon Prime delivery driver.

Austin likes me like a Prime driver, and he wants to make sure I keep my job.

Giuseppe's love song cuts off suddenly, and the gondola slows.

I turn to the gondolier. "What's wrong?"

"It is blocked. The canal." He nods at the chain and sign ahead, preventing us from continuing straight. "*Venezia* is very busy today. We will have to go the long way around."

I sigh. "Of course we will." Could this day have gone less according to plan? So much for dessert and fireworks.

"How much longer will it take?" Austin asks.

"Hard to say," Giuseppe says, turning us to the left.

Austin grimaces. "I'm *really really* sorry."

I shrug like I have plans to come back to Venice for this festival on an annual basis and like losing my phone and purse

is an everyday occurrence for me.

“It’s okay,” I say. And it really is. I would have loved to eat dinner on a boat and watch one of the biggest firework shows over the most romantic city in the world, but then I wouldn’t be having this conversation, and I don’t know that I’d want to sacrifice that.

Austin pulls out his phone. “I’ll let the others know we won’t make it to dinner.”

I admire the views as he works on his phone. There are certainly worse places to spend an evening.

“Hey, Giuseppe,” Austin says. “Could you pull over up there?”

Giuseppe obliges, and once the boat is against the side, Austin climbs out. “I’ll be right back,” he assures me.

Fifteen minutes later, I’ve learned all about Giuseppe’s family, including how his mom and wife fight like cats on a daily basis and how he has three sons and is trying to convince his wife for another baby so they can have a girl.

Just when I start to really consider whether Austin decided to leave me with Giuseppe for good, he appears around the corner, holding a big paper bag.

He hands it to Giuseppe while he climbs into the gondola. He gets all situated on the seat, then looks at me because I’m staring at him.

“What?” he asks.

“Have an enjoyable shopping expedition?”

He chuckles as he takes the bag from Giuseppe. “I promised you food and fireworks, right?” He breaks the little sticker holding the top of the bag together and pulls the sides apart, releasing an aroma that induces an enormous growl from my stomach.

He pulls out a container and opens it, releasing waves of euphoria only a creamy risotto could produce.

“I think I’m in love,” I say.

“Slow down, Mia,” Austin says. “We’re still getting to know each other.”

I shoot him a look as he hands me the food. We share risotto, gnocchi, and the most delicious cannoli I’ve ever tasted in the most beautiful place I’ve ever been. And yet, the second my appetite has been satisfied, my mind fixates on the conversation we never finished.

“So,” I say as we load the empty food cartons back into the bag, “should I expect you to ignore me once we’re back with the group?”

“Not ignore. Protect. You get why I was avoiding you now, right?”

“Yeah, I was just joking.” *Not joking, and no, I don’t get it. I have so many questions.* “Thanks for looking out for me.”

“Of course.” He sets the bag down. “I think it’s for the best for both of us if we can keep things as simple and uncomplicated as possible on the tour.”

“Definitely.” So this *isn’t* just about me. But he’s right. Having things get weird between us—and everyone else, as a result—doesn’t sound fun. “So, if I’m hearing correctly, what you’re saying is that you liked things better between us when I pushed you into the pool.” I peer over the edge of the gondola. “How does a swim in a Venetian canal sound?”

“You push me in, you’re coming along with me.”

I wrinkle my nose at the sight of the discolored, mossy sides of the buildings that run along the canal. “You really would, wouldn’t you?”

“Absolutely. Or you could be nice to me... We can still be friends, you know.” His eyes search my face, pausing on my lips. It doesn’t feel *just friendly*. “Just not more.”

“Gotcha.” Does this mean he wishes it could be more? Or is he letting me down easy?

Not like it matters. I mean, who am I kidding? Even if Austin and I agreed to be more than friends—whatever that means—what would I expect? The American dream?

Suburban home with a white picket fence and neighborhood barbecues?

This is Austin Sheppard, for crying out loud. He has women throwing underwear on stage, issuing death threats based on dating rumors, and following his tour around continental Europe. For him, liking a woman might mean he wants to sleep with her and never see her again.

The light has started to fade, and Giuseppe is at it again, singing *O Sole Mio* at the top of his lungs. That's probably why it takes a minute for me to realize it's started raining again.

Austin and I exchange glances, then he looks back at Giuseppe, who waits until a natural pause in the song to put up a hand and say, "Five minutes, *signore*. Five minutes only."

Try twenty-five minutes. I have to bust out Ye Olde Tiny Umbrella, and Giuseppe has to tell us where a blanket is. Which is how I find myself cuddled with Austin beneath it.

"Do you have another umbrella?" I ask Giuseppe.

His face screws up in an apology. "*Scusa, signora*, but no."

Seems like a pretty huge oversight in an open-air boat. "It's okay." *I'll pretend snuggling with Austin Sheppard is an everyday occurrence.*

But this umbrella was made for a child, not two grown adults—especially when one of them can make a living ripping off his shirt.

"I saw your YouTube videos," I say, snatching at anything to reign in my wandering mind.

He frowns. He has no clue what I'm talking about.

Right. There are thousands of videos of him on YouTube.

"Songstrider842?" I offer.

His brows pull tighter together, then recognition lights his eyes. "That channel's still up?"

"Very much still up." As in, currently up on my laptop *and* my YouTube app on my phone. If my purse thief figures out

how to unlock my phone and decides he might as well blackmail me while he's at his criminal mischief, my YouTube history will give him some great ammo.

Austin frowns. "Does it have a lot of views or subscribers?"

"I mean, personally, I'd be thrilled with those numbers."

He laughs softly, but his brow is still pinched.

"What?" Does he really hate those videos so much? I don't get that at all.

"Nothing. Just trying to remember my password."

"Because..."

"To deactivate it."

"What? Why?"

"Fusion wouldn't like those videos being up."

"So?"

"So, I'm in a really strict contract. The songs don't even belong to me anymore."

Now I'm the one frowning as Giuseppe ducks, and we pass under a short bridge.

"I don't get it," I say. "If that's true, why haven't they released any of them?"

"They don't fit the brand." There's a touch of bitterness to the words.

"They're amazing songs, though."

His eyes fix on mine like he's trying to gauge how sincere I am.

"At the risk of sounding rude," I say, "I had no idea you had such an amazing voice... or such a talent with words."

His Adam's apple bobs. "Thanks."

I nod, and our gazes hold, along with my breath.

Austin's hand shifts next to mine, and his eyes flit down to our hands, then back to my face. Maybe it's because my rebellious side doesn't like being told what to do, but now that we've agreed on being just friends, I find my eyes wandering to his lips.

A *boom* makes us both jump, and Giuseppe grins as he puts out both hands like a showman. "The fireworks have begun."

And the rain has stopped. I collapse the umbrella, my heart still going haywire.

There's another *boom*, and above the rooftops, a fountain of neon red sprays across the darkening sky.

"Whoa," I say under my breath. I've seen a lot of fireworks in my life—I'm American, after all—but with the setting, this... this is something else.

Austin hands his phone over with a smile. "As agreed upon."

I take it and open the camera app, recording the show as Giuseppe continues to row us, reverting to his humming. We turn a corner into a wider canal, and my jaw slips open as the view opens, revealing a sky full of fireworks and a view of Piazza San Marco in the distance. On the water ahead are dozens and dozens of boats and gondolas, filling the canal below the show.

Austin clears his throat. "Good thing this isn't romantic," he says way louder than necessary.

A rose suddenly appears between our faces.

"To give to the *signora*," Giuseppe says.

Austin and I catch eyes, and I try to suppress a laugh.

"Thanks," Austin says, taking the flower. He spins it between his fingers for a second, then offers it to me.

I look at it warily. I can't be receiving roses from Austin while feeling only platonic things. It's like patting your head and rubbing your tummy. I was always terrible at that.

“It’s a friendly rose,” he says as Giuseppe guides us toward the edge of the canal where there are a few steps.

“Right. That’s definitely a thing.” I take it, ignoring the way a thorn stabs my finger. This rose is warning me against reading into things, bless its heart.

The gondola comes to a stop, and Giuseppe hops out deftly, then secures it with a rope. “I take a photo?” he asks, putting out his hand for Austin’s phone.

I glance at Austin, and he gives a shrug. “Why not?”

I hand the phone to Giuseppe, who takes it with a knowing smile and hurries to the top of the nearest bridge.

Austin hesitates, then drapes his arm around my shoulders. “A friendly picture.”

I can’t stop a smile.

Giuseppe is a thorough photographer. He must take thirty pictures from ten different angles before returning the phone.

Austin helps me—in a friendly way—out of the boat, then settles up with the gondolier. And that’s when I see it: the big, long, closed umbrella sitting behind our thrones.

Giuseppe, you sly dog.

“ROSE. ROSE.” I jostle her in her bed, and she moans. “I need to use your phone. What’s your passcode?”

Rose and Kelly had plenty to say about Austin and me disappearing together in Venice. I rolled my eyes and told them he’d sent us on a wild goose chase.

One I’ll never forget. It’s probably for the best the pictures and videos are all on Austin’s phone. I don’t need that kind of temptation at my fingertips.

But I do need a phone. And to cancel my credit card.

“Rose.” I shake her harder. She’s a deep sleeper, but not usually *this* deep.

Suddenly, she flips the bedcovers off her, shoves me out of the way, and runs to the bathroom.

A few seconds later, I hear the distinct sound of vomiting.

I clench my teeth as Kelly sits up, rubbing her eyes.

“Rose is sick,” I say, setting her phone on the covers and heading to the bathroom. “You okay?” I ask through the closed door.

“Go away,” Rose says miserably.

I wince at the sound of more vomiting and look at Kelly.

She doesn’t look so good either.

“Are *you* okay?” I know a lot of people are sensitive to the sound and smell of vomit, and the last thing we need right now

is a vomiting train.

Kelly shakes her head and hurries out of her bed, pushing past me to join Rose in the tiny bus bathroom.

“Oh dear,” I say. I don’t have a weak stomach, but I don’t want to tempt fate, so I hurry to the front of the bus and then outside, my mind racing.

Rose and Kelly are throwing up, and we have a huge performance today.

I hesitate for a second, then run to Austin’s bus, pounding on the door. “Austin!”

It’s thirty seconds before the door opens, revealing him, boxer-clad and shirtless. His hair is a mess, and he’s squinting like I’m personally shining the sun in his face. “Mia?”

“Rose and Kelly are both sick,” I say, keeping my eyes on his sleepy face instead of... everything else.

“What?” he blinks a few times.

“They’re both throwing up.”

He rouses more, but he’s still squinting at the light, shading his eyes with a hand. “Here. Come in.”

I hesitate. “That’s okay. I only wanted you to know. I’m hoping it’s just a fluke. They’ll probably be fine in a few hours, right?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Hold on a sec.” He disappears, then returns with his phone. He taps and swipes, then puts it to his ear. “Paul, Rose and Kelly are throwing up.”

Silence.

“Jeez,” he says. “You think it’s food poisoning?” Pause. “Okay, I’ll check on you in a while.” He hangs up and blows out a breath. “Paul’s sick too. They all had oysters last night.” He runs a hand through his messy hair, something I’ve been wanting to do the last couple minutes.

“What do we do?” I ask.

He hits his phone against his hand, then shrugs his wide, defined shoulders. “Hope they feel better by the time we go on?”

“And if they don’t?”

He meets my gaze, his lips pressed together. “Come sit down. We can talk about it.” He makes room in the doorway.

I hesitate, and he gives me a weird look. “Why won’t you come in?”

I scramble for an answer that doesn’t sound stupid. “I need to get a new phone. I was just heading out.”

“How’re you going to do that? Your credit cards were in your purse, right?”

Dang. “Um, yeah.”

“I’ll go with you.” He slips on some shoes. “We can talk about the festival while we’re out.” He shuts the door behind him and slips down the stairs.

“Um, Austin?”

He raises his brows.

“You forgot a shirt. And pants.”



AUSTIN PAYS for my new phone. It was really my only option, but I promised I’d pay him back. He also paid for the medicine we got for Rose, Kelly, and Paul. A quick call to the sound guys reassures us, since they were smart enough not to go for the oysters.

Austin and I agree to feel out the day and see how everyone does, but he really doesn’t want to cancel.

“If push comes to shove,” he says on our way back to the buses, “you’ll do backup alone.”

“Push cannot come to shove,” I say firmly. “No pushing or shoving.” I don’t know why the thought of doing it by myself is so terrifying, but it is. It’s not like the backup vocalists are the focus of attention. Austin has that covered. But I feel less

conspicuous when Rose and Kelly are next to me. Not just visually, but vocally.

Austin takes medicine to Paul, while I take it to the girls.

They both look awful, and the bus doesn't smell fantastic, frankly. I crack the windows and spend a good hour cleaning and nursing, losing hope with every passing minute they'll be up for a performance later.

Even if they were feeling more lively and less attached to the toilet, vomiting isn't exactly great on the vocal cords.

But today, I believe in miracles. I have to.



EYES CLOSED, I lie on the floor of what's supposed to be the dressing room for Rose, Kelly, and me but is currently deserted. I take in a deep breath and let it out as slowly as possible.

Austin's song, *Heart on Fire*, is playing through my earbuds, calming me. And making me fall deeper in love with his voice. At the moment, my nerves are the more pressing issue, though. I'll deal with the whole falling in love thing later.

For now, I'm thanking my lucky stars the hiccups haven't arrived.

We have ten minutes until we're on stage. Just Austin and me.

"Mia."

I open my eyes and flinch. Austin is standing right over me.

I take out one of my earbuds. The music pipes into the room, albeit softly, and I hurry to press pause.

He puts out a hand and pulls me up. "What were you listening to?"

"Nothing," I say. "Some warm-up videos."

He raises a brow. “If just *listening* to warm-up videos helps you warm up, you’re even better than I thought.”

“Warm-up as in calming,” I say, wishing I’d come up with a different lie. “What’re you doing in here?”

He smiles. “Got a little surprise for you.”

That word acts like a match on the gasoline that is my nerves. My body spasms as a loud hiccup escapes me.

“No, no, no!” I bury my head in my hands.

“I thought surprises helped you get *rid* of hiccups,” he says.

“Normally they do. But I’m hanging on by a thread here, Austin. What’s the surprise?” My eyes widen and hope blossoms in my chest. “Is it Rose and Kelly?” *Hic!*

“No. But it’s still good.” He grabs something in his back pocket, grinning widely, and reveals it.

I stare at my phone.

“I guess the mom of the kid who stole it demanded he return it. I wasn’t totally clear on the details, since the security guys he gave it to don’t speak great English. Apparently, your sister Gemma called your phone at one point, and they found out through her how to find you. She called the phone a few minutes ago, after security gave me the phone, to make sure they followed through, so we had a nice chat.”

I blink and take the phone from his hand, speechless. I never thought I’d see this thing again. Bless Gemma for being such a nosy sister.

“This too,” he says, handing me my purse.

“I can’t believe it,” I say, rifling through it like it might be some other person’s. It seems too good to be true. The stress of losing my phone and purse got put on hold last night with the whole Venetian gondola experience, but it came on full force this morning.

I throw my arms around him without thinking. “Thank you so much.” *Hic!*

He hugs me right back, leaning so I'm lifted off my feet. He tilts his head to look at me. "I didn't do it, but I'll gladly receive the gratitude for it."

The most natural thing in the world would be to kiss him right now. His lips are right there, and his eyes are telling me as clearly as they can to just do it. *Kiss me, Mia. You know you want to.*

Hic! I wriggle out of his arms, and he sets me down.

"Was that a friendly hug?" I ask rhetorically, my body teeming with electricity.

"Your run-of-the-mill, friendly hug."

I give him the side-eye. "I think you and I have different definitions of *friendly*."

Bobby, one of the sound guys, appears in the doorway. "There you are," he says breathlessly. "Three minutes." He disappears again.

I suck in a deep, shaky breath. *Hic!* Suddenly desperate, I wave my fingers. "I've got the hiccups."

Austin's mouth pulls into a crooked smile. "Yeah. I know."

"Well, don't just stand there! *Do something!*"

He hesitates for a second, then grabs me and throws me over his shoulder like he did last time.

Hic! "Something else. Hurry! I cannot sing like this, Austin."

All his amusement is gone now. He's as frantic as I am.

"Boo!" he yells, fingers splayed in jazz hands.

Hic! "Are you for real right now? I'm not six months old!"

Using his fingers, he does something to his eyelids until they're flipped inside-out. He sticks out his tongue.

"Ew," I say, drawing back slightly. *Hic!* My anxiety is through the roof, my entire body shaking like a leaf. I cannot do backup vocals when I've got the hiccups. These things are loud and embarrassing enough without a mic and an elaborate

sound system piping them through the venue. “Austin! Do something!”

“Like what, Mia?!”

“Anything!”

He stares at me, eyes searching mine frantically.

And then his lips are on mine, his hands on my cheeks, holding us together.

He pulls back, his hands still on my face, his gaze fixed on mine while I try to catch my breath and see whether my heart is still a functioning organ.

Austin kissed me. He kissed me, and I didn’t even register what was happening until it was already over.

I pull him to me until our lips meet. It’s his turn to be surprised, but it only lasts a second before his grip tightens, keeping me from pulling back like he did.

His lips explore mine, and his fingers slide to my neck, making me shiver in the most glorious way. I shift my hands to his chest, my fingertips on warm, bare skin, my palms against fabric.

He deepens the kiss, and I grasp the shirt, feeling myself lose my composure. I have no idea where I am or *who* I am. All I know is I don’t want this to end.

A small ripping sound makes us both slow.

I pull back and widen my eyes at the tear at the neckline of his shirt. He gives a breathy chuckle.

“Austin!” Bobby’s head peeks around the doorway. “Thirty seconds.” His voice is urgent, and his gaze flits between us.

Austin drops his hands from my neck and nods. “Coming.”

After a slight hesitation, Bobby disappears.

Austin pushes his hair back. “You good?”

My legs are shaking, and I’m still not entirely sure where I am, but I nod. “No more hiccups.”

“Good.” He studies me for one more second, like he has something to say. But there’s no time. “Let’s go.”

THERE ARE thousands of people in front of me, cheering for me, screaming my name, but all I can think about is the girl ten feet behind me.

I don't know what came over me. I mean, I do. She needed a surprise, and I gave her one—one I've been wanting to give her for a few days now.

The craziest part, though, is that when I pulled away, she reeled me right back. Maybe she knew getting rid of those hiccups would require more than a quick kiss. Maybe she's been thinking about kissing me as much as I've been thinking about kissing her.

Whatever inspired it, I'm not mad.

But I have to get it together for the sake of this enormous crowd.

I turn toward her every few minutes of the show. Just to make sure she's still okay, you know? It's common courtesy. It can't be easy being the only backup vocalist all of a sudden.

The festival crowd has a completely different vibe than what we've had so far. Yes, there are a lot of wasted people out there, so I can't read too much into their cheering, but there are also a ton of people hearing my music for the first time. I use the term *my* loosely, of course.

Speaking of my music, am I crazy, or was Mia listening to one of my old songs backstage? I could've sworn I heard the chorus of *Heart on Fire*.

She also ripped my shirt while we were kissing. Not like she meant to. Honestly, it's hard *not* to rip those shirts. But when I pull it off in front of the crowd, I can't help but smile and look at her. She helped make it a little easier, after all.

The way her entire face goes red sends a thrill through me.

It's a shorter show than usual, since I'm not the only artist performing, and for the first time I can remember, I'm anxious for it to be over. I want to talk to Mia.

I wave to the crowd as I jog offstage, then make my way to Mia's tiny dressing room. I run into her before I get there, though.

"Hey," I say, breathless.

"Hey." There's that tentativeness in her gaze that tells me she's thinking about the kiss as much as the concert. "How do you think it went?"

"The kiss? Amazing." This is me testing the waters to gauge how much of it was sheer desire versus desperation to end the hiccups.

"The performance," she says firmly, looking around us like someone might have heard me.

"Oh, that." I smile. "I think it went great. You did amazing. We can probably fire Rose and Kelly."

She hits me, and I suppress the impulse to grab her wrist and pull her into me.

"I'm joking," I say.

"Well, if it isn't Austin Sheppard. In the flesh."

Mia and I turn toward the unfamiliar voice, and my stomach clenches.

Blond hair brushed forward to a point, mouth arranged in his characteristic half-smile, Noah Hayes walks toward me, hand out for a shake. I think Paul mentioned he was in Europe, but I didn't know he'd be in the festival crowd.

Hardly aware of what I'm doing, I take his hand and go in for the usual bro-hug. He stiffens his arm.

“Whoa,” he says, still smiling while he rears back. “I don’t hug guys who are half-naked.”

I attempt a chuckle and drop his hand.

His gaze flits to Mia. “Mia, right?”

She nods, her eyes wider than usual as she takes his hand.

“You were amazing out there,” Noah says, dripping with the sort of charm that’s gotten countless women into his bed—including the woman I was dating after I first signed with Fusion. She came to watch one night in the studio, and that’s where she met Noah. It took her a full two more days to cheat on me with him.

“Oh,” Mia says, looking away modestly, “thanks.”

I look at her, my nose wrinkling. Oh my gosh. She’s starstruck right now.

“No, I’m serious,” Noah says. “It’s not easy to hold down the fort by yourself, but you made it look *and* sound easy.”

He’s still holding her hand. Can I punch him right now? What are assault laws like in Italy?

“Is this your first tour?” Noah asks her.

She clenches her teeth. “Is it that obvious?”

What is going on with her? Where’s the feisty Mia I know? Why do I get shoved in a pool while Noah gets blushes and eyelash flutters?

“Not at all,” he replies. “I’d *definitely* have heard of you if you weren’t new on the scene.” He glances at me, with that subtle glint in his eye that has my hands clenching, then looks back at Mia. “I’ll be going on tour myself pretty soon. We’re still in the planning stages, but are you booked up all year?”

Mia can’t even respond. She’s so surprised, and suddenly, I’m wondering if I can extend this tour another twelve months. We could do a U.S. leg. And an Antarctic leg. Space travel is making long strides, I hear. I wouldn’t say no to the moon as a concert venue. Might be hard to kiss the hiccups out of Mia in a space helmet, though.

“Are you serious?” she finally asks Noah. “That would be a dream come true. I’m a *huge* fan.”

“Likewise,” he replies, making me want to shove chopsticks in my ears. “Do you have your phone?”

Mia’s excitement flickers, and she looks at me. “It’s in the dressing room. Would you grab it for me?”

“No.”

Noah’s eyes snap to me, and Mia frowns.

“What I mean,” I say, “is that I have my phone right here.” I stride over to the bin with my stuff in it and grab my phone. “You can put your number in there, and I’ll make sure Mia gets it.”

Noah takes the phone from my hands. He puts his number in, and I’m already having an internal ethical debate over whether I can delete it in five minutes. Or provide it to every aggressive car warranty call center in existence.

“Thanks,” I say, taking it with a wide smile as a text comes in from Rose.

“What?” Mia asks.

I shake my head. “Rose is feeling better, but Kelly’s still sick.”

“I should go check on them.” Mia looks at Noah. “It was really good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he says with a smolder that promises it won’t be the last time they talk.

I watch Mia hurry off, then glance at Noah, who’s *also* watching her walk off. I hate it.

She turns a corner.

“Great team you’ve got,” Noah says.

I clench my teeth. “Thanks.”

He grasps my bare shoulder, squeezing extra hard. “Well, Sheppard. Be seeing you around.”

“Not likely,” I say.

He either doesn't hear or doesn't care.



THE GIRLS' bus has all the curtains pulled, but the door is ajar. I consider knocking, but I don't want to wake Kelly if she's asleep. It's only been a few minutes since Mia came to the bus, but I peek my head around the stairs to make sure I'm not intruding on anyone undressing.

Mia's kneeling on the floor next to Kelly, who's lying on the couch, miserable. Mia's hand strokes her hair while Rose snores softly on the other couch.

I allow myself a few seconds to watch Mia in this role. Gosh, I like her.

And you know who *she* likes?

Noah Hayes.

Whatever that kiss with me was, it fled her mind the second he stepped into the picture.

I clear my throat gently, and her head whips around.

"Austin." She hurries to her feet. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Can I talk to you for a sec?"

A hint of wariness flashes in her eyes, but she nods and follows me out of the bus.

"What's up?" she asks once we're out and standing on the pavement.

I hold up my phone. "Noah's number."

"Oh, right! Hold on just a sec." She disappears into the bus and returns with a phone in each hand. She sticks out the one I bought her earlier today. "Don't know if you want that back or if you'd rather I pay you for it and sell it myself."

"I can take it."

"Thank you." She holds my gaze after I take the phone. "It was really nice of you—to go after my stuff in the first place and then to help me out with a new phone."

I shrug. “It was no biggie.” I navigate to Noah’s contact. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” She opens the dialer in her phone.

I say the numbers slowly—slowly enough I’ve got plenty of time to consider tweaking just one of them. But I don’t. Can I nominate myself for a Medal of Honor, or does someone else have to do it?

“Thanks,” she says once he’s saved in her phone. “Oh, and thanks a lot for the new lock screen.” She holds it up and shows me the picture I saved to it before bringing it to her in her dressing room.

It’s one of the ones Giuseppe took of us in the gondola. I did it as a joke, but since that little interaction with Noah, I feel weird.

“Figured it’s what you’d have wanted.”

“Mmhmm,” she says, smiling at me in a way that makes my heart pound.

“Hey, about that kiss...”

“You were just trying to help me. I get it. Don’t worry. I’m not reading into it. I promise.”

I nod, and there’s a prolonged silence.

“Just a friend helping out another friend, right?” Her smile is less strong now.

“Right...” I’ve never said a word with less confidence.

“Besides,” she says. “No one saw. So... we’re safe.”

I nod, aware we’re totally alone here too. No one would see.

I take a step closer.

“Austin!”

I whip my head toward the voice.

Paul is looking out of our bus toward us, wearing a wrinkled shirt and sweats. “Gotta talk to you.”

“Coming,” I say.

He stays put, and I look at Mia.

“Good night, Austin,” she says, and then she disappears into her bus.

I shut my eyes, let out a breath, and head over to Paul, preparing myself

He lets me pass, then closes the door behind me. Maybe it’s because he spent the last twenty hours puking, but he doesn’t look thrilled. He takes a seat on the couch and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees while I wait.

“I just got off a call,” he finally says.

My brows go up as I sit. This isn’t the direction I’d seen this going.

“With Fusion,” he clarifies.

“Okay...”

He sighs. “They want you to play a couple of shows with Noah Hayes.”

“*What?*”

He nods. “They’re hoping to expand his audience over here, especially with his upcoming album and tour.”

I put my hands up. “Whoa whoa whoa. Hold on.”

He grimaces because he gets it.

“So, what, they want me to hand him my audience on a platter?”

“I know. It’s not what we want.”

“Understatement of the century. I hate Noah, Paul.” Today more than ever.

“I know.”

“And the feeling is mutual.”

“I know.” He sighs, lifting his shoulders. “Fusion really wants this, though. It’s just for the shows in Lyon and Paris.”

I drop my head in my hands and rub my face harshly. What sort of sick joke is this?

“Why, though? We don’t even have the same type of music—something Fusion has made sure of since they won’t let me *touch* the kind of sound Noah has.” The type of sound *I* have. And I had it before him.

Paul nods, and I know he gets it. I’m preaching to the choir here. “Maybe this is an opportunity, though, you know? If the crowds are responsive to Noah, we can make a stronger argument for you leaning into that for your next album.”

I blow out a breath and let my head fall back, shutting my eyes. “Is it even an option to say no?” Noah’s sudden appearance here makes a lot more sense now, as does the whole “*Be seeing you around*” thing.

“An option?” Paul repeats. “Of course it’s an *option*. Would I recommend it? Not really. You know how Fusion is, Austin. They can make your life a heckuva lot harder if they want to.”

“Can they?” I drop my chin. “Because it feels like that’s about all they do these days.”

“I know. But they did agree to this tour, which both of us felt was a long shot.”

“Barely agreed. And with hardly any team.” I clench my teeth and shake my head. Paul’s right, though. I can fight this, but it means they’ll feel more justified fighting *me* going forward. “Fine. But I want you to ask them about me playing one of my songs. Noah and I can sing it together, for all I care. Just let me sing something *I* wrote. For once.”

Frowning, he nods. “I’ll ask.” He studies me for a second. “You know I’m on your team, right?”

“Of course I do. And I know it’s not your fault. I just need a minute to be mad about it.”

He grimaces as I kick off my shoes and lie on the couch, staring at the ceiling.

After a minute of silence, Paul wishes me goodnight and heads to the back of the bus.

“I DON’T KNOW, GEM,” I hiss into the phone from my hiding place between the front of my bus and the back of Austin’s. “It was a kiss. What sort of adjectives are you expecting?”

“Literally *any* adjective,” Gemma says. “Quick. Gross. Passionate. Whimsical. Playful. Download a thesaurus app on your phone or something.”

“It was...” I struggle for words. “Short.”

There’s a pause. “The *kiss* was short, or it *felt* too short? Because those are two very different things.”

“Both.” I peek around the side of the bus to make sure I’m alone. We’ve got fifteen minutes until we head on the road to France, so I’m on a tight schedule with this obligatory fill-the-sister-in-on-things call.

“What?” Gemma says. “You’re making zero sense, Mia.”

Even though I made sure all the windows on both buses were rolled up and the curtains drawn, I sweep my gaze across Austin’s bus. The last thing I need is him overhearing this conversation.

“The initial kiss was short,” I explain, “but then we kissed again right after, and it *felt* too short.”

“Whoa. So, you kissed twice.”

“Kind of.”

“So what now?” Gemma asks.

I shrug. “What do you mean? Nothing. It was a weird moment. We both agreed it was done out of necessity.” Me pulling him in for more was definitely *not* a necessity. At least, not the way I’m using the word to Gemma. It sure felt like a necessity at the time, though.

“But you’d do it again?”

Why does she ask me the exact questions I don’t want to answer? It must be a sister thing. It’s super annoying.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she says after a few seconds of silence.

“What? No! I was thinking.”

“Need to phone a friend? Have me eliminate one of the options? It’s a yes or no question, Mia.”

“It’s really not. It requires context and certain conditions being met and—”

“Is this a contract or a kiss we’re talking about?”

“A ki—”

“Boo!” Austin’s head appears around the end of the bus, and I almost drop my phone.

My cheeks go up in flames. Exactly how long was he listening? “So, in review, twenty minutes at 350 degrees. Gotta go. Bye!” I hang up on Gemma mercilessly.

Austin’s brows go up. “Who was that?”

“Gemma.” I feel the sudden need to defend my strange choice of coverup for our conversation. I’m not exactly a quick thinker. “She’s baking cookies.”

“Isn’t it like one in the morning there?” He’s wearing a tank top and exercise shorts, his forehead glistening the slightest bit, like he just went for a jog.

“She’s a night owl.” She’s not. In fact, her schedule is pretty regimented. And she’s not a great baker, either.

“A night owl who loves burned cookies, apparently. Twenty minutes in the oven? Or are you guys the type of

weirdos who like their cookies crispy?”

I shove my phone in the back pocket of my overalls. “Is there something you need? You almost made me drop my phone.”

He smiles. “I figure it’s best to surprise you whenever I have the chance. In case you have the hiccups, you know?”

“Real thoughtful.” I say that instead of *I prefer the last surprise. Heavily prefer.*

He glances around, then slips into the space between the buses to face me. His jog was short enough that he still smells amazing. Or maybe he’s superhuman and his sweat glands secrete cologne.

He smiles. “Hey.”

“Hi,” I say, annoyed when it comes out breathless. *He* went on a jog, not me, for the love of all that’s holy. I try to back up, but given the 30,000-pound bus behind me, I’m not going anywhere.

My hands are weirdly hovering between us, grazing his shirt. I hesitate for a second before lowering them to my sides.

He watches their progress with a hint of a smile.

Get it together, Mia. “Don’t want to accidentally tear your shirt. They seem really fragile.”

“Or you were really into that kiss yesterday.”

I roll my eyes. “I barely touched your shirt. Aren’t you worried they’ll disintegrate if it gets too hot or if someone brushes against you?”

He just smiles at me, and I’m so out of my league here.

“You think you’re funny, don’t you?” Austin says. “For your information”—he reaches to the buckle on my overalls and fiddles with it. I can no longer breathe—“those shirts were made specially for the tour. They *do* rip easily, but concerts are the only time I wear them.”

I screw my face into a sympathetic grimace. “Couldn’t rip off a normal shirt?”

“Got to save my strength for the vocals.”

“Uh-huh.” This is totally normal, talking to someone whose face is four inches from yours. They say cultures in warmer climates are comfortable at closer social distances. Apparently, we’re embracing the culture of the sun.

“So,” he says, still fiddling with my overalls, “I’ve been thinking about yesterday. Like, a lot.”

“Okay...” I try to sound casual, but I’m not built for life on the sun. My body is about to combust.

Hic! I slap a hand over my mouth, my eyes wide. Has a body ever betrayed anyone so treacherously?

One side of Austin’s mouth draws into a smile he’s trying but failing miserably at suppressing.

I smack his chest, and he pulls back slightly, but he’s laughing.

“You did that on purpose!” I say.

He puts his hands up, proclaiming—totally falsely—his innocence.

“You did, didn’t you?” *Hic!*

“Okay, fine. I had *hoped*, but I didn’t really think it’d work.”

I pin him with my glariest glare.

He takes in a breath and gets more serious. “I’m sorry. I didn’t expect you to get the hiccups. Will you please forgive me?”

I don’t respond right away, but his puppy dog eyes are fixed on me, doing their magic. “Fine. You’re forgive—*Hic!*”

“Thank you.” It’s quiet for a few seconds. “So... You need any help with those hiccups?”

Do not, under any circumstances, smile, Mia. But I can’t help being a little flattered that he wants to kiss me again. “Maybe you forgot,” I say, “but it’s *surprise* that gets rid of my hiccups.” *Hic!*

“To *your* knowledge.”

I let out a breathy scoff, but he’s successfully piqued my curiosity. And it’s not like I *don’t* want to kiss him again.

He shrugs. “Maybe we should just give it a shot. Do our due diligence, you know?”

His talk of due diligence makes me think of Gemma’s question: *are we talking about a contract or a kiss?* I don’t even know anymore.

I consider saying no, shutting this whole thing down right here and now. That would be the smart thing to do. But when I picture Austin walking away, I can’t do it.

Besides, I definitely want to know if kissing Austin is a magical cure for my hiccups, however far-fetched the possibility is.

I cock a brow at him. “Are you saying you want to brave the possibility”—*Hic!*—“of a hiccup kiss?”

His eyes already on my lips, he takes my overall straps in hand. “Absolutely.” He pulls me toward him, and I don’t even try to combat it. I just let go.

Our lips meet, and once he’s satisfied I’m staying put, he lets go of my overalls and wraps both arms around my waist.

My back’s pressed against the bus. I have nowhere to go but toward Austin. Easiest choice in the world. I’m no longer qualified to lecture him on boundaries. Every last one of mine is at our feet as our mouths meld and the space between our bodies becomes non-existent.

An engine starts up, and we both startle, our lips breaking apart.

We both laugh softly as the bus rumbles behind me.

“Guess we’re leaving,” I say, hardly able to meet his eye.

“Guess so.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “How about those hiccups?”

I take in a slow breath and let it out just as slowly, but I don’t need to. We were kissing long enough for a few hiccups

to have happened.

He smiles as the silence stretches on. “Bingo.”

“It could’ve been the engine. It definitely surprised me.”

“Keep thinking that, Mia.” He winks and slips out from our little space.

Once he’s gone, I let out a big, shaky breath and look up at the morning sky.

I shut my eyes and let my head roll from side to side against the bus. “You’re such an idiot, Mia.”

“SPILL.” Rose sits on the couch across from me and folds her arms, staring me down. She and Kelly are finally looking like they’ve rejoined the land of the living.

I raise my eyebrows, but my pulse is officially in gear. Did she see or hear something earlier? What if she peeked through the curtains? “Spill what?”

She tilts her head to the side, not amused.

Kelly takes a seat next to her. “Don’t play, Mia. Bobby told us how he found you and Austin at the festival yesterday. Very cozy indeed.”

I shrug, slipping my earbuds inside their case so I don’t have to look my interrogators in the eye. If I do, they’ll see the neon sign in mine that says *I’m falling for Austin*. “It was nothing. He was helping me get rid of my hiccups.”

Their brows both go up.

“What exactly did his *help* entail?” Rose asks.

“Ew, stop,” I say, drawing from the suggestive expression on her face. “It was just a kiss.”

“He *kissed* you?” Rose yells.

Shoot. What was *she* thinking? “Nothing else was working,” I say, “and he knew it’d take me by surprise.”

“*I’ll* say,” Kelly says.

I’m guessing this isn’t the time to tell them we were kissing between the buses a couple of hours ago too. On a

related note, I don't think I'll ever wear overalls without thinking of Austin again. Which is a real problem since they make up about half of my current wardrobe.

"It's really not a big deal." Says the woman considering buying a fan at the next rest stop to use whenever I think about those kisses.

"Hey," Rose says, "as long as you know what you're getting into, you have yourself a grand ol' time, Mia."

"I'm not *getting into* anything."

"Definitely not anything a whole lot of other women haven't already gotten into," Kelly teases.

Rose shoves her. "Don't listen to her, Mia. You do you. Just don't let things get awkward."

"You guys are the ones being awkward," I say. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Like how Noah Hayes showed up at the concert?" Kelly suggests.

Rose scoots to the edge of her seat. "Yeah, what was that about?"

I shrug. "He was in the area, I guess."

"Did you talk to him?" Rose asks.

"Um, yeah. I did."

"*And?*" Rose prods.

"Are you going to make us milk this information out of you?" Kelly says. "What was he like? What did he say? And don't act like it wasn't a big deal. We know how you feel about that man."

I lift my shoulders. "It's not like we sat down for hours to chat. He was nice. Really nice. He mentioned the possibility of me going on tour with him for his next album."

"*What?*" they say in unison.

"Isn't that, like, your greatest dream?" Rose asks.

“Well, no,” I say as the bus slows in a gas station parking lot. “My greatest dream would be my *own* tour. But yes, it would be incredible. If he actually meant it.”

Rose motions for me to expound. “Did he say he’d call you? Did you make a plan?”

“He gave me his number.”

Four big eyeballs stare at me.

“Noah Hayes,” Rose says slowly, “gave you his number.”

“Well, he put it in Austin’s phone because I didn’t have mine at the time, but... yeah.”

“And?” Kelly asks. “What happened?”

My gaze shifts between them. “What do you mean? He gave me his number. *That’s* what happened. We just went over this.”

Rose and Kelly share a glance that says *this girl will be the death of us*. “What were your texts like?”

“I haven’t texted him.”

Blank stares.

“What are you waiting for?” Rose asks incredulously. “You know how many people he meets? How many girls probably offer themselves up to go on tour with him?”

“I didn’t *offer myself up*,” I say, wrinkling my nose. “He was the one who suggested it.”

“I’m sorry,” Rose says, blinking like she’s lost in the conversation. “*Why* exactly haven’t you used the number he bestowed upon you like a gift from heaven?”

“I will, I just...”

“Do you have other plans after this tour finishes?” Rose asks.

“No.” In fact, the only thing I have waiting for me at home is more busking and being forced to apply for another telemarketing job.

I feel sick thinking about it. Especially when the alternative is going on tour with Noah Hayes. Noah freaking Hayes.

“So *text him*,” they say in sync.

“Okay, okay.” I pull out my phone, and they hover behind me to oversee things.

I hesitate for a minute, unsure of what to say.

MIA

Hey Noah, it's Mia Sawyer. We met backstage last night.

After I press send, I'm assailed with doubts. He probably met dozens of girls backstage. It was a gigantic festival.

MIA

I'm one of Austin's backup vocalists.

NOAH

Hey, Mia. I've been waiting for your text *smiley emoji*

Rose and Kelly start flapping their hands like they're baby birds trying to take their first flight.

NOAH

I'll be in Lyon at the concert. Would you have time to grab breakfast or lunch? Or a post-concert dessert? That'll give us the chance to talk about the future.

The amount of flapping and poorly suppressed squealing is getting out of control.

MIA

That'd be great. I think we have free time around lunch tomorrow.

There's a knock on the door, and Rose hurries over to open it amidst squeals.

"Come in, come in," she says, and soon Austin's head pops up at the top of the stairs as Rose rushes over to see if any more texting has happened.

Austin's brows rise. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Yes," Rose says right as I say, "No."

Austin looks back and forth between us.

"Noah Hayes asked Mia out!" Kelly blurts.

My head whips around. "What? No, he didn't." My heart beats at a clipping pace. "He didn't. He just wants to follow up on what we talked about last night. It's a business lunch."

Austin's gaze takes me in for a second, then he nods. "Cool. Anyone want anything from inside the gas station?"

My stomach is tight as Austin takes Kelly's and Rose's orders. I wish I knew what he was thinking. That little pause before his *cool* response niggles at me, but he seems totally fine.

Is it possible he's a bit jealous? Or am I dreaming that up because it would help clarify what's going on between us?

I know he's not a Noah fan, so maybe he's annoyed.

I consider inviting Austin to explore Lyon with me, but when I go to find him backstage after rehearsal, he's talking with a beautiful blonde.

My heartbeat skids to a halt as they both start laughing. Paul comes over a few seconds later, and I beat it before anyone sees me.

I may go crazy trying to figure out this whole situation. Whatever it is, it's the reason why, when I'm out in Lyon

hours later, exploring alone, I stop in a shop and buy two things for Austin. It's my peace offering. And possibly a passive and safe way of letting him know I like him.

Because I'm an adult and can't say those words out loud.

When I get to the buses late that evening with my little shop bag in hand, I head straight to Austin's bus and knock on the door, smiling to myself in anticipation of his reaction.

The door opens, and my smile disintegrates. Standing there in an oversized t-shirt—and *only* an oversized t-shirt—is the blonde girl from earlier, complete with a mussed messy bun.

Not a girl. She's a woman. She *is* coming out of Austin's bus, after all.

She tilts her head to the side like I'm lost. "Can I help you?"

"Oh, um, no. I—"

"Is that for Austin?" She indicates the bag in my hand.

I hesitate. It *is* for Austin. And if I say it's not, how do I explain why I'm knocking on his door?

"Yeah," I say, forcing a smile. "He asked me to pick up a couple of things while I was out." I hand her the bag, and she takes it, peering inside.

I stiffen, but the contents should hold up to her nosy scrutiny.

"I'll make sure he gets it," she says sweetly as the neckline of her shirt—nope, Austin's shirt—drops over her shoulder.

"Thanks." I make my escape as quickly as possible, feeling like a love-sick fool who just got sucker-punched.

MY FOOT TAPS impatiently on the ground as I wait for my phone to buzz. Lyon is a really pretty city. Probably. I'm not in the mood to enjoy it at the moment, but I'm working on it. I've got a crowd to perform for tomorrow, and I want to give it my best, which means throwing off today's funk.

My phone buzzes.

TORI

Just three days left for y'all to reconsider.

Her next text is a GIF of the Eiffel Tower.

MOM

I may have bought tickets last night. Dad can't make it this time, but I'll be there to cheer for you on his behalf, Austin. We love you!

I smile, but the thought of my mom observing me rip off my shirt is slightly weird.

AUSTIN

It'll be so great to see you! I'll make sure you get backstage passes.

SIENA

Madi and Rémy will be there as our envoys since neither of us can get work off right now.

TROY

We'd love to join too, but the thought of throwing up on the plane is more than Stevie can handle right now. She's doing enough of that as is *wink emoji*

SIENA

WHAT?

EXPLAIN YOURSELF, YOUNG MAN.

TROY

Baby Sheppard will be making his/her debut in December!

The family text thread goes wild. Let's be honest. It's always pretty wild. I send my own GIFs and congratulations, but my stomach feels weird.

It takes me a minute to figure out what's behind it. Settling down and having a family hasn't even been on my radar. I'm chasing my dreams—and some days, it feels like I'm catching up to them.

So, why does Troy's announcement make me feel *jealous*?

Another text comes through.

PAUL

Coast is clear.

“Finally,” I mutter. It’s not that I grudge Paul his romantic rendezvous in the bus—heaven knows he’s gotten my back for plenty of my own. I just didn’t expect it to last this long.

I stick my phone in my back pocket and make the ten-minute walk to the buses. I thought about texting Mia to come with me tonight, but even though the prospect of roaming around Lyon with her was really tempting, I didn’t do it. The whole Noah thing has me feeling salty, and I’m trying to grow up a little so I don’t do something like stick my tongue out at her when he comes up again. Which he inevitably will.

My gaze flits to the girls’ bus. Are they still shrieking with excitement over him asking Mia out? Mia said it’s a business lunch, but I’m familiar enough with Noah to know differently. And I know Mia’s feelings about Noah well enough to guess she’d be happy to go on a date with him.

Paul’s getting out of the shower when I get inside the bus.

“How was it?” I ask. Paul started dating someone just before the tour, and she finally got tickets to see him. I’m grateful, since the constant texting and late-night calls between them have gotten a bit old.

He smiles at me as he rubs the towel on his hair.

“That good?”

“She wants to stay for the rest of the tour and work remotely. Just has to clear it with her boss first.”

I give Paul a noogie. “I’m happy for you, man.”

“Oh,” he says. “Someone dropped off a bag for you.” He indicates a brown sack on the table.

I frown and stick my hand inside, pulling out the first thing it touches. I hold it out with both hands. It’s a white t-shirt, but I can see some design on the other side, so I turn it around.

The entire front side is covered with a caricature illustration of abs—hairy abs. My eye catches on the tag, and I turn it over.

Thought this might come in handy.

Smiling, I reach into the bag and pull out something solid and long. It's a belt. *For peace of mind*, the tag says. There's a heart next to the words, and I rub my thumb over it, wondering if it was done as a matter of habit or intentionally.

“What're those?” Paul asks as he pulls a shirt on.

I drop the tag and put them in the bag. “Nothing. Just a couple things I needed.”

And just like that, the funk is gone.



THE MORNING IS chaos as everyone gets things together for rehearsal at the venue. It's one of the smaller ones on the tour, but I don't mind. It's nice to have a mixture of big and more intimate places. While the sound guys get everything hooked up and going, I go through wardrobe, feeling impatient to see Mia. I added my belt, and I'm hoping Victor won't mind.

Who am I kidding? It's the first thing he sees, and we argue back and forth for a couple minutes before he finally gives in.

Once we're done, I hurry out of my dressing room and go in search of Mia. If I don't see her now, I won't get to talk to her alone until after she goes out with Noah. For some reason, it feels important that I see her before. I'm worried things will be different after.

I run into her coming out of the bathroom, and with a quick glance around, I grab her hand and tug her into the nearest closet, pulling the door almost all the way closed so only a strip of light streams in with us.

“What're you doing?” she hisses.

We're in some sort of janitorial closet, with boxes, different types of brooms and mops, the subtle scent of chemicals, and hardly any room for two humans.

“Saying thank you,” I reply. “For my shirt and belt.”

“Oh,” she says. “Yeah, it was dumb, but I couldn't resist.”

“I loved it. The belt is officially part of my tour wardrobe. Victor drew the line at the t-shirt, though.”

“I’m surprised he said yes to the belt.”

“Oh, we fought about it. He probably won’t talk to me until Paris.” I shift closer to her, feeling that electricity I always do when I’m near her. “Thank you for thinking of me,” I say softly, running my hand along some of her hair. It’s soft and sleek.

I dip my head to kiss her, and she pulls back until her head hits the broomstick behind her. A game of janitorial dominoes starts, and both of us scramble to keep the entire room from crashing down.

Once things have settled, I face her, but she’s not looking at me. She’s straightening an already-very-straight mop.

“Mia?” The electricity between us is gone, and I think I know why. His name starts with N and rhymes with protozoa. “What’s wrong?”

She keeps avoiding my eye and re-situating that mop, and I pull her hand away from it. “The mop is good, Mia. What’s going on?”

She sighs and faces me. “We’ve talked about this, right? I’m not good at this whole secret friends-with-benefits thing. It might not be a big deal for you to sleep with a girl one night and kiss me the next, but I’m not up for that.”

I blink, completely lost. “Huh?”

She tilts her head at me like I’m being purposely dense. “She answered the door last night, Austin. When I came to bring the shirt and belt.”

I stare at her for a second, trying to follow her thought train. And then it hits me. “Mia, I wasn’t even there last night when you brought the bag. Daisy wasn’t there for me. She’s dating Paul.”

She searches my face—to see if I’m lying, I assume. It’s hard for me to believe she thinks I’d treat her the way she’s implying.

Well, no. That's not true. I'm aware of my reputation. And it's not like there's no grain of truth in it. I've let loose and embraced the lifestyle expected of me, but it got old quickly.

Mia's brow furrows. "I saw you laughing with her yesterday, so I just figured..."

"Yeah. We were laughing because she and Paul were so awkward about asking me if I'd make myself scarce. Believe me, Mia, last night I was totally and completely alone, kicking my heels in the city so they could spend time together. She flew in yesterday."

"I had no idea." She absently reaches for the hem of my sleeve and flips it down. "I'm sorry for assuming."

"You love assuming the worst of me, don't you?" I grab her hand from my sleeve and thread my fingers through, tugging her close until our noses almost touch and our clasped hands hover between us.

"It can be scary believing the best of someone," she says, her voice the tiniest bit breathy. She's feeling it too—the spark between us. Knowing that only intensifies it for me.

"Why's that?" I say, letting my lips graze hers.

"Because it hurts more when they prove you wrong."

"I'm not going to hurt you, Mia," I whisper.

She takes in a shuddering breath, then searches out my lips, gently kissing me like she's still not sure whether to believe me.

I clasp her hand more tightly as I kiss her slow and soft. The way I feel for Mia scares me in a way I haven't been in a long time. But I don't know how to stay away from her. I don't want to.

She drifts away slowly, and her gaze lifts to me. "What are we doing?"

I hesitate. "Kissing in a cleaning closet?"

"And *why* are we kissing in a cleaning closet?"

I don't respond, searching her face as well as I can in the dark.

"You said we can't be together," she says. "So, what exactly are we doing?"

"We're... getting to know each other. Without the pressure of other people having opinions about it."

She nods slowly. "And what's *your* opinion about it?"

"My opinion?" I think for a minute. "My opinion is we don't need to rush into putting a label on things."

She nods again. "Maybe we should take it a little more slowly, then."

I try to ignore the way my stomach clenches. "Okay. No more cleaning closet kisses. Got it. That's more of a tenth date thing, anyway." Jokes are the only way I know to keep myself from reading into her suggestion, from translating it in my head into being about something it's not. And that something is Noah Hayes.

I take my phone out of my pocket and check the clock. "We should probably get out there. They'll be starting blocking. Are you and Noah heading out right after?"

"Yeah," she says, peeking at the time on my phone. "I told him I'd text him when we're done."

My brow knits. "Why? He'll finish the same time as you."

"What do you mean?"

I search her gaze. "He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"He's doing surprise appearances at our shows in France, including tonight's."

She stares at me. "Was that always the plan?"

I shake my head, feeling the frustration at the situation building inside, but I'm not letting it get to me. "It just got decided." Thrown at me, more like.

Footsteps near, and Paul's voice sounds. "Anyone seen Austin?"

"Not since earlier," Kelly says.

Mia and I both hold our breath as Paul lets out a frustrated noise and the footsteps fade.

"We should go," I say.

"Yeah."

We stare at each other, and it occurs to me we didn't really settle what Mia meant by slowing down. Does she mean for us to kiss more slowly? Because I could take all the time in the world and be content.

But there's no time to hash it out right now.

"Go ahead," I say. "I'll follow in a sec."

She peeks through the crack, holds my gaze for a second, then slips out.

I sit there in the dark with the brooms and mops for another minute. I grab the shiny handle of a mop, considering whether I should take it in case Noah steps out of line.

With a sigh, I set it against the wall and leave the closet.

IT TAKES Austin longer to show up on stage than I'd expected. He walks in right as Kelly happens to ask me, "Where in the world did you disappear to?"

I'd be shocked if the color rushing to my face doesn't spell *I was kissing Austin* in bright crimson. "I spilled my drink and had to clean up."

"You find the cleaning closet okay?" Austin asks, having the audacity to wink.

"Yep," I say firmly. "Thanks."

I had a lot more I'd like to have discussed in that little closet, but it'll have to wait. Austin seems to be sincere about not wanting to hurt me, but then he doesn't want to put a label on things either.

Not that I'd know *what* label to put on whatever's going on between us, but still... I don't know what to think. All I know is that kissing him is quickly becoming an addiction, and my feelings are getting ahead of the no-label thing. If my feelings were a label, they'd be Coca-Cola. Fairly well-established.

Noah shows up about an hour into rehearsal, looking very handsome, with his guitar case hanging over his chest. After acknowledging Austin, he pulls his guitar strap over his head and walks straight to me.

With a smile, he gives me a hug, then pulls back. "We still good for after?"

Words stuck in my throat, I nod, very much aware of Kelly and Rose making silent screaming faces behind him.

“You have the tracks you want to do?” Bobby asks him.

“Not exactly,” Noah says, glancing at me. “Still figuring that out, but”—he puts a hand over his heart—“I swear on my life I’ll have them to you in the next couple hours.”

Bobby nods and heads to his station, and we carry on with rehearsal.

When Kelly, Rose, and I have to go through a couple parts to check our mics, my voice trembles like Jell-O. It feels like an audition for Noah’s tour, and I want to nail it.

When things wrap up, Noah hands his guitar off to someone and walks over to me. “You ready?”

I smile and nod, feeling Austin’s eyes on us. He winks at me.

For the love of all that’s good and holy, what does it mean?

Noah leads the way out of the building and along the streets of Lyon as I ask him about his time in Europe so far. He’s been traveling for more than three weeks now, and he heads home in three more. I steal a few glances at him as he talks, but he catches me every time. I’m curious about him—about the sort of guy who can write the lyrics he writes. I had imagined him to be a sort of brooding romantic, but that’s not his vibe at all.

He’s got more of the homecoming king aura.

After about fifteen minutes, we reach a big restaurant right in the middle of the city, its terrace overlooking the river. Once we get seated, I wait a few seconds for Noah to take his turn guiding the conversation.

“You having a hard time figuring out what to sing tonight?” I ask when he doesn’t pipe in.

“A bit, yeah,” he says. “My style and Austin Sheppard’s don’t really jibe. He’s got more of a generic pop feel, and my music has a little more...”

“Soul?”

His mouth tugs up at the corner. “Yeah. More soul.”

My conscience wriggles. I shouldn’t have suggested that word. I know Austin is capable of singing with soul, but it’s also true that, based on his released music, there’s not a lot of that on offer. I still feel bad, though. I don’t like feeling like Noah and I are connecting over anything negative about Austin. And I’m also not supposed to be bad-mouthing Austin’s music.

“I don’t really have any songs that fit his style,” Noah says.

“You know, he actually writes some music that’s similar to yours,” I say, hoping to right my wrong. “Fusion owns it but won’t release it because it’s not on-brand. But I’ve listened to some of his stuff from his old YouTube channel, and it’s *really* good.”

Noah’s brows go up. “Really?”

“Really. His song *Heart on Fire* is my favorite.”

He’s frowning like he doesn’t know what to think, so I pull out my phone and navigate to YouTube. I angle my phone away from him so he can’t see my search history—which is full of Austin’s channel.

“It’s very different from the stuff you usually hear from him,” I say as I tap on the song and hand my phone to him.

He listens for about thirty seconds, then hands it back to me. “Huh. Guess we aren’t as different as I’d thought. You said you’re a fan of my music?”

I let out a breathy laugh. “Um. Yes. Huge fan. If you couldn’t tell, this is really weird for me—meeting one of my music idols.”

He smiles. “So, do you know most of my songs?”

“Try *all* of them.”

“Good,” he says as the waiter sets his salad in front of him.

I frown. It's a weird thing to say, like I just passed a test or something.

He's still wearing that half-smile, then leans forward, putting his elbows on the table. "How well do you know *Stars Align*?"

I search his face, trying to see what he's getting at. "Very well. It's one of my favorites."

"Then you know it's written as a duet."

My heart starts racing. "Yeah..."

He leans even closer, pinning me with those brown eyes. "How would you like to sing it with me?"

"Sing it *with* you?" I have no idea what he means. Are we about to busk on the streets of Lyon? What is the man getting at?

"Tonight."

I swallow, my eyes glazing over as I stare at him. This isn't real. It's a dream. A terrible, cruel dream where Noah Hayes asks me to do a duet with him at a sold-out concert, only for me to wake up at my telemarketing gig.

"Mia?"

"Hm?" I reach under the table and pinch my leg. Hard.

"Is that a no?"

"No!" I say loud enough that the people at the table next to us look over. I take a breath and try again. "No, it's not a no."

He cocks an eyebrow. "So, it's a yes?"

I hesitate for a second as Austin's face pops into my head. It's not like he's asked me to do a duet with *him*. And he wants me to be successful. It's amazing being a backup vocalist, but this is a whole new level. This is lead vocals.

"I just need to clear it with Austin and Paul first," I say.

Noah waves that away with a hand. "No need. I'll do that."

I hesitate, but who am I to second-guess the proper etiquette of this sort of thing? It's Noah's opening, after all.

“So, it’s a yes?”

I nod, adrenaline kicking my heart into gear. “Yes. It’s a yes.”

Noah sits back and grins. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“What about rehearsing, though? I mean, we can’t just show up on stage and hope it comes together.”

“What do you say we eat this delicious food and then do a little rehearsing outside? How does that sound?”

It sounds, in a word, sublime.

I STARE at the dialog box on my laptop that's asking me whether I'm sure I want to delete the channel or not. My finger hovers over the *Yes* button.

I don't know why I'm hesitating. I haven't used the channel in a long time, and it's not supposed to be up. I'm shocked it hasn't been shut down. Fusion is pretty proactive about going after anyone utilizing their songs without copyright.

I guess when it's songs they don't like and don't plan to produce, they don't care as much. Though, why they took the trouble of producing the backing tracks, I'll never understand.

I hesitate another second, then slam the laptop lid shut. I can't bring myself to delete it right now. It feels like erasing part of me that already feels more distant than I want it to.

I check the time, my foot tapping on the floor of my bus. Mia's not back yet, and I hate it. It was supposed to be lunch—supposedly business only—but it's past three now. Plenty of time for Noah to mosey his way into Mia's heart. I should've warned her against him, but I didn't want to come off as being petty or jealous, which, to be clear, I am.

It's fifteen minutes later when I catch sight of the two of them heading for her bus. My heart whirs like a power drill as I scramble closer to the window to watch through the gap in the curtains.

Please tell me he's not going inside.

She wouldn't. She *couldn't*. Not when she got mad at me when she thought I'd spent the night with Paul's girl.

They stop just in front of the doors to Mia's bus. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my breath steaming up the window. I have zero chill, but I don't even care. I refuse to blink for the foreseeable future.

They laugh and smile and cut my heart out for thirty seconds, then Noah goes in for...

A hug.

Whew! That was a nail-biter.

Mia smiles, waves, and disappears into the bus. Noah stares after her for a second that has my jaw about to shatter from the pure pressure I'm exerting. Then he heads out.

I narrow my eyes through the thick window and nod. *Yeah, that's right. Walk away, buddy.*

He glances toward my bus, and I hop back, praying he didn't see me. That's the last thing I need—Noah Hayes thinking I'm surveilling him.

I want more than anything to stomp right over to Mia's bus and grill her about lunch, but I don't. I don't even message her—a decision I come to after writing and deleting four texts.

When I head to my dressing room for wardrobe and makeup, I stop on the threshold at the sight before me.

Noah glances over his shoulder at me and smiles. How does he do that? Make a simple, universally recognized facial expression look so cocky and condescending?

"You hungry?" he asks, indicating a to-go box on the counter by the mirrors. "Feel free. I took Mia to lunch, but we didn't spend much time eating."

Where's that metal mop handle when I need it?

"Thanks," I say, "but I'm good."

Victor points me to my wardrobe rack, and there's no conversation between Noah and me for a short but blissful twenty minutes as the two of them discuss what he'll wear.

“This one will match better with Mia’s,” Victor says.

What now? I whip my head around and see him holding up a shirt in front of Noah.

“You planning on joining my backup vocalists?” I wink at Noah, doing my best to match his annoying vibe.

He chuckles as he starts taking off his shirt. Suddenly, I get why Mia has been so quick to mock that part of my show. Who does that?

Noah pulls the shirt over his head. “Sorry, Sheppard. Not this time. Did Paul not tell you? Mia’s singing with me.”

My smile flickers. “Singing with you?”

He nods. “*Stars Align*. The girl’s got pipes.”

I say nothing. *Stars Align* is one of Noah’s most popular songs, a duet he did with Ayva Peters. And tonight he’s singing it with Mia. At the concert I’m headlining.

No wonder he didn’t answer at rehearsal earlier when they asked what he’d be singing. And no wonder he looked at Mia right then.

Was it already planned? Or was this something they discussed over lunch? Either way, I should’ve been told.

“Did it occur to you I might not want my backup vocalist tiring out her voice before my show?” I ask.

Noah’s gaze takes on a steelier quality, but his smile stays intact. “I think she can handle it.”

She can. I know she can. It’s me who’s struggling here, and Noah knows it. But I’m not going to play into his hands.

“You’re right,” I say. “Mia can definitely handle it. Next time, just clear it with me before you use one of my team.”

Not that there’ll be a next time.



NORMALLY, I spend the time before it’s my turn on stage in my dressing room. I like to head out at the last second, or my

nerves get to me. It's better if I can jump right into performing.

But tonight is different. I'll be just offstage, watching Mia and Noah. Not just because my curiosity is a bottomless pit and I'm a glutton for punishment. This is big for Mia, and I want to see her in the limelight.

I put on the headphones that connect to the electric keyboard backstage, playing the tune of the latest song I've been working on. I have about twenty of these unfinished songs. I leave them that way purposely because then I don't have to give Fusion first right of refusal. For some reason, they never refuse, despite the fact that they also never produce them.

This way, the songs are still mine, even if they're just bits and pieces.

Someone taps my shoulder, and I turn to find Mia staring at me like a deer in the headlights. Before I even take off the noise-canceling headphones, I see the problem.

She's got the hiccups. Of course she does. She's got to be out-of-her-mind nervous right now. Which doesn't make me particularly happy.

"I need your—*hic!*—help."

I set down the headphones. There are a couple people from the venue out and about, so I grab Mia's hand and lead her away until we reach a door on our right.

I look down the hallway, then open it and pull her inside. It's some sort of storage room, with plenty of cords and sound equipment and odds and ends.

I face her.

Part of me is happy she came to me for this, weird as it is. I mean, she could have gone to Noah, and I have no doubt the man would've gladly kissed the hiccups out of her.

But the other part of me is wondering if it was a bad idea to attach getting rid of the hiccups to kissing me. It'd be great if Mia liked kissing me for kissing me's sake instead of

because she's desperate not to have the hiccups on stage. With Noah Hayes.

And then there's the fact she didn't tell me about the duet with him.

But now's not the time to discuss that.

"Listen, Mia," I say, taking her face between my hands. "You're going to be amazing, okay?"

Hic!

"You've got this."

She nods, and I can see she's trying hard to believe me.

"But just in case..." I search her eyes, then press my lips to hers.

I've kissed Mia a few times now, but this one feels different, probably because this isn't just about hiccups for me. This is about the fear Mia is slipping away from me before I even get a real chance with her. So, I kiss her like this might be my last chance.

She's about to go on stage and sing Noah Hayes a love song... and be serenaded right back. I'm thinking it's best to hedge my bets.

If my kiss were actual words, it would say, "Choose me. Please choose me."

She slowly pulls away, her eyes fluttering open like she realizes this kiss was different, and she isn't quite sure what to think of it.

I let my hands drop and stare at her, waiting to see if it worked. What if she still has the hiccups? Would she take it as a sign that whatever we've had is fizzling?

But no hiccups permeate the silence between us.

"I should go," she says. "We're going on soon."

I nod and try for a smile. "Break a leg, Mia."

She smiles. "Thanks." She reaches for the door, then pauses. "And... thanks for your help."

“Anytime. Literally.”

She laughs softly and leaves the room.

I wait twenty seconds, then follow, wondering what’s become of my life that I’m sneaking into closets multiple times a day to kiss a girl. It’s like I’m in junior high.

Noah goes on stage first, singing two of his well-known songs. Then he announces Mia, who glances at me and takes a big breath.

I give her a smile and a thumbs up, then watch her walk on stage.

“Our little baby,” Rose says, wrapping her arm around my shoulders. “All grown up and living her dreams.”

“I wonder how she got rid of the hiccups,” Kelly says, stealing a significant glance at me. “She was really freaking out there.”

“Shh,” I say as the music starts.

Mia’s voice comes through the mic a bit shaky at first, and every muscle in my body clenches. A few seconds later, she’s got it under control, and I relax. She’s ready to wow this crowd.

When her voice and Noah’s join at the chorus, my joy on her behalf suffers a minor setback. And when the two of them stare at each other as they sing, my joy is un-full. My cup runneth under.

Am I being dramatic? Absolutely. Do I know how to stop? Not a chance.

I know it’s a performance, but I also know how powerful the energy of a performance can be. And I know how much Mia loves Noah’s music. Too bad the man is nothing like his lyrics portray him.

What’s getting to me the most, though, is how much I wish it was me out there with her, singing music we both love in front of a crowd eager to sway and sing along. That seems like a dream—and one completely out of my reach.

When they reach the end of the song, Noah grabs Mia's hand and raises it above their heads. "Ladies and gentlemen, Mia Sawyer!"

The crowd claps and cheers, and Mia's smile is radiant. Noah pulls her into a hug that makes every muscle in my body go taut. It seems unnecessarily long for a hug, but eventually, they pull apart, and Mia heads in our direction.

Kelly and Rose intercept her, trying to squeal silently as they congratulate her.

I've never felt so torn in my life. I'm so happy for Mia. But my stomach feels weird and tight.

Once the conversation settles between her and the ladies, her gaze shifts to me. I grin and pull her into a hug. "You were amazing," I say into her ear, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"Thank you," she whispers back.

Paul walks over with Bobby to check our mics, and there's no more time for talk before it's our turn—Mia's turn *again*—on stage.

I take Paul aside quickly. "Hey, how did the whole Noah and Mia thing happen?"

"I have *no idea*," he says.

"Noah said you were supposed to tell me."

Paul shakes his head. "He didn't say a word to me. I had no clue until he announced her."

I nod. It sounds just like Noah to pull crap like that.

I try to shake off everything I'm feeling and pay attention to the crowd, which seems to be in rare form. They really liked Noah, which makes me want to call up Fusion right now and shout, "*See?! They'd like my music too.*"

The only way I know how to keep my mind where it needs to be is to give it everything I've got.

This is the smallest crowd so far, but I give them the performance of their lives, and they eat it up.



AUSTIN

What're you up to?

MIA

Just changed into my PJs.

AUSTIN

Serious question: do they make PJ overalls?

MIA

I don't know. But I'll be looking into it now. What's up?

AUSTIN

Want to come hang out for a bit?

MIA

Want to go for a walk instead?

AUSTIN

In your PJs?

MIA

Are you embarrassed?

AUSTIN

Never. Meet you outside in three.

I SLIP on a pair of sweatpants and pull a t-shirt over my head as I hurry down the stairs. Paul isn't around—he promised to give me the bus to myself tonight, which is why I asked Mia to hang out.

Mia's already waiting when I get out there. For some reason, I'd been expecting an oversized onesie, but she's wearing loose sweats and a fitted t-shirt. How does she look every bit as amazing in that as she does in that silver sequin dress?

She smiles as we start walking without a specific destination in mind. She's got that after-concert glow I don't know what to do with. I'm not in the habit of letting myself fall for girls like I have for Mia, and I'm definitely not in the habit of letting myself fall for someone who hasn't already made it clear they'd welcome that with me.

First world problems, I know.

“How are you feeling after tonight?” I ask.

“Amazing,” she says, grinning as we turn onto the bridge over the Sône River. “I think I get it now.”

“Get what?”

“How you can get so hyped from a crowd that you rip your shirt off.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Wow. Was that something you were tempted to do?”

She shoves me, but I grab her arm, so we both stumble for a second.

“I mean that feeling... It’s powerful.” She stops in the middle of the bridge and rests her elbows on the iron rail.

“It is.” I search her profile, wondering how powerful it was for her and how it’s affected her. “I assume you plan to repeat it in Paris?”

“Um, yes.” She looks over at me. “If that’s okay with you?”

“Yeah... I mean, it would’ve been nice to know beforehand.”

Her eyes widen. “Did Noah not tell you?”

“Oh, he did.” I look out over the lamp-lit city. “In the dressing room.”

She clenches her teeth. “I’m sorry, Austin. I told him I needed to clear it with you and Paul, and he said he’d do it. He must’ve forgotten.”

I snort. “Yeah. Something like that.”

She searched my profile for a few seconds. “You’re not a big fan of his, are you?”

“No.”

She turns and faces the other way so she’s leaning on the iron rail but looking at me. “Why *is* that?”

I shrug. “I don’t like the guy.” I could say a lot more, but I’m in dangerous territory here. It’s not a good look to talk crap about a person everyone else likes.

She frowns. “He’s been really nice to me.”

I give a soft chuckle.

“What?”

I search her face. “You assume everyone is as authentic as you are, Mia. That what you see is what you get. And it’s not always the case.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You think Noah isn’t genuine?”

I don't respond right away, and she turns her body fully toward me.

"Please, say what you mean, Austin. You think Noah asked me to sing with him for a reason other than my voice?"

I face her. "I think he asked you to sing with him for reasons *more* than just your voice."

"Ouch."

"Mia, you know I love your voice. I have since the second I heard it. No one believes in your voice like I do, okay? I'm telling you to be careful with Noah Hayes. That's all."

"You still haven't told me why you hate him so much."

I want to tell her. But how do I do it without sounding petty and jealous? What if Noah's not the problem? I'm the one who can't manage to keep a girl around.

She turns away. "I think I know why," she says softly.

"And why is that?"

She takes a second before responding, and when she does, her voice is still quiet. "I think you feel like you sold out, and you're jealous of Noah because he didn't." She turns to meet my gaze.

I swallow. Those words hurt. For more reasons than one. "If you think Noah wrote his own songs, Mia, you've got another thing coming. Besides, I'm not the only one selling out here."

"What?"

"Weren't you the one who said you want to *make it* on your own talents?"

"And?" There's danger in that tone.

I hesitate, then turn toward the river again. I don't want to hurt Mia, and that's where this is heading. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. I just don't want you to get hurt, okay? I know you think highly of Noah."

"I have no reason not to."

“Except that I’m telling you to be careful. He has a reputation. He’s not quite as chivalrous as his songs make him sound. I don’t want him using you.”

“Using me? For what exactly?”

I shrug. “To get under my skin? To prove he can have whatever he wants?”

She looks at me for a few seconds. “Not everything is about you, Austin.”

I swallow. This is exactly what I was afraid of. She thinks I’m being petty.

She lets out a breath through her nose. “I should head back. I’m getting weird looks for these pajamas.”

So we leave. But I know that’s not the real reason.

WE TALK on the way to the buses, but things are weird. In a very official way. There are no kisses between the buses when we say goodbye, not even a shadow of a thought about kissing. Just a quick goodnight.

What follows is a very drawn-out stint of lying in my bed, staring at the ceiling.

Austin thinks I'm selling out. He thinks I'm trading on Noah's name for my own benefit. Not just that, though. He thinks Noah has ulterior motives for asking me to sing with him—namely, to make Austin jealous.

I think Austin is making this about himself. I don't think Noah asked me to sing with him because of that. I think he saw my talent and went for an opportunity to do me a favor *and* make a performance fans would love. And they did.

I don't think Austin can see straight when it comes to Noah. He says Noah has a reputation, but guess what? So does Austin, and I've seen firsthand how inaccurate it is. Austin's not a talentless womanizer. He's fun and thoughtful and *very* talented. So why should I believe Noah's reputation?

But the thing Austin said about me selling out?

I'm worried he's right. This whole time, I've been so adamant I want success on my own terms and on my own merit. I don't want any legs up. But then Noah comes along, and I jump at the chance to sing a duet with him. Why *did* I say yes? I told Austin it's because Noah has my same style,

but doesn't that just mean I'm hoping his fans will become my fans?

I convinced myself that touring with Austin had nothing to do with my hopes and dreams for my own career, but I was kidding myself. If getting exposure from other artists is selling out, I took a step in that direction the second I said yes to Austin.



THE BUS RIDE to Paris takes five hours, and for the first hour of it, Kelly and Rose are eager to rehash my experience singing with Noah. Not that I mind. It *was* amazing.

But my thoughts keep turning to Austin. I can't even tell whether I'm mad at him or myself. Both, I guess.

"Look at you," Kelly teases. "Performing with Austin Sheppard. Kissing Austin Sheppard. Performing with Noah Hayes. Who knows what's next?" She wags her brows.

"Movin' on *up*!" Rose says, putting out her palm for a high-five.

I smack my hand against hers and laugh, but it's as genuine as the cubic zirconia on my finger. I love Noah Hayes's music, but there's no spark with him, and I don't want Kelly and Rose—or Austin—thinking I'm making a habit of performing with musicians and then... doing more than that with them.

The day is a blur once we get to Paris. It's a big venue for us, and the stage configuration is different from any of the others so far, which means extra rehearsing and blocking.

I'm probably being hypersensitive, but when Noah puts his hand on my waist at one point during rehearsal, I get stiff, and my gaze darts to Austin, who looks away.

It's almost midnight when we finish and head for the buses. I feel strange not having talked with Austin much today, but things are still weird between us, and it's leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

So sour that the next day, I'm not even sure I want to go out and explore Paris. Part of me wants to lie on my bed with my headphones in all day. Is the song I want to listen to on repeat one of Austin's?

No comment.

But I go out anyway because Rose and Kelly persuade me to. We're sitting in the Louvre courtyard to rest our feet when my phone buzzes.

GEMMA

You really shouldn't hunch when you sit.

I frown and reread her text.

MIA

Wrong thread.

GEMMA

You'll get wrinkles if you make that face too much.

"What in the world?"

I start typing out a text, but another comes through.

GEMMA

Are you going to say hi to me or stare at your phone all day? Look up.

I whip my head up, and fifteen feet away, my sister Gemma watches me with a huge, mischievous smile on her face. Standing next to her are a few unfamiliar faces... and a very familiar face: Austin's.

My jaw goes slack as I push myself to stand. Gemma runs over and throws her arms around me. "Surprise! Also, Austin

has my full approval, FYI,” Gemma whispers into my ear.

I blink, too shocked to register what she said. “How... when...?”

She steps back and links her arm through Austin’s. I kind of want to punch her for it. “He flew me out to surprise you.” She looks over at him. “I’m thinking it worked.”

Austin’s gaze is fixed on me, his expression impassive. “I think so.”

“You must be Kelly and Rose,” Gemma says, letting go of Austin. The three of them start chatting, and I scan the faces of the strangers. One is definitely Austin’s mom. Then there are two women and one guy near my age.

“Mia,” Austin says, “this is my mom, Sue, my sister Tori, and our good family friends, Madi and Rémy. They live in France.”

Austin’s mom smiles and gives me a hug. “Has my son been taking good care of you, Mia?”

I glance at Austin, who chuckles and rolls his eyes. *He’s been kissing me to help me with my hiccups, Mrs. Sheppard.* “He’s done a great job.”

Madi and Rémy greet me next, and we talk about Paris for a minute. Apparently, this city is where they fell in love. How magical must that have been?

“My turn,” Tori says, pulling me into her arms. She’s got a head of fluffy blonde waves that temporarily obscure my vision. These Sheppards really know how to hug. “I watched your performance last night with Noah Hayes. You were incredible. Austin’s lucky to have you.”

My gaze darts to Austin again, and there’s a short, awkward pause as we stare at each other. *Does he feel lucky to have me here? Or is he regretting the choice to ask me to come on tour?*

Kelly and Rose introduce themselves to the Sheppards and Scotts, leaving Austin and me to stare at each other a little

more. Just in case I hadn't stared at him enough over the past couple of weeks.

I can't believe he flew Gemma out here for me. I didn't even realize how much I wanted someone from my family here until I saw her.

"Your parents really wanted to come," he says, "but the notice was too short. Maybe they can make it to one of the shows during Noah's tour." There's no bitterness in the words.

I wrap my arms around him. "Thank you." I swallow, burrowing my head in his shoulder so there's no chance he sees my emotion slipping through. "So much."

His arms tighten around me. "You're welcome."

My arms have a mind of their own, and they want to hold on for dear life, but we have an audience, so I pry them from Austin's body and smile at everyone like I'm not about to lose it over Austin's kindness.



"WHAT ARE YOU *DOING*?" I hiss, scrambling to get out of the sheet Gemma threw over me.

"Trying to *help* you." She pulls it off.

"I need to be surprised," I say, putting my hands to my hair to make sure it's not completely ruined. "Not suffo—*hic!*—cated."

"Go find Austin, then," Gemma says, tossing the sheet to the side.

It's not even the performance that's got me nervous. I don't know exactly what it is. I know it has to do with Austin. And Noah. The whole situation is weird. There's a palpable tension between the three of us I'd like to take a pair of scissors to.

"I'm not doing that," I say. Not that I don't want to kiss Austin. But things are still off between us, and I don't want to use him like that. Especially after how nice he was to bring Gemma here.

Hic!

“Two minutes,” Bobby says.

I nod, then turn to Gemma, clenching my teeth. I need to get rid of these hiccups. Stat. And Gemma is failing me. Part of me is afraid I’ve crossed the border into only-Austin’s-kisses-can-save-me territory.

“What do I do?” I ask, not expecting an answer.

“Mia!”

I whip my head around as Austin jogs over.

Hic!

He gives me a smiling grimace, and Gemma moves out of the way. “She’s all yours, buddy.”

I shoot her a look that says *you’re so not cool*, then look at Austin standing in front of me. My heart speeds. How is he so ridiculously handsome? And how am I so ridiculously pathetic?

“Austin,” I say. “You don’t have to—”

He takes my face between his hands and stares into my eyes. “You’ve got this, Mia. Okay?”

I nod.

“I’m sorry for the things I said last night. I was jealous and scared and being a complete idiot.”

I laugh softly and shake my head.

“You belong on that stage,” he says. “They need to hear your voice. So go out there and give it everything you’ve got. And enjoy yourself doing it. Okay?”

I swallow and nod quickly, waiting for the thing he came to do: kiss these hiccups away.

I breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

His hands drop from my face, and he steps back.

No hiccups.

I glance at Gemma, who's ten feet away, staring at us with wide eyes and mouth slightly agape.

"That's your cue," Austin says as Noah announces a *special surprise*.

"Thank you," I say, then I turn toward the stage, take a deep breath, and walk out.

THE CROWD TONIGHT is five times the size of last night's, and even though the stage lights are blinding me, I can see it's almost sold out.

You belong on that stage. I feel that in my bones as I wait for the cue to begin my verse. Is it so wrong for me to be on this tour? To get a little help to do the thing I feel I'm made to do?

Noah stands closer to me than he did during rehearsal, and when we get to the chorus, he slips a hand around my waist and pulls me to face him so we're singing to each other rather than the crowd.

My heart gallops, and my voice wavers, but the audience goes wild with whoops and cheers. I can smell alcohol on his breath, but Noah's smile grows as we sing, and my gaze shifts behind him to where Austin, Gemma, Rose, and Kelly stand offstage, watching.

Austin's expression is impassive. I have to turn my gaze away to focus on my breathing so I don't mess up. As soon as the chorus is over, though, I shift my body away from Noah and toward the crowd for the bridge.

I know it's all a performance—like Austin's shirt gimmick—but I'm not used to it. And as I leave the stage to applause, I can still feel the places Noah's fingers pressed into my side.

Austin's nowhere to be seen, but Gemma smothers me with a hug and a slurry of congratulatory words, followed by Rose and Kelly doing the same. I break away and hurry to the

place set up for my quick wardrobe change, searching for Austin.

Did he stop watching because he was jealous? Or was there some other reason? It's got to be the latter. Of all people, he understands crowd-pleasing.

Then again, he didn't kiss me before I went on stage, and it was the perfect opportunity to. What does it all mean?

Austin appears just in time, and before I know it, I'm back on stage, this time next to Kelly and Rose.

Whatever the reason for Austin's disappearance, it doesn't affect his performance negatively. In fact, he seems extra energetic tonight, getting closer to the crowd to touch their hands and crouch to sing to random front-row fans.

They eat it up. And I get it. One hundred percent. But all these girls and women wearing shirts with his face on them... they know Austin can sing, they know he's a gorgeous human specimen, but do they have any idea about the other parts of him? Like how funny he is? Or how kind? How supportive? How cute he is with his mom? (I got that on full display as we walked around Paris together earlier today.) How fun his relationship with his sister Tori is?

Maybe it's for the best they don't. If they knew what he'd done for me flying Gemma out here, they'd lose their minds, and some of them are already crying.

I can see how Austin would worry about death threats against any woman presumptuous enough to take him off the market.



THE ROOM for the meet-and-greet is filled with the high-strung chatter of young females anticipating the opportunity to acquire photographic evidence they touched the physical form of Austin Sheppard.

I hang out near the refreshment table with Gemma, Tori, and Mrs. Sheppard while Kelly and Rose chat with Noah. The way he interacts with them makes me think maybe I

overreacted to his ad-libbing on stage. He's just one of those people who's comfortable with a much higher degree of physical contact than I am. Or the alcohol has made him more loosey goosey than normal.

As fans move through the meet-and-greet line, a number of them ask for a photo with Noah. When two girls ask me for a photo, it takes me a second to register what they're asking.

"Me?" I gesture to myself like they might've actually meant they wanted a picture with the wall behind me.

Gemma kindly takes the photo while I feel like I've just unlocked a new level in my career.

When two girls ask if they can get a picture with Austin and Noah *together*, my hand tightens on the paper cone my water is in, and some liquid spills onto my shoes.

Austin doesn't answer, but he doesn't need to. Noah ducks under the velvet rope barrier and slides right in. He's not even supposed to be at the meet-and-greet, so I can only imagine how Austin feels.

One of the girls leans into Austin and splays her fingers over his pec. I toss the cup, water included, into the garbage can so I don't go Hulk on it.

Austin smiles, grabs her hand, and pulls it down between them, then says something that changes her expression from embarrassed to laughing.

I breathe and fill myself another cup.

The Noah-Austin combo picture becomes the new norm, and while part of me wants to pull Noah away so Austin can enjoy his own meet-and-greet for his own tour, by the way the fans are behaving, I get the sense it might cause World War III.

Tori and Austin's mom keep Gemma and me entertained with conversation, including some funny stories about him I fully intend to use as future ammunition *and* some tender stories I kind of wish they'd kept to themselves. Just like these fans lined up all the way out of the room, I don't need more reasons to fall in love with Austin Sheppard. I don't need to know he paid down his parents' house with the check from his

last tour. It would've been *really* nice if they'd told me he blew it all in Vegas and woke up hungover and married to a stripper.

The line slowly tapers until the last group gets their five seconds of fame with Austin and Noah.

Paul goes over to Austin, and Noah slips under the rope and heads straight for me.

“Hey,” he says, “can I talk to you for a second?”

“Um, yeah, sure.” I glance at Gemma. “Be right back.”

Instead of pulling me to the side like I expected, Noah leads the way out of the room. I check over my shoulder and find Austin's gaze on us, even though Paul's still talking to him.

Noah and I turn a corner and walk a bit farther until he stops and faces me.

“What's up?” I ask with as much nonchalance as I can muster.

“You.” The way he looks at me makes my heart speed up. I take it this isn't a conversation about his upcoming tour.

“Me?”

“I've been thinking about you all night, Mia, waiting for the chance to talk to you.”

I raise my brows. It didn't look like he was thinking about me when he was butting in on the meet-and-greet, letting Austin's fans be all over him. In fact, he could use the pointers I gave Austin on personal boundaries.

“Talk to me about what?” I keep my tone light to counter the smolder in his bloodshot eyes. I feel my back bump against the wall, even though I don't remember turning this direction.

Noah rests his palm against the wall, boxing me in.

“About how beautiful you are,” he says, assaulting my nostrils with the smell of alcohol. “And that voice.” He shuts his eyes and groans softly.

Chills erupt on my skin, and they're not the good kind.

I press my back and head as far into the wall as it will take me as Noah gets closer, but it's frustratingly solid.

"Noah," I say, willing myself not to shrink into the wall. "I'm flattered you think those things, but I think you've got the wrong idea about me. And you're drunk."

His mouth quirks at the side. "I have a lot of ideas about you, Mia."

I put my hands to his chest to keep him from stepping any closer as panic builds in my chest. "Noah. I'm serious. Stop."

"You didn't say please." He dips closer, and I push him away, but the man is as solid as the wall behind me.

Hic!

Noah goes still, his brows contracting.

I take the opportunity to push him again while he's not expecting it. "Get *off!*"

"Hey!"

Noah's head whips around. Austin's at the end of the hallway, gaze shifting between the two of us. He runs toward us and barrels into Noah, shoving him.

I CHARGE into Noah like I'm a battering ram, and he stumbles sideways. Mia hurries toward me just as Gemma, Tori, and a few others appear down the hallway.

"You okay?" I ask Mia, my heart pounding.

Before she can respond, Noah charges me right back—like a *drunk* battering ram. I intercept him, and our arms lock. We push against each other until Noah pulls back, cocks his arm, and throws his fist at me.

I try to dodge, but it hits my cheekbone, sending pain through my skull.

Eyes watering, I shove him, and before he can react, I hurl my fist into his jaw.

Someone pulls on my arm, and Paul grabs Noah and tears him away.

Mia and Tori drag me backward as Gemma and Rose help Paul.

Satisfied I'm not getting charged again anytime soon, I turn to Mia.

Her wide eyes fix on my cheek. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I say tightly, even though my knuckles and cheek burn. "Are *you*? Did he do anything to you?"

"I'm fine." She looks shaken up, though.

My jaw clenches. I can't get the image of Noah boxing her in out of my head.

Why didn't she listen to me? What would've happened if I hadn't checked on her?

I need to get out of here. If I don't, I'll say or do something I'll regret.

I push through the space between Mia and Tori and head for the exit, satisfied Mia has enough people to keep her safe from Noah.

"I want him gone," I say to Paul as I pass him and head for my bus.



HEAD RESTING on the arm of the couch, I toss the stress ball into the air, seeing how close I can get it to the ceiling without hitting it. I haven't even looked in the mirror yet to see what damage Noah did to my face. I don't want to think about him. It makes me want to go ape on everything within arm's reach.

This tour has gotten completely out of hand. What started as my big chance, the thing I've been dreaming of for years, somehow morphed into a Noah Hayes/Austin Sheppard joint concert.

It's not just the tour, though. Seeing Mia with Noah woke a crazy beast inside me. I've never felt that way before—like I would tear a guy limb from limb if he hurt her.

It forces me to admit something to myself: I'm in love with Mia. Out-of-my-mind, can-barely-think-straight in love with her.

How did I get here? I never wanted this. I never wanted to fall in love with *anyone*.

There's a knock on the door of the bus.

"Go away," I yell.

The door opens.

I keep tossing the ball in the air, waiting for Paul to lay into me and tell me Fusion wants Noah to not only perform

tomorrow night but to follow us to our last show in London. Maybe I'll even be opening for *him*.

“Hey.”

I whip my head around and find Mia looking down at me. And then the ball hits me in the face.

I wince and cover my nose with a hand as Mia hurries to my side.

“Sorry,” she says like it's her fault I threw a ball directly over my own head and forgot about it.

Well, it kind of is. She makes me forget a lot of important things.

“Did it hit... right *there*?” she asks, referring to the spot on my cheek Noah hit.

I drop my hand and nod, letting out a breath through rounded lips. Pain isn't bad. It's better than having to deal with the other things I'm feeling.

She clenches her teeth at the sight of me. “Jeez.”

I push myself to a sitting position. “That good, huh?”

She points to the spot under my eye. “It's really red. Hold on.” She gets up and goes over to the fridge. She comes back with a can of Diet Pepsi in hand.

“I'm more of a Coke Zero guy,” I say.

She smiles and puts the cold can to my cheek. “Coke Zero is no good for black eyes.”

“Do I really have a black eye?” That'll cause a stir at tomorrow's performance. Let's hope makeup can cover it.

“No. At least not yet.”

“I don't think I'll get one. He hit my cheekbone.”

“Let's hope you're right. We can't have damage like that to Austin Sheppard's precious face. Do you insure it like JLo's butt?”

“Are you comparing my face to a butt?”

She smiles, that little mischievous light in her eyes.

I cover her hand holding the soda with mine and gently pull it away. Her gaze fixes on me.

“It’s a little cold,” I explain.

She nods and sets down the soda slowly. “I’m sorry, Austin. Really, really sorry.”

“For what? *You* didn’t punch me in the face.”

“No, but it’s still my fault.”

I hold her gaze.

“I was too proud to listen to you about Noah. But you were right.”

My forehead pinches. “I should’ve told you all the reasons, even if it made me look dumb.”

“What *are* the reasons?”

I fiddle with the tab on the Diet Pepsi, then tell her my history with Noah—how he’s always talked down to me, how he came onto my ex, and she cheated on me, how he’s got a reputation for being a Don Juan.

When I finish, she looks down. “I should’ve trusted you. I didn’t want his motives to be tainted, though. I wanted it to be all about my talent.”

“If he wasn’t such an idiot, it *would’ve* been. To be clear, I’m not thrilled about being right.”

She cocks an incredulous brow. “Everyone loves being right.” Her smile fades as she twists the soda can absently.

“Not like that. It had nothing to do with you, Mia. I hope you know that. Much as I hate to admit it, Noah was smart to ask you to do a duet. I wish I’d thought of it first. But Noah can’t pass up an opportunity for more. Or to rub things in my face.”

Her eyes flit to mine. “What do you mean?”

“He knew, Mia. He knew it’d drive me crazy to see you with him—to take you from me.”

She swallows. “It... drove you crazy?”

I let out a soft laugh. “I couldn’t even watch you on stage tonight once he started putting his hands on you. I listened, though.” I can’t *not* listen to Mia’s voice.

“I had no idea he was going to do that,” she says. “It wasn’t rehearsed. I assumed it was for the crowd or because he’d been drinking.”

I grimace, but the edge of my lip creeps up. “What happened to all those fancy boundaries of yours, huh?”

Her mouth twists to the side. “Okay, yes, I deserve that. And I get it now. I’ve been really hard on you.” Her eyes search mine. “I’m sorry for what I said... about you selling out.”

I look away. “It’s true. I did sell out.”

“You did what you thought would help you live out your dream.”

“Yeah. And look where that got me. Singing somebody else’s stupid songs while mine are in prison with my label.”

“Have you asked if you can sing one of them? To finish off the tour?”

“I told Paul I wanted that if I agreed to the whole Noah thing.”

“And...?”

“They said they’d think about it. Which is their way of saying no gently. They always say no. It’s about the *brand* and the *image*. Can’t be messing with that.” I grab the stress ball and chuck it at the wall.

“Your hand,” she says, taking hold of it. My knuckles are red, and the skin on my middle finger is torn.

“It’s fine.” I don’t pull away, though. I like her holding my hand too much. “It was worth it.”

She smiles sadly, then brings my knuckles to her lips and presses a soft kiss to it.

The tenderness of it strips the breath from my lungs. Mia and I haven't ventured into that sort of territory before now. I mean, she shoved me in a pool the first time we met, for heaven's sake.

"Thank you," she says, "for protecting me."

I nod, and my chest tightens as I consider how far I would go, the things I would do for Mia. A few scraped knuckles and a shiner are only the beginning of it.

I put my palm against her cheek and look into her eyes. What I see is the invitation I was hoping to see.

I press my lips to hers, and she's ready for it. There are no hiccups this time, no performances to get to. Just us, lips locked for no other reason than we want to.

We turn toward each other, and our knees bump. I break away, my eyes on hers as I slip one hand under her thighs and the other around her waist and pull her onto my lap.

She wraps her arms around my neck, and we look at each other for a second before she tucks her hair behind her ear and leans in for more. Her hands grasp the back of my shirt, and a ripping sound stops us both.

She sighs dramatically. "Can a woman not grab a fistful of a man's shirt without it disintegrating? I thought I gave you a better option than these single-ply shirts. How is it even still intact after your tussle with Noah?"

I frown. "No clue." I try to look over my shoulder at the tear. "This one's useless now, though. Better see it through."

Her brows go up. "Can I?"

"Of course. It's pretty satisfying, actually."

She hesitates for a second, then grabs the front of my shirt and pulls.

And suddenly I'm half-naked.

Mia plays with the fabric in her hand. "Okay, that *is* kind of fun." Her gaze drops to my body. She stands up suddenly. "I should probably go now."

I smile. "I have other shirts, you know. A lot of them."

"Yeah, and I'll rip those too. They're like tissue paper."

I sigh and stand up. "Fine. I'll walk you out." I step right behind her, wrap my arms around her, and waddle with her toward the door.

She turns toward me when we reach the stairs. "I think you should ask Fusion again."

"So they can say no? It gets depressing, Mia. Always hearing no, always having them take my songs but never do anything with them."

"This is *your* career, Austin. It's *your* name people see next to these songs. You should make it what you want it to be. Don't give up on that."

I search her face and nod. She's right. I know she is. And after all I've done for the label, all the money I've brought in, it's time they showed up for me in the ways I care about.

I kiss her again. I don't know how to stop. She kisses me back, but something's off, so I pull away.

She's got her hands clasped behind her back.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Trying to keep my hands to myself."

I chuckle and bring my lips right next to hers. "I wish you wouldn't," I whisper.

The door opens, and our heads turn.

Paul stands at the bottom of the stairs, stock-still.

Mia steps away and starts down the stairs, her movements uneven and harried in a way that makes me want to smile. "Like I was saying," she says way too loudly, "keep icing that cheek. And your hand." She slips past Paul with an awkward smile, then disappears.

Paul watches her leave, then shifts his gaze back to me. "Looks like we need to have a little chat."

"Yeah," I say. "We do."

“THIS CITY IS RIDICULOUS,” Gemma says as we dangle our feet over the River Seine next to one of Paris’s many bridges.

I sigh and look around as a couple of riverboats pass us by. It’s still pretty early in the morning, so they’ve got plenty of extra seats. That’s one thing I’ve discovered in Europe—the early bird truly does get the worm. And my worm today is a delicious, warm croissant from a bakery we passed walking here.

There’s no concert tonight. We have a day in-between shows due to a scheduling conflict with the venue, which means a free day in the city. I’m hoping that’ll involve Austin at some point, but he had a meeting with Paul this morning. Given the way Paul looked when he found us in the bus last night, this meeting could be bad news. Or it could mean they’re discussing what original song Austin will perform tomorrow. I’m crossing my fingers for the latter.

“So, how does it feel?” Gemma asks, pulling off a buttery flake from her croissant.

“How does what feel?”

“Having two gorgeous, famous men fight over you?”

I roll my eyes. “That’s not what happened.”

“It’s exactly what happened.”

“That fight had been bubbling up for a long time. I was just the one to crack the tab to open it.”

“Well, my vote is for Austin.” She stuffs a big bite into her mouth.

I glance at her. Noah isn’t even in the running, but I’m curious to hear how Gemma perceives Austin. “Because he flew you to Paris?”

“I mean, it’s not *not* because of that.” She smiles big, then gets more serious. “But really, Mia, I like him.”

I wave at the little boy on the top of the passing boat. “You and the rest of the female world.”

“No. I like him *for you*.”

I sigh. “I do too.”

“Why the shame?”

“Because I’m trying not to get hurt, Gem. This is Austin Sheppard we’re talking about. He’s not exactly America’s poster boy for committed relationships. Besides, I don’t want him to think I’m trying to ride his coattails.”

“First of all, I wouldn’t trust any piece of clothing that man owns to hold your weight for a ride like that, and second, anyone who knows you wouldn’t think that.”

“But I *would* benefit from a relationship with him.”

“So what? You’ll get as much flack as you’ll get benefit. I’ve been following Austin more closely since you met him, and”—she raises her brows significantly—“the man has quite the rabid fan base.”

“Tell me about it. Apparently, I can expect death threats if our names are paired.” I fiddle with the napkin in my hand. “I just really wanted to make it on my own merits, you know? Not because I’m dating an emerging pop icon.”

“I get it. But is that pride enough to keep you from being with him?” She looks at me intently, waiting for my answer.

I don’t respond right away. *Is* my pride that important to me? More important than Austin? I shake my head. “No.” No way.

She squeezes my thigh until I pull it away. “Good answer. There’s nothing wrong with a little help, Mia. You’ve worked your butt off at music. And whatever boost you get from Austin, I’m sure you’ll pay it forward at some point. We all give and get. It’s what makes the world go round.”

“You’re so wise,” I say dramatically, squinting at her through narrowed eyes. But she really does have me thinking.

“I truly am,” she says. “Better take advantage of it while I’m still around.”

“You planning on dying soon?”

She takes another huge bite and covers her mouth. “Worse.”

I frown. “Meaning?”

She tries to speed up her chewing, then swallows with effort before responding. “I talked to Mom last night. Grams insists on moving into the retirement home in Sunset Harbor, and Mom’s worried about it.”

“For good reason,” I say. Our family and the Palmer family (who owns the home) have a rivalry spanning multiple generations.

“Exactly. So, given all the unused PTO I have, I offered to help with the move and make sure she’s being treated right.”

I stare. “You’re going to Sunset Harbor?”

She wipes her hands with her napkin. “Condolences are appreciated.”

“You *hate* Sunset Harbor.”

“So do you.”

“Which is why I have no plans to go back there.” We all hate that place. There’s a laundry list of reasons we moved from that claustrophobic little island all those years ago—and the Palmers are tippity top of the list. Grams has too much spirit to surrender, though, so she stayed.

“I didn’t plan to go back,” Gemma says, crumpling her napkin in her hand. “But this is Grams we’re talking about,

Mia. She's stood her ground for a long time, but she's getting older, and I want to make sure they're not messing with her or treating her poorly."

I blow a breath through my lips. "You're right. *And* you're the best person for the job. You can hold your own against that crazy town."

"You betcha."

"Heaven help them." My phone buzzes next to me, and I pick it up.

BABE

Let me guess. You're at the Eiffel Tower.

MIA

I can see it from here. Does that count?

BABE

Nope. Can I meet up with you somewhere? I was hoping to talk to you for a sec.

My chest tightens. Those words are ominous. I have no doubt Paul chatted with him about what he walked in on last night, not to mention whatever they met about this morning.

"Babe, huh?" Gemma's peering over my shoulder at my phone, and I swipe it out of her view. "Didn't know things had progressed that far already."

"They haven't. That's the name he saved his number under the night I met him."

She grins. "Cheeky boy. Like I said, my vote is for him."

"Noted." I act like I don't care what Gemma thinks, but I absolutely do. Not just because her opinion matters to me, but

because the woman can be ruthless when she thinks it's called for. "He's going to meet up with us if that's okay."

"With us? Or with you?"

"Same difference."

"It's really not. Does he know I'm with you?"

"He probably guesses."

Gemma gets out her phone and starts texting.

"Who's that?"

She doesn't respond, typing for a few seconds before turning off her phone and smiling at me. "I've got plans, anyway."

I cock a brow. "With?"

"Tori."

"Since when?"

"Since five seconds ago. She'll tag along with Austin, then she and I will leave you lovebirds in peace." She winks.

I try to smile, but inside, I'm wondering if this talk with Austin will bring an end to whatever's been going on between us.

And that is one terrifying thought.



GEMMA PUTS her hands over my fidgeting ones. "Are you always this nervous around him?"

I make fists with my hands but don't answer. I'm *not* usually nervous around Austin anymore, but today is different.

"Are you about to get the hiccups?" Gemma asks. "I guess it's a good thing he's coming."

I elbow her just as Austin and Tori appear at the bottom of the Metro staircase. I force a huge smile at them. It's my way of telling them and my body and the entire world that

everything is completely fine, and it's a normal day in Paris without the threat of anything looming overhead.

We chat for a couple of minutes, then Tori and Gemma leave to check out a café. Never mind the fact Gemma and I ate massive croissants half an hour ago.

“You want to walk or sit?” Austin asks.

“Walk.” Or run, maybe. That's an adult way to handle things, right? Avoid the person so they can't break up with you before you're even together?

“Maybe we can go down there, so it's a bit less crowded?” Austin indicates the banks of the river where Gemma and I were sitting.

Everything he says makes me more nervous. Why do we need privacy?

I know. He doesn't want to humiliate me in front of a thousand tourists. Very chivalrous of him.

We make our way down the stairs, and Austin looks over at me once we reach the bottom.

“You're quiet,” he says.

“Just enjoying the fresh air,” I say, inhaling deeply. I cough when the smell of urine fills my lungs. *Ah, Paris.*

Austin chuckles, then grabs my hand, which is fidgeting again. He cuts in front of me, so I'm forced to stop. “Are you okay?”

“Can you just get it over with?” I say, unable to keep the pleading out of my voice. “I hate suspense.”

His brows pull together. “Get what over with?”

“You're breaking things off between us, right?”

His eyes search mine, and my knees shake, mercifully hidden by my wide-leg pants.

He slips his arms around my waist, pulls me flush against him, and kisses me until I can't breathe.

He breaks away and looks me in the eye. “Hell no.”

I let out a huge breath, my knees shakier than ever. “Jeez, Austin. Then why the whole *we need to talk* bit?”

He shrugs. “We *do* need to talk.”

“Okay, but everyone knows that’s code for *we’re breaking up*. Not that we’re together,” I hurry to say. I don’t want him to think I’m reading into things more than I should. I’m very chill and nonchalant about the whole thing. Clearly. “What do we need to talk about?”

He grabs my hand and starts walking again. “Paul and I spoke to Fusion.”

Impulsively, I squeeze his hand. “They’re letting you sing one of your songs?”

“Um, no. They’re still thinking about that. They should be getting back to me soon. I’m hopeful, though, at least for London. Partially because of the other thing we talked to them about.”

I raise my brows to show I’m eagerly waiting for him to expound.

He takes in a deep breath. “Paul really went to bat for me over the whole Noah fight, and he convinced them to cut his act from tomorrow night’s concert. So, I proposed an idea. And they gave the green light.” He stops again. His face is serious, but his eyes are smiling. “We want you to open the show tomorrow night.”

Every muscle in my body tightens. Austin’s face goes hazy, and I blink. “I’m sorry, what? I spaced out there for a second.”

He grins. “You heard me.”

I shake my head. “Nope. My mind was in la-la-land.”

He takes my cheeks in his hands and stares into my eyes. “Then listen up this time. We want you to open tomorrow’s concert.”

I blink and give my face a shake. “Sorry. It happened again.”

He laughs and presses a kiss to my lips as my breathing quickens.

I'm torn between the need to see this kiss out for the next twenty minutes and to pull back because I need more information urgently. I give myself another five seconds, then pull away. "You're 100%, cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die serious?"

"Apart from the *hope-to-die* thing, yes." He crosses his heart with his free hand.

I stare, and he lets me. For a very long time. Fusion wants *me* to open Austin's second Paris concert? "What would I even sing?"

"Whatever you want. Fusion's words, not mine. They loved your last two performances *and* all your videos on social media. You've been a hit."

Fusion watched my stuff and *liked* it? I know true confidence comes from within and all that, but man, that's validating. There are just one or two problems. "But I haven't practiced!"

"We have all day for that. And tomorrow morning."

"I don't have backing tracks. Or *any* tracks."

He shrugs. "So you go organic and use a guitar. We've got a team of people ready to make it successful. I know you hate help more than anything"—he dodges my elbow—"but *take the help*, Mia. There are no real solo acts in this industry."

I swallow. I know he's right.

"What do you say?"

Hic!

He laughs and pulls me toward him so our lips are almost touching again. "I kind of hoped that would be your response."

And then he kisses me. On the cobbled banks of the Seine in Paris, thirty-six hours before I open an Austin Sheppard concert.

What is even happening?

He probably *should* break up with me, because nothing will ever top this moment. It's all downhill from here.

His phone rings, and we reluctantly break apart.

"It's Paul," he says, showing me the screen.

"Go ahead." I need a second to process this news, anyway. To catch my breath. Thanks to Austin, though, those hiccups are gone.

I face the river and blow air through my lips slowly, trying to take things in. Tomorrow night, I could be singing *my* songs in front of a crowd of thousands.

How is that possible?

But I know how it's possible. Austin made it happen by going out on a limb for me with Fusion.

I glance at him. His brows are pulled together as he talks on the phone, and my joy checks. That doesn't look like a happy conversation.

He hangs up and slips the phone in his back pocket.

"What did he say?" I ask.

He shakes the frustration off his face and smiles at me. But it's not genuine. "Nothing."

"Come on. Tell me."

He hesitates for a second. "They said no to me singing one of my songs. It's okay. It was dumb of me to hope. I know better. Anyway. Let's forget about that and celebrate your win." He smiles and takes my hands in his.

But I'm not ready to brush this off. How can they make that sort of decision when they said yes to having me—the most obscure artist alive—open his concert? It makes no sense.

"So," he says, "what do you want to sing? We can practice."

My eyes snap to his. *We can practice. We.*

An idea buzzes in my head, and I stare at Austin, not really seeing him.

He waves a hand in front of my eyes, checking for any sign of life.

“They really said I can choose what I sing?” I ask.

“Whatever you want.”

“*Whatever* I want...”

His eyes narrow, and I thread my fingers through his, filling with sudden bravery.

“Okay, then. I want to sing one of *your* songs. With you.”

MIA WAITS for me to respond, but I've got no words. The first day I met her, she was dripping water and disdain for me. Today, she's offering to sing one of my songs with me instead of highlighting one of her own.

All I can do is admire her.

"Unless you don't want to," she hurries when I don't respond. "Maybe you're worried about the whole not-wanting-our-names-associated thing? Which I underst—"

"I don't care about that, Mia. Not even a little. I'd be honored to have my name associated with yours."

"Really?"

"Really. But I'm not allowed to sing those songs."

She shrugs. "They said I could sing what I want. *That's* what I want." She fiddles with the collar of my shirt. "Sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness than permission."

My mouth tugs up at the corner. "Never knew you were such a rebel."

"Only when rebellion is called for." She smooths my shirt with her palm, then meets my eye. "So, what do you think?"

I take in a deep breath. "I think I'm in love with you, Mia."

Her hand stills.

"It terrifies me to say that. It terrifies me to *feel* it. But it's the truth." I wait for her to respond, feeling like my life and sanity are on the line.

“Are you *trying* to make me get the hiccups again?”

I clench my teeth. “Does my saying I’m in love with you make you nervous?”

She nods. “Really, really, really good nervous.”

I can breathe again, and it comes out in a shaky laugh. I brush her hair away from her face. “Good. Because I don’t want to do any more closet kissing.”

She frowns. “I kind of like the closet kisses.”

“Fine. Closet kisses are back on the table. But I also want to kiss you out in the open.”

She drapes her arms around my neck and looks up at me in a way that makes it feel a lot hotter than the seventy-five degrees it is outside. “Then what are you waiting for?”



IT’S a good thing I’m cool with the sound guys. Without them on board, there’d be no singing my song with Mia. They’re the ones with access to Fusion’s sound database. I don’t even have to reassure them to blame me if they land in hot water because of this stunt. They’re fully on board.

Paul’s wary of the idea at first, but after talking to Mia and me for a few minutes, he shakes his head at us, smiling. “You two have really kept things interesting on this tour. Let’s hope I have a job after this.”

I squeeze Mia’s hand offstage as she waits for her cue, guitar hanging at the hip of her overalls. Victor almost had a heart attack, but it felt wrong to send Mia out to sing lead vocals and her own stuff in anything but overalls. In some miraculous turn of events, she’s hiccup-free too.

She gets her cue and looks over at me in a way that has me wondering if it’s too much to propose to someone the day after you make your relationship official.

Watching her sit on a barstool and strum the guitar, I know without a doubt I’m completely gone over this woman.

I still remember how I felt going out on stage for my first solo performance. Walking out to join Mia to sing one of my own songs beats that by a mile. The way she smiles at me makes me so glad I used whatever pull I had with Fusion to convince them to let her sing. It was so worth it.

I'm vaguely aware of the deafening cheers of the crowd as I stand next to Mia, and she hands over the guitar.

Mia covers her mic and leans toward me. "Think you'll be able to keep your shirt on for this one?"

I suck air through clenched teeth as I arrange the strap over my chest. "It'll be a close call."

She laughs softly, then squares me with a more serious glance. "You ready?"

I look out over the crowd and swallow with effort. "I've *been* ready."



"ANYTHING YET?" I ask Paul as we step off the Eurostar in London.

He shakes his head. "I left a voicemail letting them know we'd be on a train under the Chunnel this morning. I expect they'll be calling soon, though." He grimaces in a way that says *and it might not be pretty*.

He's probably right. We did go behind their backs on last night's stunt. But the crowd loved the song. Why wouldn't Fusion be happy about that and want to capitalize on it by producing more of my own content?

We're a bit of a circus going through St. Pancras station, with all our luggage and equipment. We have no tour buses now, so we'll be staying in a hotel for these last two nights. I can't believe it's almost over.

In the hired cars that take us to our hotel, I make sure I sit next to Mia. Paul knows how I feel about her, but no one else is in the know yet—at least not totally—so I set my backpack on my left leg and hold her hand beneath it like we're star-

crossed lovers in junior high instead of grown adults. I kind of like having this little secret between us for a little longer.

Paul talks to the people at the hotel's front desk, and Mia steps aside to take a call.

As Paul distributes room keys, I try to stay focused, but I can't keep my eyes off Mia.

"Who's she talking to?" Kelly asks.

"No idea."

"Whoever it is, apparently, she likes them."

She's not wrong. Mia's eyes are wide, her mouth pulled into a huge smile. My heart skips as her gaze shifts to mine. I can't believe she wants to be with me. Given how things started between us, it's a modern-day miracle.

People head to their rooms, and I hesitate.

"I'll stay and give Mia her key," I say to Paul.

He hands me the card. "I'm going to call Fusion. I'll let you know how it goes."

I take a seat in one of the lobby couches, but less than a minute later, Mia heads my way.

I've never seen her eyes so wide as she lowers herself next to me.

"Who was it?" I ask.

"Fusion."

My brows shoot up, and I get a knot in my chest like I do anytime my label comes up.

She blinks a couple of times, still staring at me like she's not totally seeing me. "They want me to sign with them."

Silence.

Mia takes her finger and lifts my chin to close my jaw. "I know."

A flurry of emotions courses through me—shock, concern why they haven't gotten back to Paul when they called Mia,

hope for what this might mean for my future with the label, disappointment at the thought of Mia facing the sort of treatment I have from Fusion—but I throw my arms around her, shoving it all to the side. “Mia, that’s amazing!”

Her arms tighten around me. “Thank you.”

I pull back, setting my hands on her shoulders. “What’d they say? What’d *you* say?”

She grabs my wrists. For the same reason, I assume that I’m holding her by the shoulders. If I can find a way to be in physical contact with Mia, I take it, however flimsy the reason.

“I told them I needed to think about it.” Her gaze grows more intent, and her hands grip my wrists more tightly. “Was that wrong? Should I have said yes right away?”

“No. No. You did the right thing. You want a manager involved. Especially with Fusion.” No way would I let Mia sign the kind of contract *I* signed with them when I first started.

She blows out a relieved breath, then hugs me again. “I owe it all to you.”

I shake my head, and she nods hers against my shoulder. Now that she can’t see me, some of the less-positive emotions bubble up.

My phone rings, and I grab it out of my pocket as we pull apart.

“Hey,” I answer.

“Can you come here?” Paul says. “We need to talk.”

My heart rate speeds up. “I’m on my way.”

Mia’s eyes search mine. “Is everything okay?”

“Doesn’t sound like it. I’ve got to go talk to Paul.” I pause. “Any chance you want to join?” Whatever Paul’s about to say to me, I get the sense it’s a big deal. I’d rather have Mia with me for it.

“Of course.”

I take her hand, grab our suitcases, and head for the elevators. Paul must've gotten ahold of Fusion. After their call with Mia, even though he's been waiting for their call since last night. But if they're happy enough to offer Mia a contract, they can't be *too* mad about our stunt last night.

I open the door of the room Paul and I are sharing, and Paul looks up, his gaze flitting between us.

I give a nod to show I want Mia here, and we take seats on the edge of the first bed.

Paul rubs his chin with a hand as he sits on the other bed. "Good news first. They're not thrilled with the choice to go behind their backs, but they acknowledge the opening was a hit with the crowd."

Yikes. I was hoping it would be something more along the lines of *they realize they've been wrong not letting you sing your own stuff*. If them not being livid about last night is the good news, I can't imagine what the bad news is.

"You're killing me, Paul," I say. "Let's have the bad news."

He rubs his chin again. It's a gesture I've become very familiar with. It crops up when he has to deliver unwelcome information from Fusion.

"I followed up with them on the Noah situation, and..." He grimaces, eyes full of apology. "Austin, they've licensed one of your songs to him."

"*What?*"

There's dead silence, but Paul's expression says it all. He's completely serious.

"They can't do that, right?" I say. "Not without my permission."

"Not under normal circumstances, no. But given your contract terms—the ones we've regretted for a while now—they're within their rights. I'm really sorry, Austin."

The room is spinning, and I shift my feet to feel the solid floor under my shoes. "What song?"

Paul lets out a big sigh. “*Heart on Fire.*”

Mia’s hand tightens around mine. That’s her favorite, and she’s not alone.

“Wait wait wait,” I say. “I don’t understand. They just... offered it to him?”

Paul shakes his head. “Apparently, Noah reached out to *them*. He was angry about what happened after the concert the other night—”

I snort.

“—and they did it to appease him. They don’t want the scandal that would result if he sued.”

“Sued? He hit me first. And if anyone sues, it should be Mia.”

Paul puts up both of his hands to encourage me not to shoot the messenger. “I get it. And I agree with you. But I wasn’t involved in this decision.”

My jaw feels like it’s about to shatter from how tightly I’m clenching it. I can’t believe this is happening. I don’t get to sing my own songs, but the man I dislike most in the industry does. “So, Noah was mad, and they offer him one of my songs to make him feel better?”

“No, he asked for the song specifically.”

“What? How did he even know about it?”

MY HAND IS GRIPPING Austin's, but my brain is out in Lyon with Noah, hashing and rehashing our conversation there, replaying the moment I showed him that exact song on YouTube.

He had no idea about Austin's original songs before I told him. *I* gave Noah the tools to take this revenge on Austin.

"I don't know how he'd be aware of it," Paul says, lifting his shoulders. "I'm really sorry, Austin."

Austin lets go of my hand and rubs his face. The hurt and anger on it cuts my heart in two.

Paul shoots me a grimace. I can't even manage a response. I feel sick inside.

"Let's get out of here," Austin says to me.

I nod, and he takes my hand as we stand. I couldn't feel worse if I'd sold his family's information to the Russian mafia.

"Talk to you later," Austin says to Paul, his voice sounding almost dead.

We head out of the room, then down the hallway toward the elevators. Austin's quiet. I'm quiet, but my grip on my suitcase handle makes my knuckles white.

My conscience is writhing like a bucket of worms as Austin presses the button for the lobby. I can't stand it any longer.

"It's my fault."

Austin's frown deepens. "What? Don't be ridiculous, Mia."

"It is, though." The doors open, and Austin waits for me to go in.

I pull my suitcase inside, then turn and face him. "I told Noah about that song."

"What?"

"When we were in Lyon, he made a comment about your music that I couldn't let slide. I told him the stuff *you* actually write is amazing. He didn't believe me, so I gave him a specific example. And showed him the YouTube video of *Heart on Fire*."

Austin stares at me.

My heart is racing, and I hurry to go on. "He didn't react much at the time, so I didn't think anything of it. But now..." I clench my eyes shut.

Austin blows out a breath.

"I'm *so* sorry, Austin. I had no idea he'd do something like this—that he *could* do something like this."

He shakes his head. "I warned you about him, Mia."

"I know, but I couldn't sit there and listen to him take shots at you. I had no clue he'd turn around and use what I said against you."

Austin looks at me. "I know. You believed the best of him. And the worst of me."

I swallow. "You're right. I was unfair to you in the beginning, and I feel terrible about that. I judged you before I knew you. I did the same with Noah, but I was wrong both times. And this is where it's brought us."

Austin shuts his eyes. "It's not your fault. I know that. I'm just... upset. At myself. At everything." The elevator dings, and the doors open. "I need a little time to get my head on straight."

I nod.

He rubs his neck with a hand and steps out of the elevator. “I’ll text you later, okay?”

“Okay.” I stand still and watch him head for the lobby doors, wondering what him getting his head on straight will mean for us, wishing I could somehow fix everything with a flick of a wand.

The doors shut on me, and I sit in the unmoving elevator for another minute, staring at nothing in particular. I can’t believe how wrong I’ve been about so many things.

For a couple of years now, I’ve had Noah Hayes on a pedestal, thinking he was some sort of god for his ability to write lyrics and music that get at the heart of love, when in reality, he’s a complete jerk.

Austin, on the other hand, was easy to roll my eyes at. I thought he was a talentless pretty face, riding the celebrity train as far as he could take it, no matter what it required of him.

Turns out, he’s not just full of hidden talent, he’s one of the best people I know—loyal, giving, funny, and full of untapped potential.

The bell dings, and the doors open to let someone in.

The lady cocks a brow at me, and I hurry to press a button. I don’t even remember what floor my room is on, but I get out on three, then pull the card out of my purse.

My room is on the fifth floor, but I opt to take the stairs. Heaving my heavy bag feels like some sort of indirect penance for my mistakes. All the excitement of my call with Fusion has deflated like an old, wrinkly, latex balloon.

I hesitate in front of the door to my room. Kelly and Rose are inside laughing, and I’m not in the mood. But I need to talk to someone. Someone who understands this whole situation. I’ve been so stubborn, so pigheaded and prideful, but a realization crashes on me with the force of a falling brick wall: I *need* help.

I promised Fusion I would get back to them soon, but I can’t do that before I talk to someone who knows this industry

better than I do.

I chew my lip for a second, then make my way down the hallway and knock on the door to room 512.

A few seconds later, it opens.

“Hey, Paul. Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I SIT on the edge of a pedestal that holds a huge lion statue, watching the hordes of people coming through to take pictures in iconic Trafalgar square. I figured being surrounded by a huge crowd might make my problems seem a little smaller.

So far, it's not working. These people are worrying about selfie angles and harsh lighting. Next to that, my issues feel like Everest.

"Move over."

I frown and squint at the person talking to me. The sun is right behind her, and I shift my head until hers blocks the light.

Tori smiles and takes a seat beside me.

"How...?"

"You're still sharing your location with me from when you picked us up at the airport," she explains.

"So, you use it to stalk me?" I love my sister, but I'm not really in the mood for her—or anyone—right now.

She shrugs. "Should've thought about that when you ignored my calls."

"I'm ignoring everyone's calls," I say as I go into our text conversation and untap *share my location*.

"Why, though? Paul said you left upset."

I slip my phone into my pocket again and clasp my hands in front of me.

“Come on.” Tori nudges me with her elbow. “Better to talk it out than keep giving the stink eye to innocent strangers.”

“I’m not giving the stink eye to—”

“You are.” She flips to her photos and shows me a grainy, zoomed in shot of my face. I’m staring ahead, brows bunched together, nostrils flared. I look like I’m about to pounce on somebody. “See?”

I relax my expression and let out a sigh before recounting to Tori what’s been happening with Fusion recently—and this morning specifically.

“I’m so tired of them screwing me over,” I say. “I’m sick of dancing to their stupid, crappy tunes.”

“So stop.”

“I can’t. I’m still in a contract with them.” A crazy contract that takes total advantage of me. Little did I realize when I signed it just how badly those seemingly harmless words would come back to haunt me. At the time, I was just happy to have an offer, to have someone put their weight behind me.

Now, it feels like they’re pile-driving me with that weight.

“What happens if you cancel?”

“I owe them a crazy amount of money I can’t afford to pay.”

“Yikes. Can you just bootstrap it until the contract’s over, then?”

“I’ve *been* bootstrapping it. Almost since I started with them. And I think the straps are about to snap.” I blow out a long breath through rounded lips and let my head fall back. “How did I get here?”

She lifts her shoulders. “Google Maps? That’s what I used.”

I shoot her an unamused look.

“Oh, you mean, how did you get to this point in your life where you’re singing dumb music while your own stuff gets sold to someone you hate?”

“You think my music is dumb?” I’ve never been brave enough to ask my family their opinions on the stuff I’ve been putting out until now. Probably because I knew it was trash and didn’t want to hear it said out loud by the people who mean most to me.

“I mean, not *dumb*, maybe,” Tori says. “But the songs aren’t about to win a Nobel Prize. Now that song you and Mia sang together...” She raises her brows at me. “It gave me the chills. Did it feel any different for *you*?”

I think back to last night. It feels like a different lifetime. “Honestly? I haven’t felt that way performing for a long time.” I pause. “No. I haven’t felt that way ever. And I don’t know if it’s because it was my own song or because I was singing it with Mia.”

“But now you’re mad at her.”

“I’m not mad at her. She didn’t do anything wrong. The fact that she stood up for me to Noah is a big deal to me. It’s just weird to have her dreams coming true thanks to Fusion while I’m getting sucker-punched by them. After all the money I’ve brought in for them... I want to be happy for her, but I’m worried.”

“Because you love her.”

I glance at Tori, and our gazes hold for a few seconds. “Yeah. I do. And you want to know the craziest part?”

“Of course I do. I’m here for all the drama.”

“Part of me doesn’t even care about all this stuff, because I just want to be with Mia. Which is insane. I’ve worked so hard to get to this point.”

“And yet you hate this point.”

I *did* say that, didn’t I?

“Look, Austin. I don’t know what you should do about Fusion. But Mia’s perfect for you. I’m no love expert, but even judging by how your voices blend, the two of you are meant to be. I think you should tell her your concerns about getting into business with Fusion, though.”

“How? I’ll sound salty and jealous. It’s how I sounded when I warned her against Noah. I don’t want to be the one to bring her down from the high she’s on.”

“Would you rather leave that honor to Fusion once she’s already locked into a contract like you are?”

I meet her gaze. She’s right.

“She deserves to go in with her eyes wide open, Aus.”

I sigh. “I know.”

Tori slips down from the statue. “Also, I think you should marry her.”

I chuckle. “*Hey, Mia, I don’t think you should take that contract, but do you want to enter into a forever contract with me?*”

Tori squints. “You’ve been practicing, haven’t you?” Her expression sobers up a bit. “It’ll all work out. I know it will.”

“I wish I knew that,” I mutter. “Thanks for the chat.”

“You can pay me later. I’m off to spot Will and Kate.” She waves, and I watch until I lose her in the crowd of tourists.

I wasn’t lying to her. I want to be with Mia. All the time. I left her at the hotel for *her* sake as much as mine. I didn’t want to overshadow her victory with my mood and my problems and my anger. But Tori’s right. Mia should have the full picture before making a choice about Fusion.



I SIT on the edge of the small fountain in the Italian Gardens, people watching. Only, I’m just watching for one person.

Kensington Gardens provide a much calmer atmosphere than Trafalgar Square. I should’ve come here from the get-go. Mia and I won’t have much time together before we have to head to the venue, but I wanted to talk to her before the craziness of the rest of the day takes over.

I see overalls before I see Mia’s face, and my heart smiles. I feel better just seeing her. Not everything is wrong with life.

I don't relish this conversation, but I do relish any time with Mia.

As she nears, she smiles, but there's hesitation in it, probably because of how I left things at the hotel.

"Hey," she says, taking a seat beside me. "How're you doing?"

"Better."

"Good." She reaches into her bag. "I brought you a Meal Deal." She hands me a triangular box with a sandwich inside, a bag of chips, and a drink. "The first of many peace offerings."

I set them next to me on the stone rim of the fountain and face her.

She grimaces. "You don't like cheddar ploughman sandwiches."

"I've never tried one. It looks delicious."

Her eyes flit to the sandwich, sitting forgotten next to me. "You're not hungry, then."

"Starving."

Her brows furrow. "So..."

I wrap my arms around her.

"You didn't do anything wrong, okay?" I say into her ear as I inhale her scent. "I'm not mad at you. Completely the opposite."

"I feel so bad, though," she whispers into my shoulder.

I run my hand through her hair, from the crown of her head down to her neck. "I don't want you to feel bad. But for the record, I always welcome food surprises. No need to limit those to peace offerings." I pull back as she laughs, her eyes glistening. "I wanted to talk to you about something, though."

She nods, blinking quickly to dispel the tears.

I let out a big breath and clasp my hands in my lap, praying that I can say things in a way that will be palatable.

“What you decide to do about your career is really none of my business. This is totally your choice, and with a good contract, maybe things would be great. But I feel like I need to let you know about my experience with Fusion—”

“I turned them down.”

My head whips up. “What?”

“About an hour ago.”

I stare at her.

“I was flattered, of course,” she says, “but I couldn’t say yes to them, Austin. Not after the way I’ve seen them treat you.”

It’s quiet for a few seconds, the trickling of the fountain and muffled conversations filling the silence.

“Are you sure, Mia? Maybe Paul could negotiate someth—”

“I’m positive.” She holds my gaze, even smiling a little. “It’s not what I want.”

I nod slowly, relief filling me on her behalf. Having Mia throttled by Fusion seems like the worst possible thing that could happen.

“I don’t know how I feel about signing with *anybody*, to be honest,” she says. “But I also want to keep doing music. Guess I’ll have to decide between those two at some point.”

“Maybe not,” I say. “You could crowdfund—finance your own production.”

Her brows pull together as she considers my idea, then her lip pulls up at one side. “With my following, I could crowdfund at *least* thirty seconds of one track.” Her smile fades as she searches my face. “Enough of that. I’m worried about you, Austin.”

“Don’t be. I’m fine. I’ll figure things out. Right now, though, I just want to be with you.”

She smiles as both of our phones chime. We look at them simultaneously, then at each other. We’re needed at the venue.

Mia grimaces. “Rain check?”

At least we have between here and the venue to be together.

I DON'T KNOW what to do with Austin today. His mood is so strange. I fully expected him to break up with me. Apparently, that's my immediate assumption whenever he asks to see me. That's healthy, right?

I've never been so afraid of losing something. Calling Fusion to turn them down was a cakewalk compared to going into that conversation with Austin. I also got to give them a piece of my mind about how they've gone about things with him, which felt amazing.

The whole way to the venue, Austin holds my hand. In public. We don't talk about what's going on with his label or with Noah. We discuss whether Indian or Thai curry is better, which is *also* a very important topic and one with no clear answer.

Rehearsal is long and tedious, with plenty of sitting around while audio issues get resolved and the last-minute opening act gets things together.

Austin's energy levels are high and his mood upbeat given the morning's events. I don't know if he's accepted the way things are or if he's determined to finish the tour on a high note, but I'm glad for the sake of those attending tonight's concert. They're about to get a fabulous final show.

Sure enough, Austin's on fire, and it's contagious. Kelly, Rose, and I give it our all, and the crowd feels it. The exhilaration has my skin tingling and my chest full to bursting

when the crowd chants the name of the song Austin and I sang together in Paris.

He turns to me, a question in his eyes.

I smile, and he motions for me to come join him. Thirty seconds later, Paul runs onstage with a guitar for Austin while Bobby sets things up.

Deep down, I'm aware of a feeling of bittersweetness as we sing together again. It's hard to believe the tour is already ending. For a few short days, I had the prospect of a Noah Hayes tour to look forward to, but not anymore. I doubt Noah is still planning on having me do backup vocals for him—the man's ego is clearly made of stern stuff—but if he is, he's in for a shock.

This could be my last big show ever, my last time singing with Austin in concert. I hope it's not, but there are no guarantees in life. What if Austin's experience isn't out of the ordinary? I don't want to end up hating music because I got locked into a contract with a label that doesn't really care about me and my vision. Maybe it's better to keep music as a hobby I love than to risk that.

Maybe if I bust my butt for a few years, busking and playing at small venues, I *could* crowdfund an album.

The crowd goes wild as we finish our song, and I head to my place by Kelly and Rose for the final song of the entire tour. I watch Austin with a tight feeling in my chest. He's meant to be on stage. I wish he could do it the way he wants to. He deserves better than he's gotten from Fusion.

The crowd noise threatens our hearing as I follow Rose and Kelly toward the edge of the stage. Before I get there, Austin runs up beside me and grabs my hand.

My eyes widen, and I look toward the audience. Austin smiles, brings my hand up to his mouth, and kisses it just before we pass the curtain to conceal us from the audience, who are now losing their minds.

My heart races. For some reason, holding my hand and kissing it feels like a bigger deal than if he'd pulled me into his

arms and kissed me, center-stage.

In the dim offstage light, Rose glances at our hands, then cocks an eyebrow. She links her arm with Kelly's. "We'll catch up with you two later."

"Thanks, Rose," Austin says. I've never seen him look so energized and happy.

"What's gotten into you?" I ask.

He just smiles. "I need to make a quick call."

"Okay." I try to let go of his hand, but he tightens his hold.

"Stay with me while I do it?"

I search his face, looking for any hint of what's going on in that beautiful head. "Yeah. Of course."

I follow him, still bewildered, while we get his phone in his dressing room. I study his face as he scrolls, then brings the phone to his ear. Faint ringing sounds, and our gazes meet as he waits. He leans toward me and presses a kiss to my lips just as someone answers.

"Hey, John," Austin says.

There's a pause as the man responds.

"Yeah. Just finished actually," Austin says. "I'm calling to let you know I quit. Effective immediately."

My eyebrows shoot up.

Austin's looking down at our hands as he fiddles with the edge of my thumbnail. He's still smiling. "I know." Pause. "Yeah. Final decision. I'll have Paul set up a meeting next week to hammer out the details. I've got to go kiss a beautiful woman senseless right now, so we'll talk later." He drops the phone from his ear and slips it into his back pocket, then pulls me in for a kiss.

I resist, reluctantly. "Whoa whoa whoa. Hold on a second. Did you seriously just quit?"

He grins. "Yeah."

"As in, quit your label?"

More grinning. “Yeah.”

I stare at him for a few seconds. “Austin... are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“What about your contract? What happens if you quit mid-contract?”

“I’ll owe them a lot of money.”

I clench my teeth. “Yeah...”

He grabs my other hand and threads his fingers through, bringing them between us. “You know what you’ve taught me, Mia?”

“That not every shirt crumbles at the slightest touch?”

He smiles. “That too. But no. You’ve taught me to rediscover and prioritize my love of music. I don’t want to put a price tag on that. Not anymore.”

I swallow and nod.

His eyes search mine. “You may not have been drowning when I met you, Mia, but I was. And you’ve saved me. You’ve given me the courage to do what I want.”

“File for bankruptcy?”

He chuckles softly, his expression becoming more serious. “I want to be with you, Mia. But I want even more than that. I want to make music. Together.”

My heart hammers.

“Only if you want,” he rushes to say. “It’s an idea I’ve been playing with. After our talk of crowdfunding, I was thinking about doing that together to maintain control, you know? But I promise I won’t be offended if you—”

I drop his hands, put mine on his cheeks, and bring his lips to mine.

He’s stunned for a second, but then his hands steal around my waist, pulling me toward him.

I’m already there.

The exhilaration of the last show, the joy of hearing what Austin wants to do and be together run rampant through my body. I can feel it in him too, in the way his hands grip my clothes and press against my back, in the fierceness of his kiss.

In it is the determination to make a future together—one that we can both be proud of. One that has us in it together.

The kiss finally slows.

“Should I take that as a maybe?” he asks.

“A definitely maybe.”

“Yeah?” He brushes my hair behind my ear with a half-smile. “Well, I’m definitely maybe in love with you, Mia.”

“I might’ve possibly absolutely fallen in love with you too.”

We stare at each other for a few seconds, smiling but saying nothing.

“Can I cash in on that rain check right now?” he asks. “Probably the last check I’ll be cashing for a while.”

I laugh and take his hand in mine. “Good thing your girlfriend is independently wealthy. Oh, wait...”

“No one I’d rather be broke with,” he says as we head for the venue’s back door. “We better enjoy being broke while we can. I have a feeling it won’t last long.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Given how much the fans loved us together,” he says, pulling me into him, “we’re going to do all right.” He presses a soft kiss in the hollow under my ear, and my entire body breaks out in chills.

“And here I thought your plan was to make a living ripping off your shirt.”

His head shakes gently against mine. “That’s a private performance only from here on out.”

I smile just before my mouth is occupied with better pursuits.

EPILOGUE

MIA

SUMMER IS GETTING into full swing, and tonight, that smells like fresh cut grass, chlorine, and barbecue. It sounds like the kids of our friends splashing in the outdoor pool we shut down specifically for this summer kick-off party. It looks like Austin's sister, Siena, lounging on a white lawn chair, her baby bump rounding out the middle of her swimsuit while her husband feeds her strawberries and opens a Dr. Pepper.

But most of all, summer looks like the hunk walking toward me, hair wet and wavy from swimming. He's wearing the shirt I bought him in Europe and a pair of Aviator sunglasses, despite the fact that it's almost dark outside.

Austin pauses on the pavement a few feet away, tips the sunglasses down, and checks me out from head to toe.

"Mmhmm," he says in a scary-good impression of the exact womanizer I used to think he was.

"Nice shirt," I say.

"What shirt?" he says, looking down at the hairy, poorly drawn abs printed on his torso—the shirt I bought him on tour. "This is an actual photograph of what lies beneath."

"There are about a million photos on Google to contradict that. Not to mention my own personal experience."

His brow hitches, and he scoops a hand around my waist. "And how would you rate that experience?"

"Somewhat pleasant," I say, putting a hand on said abs. "But I could be convinced to change my answer."

Austin smiles.

“Pause on the PDA,” Gemma says, coming up right next to me. She motions with a hand for Austin to back off a little. “Gotta say bye to my sister. My flight leaves in a couple of hours.”

“I can’t believe you’re really going,” I say as I wrap my arms around her.

“Me neither,” she says. “Worst use of PTO ever. But at least I’ll see Grams. It’ll be hot as Hades, so I’ll be spending as much time as possible indoors.”

I sigh. Even hopping onto a red-eye flight, Gemma looks like she’s going to direct a Fortune 500 board meeting. “Text me all the time, okay? And let me know if you need backup.”

“I’ve got this,” she says as she gives Austin a quick hug. “Sunset Harbor won’t know what hit them.”

I absolutely believe her. Between Grams and her, there’s plenty of spitfire to go around.

She gives a little wave and walks off, and within two seconds, Austin has his hand around my waist. “Where were we?”

“Austin,” Paul says breathlessly as he jogs up to us.

Austin shuts his eyes as if to plead for serenity, then turns to him. “What’s up?”

Paul smiles. “Two things.” He shows his phone screen to us, and my jaw slips open.

I look at Austin, who blinks, then looks at me.

“You met the crowdfunding goal,” Paul says. “And shot past it.”

I throw my arms around Austin, who squeezes me tightly. We’ve been writing music together since we got home from Europe, but the crowdfunding goal has only been up for contributions for a week. A week, and it’s already funded.

Which means we get to make an album together. An album all our own.

“You ready for the other news?” Paul asks.

We break apart, and Austin nods as he threads his fingers through mine.

“I got off of a call with Fusion a few minutes ago,” he says.

Austin and I give each other a look. He’s been working to pay what he owes as a result of canceling his contract with them, and it’s a huge chunk of money.

“They’re offering to produce all the songs you’ve got planned for the album you’ve been crowdfunding—”

Austin snorts.

“—and to forgive what you owe them if you do.”

His smile flickers, and my eyes widen. They’re willing to give up all that money if we’ll contract with them for our album.

“And the kicker,” Paul says, “is that they’d write a U.S. tour into the contract terms.”

I squeeze Austin’s hand, and he looks at me. Our gazes lock for a few seconds, and without a word, we agree.

“Tell them,” Austin says, still looking at me, “thank you for the offer, and they can stick it where the sun don’t shine.”

I try to stop a smile, but Paul doesn’t.

“I hoped you’d say that,” he says. “I’ll call them right back to let them know. Given the response to your crowdfunding efforts, you’ll have your own U.S. tour in no time. And you’ll do it your way.” He gives us another smile, then turns and puts his phone to his ear.

“Want to play hookie and help me skim the indoor pool for a minute?” Austin asks.

I cock a brow. “Is that a euphemism?”

He chuckles. “I wish. I told your dad I’d do it because he was missing the party trying to strain at hairballs and stuff.”

“No one can meet his standard of cleanliness,” I say as we head through the door that leads to the indoor pool.

We both grab a skimmer from the wall and set to work, talking about Fusion’s offer and the crowdfunding goal. It’s crazy to think what our first meeting at this pool was like and where we are now. The last months have been the happiest of my life, and it all started in the most unlikely of ways.

I can’t help a smile at how Austin’s brow knits as he tries to use the skimmer to get something at the bottom of the pool. I still have to pinch myself sometimes to believe he’s mine.

His eyes dart to mine, and he smiles. “You checking me out? *Again?*”

“Just watching you really ineffectively try to grab whatever that is.”

“Hey,” he says. “It’s not as easy as it looks.”

“Watch and learn.” I take the pole of my skimmer in two hands and walk around to his side of the pool as the door opens and Tori’s head peeks inside.

“What are you guys *doing?* This is a party, in case you didn’t notice.”

Troy’s head pops up behind hers. “Isn’t it obvious? They’re scraping the bottom of the pool to try to find you a man. You’re the last woman standing.” He gives her a noogie, and she pulls away.

“And I’ll continue to be standing here, thank you very much,” Tori says. “I’m going to be the crazy, single aunt with seven cats who gives your kids so much sugar they bounce off the walls until they barf—once they’re safely back at your houses, of course. Speaking of sugar, hurry and finish skimming. We’re about to have cake.”

“We’ll be right out,” I say, and they both disappear. I dip my skimmer into the water and reach it toward the dark object at the bottom of the pool. “Now, watch the master.”

But instead, Austin starts playing air hockey with our poles, trying to get the object before I do. The nets of our

skimmers collide and pull apart at the bottom of the pool, pushing the object even farther away.

“Forget this!” Austin lets go of his skimmer, then yanks off his shirt. Before I know what’s happening, he wraps his arms around me and pulls me in with him.

Trying to laugh in a way that doesn’t result in water in my lungs, I break the surface just as he does. Our eyes meet, and we both know it’s on.

We take deep breaths and dive in, kicking our feet to take us to the bottom. I didn’t have an amphibious childhood for nothing, though, and I pull ahead, reaching the object just before he does.

My fingers close around the box before I realize what I’m holding. My stinging, chlorine-saturated eyes flit to Austin, who’s already looking at me, the hint of a smile on his face.

All my training of these lungs is out the door, and I hurry to the surface with the sound of my throbbing heart pounding in my ears.

I break the surface, grasping the side of the pool and gulping in air like I just spent three minutes instead of fifteen seconds underwater. Austin is right behind me—or right next to me.

He wipes the hair out of his face and meets my gaze. “You win,” he says, short of breath.

Slowly, I bring my hand out of the water and unfurl my fingers. A wet, velvety black box sits on my palm. I stare at it, no closer to catching my breath than I was a few seconds ago.

Finally, I let go of the ledge long enough to open it. A silver band with a glimmering red stone set inside glitters back at me.

“Ruby,” Austin says. “It symbolizes passion, love, and courage. I’ve never known anyone as passionate, loving, or courageous as you, Mia.”

I swallow and meet his gaze.

“My question for you,” he says, “is whether you’ve got enough courage to tie ourselves together. Forever.”

My eyes start watering, and I dash at a tear. “Pool water,” I say in a waterlogged voice.

Austin sniffs. “Same here. Dang chlorine.” His smile softens, and he puts a wet hand to my cheek and stares into my eyes. “I love you, Mia. I’ve wanted a lot of things out of life, but nothing comes close to how much I want to be your husband. If we thought the tour was crazy, I can only imagine what life together will be like. And I. Cannot. Wait.” There’s a pause as we stare at each other, the only sound the water lapping against the side of the pool. “Will you marry me?”

I only get in a couple quick nods before a loud *hic* echoes throughout the room. I slap a hand to cover my mouth as Austin’s lips pull into a grin.

He reaches to my hand and pulls it away. “I think I can handle this one.”

And he *so* does.

THE END

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I have so many people to thank for helping this book come to life!

My husband is the best. ‘Nuff said.

I’m fortunate enough to be part of two amazing critique groups whose help—both with craft and navigating the author experience—I am forever grateful for. Kasey, Jess, Deborah, Kortney, and Ashley, thank you, my wonderful friends!

Thank you to all my beta readers for helping me hone things and for giving me boosts. Thank you in particular to Brooke, who helps me and cheers me on at the drop of a hat.

Thank you to my editors, Jacque and Cassie, who made the book shine.

Most of all, I give thanks to God, who provides me with all I have.

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Whitney Award-winning Martha Keyes was born, raised, and educated in Utah—a home she loves dearly but also dearly loves to escape to travel the world. She received a BA in French Studies and a Master of Public Health, both from Brigham Young University.

Her route to becoming an author was full of twists and turns, but she's finally settled into something she loves. Research, daydreaming, and snacking have become full-time jobs, and she couldn't be happier about it. When she isn't writing, she is honing her photography skills, looking for travel deals, and spending time with her family. She lives with her husband and twin boys in Utah.

