

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER M. ORGERON



Worth
THE SHOTS

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HEATHER M ORGERON

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*For Harloe Rae, who practically forced me out of retirement.
(Again). Because everyone needs a best friend who calls them
a whorebag and refuses to let them quit.*

CHAPTER 1

AIDEN

SWEAT DRIPS from my brow while my fingers glide across the keys, a final wave of adrenaline surging through me as I belt out the background vocal, relying strictly on muscle memory to synchronize with our drummer Nick's steady beats.

My vision devolves into flashes of white light as I lose myself to this ultimate high—one that no drug has ever come close to reaching. Hell, not even the ecstasy that comes from sinking my cock into a warm, wet pussy can compare with the burst of euphoria that hits at the end of a set when the stars align the way they have tonight.

The band is perfectly in sync, and the crowd's energy is the kerosene driving our flame.

As soon as the curtain falls, our manager, Anika, rushes out from backstage with a blinding smile. "You guys are on fire!"

My bandmates' spouses aren't far behind my work wife, spouting similar sentiments and going in for some semi-public displays of affection.

Warmth swells in my chest as I drop back on my bench and soak it all in.

The opening of our club, Booze & Bad Decisions, in the heart of Nashville last year has turned out to be a godsend.

With a steady Saturday night gig, The Rhett Taylor Band has, for the most part, put our touring days behind us. And for the first time in my twenty-eight years of life, I have a place that feels like home.

Not too shabby for a foster kid from the wrong side of the tracks.

“Them titties, though...” With a feral growl, I haul Annie into my lap and give those tatas the motorboatin’ they’re begging for. They’re practically pouring out of that skin-tight band tee she’s customized with a very, *very* deep neckline.

“Ugh, gross.” She shoves my head back, her face aghast. “Now my tits are gonna smell like your boozy breath.”

I snort, brushing her nose with the tip of my own. “So?” With a quirk of my brow, I reach around to retrieve my whiskey glass from the keyboard and take a long swig, relishing the burn in my throat.

“So...” She scoots off my lap, the motion causing my dick to strain against my zipper. After righting her clothes, she shakes her hair out. “I have someone I’d like you to meet.” Her voice raises a few octaves as her eyes leave mine to scan the room. “All of you.”

A petite redhead with lush curves built for sin steps out from the shadows. Her right hand lifts to chest level, and she gives her fingers a tentative wiggle. “I’m Talia.” The timid smile that follows perfectly complements this shy girl act she’s trying to pull off. My dick twitches in anticipation of what’s to come. It’s these innocent types that are always the most fun in the sack.

Anika chose well tonight. Not that I can complain about any of the treats she occasionally delivers to me backstage. No

one knows my tastes better.

I bound to my feet and cross the stage to where she's standing beside our manager and tuck a finger beneath her chin. Tilting her face this way and that, I give her an appreciative onceover. "Annie," I purr, meeting the groupie's emerald irises with my own. "You shouldn't have."

"I didn't." The little spitfire's voice is filled with piss and vinegar as she shoves my hand away. "Jesus, Aiden." She tosses her long dark hair over a shoulder and levels me with a look that has me feeling about two inches tall. "Can't you ever just act civilized?"

My eyes volley around the room, finding everyone else looking confused as well. "My mistake." I take a step back, the fire in my veins now running ice cold.

She's not usually so bitchy with me.

"Sorry," Anika says, before taking the woman's hand into her own.

My breath stutters. Then she laces their fingers together and I swear it stops completely.

"Guys, this is Talia...my *girlfriend*."

I barely register the ceremony taking place around me. It's so far removed from the place I find myself in.

"You all right, man?" Our bassist, Lyle, claps me on the back, jogging me from my stupor.

"I'm fine," I lie. Seems like the right thing to do, considering I have no explanation for why I'm not even remotely okay with this. I'm with other women damn near daily, and Anika's not mine. She's never been mine. Yet, I feel

an undeniable sense of possession over her. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You look a little shaken up.” His throat clears. “I know you and Anika are really...uh, *close*.”

Close. That’s one way to put it. She’s the Jane to my Tarzan. My fucking soulmate, if such a thing exists. And sure, I’ve known she was attracted to women for quite some time now, but given even the slightest bit of liquid courage, she’s hanging all over me.

We’re a perfect match everywhere but the bedroom. And I’m positive it’s only because we’ve never explored that area. That’s where the groupies come in. And while I always take care to treat them like the goddesses they are, I make it very clear from the start that it’s a one-and-done situation. My emotions have never entered the equation.

And maybe that’s what has me so fucked up. She put a label on it. This isn’t just some random hookup. It’s an emotional entanglement and a threat to the most dependable relationship in my life.

“We’re all really close.” My voice carries a little more edge than I intend as my composure dangles in the balance. “One big happy family.”

Lyle pinches the bridge of his nose. “Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?” I say loudly. “Nothing’s gonna change, right, Annie?”

The nervous smile plastered to her face looks so out of place. Anika is a pistol. Always steadfast and sure. “Right,” she quickly agrees.

“Just so we’re clear, *bestie*.” I trail a finger along her cleavage, unable to keep from smiling at her sharp intake of

breath. “How’s this gonna work? Get our rocks off separately...” I waggle my brows at her *friend*. “Then all crawl into bed together to cuddle?”

“Oh, brother.” Raven climbs out of Nick’s lap, her eyes widening with unnecessary alarm. “Do something!” She shoves her husband in our direction.

“That’s enough, Aiden.” The giant of a man rakes a hand through his spikey blond hair. “Come on... just fucking chill.”

A loud guffaw bursts from my chest—a lame attempt at saving face. “Oh, my God. I wish you could see yourselves right now.” But my voice sounds maniacal even to my own ears. “I’m fine.”

Desperate for a reprieve, Anika’s the only one buying into my bullshit. Her pinched expression visibly relaxes, just as her tiny fist connects with my sternum. “I hate you.”

“No, ya don’t.” Scooting her aside, I reach for Talia’s hand. “Good luck.” I press my lips to her knuckles. “You’re gonna need it with this one.”

“Truer words never spoken,” Rhett agrees, stepping between the happy couple and myself. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

He already knew about this girl?

“Likewise,” she smiles up at him. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“That was really shitty.” At the sound of her familiar voice, I look down to my left to find Annie glaring up at me. “Could you have made her introduction to the group any more uncomfortable?”

“Whatever.” I shrug. “Clearly you expected my shenanigans.”

“Why do you say that?” she asks, while dragging me off to a secluded corner backstage.

“Rhett already knew about her.” I quirk a brow, curious to see how she’ll explain that away. “But you didn’t say a word to me...your roommate and supposed best friend.”

Anika’s face falls as she folds her arms across her chest. “I couldn’t figure out how to tell you.”

“Hmm...wonder why that is?” I lean in closer. “*Guilt, maybe?*”

“I have nothing to feel guilty for,” she snaps. “I just... didn’t want to hurt you more than necessary.”

I nod, sucking my tongue to my teeth. “How long have the two of you been *secretly* dating?”

“Not long,” she hedges. “It’s new.”

“She’s hot.”

Anika blushes. “Right?”

“Licked her clit yet?”

She jerks back. “Why are you like this?”

“We’re besties, right?” I don’t know what she wants from me. That was totally a best friend thing to say.

“Yeah...”

“Who else you gonna talk to about these things? Just sayin’, you got the connoisseur of cooch right here, at your disposal.”

“We haven’t gotten that far yet.” Her anxiety over their looming intimacy makes itself known in the unease of her tone.

“There’s still a chance,” I mutter out loud.

“A chance for what?”

“That you’ll make an honest man outta me.”

“I have *a girlfriend*,” she counters, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah. Yeah...” I wave that pesky detail away. “Relationships come and go. I’ll just sit back and watch the movie—wait for this one to run its course.”

I yelp when Anika’s hand shoots out and twists the barbell on my nipple. “Stop using me as your excuse to keep from getting serious with anyone else. It isn’t fair,” she says through clenched teeth.

Her accusation stings, or maybe that’s just my tit. *Because, fuck, that hurts.* “That’s not what I’m doing.”

“You are.” She releases my nipple and gently shoulder-checks me. “And it isn’t fair to either of us. I want the chance at romance, Aiden. The shit the rest of these guys have. A physical...emotional...spiritual connection.” She jabs a finger into my chest to punctuate each word.

I shake my head, the bitter pill of denial perched on the tip of my tongue.

“You’re so fucked in the head,” she accuses, “that you’re willing to settle for the first thing that feels comfortable.” She reaches out to cup my cheek in a rare show of compassion. “I do love you, Aiden, and I always will. But I’m not *in love* with you. If you opened yourself up, you’d realize they are not the same thing, and that you aren’t in love with me, either.”

“You don’t know shit!” Her declaration is a crushing blow, because if nothing else, it’s clear to me in this moment that her feelings don’t run half as deep as mine. The only woman I’ve ever loved is essentially breaking up with me, and I’m completely alone in my pain. I resigned myself long ago to the fact that a physical relationship may never be in the cards for us, but I don’t know how to sit by and watch her give her heart to another.

“I know you deserve a hell of a lot more than a revolving door of meaningless sex and this half-assed game of house the two of us have been playing at.”

“What if I like things just the way they are?” I back her up to the wall. “What if I enjoy fucking random women? And what if I don’t need more emotional baggage than whatever this...” I flatten my palm to her heaving chest. “Whatever this fucked-up thing between us is? What if I don’t want more?”

I fist a hand into my hair and growl, “What then?”

“Then that’s just too damn bad, because you might not want more, but I do.” Her eyes well with tears. “And if you’re really my friend, you’d want that for me too.”

The crack in her voice splinters me to my core. I’m being selfish. A total dick to the person I care about above all else. So what if my heart is breaking? No one in my life has ever loved me enough to put me first. Not my parents. Not the shitty foster homes I bounced between throughout my childhood. I swore I’d never be like them, yet here I am, acting like a true product of my raising.

Well, if my wants come at the expense of my best friend’s happiness, then I’ll just have to do without. Can’t imagine it’ll be too hard of an adjustment. I should be a fucking pro at this shit by now.

Drained of any fight I might've had left, I grip her chin in my hand and gently glide the pad of my thumb along her jawline. "Then I hope you find it," I rasp before ripping myself away and storming off into the night.

"Aiden! Bro, where's the fire?"

Freezing rain pelts against my face as I barrel down Broadway, ignoring the frustrated calls coming from my bodyguard, Josh, at my rear.

My booted feet splash through neon tinted puddles while every few steps the music from one live band bleeds into the next. Yeah, a trek down Honky Tonk Highway is just what the doctor ordered. This place is always buzzing with fresh talent and big dreams. It takes me back to the beginning, reminding me of how far I've come, and never fails to get my blood pumping. It isn't long before the excitement overtakes whatever unnamed emotion had me feeling numb and lifeless back at the club.

I cringe at the thought of my own weakness.

All I need is my music—the true love of my life. She raised me up. Comforted me in the darkest days of adolescence and ultimately afforded me a career and stability I only ever dared to dream of. And tonight, she and whiskey are gonna nurse me through my first—and if I have any say in the matter, only—broken heart.

Another minute ticks by and Josh is at my side, his jaw clenching as he speed-walks to keep up. "Mind giving a guy a head's up before you haul ass on foot like that?"

“Sorry.” I hook a right into Bottle Grounds Dueling Piano Bar, my favorite haunt when I need to burn off some energy, or in tonight’s case...a little steam. “Needed to clear my head.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

I remove my ball cap, shaking the water off on the entrance rug before replacing the sopping wet garment and giving him a hard stare. “Do I ever?”

He shakes his head, guiding me to the VIP section that’s roped off to the left of the stage where my favorite girls, Bangin’ Betty and Tenacious Trixie, battle it out on matching grand pianos to a crowd favorite, “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.”

It’s impossible to come to this place and not leave in a good mood. Bottle Grounds isn’t your run-of-the-mill classy piano joint, but a modern-day spin with boundless energy and theatrical flair. The hostesses’ over-the-top antics and bubbly personalities are, in a word, infectious. But strip away the gaudy costumes, big hair, elaborate makeup, and fuckery, and they’re still two of the best damn pianists I’ve ever encountered. Better than myself, even.

“Fuck yeah!” I shout, garnering a wink from Trixie. I stick out my tongue and lap the air, imagining running it along those triple-Ds bouncing and glistening beneath the stage lights while she executes the ending with flawless accuracy and unparalleled showmanship.

The packed house goes nuts, cheering and tossing wads of money to the stage.

“Well, if it isn’t our favorite rock star,” Betty coos into her mic when she finally notices me occupying my usual spot just behind her setup. “No lady friend tonight?”

I choke, taking the glass of Johnnie Walker the bartender just set in front of me and washing down the sour taste climbing in my throat. “Nah.”

I swirl what’s left of the amber liquid, momentarily stricken by how similar it is to the color of Anika’s eyes. “Decided to leave my options open tonight.”

“We-heh-heh-helllll, you hear that?” The voluptuous brunette directs her gaze to the gaggle of women gathered in front of the stage. “Sounds like it just might be someone’s lucky night.”

I toss back the rest of my drink then shake the cup at the bartender, signaling for another. “Come home with me after your shift, sweet Betty, and the luck’ll be all mine.”

“Don’t think Mr. Betty would be too happy with that.” Her lips curve downward into an exaggerated frown. “But Trix and I would be more than happy to invite you on stage to strip for your supper.”

“Or dessert,” her blonde counterpart chimes in, her palms on the keys causing a ruckus as she bends forward, shimmying behind her piano. “Maybe some...*cherry pie?*”

My ears fill with the sound of lusty squeals.

“Trying to get me in trouble with my boss?” I tease before promptly leaping to my feet. “Well...just so happens she’s earned a PR nightmare or two.”

“Ah, fuck,” Josh groans beside me.

I shoot him a wink as I make my way to the stage.

“Evenin’.” I tip the brim of my cap to each of the babelicious entertainers.

“For those who may not recognize this handsome young fella, our special guest here is none other than Aiden Addams, keyboardist and backup vocals for The Rhett Taylor Band. And...” Trixie pauses, a gentle nudge to hold the applause. “You can catch them in action at their club Booze & Bad Decisions, just up the strip, every Saturday night at seven.”

This time she waits for the crowd to quiet on their own before adding, “When we’re lucky, you’ll find him here afterward doing the Lord’s work...*charming the ladies.*”

“It’s a tough job...” I flatten a palm to my chest, smoothing it over the drenched white tee that’s clinging uncomfortably to my skin while ogling those closest to the stage. “Ah, who am I kidding?” I scrape my lower lip through my teeth. “It’s an honor any time I get to grace this stage with these two amazing talents, and a privilege to be gifted with the opportunity to seduce all of you.” I punctuate my position by lifting my tee to expose my right pec, licking a finger, and toying with the bar through my nipple. Their howls of delight spur me on.

“Oh, this next song is perfect for a strip tease.” The exhilaration in Betty’s voice captures my full attention. I hit pause on the self-lovin’ sesh and spin on my heel to catch her beaming at Trixie as she hands the card with the winning song over.

“It was a close one. Came down to Journey’s ‘Don’t Stop Believin’,’ submitted by Mr. Ryan Jones with a bid of twelve dollars and ‘Great Balls of Fire’ with a fifteen-dollar bid, submitted by Veronica Vanderbilt.”

Hell, yeah...I could totally get my Magic Mike on to some Jerry Lee Lewis.

“Yeah, Ronnie!” My eyes are immediately drawn to the hottie with tawny brown skin and striking green eyes who’s cheering for her friend front and center like she’s just won a million bucks.

Then Ms. Vanderbilt turns around, and my pulse goes fucking haywire. Creamy alabaster skin, golden blonde locks knotted delicately at her nape, and holy dimples. Dear God above, I want to reach out and dip my fingers into those cheek divots.

What is wrong with me?

Since when have I ever had the urge to finger a woman’s cheeks? *Those* cheeks, anyway.

I can’t seem to look away from the hunger blazing in the twin blue flames boring into me. She screams of innocence yearning to break free. And I just might be the one to corrupt her.

As if commanded by instinct, the moment the first notes ring out, I extend my hand, beckoning her to join me.

There’s a single beat where I think she might actually refuse my invitation, but then she reaches out, rests a foot on the edge of the platform, and invites me to pull her up with a nod. I bring her close, so her front is flush with mine. The girl is so starstruck she doesn’t even balk at the fact that in doing so I’m getting her all wet.

“Hope you like it dirty,” I rasp against her ear, breathing in her fresh, floral scent as I reach around to remove the pins securing that demure bun that’s driving me to distraction. A river of spun gold cascades down her back in loose waves, stopping just above her waist.

She gives no verbal response, but I can feel the pulse at her neck escalating as I shift some of the hair to rest in front of her shoulders. “Should wear it down.” My voice is rough and thick with desire I wasn’t at all anticipating.

“Okay.”

Her lithe body stiffens then relaxes marginally as I trail the knuckles of my right hand along her arm. “You can stand here and watch, or be my partner, but fair warning...” I eye her outfit, better suited for a boardroom, pointedly. “I’m no country club gentleman. I also won’t lay another finger on you without your consent.”

Her icy blue eyes flutter up at me, her tongue slowly skimming her plump lips as she lightly bobs her head.

Lord, but she’s sweet enough to cause a toothache. “Words, doll. I need ’em.”

“Right...I—uh.” She blows out a breath, laughing to herself. “I’d love to umm, to dance...w-with you.”

I hook an arm around her middle and remove my hat with the hand of the other, lassoing it in circles while thrusting my hips into her rigid form before tossing the still-damp eyesore to the crowd.

“Loosen up, baby,” I croon while the women below nearly come to blows vying for possession of my discarded ball cap. With a hand on each of her khaki-clad hips, I guide her movements to match mine. “Feel the music.” I trail the back of a hand along the column of her throat, feeling it bob with the force of her swallow. I’m enjoying this far too much to stop when I reach the bow of her flouncy blouse tied at the base of her neck. I finger the ends of the ribbon and quirk a brow, giving a gentle tug to ensure she knows what I’m after.

Her answering nod has me cracking a grin. “Words, remember?”

“Y—yes.”

“Atta girl.” I give it a good yank and the slinky fabric falls away, allowing access to skim my lips over her freshly exposed collarbone. “That’s it, now shut your eyes.” I glide the tip of a finger along her subtle cleavage, delighting in the sight of her porcelain skin as it flushes beneath my touch. “Breathe, baby,” I rasp, taking hold of the leather belt at her waist. While continuing to lead her, I alternate hands as I rip off my shirt and feed it, too, to the vultures.

When the tempo picks up, I grip the back of one of her thighs and lift, resting my other palm at the small of her back. “Brace yourself,” I warn, dipping her low. On the return trip, I skim my lips up the front of her shirt, over a shoulder, along the bend of her neck and suck her lobe into my mouth. “Now you’re getting the hang of it. Just like making love.”

With her gasp, I back away, leaving her to watch while I play to the crowd, unfastening my belt and giving them a show before handing it off to her friend. I fall to my knees, thrusting hard into my air guitar, as I skid across the stage wearing only my jeans on my path back to blondie.

This time there is no reluctance whatsoever when I crook my finger, urging her to join me on the floor.

I place her hands on my shoulders, grip the back of her neck, and whip her side to side like a rag doll before finishing the number with a hard press of my lips to hers.

Screams and cat calls come at us from all around. Yet somehow, it’s the sound of our labored breathing and frantic hearts at the forefront.

“Wow,” she huffs.

My dance partner, I notice when I finally break away, resembles a deer in headlights, while I feel like I could blow the roof off this joint. I leap to my feet before helping Veronica back to hers. “You all right?”

“Y—yeah,” she rasps, lightly fingering her kiss-swollen lips as if she’s having an out of body experience.

I tuck a knuckle under her chin so she’s looking at me. “I have this effect on some women,” I say, in all seriousness. “That tingling in your loins will wear off eventually.”

CHAPTER 2

VERONICA

WHATEVER TRANCE I find myself under lifts the instant those arrogant words leave his lips—those pillowy soft lips that were just melded so intimately to mine. Okay, so maybe not that *exact* instant...

I can still feel the delectable burn of his days-old stubble surrounding my mouth. The warmth of his touch lingers at my nape, spreading through my veins like a wildfire. No one's ever kissed me like that...so thoroughly I'm rendered senseless.

A swarm of butterflies take up residence in my chest, and that's when I realize I'm allowing myself to get sidetracked—seduced by a world-famous womanizer.

Well, that chiseled jaw and unruly dark mop of hair are no match for me. So what if my fingers are dying to take a leisurely stroll through those disheveled strands? Never mind the overwhelming urge I'm battling to run my tongue over every beautiful inch of ink decorating his toned chest...to nibble on the rods impaled through his pert nipples.

I am in complete control. *Clearly.*

My eyes narrow on his as I prepare to let him have it, but instead, I find myself homing in on the shocking sincerity reflected back at me.

“Dear God...” I mutter to myself, because it’s clear that he actually believes the shit he’s spewing. “You’re *serious*.”

His answering chuckle, chock full of arrogance serves to douse any remaining embers. Just like that, his guard is up. His stare hardened. Jaw taut. “Course I am. I’m well aware of my appeal, doll.”

My eyes damn near pop out of their sockets. *Who talks like that?* “Thanks for the dance.” Fumbling to retie my top, I take a calculated step back. “No need to concern yourself with my loins.” My body shudders in disgust. “I must be one of the rare breeds immune to your...” I give him a parting onceover before concluding that thought. “Uh, charm?”

“Join me in the VIP section for a drink?” he calls to my retreating form, not the least discouraged by my blatant disgust.

“No, thanks.” I hop down, not chancing a backward glance for his reaction, lest I find myself getting pulled back under his spell.

“What the hell was that all about?” My best friend, Kinzy, latches onto my arm, studying my face. “Were you just arguing with him? It looked tense up there for a minute, but I couldn’t hear anything you two were saying.”

Irritation vibrates through me. “He’s a jerk.”

“What happened?” Her gaze flickers from me to the stage and back again. “Sure looked like things were going well from where I’m standing.” She fans herself with the dramatic flair befitting a music theater major. “You know, right up till the end.”

“They were,” I admit, already mourning the loss of something that never even existed. “He’s just...ugh.” I

shudder. “So full of himself.”

She chokes on a breath. “He’s Aiden fucking Addams... what did you expect? Prince Charming?”

With a shrug, I glance over my shoulder to find he’s already moseyed back to his *exclusive* spot and found a few willing victims to feed his ego. “Nothing.” Forcing a smile, I rip my gaze away. “I expected nothing. It’s fine, really.”

“Uhhh...” Kinzy’s lips pinch together. “The fuck it is. That prime hunk of man meat should be deflowering your hoity-toity ass in a dark alley somewhere as we speak.”

I slap a hand over her mouth as heat flares in my cheeks. Sometimes I truly question my judgment in friends. “Not him.” I bite back tears, because for just a moment, I allowed myself to hope for the same thing. “It can’t be him.”

Her argument’s muffled into my palm. I don’t remove it until she sags in defeat, nodding her agreement. “Fine.” She folds her arms across her chest, stomping a booted foot, like a total brat. “I’ll drop it...for now. But you’re telling me everything when we get back to the dorm.”

“Deal.” I slip an arm through hers, resting my head on her shoulder briefly. “Think you could find that guy that was buying our drinks earlier and get me something tall and strong?” I bat my lashes, reaching into my pocket for a twenty.

“Sure, but you’re buying mine too, ya rich bitch.”

I snort, doling out another bill. “You know I don’t mind spending daddy’s money on you, lover.”

She presses a kiss to my cheek, adjusts the mass of natural curls that I’ll forever envy, then flounces off in her short, poufy skirt, an underage college girl on a mission.

Whereas I have no game when it comes to guys—credit to the girls’ schools my parents were annoyingly insistent upon—my roomy could write a manual on the art of seduction. In fact, she’s made it her mission to see me rid of my hymen before the end of our junior year, an idea I’m not at all opposed to. That little flap has more than overstayed its welcome. I feel like the last remaining twenty-year-old virgin. Fuck making it special. I just wanna get this shit over with.

I know I shouldn’t, but the second she’s out of sight, I steal a peek at the rock star’s table, who’s somehow acquired a fluffy purple robe trimmed in cheetah print. Aiden is slouched back in his chair, drink in hand, watching three girls undulating provocatively on the table in front of him. Exactly what I’d expect from a guy like him... I truly didn’t think I had many requirements for my cherry picker at this point, beyond clean and semi-attractive, but apparently a superiority complex is a hard line for me.

“Here, bish.” I nearly pee my pants when Kinzy returns with my drink, announcing her arrival with an obnoxious cough.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that.” I take the tall glass of dark liquid and give the straw a spin, watching the ice cubes swirl around with rapt fascination as I slowly move my gaze toward the pool tables, as if there’s any way I could fool her into believing my attention wasn’t glued to the VIP section the entire time she was away.

Her unyielding glare is all-knowing. “*Loverboy doesn’t seem to be enjoying himself much.*”

It’s my bestie’s observation that has me returning for a closer inspection, myself.

Well, I’ll be damned.

She's right. Aiden couldn't look more disinterested, slumped back, staring blankly off into the void. It's as if he's become completely detached from reality.

"Bet he's missing you, too," Kinzy singsongs.

"Yeah, okay." I redirect my line of sight back toward the stage, hoping she'll follow suit and move on from this obsession. This whole rock star thing is really killing my vibe.

No such luck. "Seriously, though. He looks sad, Ronnie." Her elbow digs into my ribs. "You should go check on him."

"His mood is *not* my problem." I sip from my straw, trying my best to appear invested in the show and to ignore the electricity still buzzing through me.

"Nice try, hooker face." She moves my hair aside, flattening her cheek to mine to be heard over the music that's just started back up. "I totally caught you stalking the guy. There's no denying you like him."

Openly ignoring her, I sway side to side, singing along loudly with the crowd. It doesn't take much time for Kinzy's needy ass to get bored and drop what I've already deemed a dead subject in favor of a little fun.

Another hour zips by, and I've all but forgotten *whatshisname* when Trixie calls that cad back to the stage, inviting him to play for us.

Still sporting the purple pimp coat, he stumbles out of his seat and, accompanied by a beefy dude dressed in black from head to foot, wobbles over to the bench behind her piano.

"Bet that's his security guy," Kinzy suggests. "He's hot. I'd hit it."

“I have no doubt you would,” I snip, annoyed over the sudden bout of empathy spawning in my chest. Cameras flash all around, recording the absolute spectacle Aiden’s making of himself. The guy’s so trashed he can’t even navigate the stairs unassisted. I don’t know why I’m so bothered over any of this. He is nothing to me.

“Yeah, so maybe when you two kiss and make up—”

“Not gonna happen,” I say, cutting her short. “But you are more than welcome to go put the moves on him if it tickles your fancy.”

“Oh, you think I won—”

There’s a loud *tap, tap, tap*, followed by the sound of a throat clearing. “Anyone wanna take me on?” Aiden drawls into the mic, raking a hand through his mussed hair. The raspy timbre of his voice is veritable catnip to the ladies, instantly commanding our full attention. “Think I’m in the mood for a brawl tonight.”

How he’s able to speak so clearly—to flirt with the room so effortlessly—when he can hardly keep himself upright is beyond me.

The flush in Betty’s cheeks as she assumes the task of securing an opponent proves that even she isn’t immune to his charm. “Do we have anyone brave enough to challenge Mr. Addams?”

I don’t know what the hell compels me to do it, but without giving it a second thought, my hand darts straight into the air.

“Fascinating...” my intrusive friend murmurs. Thankfully she’s wise enough to leave it at that.

“Oh, my,” Betty coos. “I have a feeling things are about to get really interesting up in here.” Her eyes are trained on me, effectively bringing everyone else’s attention to yours truly. “You play?”

“I do.” I nod. “I’m a music major at Winchester.”

“Well, get on up here, girly.”

This time there’s no one offering a hand to help me up, so I head to the stairs on the opposite end of the stage from the moody rock star who I swear I can feel glowering at me.

While Betty gets me situated behind her instrument, Trixie encourages their customers to enter bids for their favorite male/female duet.

“You sure about this, honey?” Betty’s concern is appreciated, even if misplaced. “It’s not too late to back out.”

“Positive,” I assure her, stretching my fingers out. I may be shit when it comes to seducing a man, but I can stroke these keys to submission with the best of ’em. “I’ve got this.”

“All right then. Best of luck to ya.” With that she saunters off to join her partner in sorting through the bids that are quickly pouring in.

With nothing left to distract me from the persistent urge to lay eyes on my adversary, I lift my head, square my shoulders, and succumb.

Just as I suspected, his penetrating gaze is fixed on me. He’s not even trying to hide it. “Got somethin’ to prove, blondie?” He speaks into the mic, so the entire establishment is privy to our exchange.

My pulse starts thrumming wildly, but it’s more excitement than fear. I’m never more confident than when I’m on stage,

playing for a crowd, a fact I'm so grateful for when there isn't the slightest hint of a wobble in my voice. "Not at all. Just wanted to ensure you got a worthy opponent."

His signature smirk curls his lip. That practiced move is the inspiration for wet dreams across the globe. Of that, I'm certain. "Cocky much?"

"Just *well aware* of my talent, *doll*..." I fire his earlier words right back, punctuating them with a wink I can only hope comes off as smooth and sensual the way I'm imagining in my head.

"All right, you two." Trixie can't conceal her amusement as she walks over to hand each of us a sealed manila envelope. "Save the fireworks for the performance, huh? That's your sheet music. Don't open it until the announcement is made."

On that note, she whirls around to address the crowd. "With a whopping fifty-dollar bid, Aiden and Veronica are gonna battle it out to 'What Ifs' by Kane Brown and Lauren Alaina."

I can't believe my good fortune that out of all the duets they could have chosen from, they selected the one I performed with my classmate, Remy, in last year's talent show.

My phone buzzes, skidding along on bench beside me—a text from Kinzy, revealing that my fate wasn't a stroke of luck at all.

Kinzy: You owe me fifty bucks, bish. Blow his mind.

Me: You're the best.

Kinzy: I know. Don't ever forget it. But seriously, I'm gonna need that money back to put gas in my car this week. :P

Me: Of course.

I set the phone face down, focusing on Betty as she introduces the house band who will be joining us on acoustic and drums from the crow's nest, a little balcony in the far corner above the bar.

“While friendly,” Trixie underscores her words with a look at Aiden, “this is a competition, folks. After their performance, we’re gonna decide our winner based on your applause.”

“All right, then.” Betty takes the mic, directing her message to the two of us. “The floor is yours. Ernest, over yonder on drums, is gonna get y’all started with a four count.”

The lights gradually start to dim, and my every sense becomes heightened. Excitement dances like pinpricks along my skin at the crack of the drumsticks meeting in rapid succession. Then, as if we’ve rehearsed it a thousand times before, our fingers meet their respective keys in perfect synchronization.

Aiden’s gravely baritone couldn’t be better suited to this song, each lyric relaying his fear of hurting the woman he loves is sung with such conviction that I can feel it in my marrow, as if his words were meant for me alone. The mere thought is ridiculous because we don’t even know each other. But that doesn’t stop the rest of the room from fading away, until all I see is this beautifully broken man, pouring his entire being into his performance. His magnetism is impossible to ignore, drawing me in mind, body, and soul.

When the chorus hits, and my voice harmonizes so effortlessly with his, no part of me can deny the magic transpiring on this stage as we lose ourselves in the *what ifs*.

I peer over my instrument toward the man responsible for the sudden onslaught of emotion threatening my resolve. Our eyes lock and hold, and I'm a goner...tumbling into those turbulent depths without so much as putting up a fight. With one look, I lay my vulnerability at his feet, all the while knowing the end result is likely to be my complete undoing.

But...*what if?* What if he were to fall with me? What if we drowned together? What if I'm who he's been searching for all these years? And what if he's the one I've been unknowingly holding out for?

My pulse rockets sky high at the start of the next verse when he rises from behind his piano, shucks off that godawful robe, and saunters across the stage with an obvious purpose—*me*. My fingers somehow continue to play despite my lungs seeming to have forgotten their sole purpose.

Aiden doesn't stop until he's at my side, mic in one hand, lyrics effortlessly flowing from his lips as he extends the other toward me.

The thought that this is supposed to be a piano duel briefly crosses my mind just before I reach back, curling my fingers around his, and leaving Ernest and company on their own to contend with the music.

My emotions spin like a Tilt-a-whirl when my opponent whips me into his arms, never breaking our line of sight as he draws me in until my breasts rest snug against his hard chest—until our thrashing hearts find a unified rhythm. It's exhilarating and frightening...being *this* connected to another person. Beyond anything I ever imagined.

Sharing a mic, we croon on about the possibility of things working out, of stars aligning, and being each other's last first kiss. Our position is so intimate we're sharing air, breathing in the pheromones smoldering in the sliver of space that separates us.

Sweat beads on my brow. I'm hot everywhere, my adrenaline at an all-time high. Liquid fire surges through my veins when Aiden cradles my face, pulling me impossibly closer, his plump lips brushing over my own, whisper soft, as we sing of loving each other's fears away...

As the song draws to a close, Aiden's voice, now reduced to a hoarse whisper, issues a final spoken "what if?" just before his mouth descends on mine in a fiery kiss. Time stops the moment his tongue parts my lips, engaging my own in a slow and sensual dance.

I'm swept away in the scent of his spicy cologne, in the taste of whiskey on his tongue, in the feel of his fingers entwined in my hair. He consumes every one of my senses so completely that I forget where I am. Forget all the reasons this could never work. Heck, I'm pretty sure I forget my own name.

Without warning, foreign hands grip my shoulders. My body cries out in protest as we're dragged apart and transported back to the present. I blink away the lust-filled fog I've fallen under and am once again center stage, standing before a raucous crowd. Whether they're screaming over the performance or the little show we just gave them, I can't be sure.

All I know is that I'm trembling from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, aching in places I never realized I could, and grieving the loss of his touch with a ferocity that's

positively frightening. I feel naked—exposed. Defenseless against the pull this man I’ve only just met has over me.

There’s talk of choosing a winner and something about an applause-o-meter, but I’m barely catching any of what’s being said, too focused on—*my partner? My opponent?* I don’t even know what to call him at this point, because that certainly didn’t feel like a competition. And judging by the confusion furrowing his brow—by the way he’s practically chewing through his lower lip—I’d venture to say he’s just as concerned with the results as I am.

The place explodes with cheers as one of our hostesses places a crown on my head, congratulating me on a hard-won victory.

I give no response, though a part of me knows I should. But the bigger part is still in some alternate reality where Aiden and I are the only two people in existence. Try as I might, I can’t break the spell...can’t tear my eyes away from his.

I see it—the moment his gaze hardens—*feel* it...like a knife in my chest. The blade twists with his expression as it begins to change from one of bewilderment, to panic, and finally unmistakable anger. It happens so quickly that if I wasn’t singularly focused on this man, I’d be sure to miss it altogether.

The urge to reach out to him is so strong, but before I have the chance to react, he rips past me in a fit of rage, hopping off the stage, and right out of the bar.

“I have to go.” I’m not even sure my voice is audible as I hand off the mic and crown and haul ass after him. My only thought is catching up to Aiden, because there’s a sinking feeling in my gut telling me something bad’s about to happen.

I round the corner of the building to find Aiden slamming his fist repeatedly into the brick facade. Crushing guilt hits like a tsunami, paralyzing me on impact. I open my mouth to scream but no sound comes out. My legs won't work, in spite of how desperately I want to go to him.

“What the hell are you doing?” The irate voice belonging to his security guy, who just whizzed past, brings a small sense of relief.

Everything happens in slow motion as I stand, frozen in place, watching with bated breath while his bodyguard wrestles him to the ground.

My knees buckle when I get a glimpse of the blood dripping from his hand.

Kinzy arrives on the scene next, just in time to catch me before I land in a heap on the cold, wet ground.

Her arms squeeze around my middle. “Are you okay?”

Tears I've barely held at bay run unchecked down my cheeks. “I—I don't know.” Sagging into my best friend's embrace, I keep my eyes trained on the chaos unfolding less than ten feet away.

Like a rabid animal, Aiden continues to flail around in an unsuccessful attempt to free himself from the man restraining him.

“Let's get out of here.” Kinzy nudges me back toward the main street just as an ambulance pulls up, sirens blaring. “Dude's got issues.”

It feels wrong to leave him in such a state, because I know deep down that somehow I'm at least partly responsible for whatever's going on with him. But I also realize my presence only seems to be making things worse. I'm likely the last

person he wants to see right now. And maybe ever again. “I hope he’s okay.”

“Like you said,” Kinzy mutters with a sigh, “his mood is *not* your problem.”

But as she shoves me into the back seat of the Lyft she must’ve called during the height of the commotion, all I can think is how it no longer feels that simple.

CHAPTER 3

VERONICA

“FAIR WARNING—” Anika levels me with a severe look as she rounds the front of her blacked-out Navi and swings the passenger door open, where I sit gathering my belongings. “He will not be happy to see you.” With that, the prim and polished brunette ushers me out, slamming it shut immediately following my exit. My body jolts with the heavy sway of the truck.

Holy hell, that woman’s got a lot of strength for someone so tiny.

“Noted.” Battling an awful case of jitters, I force a smile. Fake it till ya make it... *isn’t that how the saying goes?*

Aiden’s manager showing up at my doorstep and offering me the chance to audition for a job—*his job*—was the last thing I ever expected. Especially after the field day the media had over “the epic tantrum rock star Aiden Addams threw after being bested by a woman.” They’ve been hounding me for days, trying every tactic in the book to get a statement, but I refuse to have my words twisted and used to further destroy the man.

As terrifying as it is to come face to face with him, after the paps have done their worst to pit us against one another, I’ve been presented with the opportunity of a lifetime and would be a fool to pass it up. And let’s just say no one’s ever

accused me of being that. I'm made of tough enough stuff to endure a little anger for the sake of realizing my dreams. This is all I've ever wanted—the chance to earn a living off my own merit. To prove to my father once and for all that my music isn't just some frivolous hobby and that I can make a real career out of covering the artists I grew up on.

“No.” Aiden's manager clasps a hand around my wrist, staring at me intently. “Like, he's pissed.” Her eyes widen before she continues. “What you saw the other night was nothing.”

I balk at her words then scurry across the parking lot chasing after her. *The girl doesn't waste any time.* “A-are you trying to scare me off?”

“Exactly the opposite.” She pauses and waits for me to catch up at the threshold of Booze & Bad Decisions. “I want you to go in there prepared for the worst, because that's likely what you'll get.” Anika grips the brass handle but stalls before opening it. “And I want you to dig deep and prove to me, but most of all to yourself, that you've got what it takes to work alongside a spoiled, selfish, frustratingly-charming-but-exceedingly-vexing man of his caliber.”

Her description of the guy has me choking on a laugh. “You make him sound like a toddler.”

She dips her head, first to one side then to the other, as if considering it. “That's precisely what he's like. Couldn't have defined him better if I tried...only bigger and meaner.” She gives the heavy door a pull. “And more often than not, drunk.”

“Oh, boy.” Bile stirs in my stomach. I thought I was nervous before. “Maybe I'm not cut out for—”

“Nonsense.” Anika rests her free hand between my shoulder blades in what I assume is meant to be a soothing gesture, though the stiffness of her delivery betrays her noticeable discomfort. I get the feeling she’s not much the touchy/feely type, which sort of makes her attempt that much more endearing. “I saw the video of the two of you on stage.” A dreamy sigh smooths the worry lines from her forehead. “I’ve never seen him look at anyone that way. And while he is all of the aforementioned things and more, he’s also fiercely loyal, incredibly funny...” Her lips curve into a semblance of a smile. “He’s smart, and so very talented. Aiden is the life of every party and the best friend I’ve ever had. You stand to learn a lot from him...and hopefully him from you.” Slight pressure at my back urges me forward. “You know, after he gets over this ridiculous pity party he’s throwing himself.”

“Okay, then.” I step past her, adjusting the twin braids I fashioned this morning to rest in front of my shoulders, hoping that along with my western button down, boot cut jeans, and cowgirl boots, I look the part. “I hope you know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, I do.” She sounds affronted, though I had no intention of offending her. “I’m paid to know everything there is to know about these boys, Miss Vanderbilt.” Anika’s red-bottom heels echo on the stained concrete as she moves around me to take lead. “And I am *very* good at my job.”

“I didn’t mean to insinuate that you weren’t.”

Her head bobs, but otherwise she gives no indication she even heard me. I can’t seem to get a good read on this woman and decide it’s probably in my best interest to shut up while she’s still on my side.

I follow her down a long hall with rooms on either side, the doors labeled with the purposes of the rooms inside. There are rehearsal suites and dressing rooms. Then comes an office and a separate door with each band member's name etched into a brass plate. I surmise these are their personal dressing rooms and that the earlier ones are intended for guest talent. When we reach the end, it opens to a huge chamber with a practice stage, complete with instruments all set up, ready to go. There's a modest bar and pool table, and in the far corner, a white leather sectional, currently occupied by a throuple engaged in some serious tonsil hockey— *among other things*.

“Uh...should we maybe give them some privacy?” Not wanting to intrude, I start backing away slowly, horrified when Anika doesn't so much as slow her gait.

The clack of heels on hardwood echoes throughout the mostly open space as she continues her trek, bringing her closer to said couch with every step.

My anxiety goes through the roof as I hang back, gnawing my thumbnail to the quick. I keep expecting one of them to hear her approaching and turn around, but they're so far gone that none of them seem to notice.

“Playtime's over.” Anika's firm command has me quaking in my boots from across the room. But as much as she scares me, I can't help being impressed by her ginormous set of lady balls. I mean, she's the size of your average ten-year-old, ordering around a group of rich, powerful, and very intimidating men. I half expect her to pull out a wooden spoon and threaten to bust this dude's ass.

“The girls stay.”

Oh, no...please, God, no.

My heart takes a nosedive straight into the pit of despair still roiling in my stomach. There is no mistaking that gruff voice as belonging to anyone but the man who's occupied my every waking thought for the better part of three days.

There's also no denying the pang of betrayal that has no business knocking the wind out of me. My only saving grace is that they're too busy arguing to witness my moment of weakness. I draw a lungful of air, trying to regain my composure while the *best friends* engage in a battle of wills that is anything but what I'd consider friendly. In the end, this round goes to Aiden, who I conclude may well be the only person on earth more headstrong than Anika.

Once the dust settles, Anika waves me over, clearly exasperated by their little standoff. "Miss Vanderbilt. Get over here. He won't bite."

"Unless you want me to..." I feel his eyes roving over my body as he slides one of the women from his lap like she's no more than an insignificant prop. A prop, mind you, who makes no attempt to right her clothes, proudly displaying her beard-burned tits and swollen nipples like some badge of honor.

To Aiden's credit, he does at least attempt to drape his discarded tee over her chest for modesty's sake, but she's having none of it.

The other girl has enough decency to shimmy her short skirt down to cover her vagina that she was just making an obscene show of diddling.

"No need to be so formal," I drawl, while trying not to stare at the woman so wantonly splayed before us. "Veronica is fine...or Ronnie," I add, hoping to gain myself an ally in Anika. "My friends...they all call me Ronnie."

I try to convince myself the little twitch tugging her lip is some variation of a smile, because it's so much better than the alternative, but her next words prove my efforts futile. "Let's start with Veronica and see where it goes." She was absolutely trying to contain a sneer.

Ouch. "Sounds grea—"

Aiden abruptly rises to his full height, and I lose the ability to focus on anything else. The scent of stale booze seeps from his pores, assaulting my nostrils on his approach. It's unpleasant, but not enough of a deterrent to calm my erratic pulse.

The guy's got to be every bit of six foot two, dwarfing my five-three frame. I must've been too buzzed the other night to fully appreciate his impressive stature—tall, lean, and ripped. The black tribal ink decorating his chest is much more visible now beneath the bright lights. Those barbells I've obsessed so hard over have been exchanged for silver rings, dangling like tempting little treats from his nipples.

My eyes wander lower, to the faded black jeans that are open and slung low on his hips, revealing that delectable V I've read so much about but had never actually seen in person before now. Well, I'm pleased to report that the romance novels don't lie...it's truly a thing of beauty.

"You're not wearing underwear," I blurt. I regret the remark instantly, but there was no help for it. Not when I tracked that light dusting of hair from his navel south and nearly got rewarded with an eyeful of his *business*.

"Nope" His one-word reply is accompanied by a devilish grin. Swaying slightly, he edges closer, pinching his chin. "Are you?"

My mouth opens and closes, imitating a fish out of water, which is so very fitting considering that's exactly what I feel like—vulnerable, and completely out of my element.

“Aiden...” Anika’s warning tone saves me from having to formulate a response. “She’s not here to entertain you.”

“No?” Brows furrowed; he brings his right hand to rest on his chest as if her statement physically wounded him. I try not to laugh when the unexpected weight of the cast he’s clearly not yet adjusted to nearly knocks him on his ass. “Well, that’s a shame.”

“Cut the shit, Addams.” Her nostrils flare. “I told you to meet me here for the interview. We’ve got to have someone trained to play in your stead by Saturday, and it’s already Tuesday.”

Aiden’s lips purse. His bloodshot eyes narrow on his manager, as if he’s working to solve a puzzle. “I’m aware.” He clucks his tongue. “Where are the applicants?”

“Right here.” She gestures to me with both hands, like a game show host displaying a most enticing prize.

The way his face furrows in disgust does nothing for my self-esteem. “You’ve already made a decision, then? Without me?” He tunnels his left hand through his hair, the veins in his neck suddenly bulging. “I thought that’s what we were here to do?”

“Don’t you recognize her?” Anika’s smug smile has me feeling like a pawn in a dirty game I never signed up for. “Take a closer look.”

My blood heats beneath his intense perusal. A flush works its way from my chest where his gaze lingers far longer than is

appropriate, up my neck, to the apples of my cheeks, and radiates through to the tips of my ears.

“I’ve never seen this woman before.” *He cannot be serious.*

Anika scoffs. “Shall I pull up TMD to jog your memory?”

“What are you getting on about?” He rests the butt of his palm on his forehead, as if fighting off a headache.

“This is *Veronica Vanderbilt*.” She says my name slowly, enunciating each syllable as if it’ll somehow make a difference.

Aiden lowers his arm and looks at her as if she’s speaking in tongues.

“Oh, you poor, drunken mess.” To further patronize him, Anika smooths a hand up and down his arm, which he quickly jerks away. “She’s the one who won the duel at Bottle Grounds on Saturday.”

His nod is curt. Jaw ticking. “Can’t say I remember much from that night.”

My poor heart—it just keeps taking hit after hit.

“No,” his *bestie* replies, “I bet you don’t. At any rate, I figured who better to fill in for you than the girl who beat you so badly you resorted to punching a brick wall?”

Holy crap. She isn’t holding anything back.

“You just said we were here for an interview. Shouldn’t she, I don’t know...maybe *play* before you make such an important decision?”

The way they’re talking about me as if I’m not standing right here is beyond awkward.

“The viral YouTube video was enough for me. It was enough for Clint at the label as well,” she tacks on, giving him pause.

I have no idea who this Clint person is. But even a fool could see that she’s got him right where she wants him. *Checkmate.*

Aiden’s jaw goes rigid. “So, it’s settled then?”

“Very much so.” Anika looks entirely too proud of herself.

“Guess we’re gonna be working together.” Invisible smoke billows from the rock star’s ears as he reaches for my hand doing an awful job of concealing the way he’s seething inside. “What’s it gonna be, doll? Should I call you Ronnie, then?”

Mortification over his ability to affect me so deeply, then forget the connection we shared on that stage like it was nothing at all, has my defenses up. “I’d prefer you didn’t.” My tongue dips out to moisten my lips. “Veronica is fine.”

“Nah.” His head shakes. “Think I’ll call you Cherry.”

“Cherry?”

“Yeah, Cherry.” He strokes the side of my face tenderly with the knuckles of his left hand. “Because your cheeks go all red like a *blushing virgin.*”

My body, of course, chooses this precise moment to betray me with an ill-timed surge of warmth, proving his point. “Please don’t.”

He eyes me, giving the pretense of mulling it over before shaking his head. “Fucking adorable.” He goes to clap his hands, remembering at the very last second how unwise of a choice that would be and drops them with a hiss of relief. “Cherry it is.”

“Fantastic.” I don’t know what else to say. Clearly, he’s going to do what he wants anyway, and him giving me a nickname is kinda cute...if a little degrading.

“Glad you approve,” he slurs, walking back toward the couch where we originally found him.

“I didn’t say that...” But my denial falls on deaf ears, because he’s already engaged in a hushed conversation with the women who’ve taken to *entertaining* one another while awaiting his return.

“You’ll call me?” the bare chested one asks while slipping back into her shirt.

“Fraid not, love.” He attempts to soften his denial with a kiss to her cheek. “You know I limit all encounters to one time only. I can’t afford attachments, but it was real fun. You’re great.”

He reached out to help the other girl to her feet. “You too.” He makes a display of sucking her fingers into his mouth, his eyes rolling back with delight. “Fucking delicious.”

“But we didn’t finish.” The whiny chick wraps her arms around his neck, staring up at him with lust-filled eyes that make me want to vomit. “So, it doesn’t count.”

Aiden’s throaty chuckle stirs something to life below my belt, a dizzying feeling I don’t want to acknowledge but can’t ignore. He’s so cavalier about the whole sex thing that I find myself revisiting the idea of letting him be the one to rid me of that barrier once and for all. I mean, the universe is practically *demanding* it with the nickname he just foisted upon me. *Cherry*. It has to be a sign.

“I don’t make the rules.”

“Actually,” Anika singsongs, inserting herself right into their conversation, “you do.”

I pull my lips inward and bite down to keep from giggling at the betrayal marring his face.

Aiden whispers something to the woman and waves them both off as they head out. Then, he reels around on his shit-stirring manager. “You know, you’ve always been a bit of a bitch.” His forlorn expression is no longer a laughing matter. “I used to consider it part of your charm, funnily enough. But I *never* thought you’d take such joy in watching me suffer.”

“That’s not what I’m—”

“Isn’t it?” he snarls pinning her with a hard look. “My fucking world is crashing down around me and here you are, smug as can fucking be.”

“I—I think I should go.” This has just become more than I can take. I spin around to make my retreat, but a large hand grips my arm, stopping me before I get my first foot off the floor.

“Stay.” He delivers the command without sparing me a single glance. His eyes are still glued to his manager’s. This man’s pain is palpable, and I find myself getting angry with Anika on his behalf, though I haven’t the slightest idea what the hell is going on between them.

The brunette’s eyes well with tears. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Save it.” With that, he turns toward me. The fingers still wrapped around my wrist loosen, as if he’s just realizing how tight his hold has been. “You should stay. You’ll need to rehearse with the guys tonight, and I need to get the hell out of here.”

I bob my head, unable to speak for fear I might burst into tears. This entire day has been a whirlwind, and it's wreaking havoc on my emotions.

Aiden releases his hold, trailing his fingers up the back of my arm to the side of my face. His mere touch sends a shiver dancing along my spine.

My eyes shut of their own accord, and my pulse takes off at a feverish pace. Eager for the chance to mate with his once more, my lips begin to tingle. And just when I think he's about to kiss me, I feel a tug at the end of one of my braids.

My lids flutter open to find him watching me with a cocky smile. "Told you it looked better down," he says, dropping a hair tie into my palm before yanking the other out. Aiden takes his time releasing the braids with a gentleness that has my heart skipping beats. He runs his fingers through the long tresses until it's a mass of frizzy waves.

"Tomorrow, we shop." He withdraws his hand, bringing it back to his side. "Meet me here at the same time."

"Shop for what?" I blink hard, trying to gather my wits, which he just scattered.

His teeth clamp down on his lower lip as he once again assesses my outfit. "You wanna fill in for me?"

I clear my throat. "Ye—yes."

"Then you need to look the part. This ain't no *country club*, Cherry Girl." He tips my chin gently before leaving me with a well-timed wink that has me swooning on impact.

"We'll talk when I get home tonight," Anika calls after him.

His only response is to raise his arm and extend his middle finger.

Until tomorrow, then...

CHAPTER 4

AIDEN

“YOU NEVER CAME HOME LAST NIGHT.”

I’m pacing the floor of Booze & Bad Decisions, waiting to see if my replacement, who’s already ten minutes late, is gonna show for our shopping trip when Anika’s unwelcome voice has my entire body tensing. “So?”

Her heels click, grating on my nerves as she falls in step beside me. “So, I told you I wanted to talk.”

“And I didn’t.” I stop, so she’ll stop, and so that annoying clacking will stop ricocheting off the walls. “Stayed over at Josh’s place.”

“I know.” Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips.

“Checking up on me now?” I shake my head in disbelief. “You’re a piece of work.”

“Yeah, well, you’re no picnic, yourself.” Anika pinches the bridge of her nose, taking a moment to collect herself. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re in right now?” she finally snaps. “Do you even care?”

I stare just over her head, toward the stage, refusing to make eye contact. “Of course, I care. This job is all I’ve got.”

“That’s just cruel.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” I say, stepping into her personal space. “We both know life is nothing if not cruel.”

Her lip warbles. “I get that you’re angry about Talia—”

My loud scoff cuts her short. “I’m not angry about your *girlfriend*, Annie.”

“Well, you coulda fooled me.”

“I was confused and caught completely off-guard. And yeah, anger may have been my initial reaction, but I got over it quick.”

“When?” she challenges. “When you stormed out on me like a child? When you made a complete ass of yourself and the entire band by stripping on stage?” She cocks her head to the side, to meet my averted gaze. “Or when you decided to punch a brick wall because you couldn’t handle losing *to a girl* and broke every knuckle in your goddamn hand?”

“That is what you’d think.” I huff out a dry laugh. “It’s clear you don’t know me at all, *friend*.”

“I’ll tell you what I do know, *friend*.” She digs a manicured nail into my shoulder. “Clint has about had it with your shit. The other guys have all settled down and haven’t caused a lick of trouble in quite a while now.”

I jab my pointer into my mouth, pop it out and twirl it in the air, giving her a silent whoop-de-doo.

“He’s threatening to drop you.”

“Huh?”

“It’s why I came down so hard on you yesterday. I’d just gotten out of a meeting with him before picking up Veronica, and when I walked in and saw you...*like that*...” She sighs. “Even though it’s exactly what I expected, I got angry.”

Because unless you show some serious maturity over the course of the next few months, you're out."

"Out?" I repeat, bile rising in my throat.

Her expression softens. "I convinced him to give you another chance, but he's at the end of his rope. You pull another stunt like that, and I don't know if there's anything I could say or do to stop it."

The room spins as the reality of what she's just disclosed sinks in. "I can't...I can't lose this."

"Then it's time to grow up," Anika says. "And fast."

I grapple for her arm as she turns to stalk off, panic making my heart feel like it's about to burst through my ribcage. "What do I do?"

"Cooling it on all the partying would be a good start."

"Done." I bob my head, chewing the inside of my cheek raw. "What else?"

Her hand covers mine where it's still gripped to her arm. "Just try to lay low for a while and maybe find yourself a girlfriend and stop fucking everything with a hole between its legs." She quirks a brow, trying to make light of her suggestion.

Meanwhile, the acid in my stomach churns something fierce. No one knows better than Anika how deep-seated my fear of commitment lies. It sits hand in hand with my fear of rejection. I learned long ago the only way to avoid feeling that sort of pain is to never open myself up to it to begin with. "Annie, I—"

Anika's hollow laugh interrupts my panicked plea. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

“I don’t know how to...I—I can’t.”

“You can.” Her whiskey eyes shimmer as she flattens a palm to my chest. “Aid, you’ve carried the weight of others’ shortcomings long enough. You were a *child*, for God’s sake. It was never your responsibility to make your parents love you.” Her fingers dig in, twisting the fabric of my shirt. “You aren’t lacking, do you hear me?” A lone tear threatens to spill over, but she swiftly intercepts it with the swat of a hand. “They weren’t worthy of a heart as pure as yours.”

“Knock, knock.” The verbal interruption is accompanied by a few solid thumps on the bar top. “Sorry I’m late. My professor went off on a tangent and kept us after class.”

Tamping down the heavy load of shit we just unpacked, I plaster on a mask of indifference. You’d never guess the inner turmoil raging beneath this well-practiced facade. “No worries, Cherry.” My eyes take a leisurely stroll over today’s ensemble, which consists of a baby blue cashmere sweater, strikingly similar to the hue of her irises, perfectly pressed khaki slacks, and black Maryjane style flats. Her golden locks are pulled back in a half up, half down style. Pearl earrings and a matching necklace complete the look.

“What?” Veronica’s cheeks turn my new preferred shade of red as she looks down at her shirt to see what it is that I find so amusing.

“You get all fancy like this for school every day?” Leaving Anika lurking near the stage, I saunter over to join our guest at the bar.

“You make a habit of judging the clothing choices of every girl you meet so staunchly, or is this humiliating ritual strictly for my benefit?”

“Just you, Cherry.” Feeling bold, I reach out to run the back of my hand over her heated skin, a move that’s become somewhat of an obsession where she’s concerned. “I’ve taken a special interest in you.”

“Whatever did I do to deserve such an honor?” Blondie rests the tips of her fingers beneath her chin and bats her sooty lashes.

The move, meant to be comical, awakens the sleeping giant in my pants, leaving me with the need to adjust myself beneath the bar like a pubescent teenager lacking any self-control.

I can’t for the life of me figure out what it is about this buttoned-up debutant that gets me going. While certainly beautiful, she’s not at all what I usually go for. Perhaps opposites really do attract and I’ve been subconsciously chasing the female version of myself, knowing it’d never go beyond surface level.

Well, whatever the case, management has just made it impossible to avoid this unexpected temptation, and my restraint is about to be tested like never before.

“You accepted Anika’s offer to fill in for me. It’s nothing more and nothing less than that.” I don’t miss the spark as it fizzles from her eyes, nor can I ignore the pang of guilt arising in my chest. “Do us both a solid and refrain from reading into things.”

“Sure,” she answers flatly. “No worries.”

“Great, let’s get going.” Taking her hand, I tip my head in Anika’s direction to bid her farewell and offer a silent truce “We’ll be back in time for rehearsal.”

“Perfect.” My manager’s serene smile assures that all is forgiven and affords a sense of peace I haven’t felt in three agonizing days.

“You’re so full of shit.”

Veronica’s outburst takes me by surprise after what has been a mostly silent walk to the car.

I chuckle, pulling the door open for her. “You’ll have to elaborate, doll.”

The seething blonde climbs into the back seat ahead of me and fastens her safety belt, waiting with impressive patience until I’ve finished instructing Josh on where we’re headed.

“You made those comments about the country club, referring to my clothes, the night we met.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Her eyes roll. “I’m sure you do. Because you took my hair down *that* night, too.” There’s no missing the shiver that moves through her at the recent memory. “Then you brought it up yesterday during my interview when you took out my braids, after claiming to have no memory of me.”

Josh’s haughty glare pins me in the rearview. The urge to flip him off must be apparent in the hard look I shoot him, because his eyes don’t veer from the road again.

“Is there a point to this?”

She shrugs. “Just that you took an interest in me before it was decided I’d be your replacement while you recover, and I don’t understand why you’re hell bent on trying to pretend otherwise. It’s insulting.”

That she looks ready to burst into tears doesn’t sit well with me. I’ve never gotten into the habit of hurting a woman’s

feelings. In fact, I take special care to avoid it. “Is it really so important to you that I remember?”

Her head dips, and she fiddles with her fingernails as she considers her response. “Yeah,” she finally answers. “I don’t like being made to feel inconsequential.”

I grip her chin, adjusting her face until our eyes meet. “Much to my dismay, Cherry Girl, you have proven impossible to forget.”

“Why do you say that like it’s a bad thing?”

I decide to give her as much honesty as I can, because it’s the least she deserves after being dragged into my mess. “Because...” I scrub a hand over my face. “I’m not a man who’s ever taken interest in a lady for longer than a night.” I think back to the way we felt so right up on that stage the other night. “I was really spooked by it.”

“Is that why you did that to your hand?”

“Partly.”

She nods, easily accepting my obscure answer. “I knew it couldn’t have been about losing, like the papers said.”

A disgruntled laugh rumbles in my chest. “No.”

Her tiny hand lands on my knee, giving a gentle squeeze that sends a jolt of electricity firing off inside me. “Are you still spooked?”

“Not so much, no.” I reach around to the back of her head, releasing the clip binding her hair, and drop it into her lap. “Because I’ve determined my purpose in your life,” I say, smiling down at her curious expression. “I’m going to make you a star.”

The pretty blonde withdraws her hand from my leg, channeling her nervous energy into the mundane task of opening and closing the claw clip repeatedly. “And you’re going to do that by changing my wardrobe?” Her dimples make a reappearance, relaying her amusement as she meets my gaze out of the corner of her eye.

“It’s a damn good place to start.” My answer comes just as the Navigator rolls to a stop in front of Anika’s favorite boutique, Posh.

Relieved to put an end to this little heart-to-heart, I hop out onto the sidewalk then assist my protégé with her descent.

“Won’t your bodyguard be coming with us?” She stares after him as he drives off to park the vehicle, eyes wide with alarm.

“Josh will be along shortly, but he’ll hang out around the entrance unless he’s needed.” I bite back a laugh, not wanting to mock her. “I can hold my own for five minutes, Cherry. Relax.”

“Okay, then...” She slaps her hand into mine without giving it a second thought, instantly lighting me up. *I’m in so much fucking trouble.* “Let’s do this.”

I wait until we’ve reached the entryway to release her hold, so I can open the door. In this instance, having just one functioning hand is proving to be quite useful.

Balancing boundaries and chivalry where this girl’s concerned is going to be a full-time job.

We’re met by an associate before the door has fully shut behind us. “Ah, you must be Veronica and Aiden.” The smile she offers is genuine, setting the tone for what I hope will be

an enjoyable endeavor. “Anika called ahead and said you might stop by.”

“Always two steps ahead of me, that girl.” It’s general procedure when we venture out into the public to have her do this kind of thing, but with how strained our relationship’s been, I didn’t bother asking. “And you are?” I extend my good hand toward the clerk.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m Penny, and it’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“I’m, umm—I’m Veronica.” The women shake hands, then Cherry lights up like a ripe tomato. “Gosh, you already knew that.”

“Nervous?” I give a light jab to her shoulder with my elbow.

“A little.”

“Don’t be.” Penny motions for us to follow her to a private sitting area lined in floor-to-ceiling mirrors with a curtained-off fitting room at the center. “I’ve already pulled quite a few things based on Anika’s instructions, which I’m sure you’re going to love.”

A rack filled to the brim with short, sequined dresses and those one-piece things that have become so popular the past few years awaits our examination. There’s also a rolling cart lined with high heels and boots to suit every style imaginable.

“Thanks so much. We’ll let you know if we need anything else.” I dismiss our assistant with an inclination of my head, hoping to make this a little less painful on my charge by getting rid of the added pair of eyes.

“Sure, yep.” Penny points to a doorbell mounted on the wall. “Just press that if you need me and I’ll come running.

I've closed the shop for my *lunch break*." She makes air quotes to be sure I'm aware it was done strictly for our benefit. "So, you two have my undivided attention."

"Perfect." I reward the little eager beaver's efforts with an over-the-top flirtatious smile that has her tripping over her own feet. "You're a darling."

Once she's disappeared from view, I turn to find Veronica glaring at me with her nose scrunched in what looks to be disgust. "You must know that's degrading."

"What is?" I scan the area, pretending to search for some other person to whom she must be speaking.

"Talking to women like that."

"You're crazy." I hook a thumb over my shoulder. "Penny there enjoyed our interaction so much she nearly forgot how to walk."

"Right..." Her tone mocks me, but that amused smile of hers is singing a different tune entirely. "Your head must be a very *interesting* place," she mutters before pulling in a deep breath and approaching that rack with about as much gusto as if it were a root canal. After examining a few pieces, she starts swiping frantically through the hangers. "This is really... umm..."

I walk up behind her, bringing my lips to her ear. "Short?"

"Uh-huh." An involuntary chill has her shuddering against my chest.

"Flashy?" I rasp.

Her head lolls back, nearly resting on my shoulder. "Y-yeah."

“Sexy?” I ask, brushing the shell of her ear before abruptly backing away.

“Aiden, I’m not—” Panic drains her face of all color. “I’m not *sexy*.”

“Who the hell told you that?”

“No one...I just—I know.” She throws her hands out as if to say, *just look at me*.

Trust me, doll...all I’ve been doing is looking.

I grab the first thing I see from the rack, a sparkly black number that hits mid-thigh, with a deep V neckline and barely-there straps. “Get your ass behind that curtain and put this on.”

With some reluctance, she accepts the dress but remains frozen in place.

“Ronnie,” I stress, using the less formal version of her name, despite her explicitly telling me not to. *I’m a rebel like that*. “Try it on. If you hate it, we’ll find something else. That’s how this works.”

“Fine.”

With a hand on the small of her back, I escort her to the little changing room. “I can’t wait to see it on.”

She gives me a hard look that has me biting back a laugh as she whips the curtain closed.

“We only have two hours,” I remind her when I collapse onto the pink, pin-tucked couch and see those khakis and black flats still haven’t budged. “Chop chop, Cherry-girl.”

One by one she slips out of her shoes, pitching them against the wall in protest. Her pants follow, puddling at her

feet. Desire heats my blood as I imagine the view just the other side of that thin drape.

“Aiden,” she calls in a high pitch, peeking her head out on one side.

“Need help?” I offer entirely too quickly.

“No...” She shakes her head. “I mean *maybe*, but not from you.”

“What’s the problem?”

She briefly gnaws her lower lip. “I can’t wear a bra with this dress.”

“Okay.” I bend forward, resting my elbows on my knees to hide the bulge tenting my pants. “Then don’t wear one.”

“But you might see my nipples.” Her excuse is a barely audible whisper.

“You’ve seen mine.”

Exasperated, she stomps a bare foot, gripping the curtain tighter to her chest. “I’m not coming out of this closet without a bra.”

“Fine, I’ll get you a *strapless bra*,” I mock whine, making her giggle as I cross the room to press the buzzer.

Just before my finger reaches the button, I discover a neat pile of undergarments that look about her size. “Problem solved,” I say, grabbing a box and tossing it in her direction. “Titty tapes to the rescue.”

Reflex kicks in and she releases the curtain to catch the package, flashing me with a brief glimpse of her white cotton bra and matching panties. Fuck, if her matronly undies don’t have my dick staging a prison break...

“Please tell me you didn’t see anything?” Veronica calls out, her voice strained with embarrassment.

“Nah, you’re good.”

“Thank God.” Her reply comes just as she flings the drape open and steps out, effectively robbing me of my next breath.

“Holy shit, Cherry.” I drop my jaw for added affect while walking over to give her the appreciation she deserves.

“I don’t know,” she hedges, tugging at the hem in a useless attempt to cover more skin.

I take her hand, lift it above her head, and give her a twirl until she’s facing the mirrors. “You don’t know what?” I ask, openly gawking. “Look at that reflection and tell me you don’t see a fucking goddess staring back at you.”

Pulling her lips between her teeth she shakes her head. “No need to be so dramatic, Aiden.”

I grip her left hip in my hand and using my cast to guide the right one, lure her in until her body is flush with mine. Our frantic hearts harmonize, beating as a cohesive unit.

Veronica’s sharp intake of breath when my hard cock meets with her back is all the confirmation needed to discern the proof of my sincerity was delivered. “You are beautiful.” Unable to resist the urge to touch her, I trail a finger the length of her arm. “Nuh-uh,” I say when she attempts to avert her gaze. “Don’t look away.” I lift her chin, forcing her to see what I see. “You are so fucking sexy I can’t think straight.”

She sags into me. “Aiden, I-I feel hot.”

Nipping her lobe, I trail my nose along the bend of her neck. “Because you are.”

“No,” she says, pulling away. “Like—like maybe I have a fever.” She brings the back of a hand to her forehead.

God bless it.

How she’s remained this damn innocent is mystifying. Have none of the men she’s been with ever properly turned the girl on?

“You don’t have a fever, Cherry.” Refusing to add to her discomfort by way of an impromptu lesson on the birds and bees, I guide her toward the couch, urging her to sit while I pour her a glass of ice water. “It’s just hot in here.”

“Thank you.” She cradles the cup, sipping slowly. “I think it’s safe to say they got my sizing right?”

I run my tongue over my upper lip while drinking every inch of her in. “It’s a perfect fit.”

“Can we just pick a few things and get out of here?” She presses the cool glass to her forehead. “I’m sure it’s all fine.”

I crouch before her. “If you don’t want to wear this stuff, we can send it all back and keep looking. Denim shorts, boots, and tank tops would work just as well.”

“But this is what Anika wants?”

I dip my head to the side. “I couldn’t care less what Anika wants, if you’re gonna be uncomfortable.”

It takes less than a minute for her to deliberate. “I think it’s fine... It looks okay, right?” She smooths a hand along the front of her body. “And I don’t feel bad in it. Better than I thought I would, in fact.” She takes another drink of water, studying my reaction over the rim of the glass. “I just started burning up all of a sudden.”

“Fishing for compliments?” I raise both brows before humoring her. “I think I’ve already made it very clear how I feel about you in that dress, but if you’d like to inspect the evidence a little more closely to ensure I’m not lugging a police baton around in my pants, I’ll be happy to oblige.”

Her cheeks visibly warm in answer.

“Ahhh, there it is,” I say, rising from my stooped position. “Your color’s returning.”

“Will you pick out a few things while I go change? And maybe we can have a light lunch before heading back? I kinda wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure,” I say, helping her back to her feet. “Dressing women is my specialty...or was that undressing?” I tap a finger to my temple, playing up the confusion.

“You’re an incorrigible flirt.”

That compliment has me widening my stance. “Just another one of my impressive talents.”

“And do all of your talents have to do with, umm...” Her finger taps the side of her head. “Bedding women?”

“Not all,” I assure her, bringing my cast to my chest in feigned modesty. “I’m a fairly decent musician, and I’m told my vocals aren’t too bad either.”

“Oh that’s right.” Chuckling to herself, she heads off to change.

My eyes remain trained on her cute little ass until she’s disappeared behind the curtain. Only then, do I ring for Penny. “Well take all of it.”

“All of it?” Veronica shrieks from behind the curtain. “There are like thirty dresses on that rack.”

Penny's giggle over her outburst comes in loud through the speaker. Almost immediately following it, she comes rushing through the door, as if she'd been standing just outside of it, waiting to be summoned.

"All of it," I repeat upon her arrival, before helping her wheel everything out to the front.

Penny's still ringing everything up when Veronica materializes at my side, fiddling around in her purse. "I can pay for it."

"You will not." I don't mean to be overbearing, but the mere assumption that I'd insist she get a new wardrobe and make her pay for it herself is insulting. "This was my idea, it's my treat."

"Okay, bu—" She forgets whatever she was about to say, homing in on the pile of silk and lace lingerie. "You are *not* buying me underwear."

"Yeah, I am."

She folds her arms over her chest, assuming a defensive stance that's not threatening in the least. "I don't need new underwear! The ones I have are fine."

"I beg to differ."

She gasps, those pretty blue eyes going wide as saucers. "You *did* see."

I bob my head slightly, guilt prohibiting me from meeting her gaze.

"It doesn't even matter." That statement is clearly more for her benefit than mine. "No one will see that stuff. Please, put it back."

“No can do.” I boop her nose. “Those white cotton atrocities are a disgrace on a beautiful woman such as yourself; it’s no wonder you didn’t think you were sexy.”

Penny snorts then apologizes profusely for her lack of professionalism.

I gaze down at Cherry, who’s earning that nickname as she fumes silently beside me. “We’re gonna have you feeling so sexy Saturday night that by the time our set’s over, you might even believe it.”

CHAPTER 5

VERONICA

“ALL RIGHT, CHERRY,” Aiden says, returning from a trip to the restroom, “We’ve got about thirty minutes until it’s time to head back.” He circles a finger in my direction, signaling he’s onto me. “Enough stalling. You specifically asked to do lunch to discuss something. So, out with it.” His tee rides up, gifting me with a tantalizing peek at his abs as he slips into his side of our booth at Moretti’s, a swanky little café he’s just introduced me to.

I drum my nails on the mosaic tile while my mind whirls with how to best present the insane proposition I haven’t been able to get out of my head since interrupting his and Anika’s conversation this morning.

My grown-up grilled cheese threatens a reappearance as dread and desire work together, wreaking havoc on my faculties. “Promise you won’t get angry?”

Aiden drops the fry that was already halfway to his mouth back onto the plate in front of him, slumping low in his seat. “No good conversation ever started off with that.”

“I’m aware.” I fold my hands together in the middle of the table to keep myself from fidgeting. And I might just be sending up a silent prayer or three; you know, since they’re already in the required position. “I just want you to hear me out...without judgment or jumping to conclusions.”

“I’ll try.” It’s a shoddy promise, at best, which is being made painfully clear by the figurative wall he’s erecting between us as we speak.

I scour the dimly lit dining room to confirm no new customers have slipped in without my notice. But we’re still blessedly alone, apart from Josh, who’s posted at a high top near the entrance, and our waitress, but she’s busily sorting menus and silverware behind the hostess station.

“I think maybe we can help each other out.”

“*You do?*” His eyes narrow in suspicion.

“I heard you and Anika talking this morning,” I say, cowering beneath his unyielding gaze.

That admission has Aiden jolting to an upright position. “You were *spying* on me?”

My throat grows thick while I watch in real-time as the veins of his forearms swell to near bursting. I whip my head side to side in fervent denial of his *mostly* incorrect accusation. “No...I—I just walked in and didn’t want to interrupt. But then I r-realized how deep your conversation was getting and figured there would be no good time to make my presence known, so I knocked.”

“*You didn’t want to interrupt?*” he mocks, leaning forward until our faces are less than a foot apart. Aiden covers both of my hands with his good one, but there’s a notable lack of tenderness in his touch.

“I wasn’t trying to invade your privacy.” Shame festers in my gut, because intentional or not, that’s exactly what I’ve done. It’s no wonder the man’s upset. I’m sure he’s expecting the play by play in tomorrow’s gossip rags. “I-I’m sorry.”

“Of course you are.” He snorts his disapproval. “Well,” he says, his grip tightening in his barely contained frustration, “I’m just *dying* to hear what you think the two of us might do for one another.” Sarcasm oozes from his every word, and the playful demeanor we’d established not thirty minutes ago now feels like a distant memory.

“I could help with the umm—the image thing; and maybe you could in turn assist me with a problem of my own.”

Aiden jerks away as if I’ve just thoroughly insulted him, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet. “How much?” The bite in his tone is blistering.

“Eh—excuse me?”

“Let’s not pussyfoot around, *Miss Vanderbilt*.” He spits my name like a curse while withdrawing an obscene wad of cash. “You’re about to offer to be my pretend girlfriend, am I right?” His scornful laughter could well be the most pitiful sound to ever meet my ears. “You found out what a fucked-up son of a bitch I am and decided to capitalize on it?”

“I—umm.” *Wow, this took a turn fast.* “Aiden, I don’t want your money.”

“No?” His terse jaw steadily ticks while he pins me with an air of betrayal. “Well, what is it, then?”

“There’s this guy...”

“Oh, this is classic.”

The way he’s continually cutting me off in that patronizing tone—and eyeing me with such scorn, like I’m somehow beneath him—consumes what little patience I have left.

“What false transgression have you decided I’m guilty of now?” I cinch my jaw, biting back the tongue-lashing he’s

more than earned. Striking out in anger would do nothing to serve my purpose, but I'm seriously considering risking all for the sheer satisfaction of knocking him down a few pegs.

"You want to *use me* to make him jealous?"

"Wrong again." Frustration stings as it builds behind my eyes. "I would *never* resort to such juvenile schemes. If you'd stop with the stupid guessing games and shut up for two damn minutes, I'd tell you exactly what I have in mind."

My outburst is loud enough to garner a concerned look from Josh, who's already halfway out of his stool when Aiden signals to him to sit back down.

"Please," I say, lowering my voice. "This is humiliating enough without you accusing me of trying to take advantage of you."

"You're right." He inclines his head slightly, indicating for me to continue, then zips his fingers across his lips and locks it before flicking the imaginary key out into the void.

With no clue how long I have before he breaks through that invisible barrier, I dive right in. "My experience with men is...*lacking*." I scoff at my own choice of words, because in truth, it's damn near nonexistent.

"I attended an all-girl schools in New Orleans until I came here for college, and apart from a few cousins, I wasn't exposed to many guys growing up. To make matters worse, my dad didn't allow me or my sisters to date until after finishing high school. But there was this one guy, Brody." Just saying his name fills me with longing. "His father and mine run an oil and gas company together."

I glance up, relieved to find I haven't lost Aiden yet, and continue. "Anyway, he's a few years older than I am, but

always made it a point to seek me out at work functions and such. Then, on the night of my going away party, we finally —”

“Cherry,” he warns. “As fascinating as this all is, I don’t need your life story. Just tell me what it is that you want, already.”

“Experience.”

He stares after me for a beat, and I find myself fighting the impulse to laugh at the thought that I’ve managed to stun the man who previously couldn’t stop talking into silence. “I’m sorry, what?” he finally asks, looking at me as if I’ve suddenly sprouted a second head.

“Brody and I are not even in the same league when it comes to...*intimate matters*. Truth be told, he’s a bit of a ladies’ man—worldly, where I’ve been sheltered. I’d like to throw my hat into the ring, so to speak, but I—I don’t even know where to start. I have nothing to offer a man like that.”

Aiden chokes, holding out a hand to stop me. “Are you asking what I think you’re asking?”

“Probably,” I answer, twirling the end of my hair, hoping to remind him how much he likes it. “I’ll help you clean up your image—with zero emotional strings— and in exchange, you bring me up to snuff.”

Lips pursed, he shakes his head. “I don’t talk in riddles, Cherry. And I refuse to read between any lines. In a world where people are constantly trying to rip me apart, misinterpretation is not a slip-up I can afford. So, none of this *snuff* business. Spell. It. Out.”

“I want you to show me how to please a man.” Humiliation threatens to spill down my cheeks but I force it

back.

“What else?” he pushes. “Do *you* want anything for *yourself*?”

“I want you to t-teach me all the ways a man and woman engage in carnal pleasure. T-to practice until I’ve mastered every skill. Make me into a temptress no man could refuse.” I swallow hard, feeling blood rush to my cheeks. “And I wouldn’t mind experiencing a freaking orgasm compliments of someone other than myself.”

“Hey,” he says, reaching across with a napkin to dry my tears that are now flowing freely. “Look at me.”

“Please don’t make fun of me.”

“Never,” he promises, still touching my face. “But I do have a question, and I need you to be truthful with me.”

I nod, sopping up the rest of my tears with my shirt sleeve.

“Have you ever *been* with a man, Ronnie?” His thumb brushes over my lower lip in a gentle manner that has me yearning for his kiss. “Because while I have no doubt of my ability to fuck you six ways from Sunday and bring you pleasure beyond your wildest fantasies, I know my place. And I’m not the guy to be anyone’s introduction to the act. Especially not a sweet little thing like you.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t much to speak of really...quick and far from earth shattering.” I attempt to cover my own disappointment with a laugh that comes out dry and brittle. “It was a lot of fumbling and bumbling. Pretty sure we skipped all of the bases.” I shake my head. “It was in my back yard, too, during my party, so like...fully clothed and fearing for our lives that my dad would find us.”

“This is so fucked up.” His anger reignites, affecting me on a much deeper level in my vulnerable state.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.” I start gathering my things, preparing to bolt and find my own way back home. I’m ready to slam the door on my dreams and never to see this man again. “I just thought we had chemistry,” I explain, sliding out of the booth. “I felt a spark, and I guess I just assumed it was mutual.”

“It is.” Aiden scrubs a hand over his face then meets my gaze, his own rife with regret. “Please sit back down.”

“But I thou—”

“You thought wrong. Same as I did earlier. My anger wasn’t aimed at you, but the sorry son of a bitch who foiled your first experience.” He waves a hand toward the space I just vacated. “How ’bout we both try to refrain from jumping to conclusions and finish this conversation like adults?”

“Okay,” I say, lowering myself back into my seat. The emotional toll of this day has taken root, draining me to the point of physical exhaustion. I feel like I could curl up on this bench and sleep for hours, if not days.

“If we’re going to do this, we have to do it right.”

I nod, unsure of where he’s going with this but willing to agree to just about anything to put an end to this mortifying encounter.

“Everyone has to believe we’re a couple.” He takes my hand, giving it a shake to be sure I’m paying attention. “*Everyone*. That includes your family. Your friends. Anika. The label. My bandmates.” His thumb moves slowly over my knuckles. “Do you understand?”

“I think so.”

“You have to *know* so, because my career is literally going to be on the line. If it gets out that this was a farce, it may be enough for the label to decide I’m no longer worth the trouble.”

“Okay,” I say, squeezing his fingers. “I am one hundred percent committed to this if you are.”

It goes quiet for a beat, then he snorts before bursting into absolute hysterics.

“What?” If he said something funny, it sailed right over my head.

It takes him a moment of hooting and howling to wind down from his fit. “Nothing. It’s just, I feel like I’m definitely getting the better end of this thing.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “Did I seriously just agree to limitless sex in exchange for a hottie to decorate my arm?”

“Pshh.” I release a little giggle of my own, his infectious energy bringing me back from the brink of collapse. “Orgasms are nothing to balk at, sir. I certainly don’t feel as if I’m getting the shaft at all. In fact, I’m quite excited about it.”

“Oh, you’ll get the shaft, all right.” His heated stare is bordering on indecent. “And I’ll make sure reality surpasses whatever you’re imagining in that pretty head of yours.”

Desire stirs in my core, resulting in the need to clench my thighs together. “I think we’ve learned something here.”

“Yeah?” he asks, poking his tongue around on the inner side of his cheek.

“Just so we’re on the same page, by *we*, I clearly mean *you*.”

That pronouncement earns me a boyish smile. “And what is it exactly that *we* should have taken from this ordeal?”

“To listen when I talk, because I come up with really stellar ideas.”

“Touché.” While pinching his lower lip in his thumb and forefinger, he stares after me with mischief dancing in his big brown eyes. “There is one little detail I’m confused on, however...”

“And what might that be?”

“When I asked what you wanted for yourself, originally, you said, *an* orgasm. But it appears the terms have already changed...in your favor.”

“Ya caught that, huh?” I shrug. “It’s just that you’ve got a lot to teach me, and somehow I don’t think you’re the type of man to leave a girl hanging.”

“Definitely not.”

“Well, then, it sounds to me like we’ve just secured a win/win situation for us both.”

“Yes and no,” he says, his expression growing somber. “It needs to be said that when our time together comes to an end, you’ll have to be the one to take the fall.”

“Of course.” I swallow hard.

“It could get messy. The media are relentless.”

“I’ll be fine.” Refusing to dwell on something that has not yet happened and spend the next few months shrouded in doom, I file his warning away in a mental box labeled *Bridges We Shall Cross When We Get There*. “And you’ll come out smelling like a rose. No worries, *lover*.”

“Lover, eh?”

“It’s what we are now, right?” I lean in closer. “Or would you prefer me calling you *Fucker*?”

CHAPTER 6

AIDEN

“WASSUP, BITCHES!” I stroll into practice with the sexy little piece, who I now refer to as damage control—*in my head, of course*—hooked to my arm. There’s a renewed pep in my step as Operation Grow the Fuck Up officially commences.

“Well, well, well...” Rhett peers up from tuning his guitar, leveling me with a piercing stare that on any other day might make me pee a little, but I’m feeling so cocky not even those laser beams he wields like the disappointed papa I’ve never had can touch me. “Look who decided to show up for work today, guys.”

“Zip it. Lock it. And put whatever ass-chewing you had planned in your skin-tight denim pocket.” I release Veronica’s hand and wrap an arm around her waist, tugging her to my side. “I promise you can all have your way with me later.” I shoot them a flirty little *wank wank*. “But right now, I have something far more important to share with you.”

Lyle plops down on the stool to the right of Rhett, resting his bass between his legs. “Out with it, man.”

“Don’t be nervous,” I whisper when I feel Veronica’s pulse rev up.

My eyes drift from each of my bandmates and finally land on Anika, who's busily preparing drinks behind the bar. "I know y'all met last night. But I'd like to formally introduce you to my main squeeze, my sweet, sweet, Cherry Pie."

"I'm gonna hurl," Nick booms from behind his drum kit. "This motherfucker in love is gonna drive my ass to drinking again."

"You," Anika says, aiming a pair of tongs still gripping a lemon slice in the recovered alcoholic's direction, "don't even joke about that shit."

His throaty chuckle vibrates through the speakers. "You know damn well my wife would hand me my ass on a platter with a little apple shoved in the hole as an added fuck you."

Satisfied that he's not ready to chug a fifth of Jack, she spins in our direction. "You two, really?"

I can't tell if the blank look she's giving us is one of acceptance or displeasure. So, I settle on a simple nod, opting to err on the side of caution until she shows her cards.

"Yep." Ronnie, however, goes all in, playing the part of besotted lover with such remarkable skill that even I forget it's a ruse for half a second. She glances up at me with hearts in her eyes. "After spending the day together, we decided it'd be a shame not to explore an attraction this strong, isn't that right, Sugar Balls?"

"Sugar balls?" Lyle snorts, nearly falling backward with the force of his laughter. "This is the best fucking day of my life."

"Thought we settled on Fucker?" My whisper is delivered directly into her ear in a hushed tone meant only for her. Not

that anyone would be able to hear otherwise with the way Lyle's still carrying on.

The crook of a finger has me bending lower still, so she can give her response the same courtesy. "Changed my mind."

"Thanks for the heads-up," I mumble.

She shrugs a shoulder. "I wanted something cutesy for you, too."

Fan-fuggin-tastic.

"Well," Rhett says, interrupting our little aside. "Get on up here, Sugar Balls and Cherry Pie. We've got a set to run through before the club opens at two."

"It's just Cherry." Veronica nails me with a pair of eyes that dares me to challenge her correction as she slips out of my hold, sauntering toward the stage. "And I'd really prefer it if everyone just called me Ronnie."

I hurry after her. "Does that mean we can shorten mine to Sugar?"

"No."

I huff. "No? That's it? No discussion?"

"Sugar is a girl's nickname." Her brows dart for the ceiling as she gets comfy behind my keyboard. "The balls are necessary to make it masculine."

"She has a point." Nick is all but dying with laughter at my expense. "Girl's gotcha by the balls, bro. Might as well let her name 'em."

"How'd it go at Posh?" Sweet vindication has me biting back a grin when Anika interjects with the not-so-subtle subject change. We may have "made up," but the petty SOB in

me can't help but hope she's experiencing a little of what I went through when she sprung Talia on me.

"Couldn't have gone better." The very recent memory of Cherry in that slip of a dress has me popping a stiffy. "I think you'll be very pleased."

On that note, I hand over the receipt.

The disapproving brunette holds the top of the paper between two fingers, allowing it to unfold, accordion style until it's nearly dragging the floor. "You realize you purchased like a year's worth of clothing for an injury that should be fully healed in eight to twelve weeks?"

"Yep." The look I deliver dares her to say more in front of our guest. Sometimes it's necessary to remind the girl that she works for me and not the other way around. "Just give it to the accountant to settle with the books."

A brisk nod accompanies her response. "Very well." Anika proceeds across the stage to a lone stool set up with a mic. "This is your new station. Obviously, Veronica will need to occupy your old one."

The suggestion that I'd sit anywhere but behind *my* instrument grates. Yeah, I fucked up, but I'll be damned if I'm relegated to a tiny corner like a kid in fucking time-out. "That won't be necessary," I grunt, ambling around to join Cherry on *my* bench.

It takes the girl a moment to catch up and realize I mean for her to scoot over. "You're sitting *with* me?"

"Is that going to be a problem?" I grip her thigh, giving it a gentle caress as I slip in beside her. "Remember how good we were together?" Mention of our intimate performance thaws

my bitter edge, replacing it with a burning desire for the chance to experience that euphoria again.

“Mmm,” she moans, her eyes drifting closed.

I can't help but imagine the ways this innocent little darling will melt for me between the sheets. “Fuuuck...” I hiss into her nape. “Give me your hand.”

Without question, she does. I place it over my throbbing cock. “Lesson one.”

Her fingers skim gingerly over my erection. The barely-there touch is enough to ignite a fire in my blood.

“Feel what you do to me, Cherry? *That's* the power you have over a man...just being near him.”

I swallow her gasp with a dizzying kiss that has her clutching the sides of my shirt for stability. “You can stay,” she murmurs, while our tongues meet in long languid strokes.

Gripping her chin, I draw what's quickly becoming a spectacle for the fools behind us to a close with a final crush of my lips to hers. “You sure?”

“Yes.” Cherry swipes the pad of a thumb over her mouth. “I'd like that very much.”

“Well, I wouldn't.” Anika shoves a finger into her throat, making an obnoxious gagging noise. “Not if the two of you can't cool that shit down by about fifty degrees.”

“What's wrong, Annie?” I taunt, pleased as a pig in shit. “Jealous?”

“Hardly.”

“I think it's kinda cute...” Lyle steeples his hands beneath his chin, fluttering his lashes. “Pussy-whipped looks good on

you, Aid.” He hangs his head, shaking it to himself. “Can’t wait to get home and tell Sammi about this shit.”

“Speaking of pussy-whipped,” our hulking drummer muses, “time to get this show on the road so I can get home to Ray and the kids.” In his next breath, Nick’s hands rise above his head, officially kicking practice off with four hard cracks of his sticks.

The two hours that usually breeze by drag on endlessly. I’m bored out of my fucking mind, missing the feel of those ivories floating beneath my fingertips. With nothing to do but sit stationary and provide backup vocals, I’ve hardly broken a sweat. Not to mention, the way Veronica’s taken to my position so seamlessly is totally blowing my shit.

“Hey.”

Speak of the she-devil.

The warmth of her hand landing on my shoulder has me rotating in my seat. “You did good today, Cherry.”

Her blue eyes brighten beneath my praise. “Thanks.” She drags her palm down my back, rotating it in soothing circles. “You okay?”

“I’m good.”

Her scoff begs to differ. “Everyone’s gone. You just gonna stay in here, mean mugging that broken hand all afternoon?”

I peer up at her through hooded eyes that seem to be the norm whenever she’s in my orbit. “Maybe.”

“I have a better idea.”

“Ready to cash in on that orgasm?” I tease, nipping at the front of her shirt just above her belly ring. “Dang Cherry-

girl...” I bite down on the button fastening her jeans and tug with a growl. “You aren’t wasting any time, are ya?”

“Aiden,” she whines, cradling my head in her hands and tilting until my focus is on her flustered face. “That’s not what I was hinting at.”

“Oh.”

“Are you *pouting*?” Her giggle is a shot of dopamine to my surly mood.

“Definitely not.” My affronted tone is solely for her entertainment. “What’d ya have in mind?”

“Well, I thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better before becoming *intimately acquainted*?”

That threat has me bolting right up out of my seat, staring down at her from a viewpoint where I feel less vulnerable. “Twenty questions wasn’t part of the deal.”

Ronnie jerks back, stunned by my admitted overreaction to her harmless suggestion. “If we’re going to make this believable, don’t you think we should know a little more than how to get each other off?”

It’s a valid point. The last thing we need is to be tripped up by reporters asking basic questions we can’t answer. But while my past is out there for anyone to discover, I avoid revisiting that period in my life at all cost.

The timing couldn’t be better when “Must be Doing Something Right” by Billy Currington drifts from the now-open club down the hall, providing me with the perfect distraction. “Dance with me?”

“Right here?” Her delicate throat moves with a hard swallow as she takes in our less-than-ideal surroundings. “N-

now?”

We’re all alone, in a brightly lit room, and the music is barely louder than a whisper.

“Here,” I confirm, leading her out to center stage. “And now.” The fingers of my left hand ghost along her spine with the sultry beat, while the injured one finds purchase just above her ass.

Cherry links her arms around my neck, her warm gaze penetrating my defenses. I feel truly seen—*exposed*—heart and soul. A deep understanding passes between us. Her easy acceptance envelopes me like the warmest embrace.

“You make my heart beat *so* fast.” Her admission is a heady whisper, issued just before she rests her head against my chest, snuggling in with a contented sigh.

There’s no way she can’t feel my own heart thrashing against my sternum, breaking like waves in a raging sea.

Then old reliable, my music, comes in clutch once again, soothing my tortured soul with her slow and steady tempo. “What do you want to know?” I ask, mindlessly fingering the ends of Veronica’s hair.

She hums to herself while considering her options. “Where are you from?”

“A simple Google search would provide that information.” A laugh bubbles up my throat as I spin us around, burying my lips into the bend of her neck. “Sure you don’t wanna ask something else?” I bite down on her shoulder. “Something *juicier*, maybe?”

“I don’t want to get to know you through a search engine.” Her blue eyes seek mine out. “Because I only want to know as much as you’re comfortable sharing.”

Well, damn. The more time I spend around this girl, the more I find myself wondering what planet she came from. I've never known anyone like her. Never been this tempted to dive headfirst into the freefall just to see where it might lead. But there's a bigger part—the broken part—that's counteracting that reckless impulsivity. This part knows exactly what happens when things seem too good to be true.

"I'm from Austin," I reply, "but don't intend to ever go back. Nashville is home."

"See?" She rewards my answer with a smile so genuine it has me searching for breath. "That wasn't so rough, now, was it?" Ronnie weaves her fingers together at my nape. Her thumbs lightly stroke the sensitive flesh just behind my ears, driving me out of my mind. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was trying to seduce me. "Your turn," she encourages.

"Right." I clear the lump forming in my throat. "You mentioned having sisters earlier?"

"You're a good listener."

I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, allowing my fingers to linger against her temple. "I have no siblings of my own," I volunteer, before she has the chance to ask. "I should probably know about yours." I hesitate briefly. "I mean, I'd like to hear about them... That's something a boyfriend would know, right?"

"Definitely," she says, drawing in a lungful of air as if preparing for some big reveal. "I'm one of seven."

I choke. "Seven?"

"Five girls and two boys," she confirms.

"Damn, Momma and Papa Vanderbilt be gettin' busy." I give her a little dry humpage to really drive it home.

Her fist pounds against my ribs. “Don’t be gross.”

“I’m sorry.” It takes a hell of a lot of effort not to laugh at the disgusted look on her face. “I don’t have parents, either,” I offer, yet again to avoid the question. “Sorry if my candor isn’t appropriate.” With a well-timed wink, I spin her out before reeling her back in.

“It’s okay.” Despite my attempts to keep the conversation light, my sad story is clearly beginning to weigh on her. Ronnie’s expression is a dead ringer for my neighbor the day someone ran over her puppy. “Don’t even worry about it.”

I am no wounded animal. “Cherry?”

“Yeah?”

“The moment you start feeling sorry for me, this conversation’s over.” My warning comes just as the song draws to a close and “Love Lessons” by Tracy Byrd wafts through the speakers.

“Okay,” she agrees with a wobbly smile that quickly morphs into a laugh. “This could be our theme song.” Her snort is anything but ladylike, yet the sound somehow turns me on. Everything about this vexing woman gets me going. “You know, but like *sex lessons*,” she adds, once again reading my mind.

“By the end of this arrangement,” I say, brushing the back of a hand over her rosy cheeks, “you’re going to be able to say the word sex without blushing.” I drag a knuckle down her heated skin before withdrawing my hand completely. “Though I must admit, I will miss this.”

“God willing.”

“Oh, baby. Make no mistake... God has nothing to do with the things I plan to do to you.”

“I think we’re umm...we’re getting s-sidetracked.” Yet again, her innocence rears its head, making it clear I’ll have to break her in slowly. Cherry talks a good game, but this little princess is in no way ready for the full extent of what I can offer.

Why the hell a woman this *pure* would choose a fuck-boy like me to awaken her inner sex-goddess is a complete mystery. My track record is well known. By anyone’s estimation, I’m not worthy of laying a single finger upon this angel on earth. But you best believe I will. After all, I’ve never been one to deny myself the pleasure of indulging in a willing woman. And fuck if I don’t plan on enjoying every second of the privilege she’s bestowed upon me.

“How old are you?” I ask, after giving her a minute to compose herself.

“Twenty...”

“Still a baby.”

“Okay, Paw-paw. What are you, like twenty-five?”

“Twenty-eight,” I correct, “but most days I don’t feel a day over seventeen.”

“You don’t act like it, either.” With that she dips out of my arms and takes off running, leaving me no choice but to give chase.

I catch up with her behind the bar where she’s stooped down low, breathing so heavy I’d be surprised if they couldn’t hear it out in the club. Rather than pull her to her feet, I plop down next to her, leaning against the cabinets. “You’re a shit.” A chuckle wheezes from my chest.

Her shrug isn’t at all a denial. “Sometimes.”

“Tell me about your family, Cherry-girl.” I suddenly have this profound urge to know everything there is to know about my fake girlfriend. “You the youngest, *baby*?” I nudge her with my shoulder.

“I’m second in line, thank you very much.” The snark in her tone has me stifling a grin. “After Victoria, who’s twenty-two.” Her face is alight with genuine affection, giving me the feeling she and this sibling are extremely close.

“Okay, so we’ve got Victoria and Veronica...who’s next?”

“Vanessa’s eighteen.” She starts ticking them off on her fingers. “Valerie is seventeen, and my *baby* sister is thirteen. Her name’s Veda.”

“Why the obsession with V-names?”

Her eye roll could give Michelle Tanner a run for her money. “Right? My parents are so ridiculous.” She sighs. “My dad’s name is Victor, so they chose names for all of the girls that also began with the letter V.” Her head shakes as she plucks at a stray thread on her boot. “You know, because having a slew of kids in this day and age didn’t draw enough attention to us. They just had to go and make us weirder.”

It warms me to know that she grew up in a world where something so silly is such a big deal. It’s the kind of childhood kids like me spend their formative years dreaming of.

“And the boys?”

“Are twins...Owen and Oliver just turned three a few weeks ago.” I thought her face brightened before, but I swear she’s glowing at the mention of her little brothers. “And they are positively feral.”

As all boys should be. “Let me guess... Your mom’s name is Ophelia.”

“Ophelia?” she snarls. “*That’s* your guess?”

“Uhhh...” I rack my brain for another O name. “Olga?”

“Olivia!” Her indignation suggests that was the obvious choice.

“Of course. Why didn’t I think of that first?”

“No clue.” She brings a hand to rest on my bent knee and smiles over at me as if truly puzzled by my guesses.

The way she just casually touches me, without want for anything more, is a comfort I didn’t know was missing from my life. Every female, for as long as I can remember—with the exception of Anika and the guys’ wives, who are like sisters—who’ve put their hands on me have done so with an ulterior motive. “You’re all right, Cherry.”

“Is that your way of saying you like me, Sugar Balls?”

“Annnnd you just ruined our moment.”

“Impossible,” she argues. “We don’t have moments, remember? Strictly dickly.”

I shake my head at her ridiculousness. “Who knows? Maybe when I’m through wearing that pussy out, and you get your guy, and my reputation is restored, we’ll walk away friends.”

“Awwww.” Her lashes imitate a hummingbird’s wings. “You *do* like me.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” I trace a finger over the back of her hand where it still sits comfortably on my knee. “I said who knows? Meaning the jury’s still out.”

“Uh-huh.” The look she gives me is far too perceptive. “It’s okay...I like you too, rock star.”

“Your turn.” I cough in attempt to cover my discomfort.
“Ask me something.”

Veronica slumps back, seeing right through me. The loss of her touch has me fighting a frown to rival the one she’s wearing. “Desperate to change the subject, much?”

“That your question?”

“No.”

Nausea stirs my gut as I anticipate my turn in the hot seat. There isn’t much I loathe more than reliving my past. Other than exchanging niceties with pretty girls, apparently. “Let me have it, Cherry, before I withdraw the offer.”

“I’m thinking,” she snaps, looking me over, her baby blues narrowed. It’s fascinating to watch—the way her expression changes by the second. “I’ve got it,” she finally says, wearing a contented smile.

“Please don’t ever try your hand at gambling.”

“What? Why?”

“I have never seen anyone think with every muscle in their face.”

She stabs a bony elbow into my ribcage.

“Ouch!” I laugh. “What was that for? That’s some sound advice I just gave you. You should be thanking me.”

“I *should* ask one of the ones I vetoed as payback for making fun of me.”

Veronica’s face contorts in my mind as I recall the wide range of frowns I just observed all in the span of about thirty seconds. “Please don’t.”

“You’re lucky I’m nice.”

“I am,” I quickly agree, resorting to flattery in the hope she’ll show a little mercy on me.

“What was the best part of your day?”

“Really?” Stunned, I reach out and set that lower lip that’s yet again trapped between her teeth free.

She bobs her head. “I have much more interest in the man who’s sitting beside me than the one you’ve clearly left behind.”

“Fuck me,” I grunt. If I don’t watch myself, I just might develop an attachment to this chick.

“Huh?”

“Didn’t mean to say that out loud.” I laugh to myself, letting the events of the day replay in my head. “The granny panties,” I say. “Final answer.”

“What are you talking about?”

I grip her chin, angling her head just right. “That was the best part of my day.” I press my lips lightly to hers, gliding the tip of my tongue along the seam. “Seeing you in those ancient white cotton relics.” My hold tightens when she shrieks, attempting to flee in feigned indignation. I wait until she stops fighting to lock eyes with hers. “Right to the spank bank, Cherry.”

CHAPTER 7

VERONICA

“OH JEEZ.” Kinzy doesn’t make it all the way into our dorm before stopping dead in her tracks. “That is *not* what you’re wearing.”

“Are you asking or telling me?” I spin back toward the full-length mirror, examining the skinny jeans and form-fitting blouse that took nearly three hours to settle on.

“Telling.” She hangs her purse and apron from DiMaggio’s pizza on their designated hooks, kicking the door shut behind her. “Thank God I got off work in time to remedy this disaster before you left.” The enormous silver hoops in her ears sway with each disheartened shake of her head. “What are we going to do with you, Ronnie?”

I fling my arms out in resignation, collapsing on my bed that’s littered with the other ten outfits that didn’t make the cut. “Well, you can start with dressing me, I guess.”

“What you have on is *cute*,” she says, showing mild concern for my feelings. “For class...or you know, *church*.”

If I showed up to mass in this, my grandmother would have heart failure. “It’s the tightest thing I own. I thought it showcased the girls well.”

“Your aim is not to tease, my friend.” She rifles through her closet, retrieving a few slinky pieces of fabric. “That.” She

flits her eyes back in my direction. “Says look but don’t touch. We’re aiming for something a little more...*inviting*.”

“Okay...” I turn to my side and prop my head up on a bent elbow, both eager and afraid to see what she deems *dirty tutoring session* appropriate.

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t bring home all that shit he bought for you yesterday.” Her mossy irises meet mine out of the corner of her eyes. “I’m sure there was plenty suitable in there.”

“You know why,” I say. “It didn’t feel right. Those clothes were purchased for performances, not dates. He gave the receipt to Anika right in front of me to write them off as a business expense.”

“Aiden told you to take them with you. It’s not like the IRS is going to show up banging on our door because you wore them out.”

I dismiss her mini tirade with a bit of logic. “I don’t have room for any more clothes in this tiny dorm anyway.”

“Oh, sis,” my bestie says, running a finger through my color-coded wardrobe. “We could have made space, *easily*. No one needs eight pairs of khaki pants.”

I fling a pillow at her head. “Stop making fun and give me options.”

“This could be cute,” she says holding out a black wrap dress with a deep V neckline that ties around the waist and looks like it’d barely cover my ass. “Easy access to the taytays.” Her brows waggle. “Jeremiah loved it when I wore it on our date a few weeks ago.”

“I bet he did. Dude could probably see your cooter cat without you even needing to bend over.”

Her jaw comes unhinged. “Now who’s being mean, hooker face?”

I snap a finger and scramble across the bed, perching at the foot when I notice how quickly time has started slipping away from me. “Too short.” I wave a dismissive hand through the air. “What else ya got?”

“How ’bout this?” Kinzy dangles a black corset top from her pointer fingers, while shimmying it against her body. “You could pair it with my black leather skirt. That sucker’s tight, but long enough that he wouldn’t be able to just slip anything in there by surprise.”

“Guys do that?” Though, admittedly I don’t know him all that well, I can’t imagine Aiden ever doing such a thing. The guy wouldn’t even dance with me without explicit consent. But I am suddenly worried about the company my friend may be keeping.

“Well, I mean no... not really. Depends on your relationship, ya know?” She walks over and sets the outfit next to me. “You did ask your new boyfriend to give you sex lessons, so set the tone on how far you wanna go with your outfit.”

“I guess I did, didn’t I?” I draw in a deep breath to calm the guilt festering before stripping out of my “church” clothes.

Lying is not my strong suit.

Allowing my bestie, who I share literally everything with, to believe this relationship is the real deal when it’s no more than a business arrangement is harder than I thought. Here we are, one day in, and I’ve almost broken my promise to Aiden by blabbing about tonight’s tutoring session.

Rather than cover with another lie, I decided to stick as close to the truth as possible. So, I told her I confessed my lack of experience to Aiden and asked if he'd be up to giving me lessons. Because of this, she's now referring to our dates as tutoring sessions.

I wonder if she'd be nearly as excited for me if she knew that I was using my body transactionally and am every bit the hooker face she's teasingly called me for years.

Oh, who am I kidding? It's Kinzy. She'd be bursting with pride that she'd finally corrupted me.

“Hold. The. Fuck. Up.” My nosey friend's gaze homes in on my new panties. “Where'd the butt floss come from?” She gets right up in my personal space, examining the matching balconette bra at a distance that's a little too close for my comfort.

“Aiden insisted on them,” I say, rushing to dress, covering the strips of satin and lace so she'll stop checking me out. “He wouldn't let me leave these at the club.”

“Wow.” Still virtually on top of me, my friend reaches out to straighten the twisted straps on the top she let me borrow. “I always knew there was a hottie under all that cotton and cashmere...” Kinzy brushes my hair back with her fingers, grips me by the shoulders, and turns me toward the mirror. “But damn,” she purrs. “You are a fucking knockout.”

“I feel naked.” But also, sexy. And powerful. And free.

And like I'm going to get in trouble. My parents would *kill me* if they ever saw me in something so revealing.

My personal stylist holds out a finger then rushes back to her closet, returning with a pair of knee-high boots. “These should take care of that.”

I accept them with a laugh. “Somehow I doubt covering the lower half of my legs is going to make much of a difference.”

“It will,” she assures me. “If nothing else, they’ll keep your calves warm. Just put them on your feet before you’re late for your deflowering.”

“Right. Okay...” While I’m zipping them up, my phone buzzes with a text from Aiden.

Sugar Balls: I’m here. Right outside your building. I wanted to pick you up at your door and whisk you away in grand style, but they won’t let me in since I don’t live here.

Me: Yeah, they’re sticklers about that stuff. I’ll be down soon. But you might not recognize me.

Sugar Balls: Tell me you didn’t cut your hair.

Me: No. LOL But Kinzy dressed me.

Sugar Balls: Can’t wait to undress you...

“What’s with the dopey smile?”

“He’s here,” I squeak, stuffing the phone into the inside pocket of my clutch and accepting the procured jacket from her hands. “Wish me orgasms.”

“To hell with orgasms. I’ll be wishing you leave blood stains on that fine mofo’s sheets.”

“You’re the worst.”

“Liar face. I’m the best.” Kinzy kisses my cheek then swats me on the ass. “Make mama proud.”

As promised, my *tutor* is leaning against the brick just behind the door, looking sexier than any man should in camel joggers and a retro MTV hoody. A backward cap and aviators offer just enough of a disguise to ensure no one would recognize him from any other dude around campus.

A plume of smoke into the frigid night air reveals a deep exhale as he pushes off from that wall with a look in his eye that's downright predatory. "Holy fuck."

The appreciation in his gaze makes it very apparent that I should have started taking my bestie's advice long ago. In fact, it may be time for a girl's shopping trip to update my entire wardrobe if the result is being devoured like this. "I take it you approve?"

"Only because you're coming home with me." His tone is extra gravely and, dare I say, a tad possessive. "Don't wear this to school." Aiden grips either side of my leather jacket, awkwardly due to the limited use of his left hand, wrestling it closed. "You look downright fuckable, Cherry."

Heat floods my neck and face, instantly twisting his lips into a wry grin. Aiden takes an odd amount of satisfaction from making me blush. I mean, let's face it, it's not like the feat is all that difficult to achieve. But by the cocky confidence he exudes each and every time, you'd swear he just accomplished some monumental task.

"That's the idea, right?" There's a discernible tremor in my voice I hope he attributes to the cold.

"Don't be nervous, doll." Aiden slings an arm around my shoulders, prodding me toward the car that's idling near the curb. "We're gonna start off real slow."

I sag with relief as the tension I've been carrying begins to wane.

"I'm not a monster." Aiden flings the door open, ushering me inside. "By the time I sink into that tight little pussy," he continues, "there won't be an ounce of hesitation. Not an inkling of fear."

My gasp is rewarded with a chuckle as he climbs in behind me.

"My first goal is to make you completely comfortable with your own body, *and mine...*" He grips my thigh, stroking his pinky back and forth along my bare skin. "I won't fuck you till you're aching for my cock."

His words render me speechless. If anyone else had said that to me, I'd either bust out laughing or run away in fear. But with Aiden, it's somehow sweet and even a little romantic. "Th-thank you," I rasp.

"Not yet." He winks. "I have done nothing to warrant your gratitude. But rest assured, milady, I aim to earn it in a few short minutes."

"And how, pray tell, do you plan to do that?"

His tongue moves at a snail's pace over his lower lip. "By delivering your first orgasm, *compliments of someone who is not yourself.*"

My eyes dart to Josh, a bit peeved that Aiden would talk so openly with him mere feet away.

"You'll get used to his presence. After a while, you'll forget he's even there."

My eyes widen. "He won't be—"

“In the apartment? No,” Aiden answers. “But as my driver, bodyguard, and friend...he will be lurking in the background when we’re any place else.” He cups my neck, stroking my nape. “And I have no plans to curb my tongue or to keep my hands off you.”

“No...”

“So, relax,” he says, reaching for my seatbelt and popping the release button. “Think of him like a little puppy napping in the distance.”

The man in question whips around in his seat, proving he’s been eavesdropping the entire time. “A Pitbull,” he corrects, glaring at his boss and mumbling something about a puppy. “These guns are lethal.”

I can’t hide my amusement as I slither across the leather seat, snickering along the way.

“Easy boy.” Still shaking his head at Josh, Aiden takes my hand, assisting me down. “I’ll give you a call when I’m ready to bring my girl home.”

“Ten-four.” Josh brings two fingers to his forehead before cutting them through the air in a salute. “Go easy on the girl, Aid,” he tosses in as my feet land on the concrete and the door slams shut.

“He got a girlfriend?”

Aiden halts, midstride. “Why? You interested?”

“No.” His affronted expression has me grinning like a loon. “But I was thinking maybe next time I could bring Kinzy along to keep him occupied. She was sizing him up at the piano bar.”

He grunts, removing his ball cap as we step through the double doors and finger combing his hair. “Maybe,” he finally says. “When you come over and he’s at his place. Anywhere else, he’ll be on the clock.”

“Right.”

“Please stop fretting. I promise you, he’s very accustomed to ignoring me and my guests.”

Well, that doesn’t make me feel very special. Not that I’d dream of making that public knowledge, considering the nature of our arrangement.

Actually, it’s probably good to hear it just before engaging in whatever he’s got planned for us tonight, to keep a little perspective. No matter how combustible we might be together, Brock is the goal. Aiden’s just the means to an end.

Electricity hums between us during the silent ride up to the penthouse.

“This floor can only be accessed by key.” Aiden flips the little card he scanned upon entering the elevator between his fingers before slipping it into his back pocket, just as the doors open into what I believe is his apartment.

Band memorabilia and platinum record plaques line the walls, supporting my assumption. Everything is white, from the marble floors to the walls to the ceiling. The open floorplan affords a clear view of a chef-grade kitchen with white granite and cabinetry. While breathtaking, it lacks the warmth of the home I grew up in. A home that was always littered with its many occupants’ belongings. Even the cluttered room Kinzy and I share feels more welcoming. There are no photos that I can see, barring a few framed magazine covers. No shoes littering the entryway. Everything looks

staged and immaculately kempt. Not what I expected from a bachelor. Especially one as reckless as Aiden Addams.

I'm no stranger to lavish homes, having grown up in the prestigious Garden District of New Orleans. But this is grandeur on an entirely different level. "You have this huge place all to yourself?"

"I live here with Anika." *Well, that explains the apparent OCD.*

"Yikes."

His lips meet my ear, sending a shiver along my spine. "She's out with her new girlfriend."

"Oh, thank God."

"You got a problem with my manager?"

"N-no." Me and my big freaking mouth. "She just scares me a little." I pinch my fingers together, leaving only a hairsbreadth between them. "I like her just fine."

"She's a raging cunt," he states flatly. "And you're a liar."

I lash my head in his direction, stunned by his brazen but accurate depiction of the woman in question. "For *best friends*, you two certainly have low opinions of each other."

"Not really. Come on—" With the dip of his head, he leads me into what should be a dining room but is instead occupied by a massive grand piano. "We just keep shit honest."

"That's nice," I say, forgetting what it is we were talking about as I'm drawn to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking downtown. "This is incredible."

"It's my favorite view of any room in the apartment." Aiden steps up behind me, wrapping his good arm around my

waist and resting his chin on the top of my head. “Got plans for your pussy and that piano,” he proclaims as casually, as if he were commenting on the weather.

I choke on my own saliva, spinning in his hold. “You have quite a mouth.”

His grin is positively salacious. “It facilitates my many oral talents.”

“You have a beautiful voice,” I agree, goading him. “And you’re a remarkable kisser.”

“I do enjoy this mouth,” he croons, ghosting his whisper-soft lips across my own. “But I can’t wait to become intimately acquainted with these lips.” The warmth of his breathy exhale intoxicates me as he drags a knuckle between my breasts, down my torso, and lower still, all the way to my sex. “To taste your arousal.” His eyes close and he draws a shaky breath. “Inhale your unique scent.”

“Aiden,” I moan, pressing into his unmoving hand.

“Not tonight, Cherry.”

Disappointment pricks my eyes as he withdraws. “Aiden, I-I—”

“Shh,” he says, scooping me into his arms and depositing me on the glossy lid of the piano. “I intend to take very good care of you.”

His words are a lewd promise as he buries the fingers of his left hand in my hair, gripping it tightly in a fist and tilting my head to expose my neck.

“Jesus,” I moan when his tongue grazes along the column of my throat. My entire body breaks out in gooseflesh.

“Aiden,” he corrects. The lone word is a gruff reprimand that catches me off-guard.

“Huh?” My brain is already reduced to mush.

“If you’re gonna call out for anyone, you call out for me.” His teeth enter the mix, and he nips and licks a path along my collarbone. “You give a man credit,” he says, correcting my blunder. “Do you want to hear me calling out for some other chick when we’re fucking?”

“N-no.” One-word answers are all I can manage as he lights me on fire.

“There’s no reward quite like the sound of your name uttered in reverence from a lover’s lips.” He peppers open-mouthed kisses along my shoulder before locking eyes with mine as he lowers the spaghetti straps of my top. “Ever had a man suck your tits?”

“No.” My nipples harden into firm little buds at the mere thought of him putting his mouth on me...*there*. “Never.”

“You are too fuckin’ sweet,” he mutters. “Mind if I do the honors?”

“Please.”

With haste, he reaches around, lowering the zipper at my back while feasting upon the bend of my neck.

“Yes,” I hiss, arching into him as he discards my top, flinging it clean across the room.

Aiden delves right in, his warm breath a gentle caress over my pebbled peaks that are straining against the thin scrap of fabric masquerading as a bra. Then his teeth clamp down and he gives a light tug, while flitting his tongue over my nipple.

“Aiden,” I yelp, using two fists full of his unruly hair like reins as I rock into him.

“That’s it, baby, roll that pussy just like that.”

My skirt has somehow migrated all the way up around my waist, and dear God, I’m dry humping this man...

Garbled nonsense spills from my lips when he brushes a thumb over my right breast. The friction the lace barrier provides, coupled with the touch of his callused hand, makes the sensation nearly too much to bear.

“So responsive,” he commends before getting right back to work, lapping and nipping and fingering my nipples.

Desire pulses through me, collecting in my core. “Oh my G—”

“Cherry,” he warns, withdrawing his mouth from my breast.

“Aiden...” Moaning his name, I arch into his face, all but forcing my breasts back to his mouth. “Please d-don’t stop.”

His hand trails around to my back, and in one quick flick of his wrist my bra hangs free, quickly joining that discarded top.

“You’re perfect.” Aiden’s lids lower as he stares at my breasts, which are red and swollen and marked by his touch. His eyes take on a feral hunger. “Fucking exquisite.”

My dignity takes a back seat to this compelling need I have for his lips.

“Will you, k-kiss me?”

“I am kissing you,” he teases, swirling his tongue around my areola.

“On the lips.” Overwhelmed with so many sensations, I don’t know if I want to burst into tears or explode from overstimulation.

“Already told you... You’re not ready for that yet, Cherry-girl.”

“On the mouth,” I growl, twisting both hands into his sweatshirt and pulling him close. My need for the emotional fulfillment that can only come from his kiss is a kink in our plan to keep things casual that I’ll have to examine later. “Please.”

Approval rumbles deep in his chest just before his lips crash against mine. It’s a punishing reunion where lust and longing collide, reducing us to savages. We’re all hands and tongues and teeth. Breathily whimpers and uninhibited moans echo in the too-pristine space. There’s no thought involved. No skill required. We’re stripped down, acting on instinct alone.

I claw his chest, grappling at his hoodie until he breaks away to shuck out of it, presenting me with a tantalizing view of taut muscles that ripple with his every labored breath. I scale his toned abdomen, running my fingers over the dips and ridges of a body that looks as if it’s been carved from stone. I trail my fingers through the sweat glistening on his pecs before bringing the slick digits to pluck at the rods impaling the dusky brown nipples that had me transfixed from the moment I first saw them.

“Fuuck.” Aiden’s entire body spasms when I take his nipple into my mouth, gently fluttering my tongue over the piercing to test his reaction. His heartbeat grows louder, his breathing faster. And I adjust accordingly.

His distinctive scent engulfs me, a combination of soap and cologne, and a hint of mint tinged in bourbon. The taste of

his salty skin is delectable, and I'm completely lost to this man when a firm tug to my hair puts an end to my fun.

"You have to stop, Cherry."

My stomach drops and I jerk back. "Was I—did I hurt you?"

His chuckle is weighted in sexual frustration. "No." His head shakes. "You're a quick study."

My chest heaves as I pant for breath. "Then what's wrong?"

"Nothing," he says, bringing my hand to his very hard penis. "You're too good, Cherry." He flattens his palms on the piano, resting his head on my chest. "Tonight's lesson is about you, and in order for me to maintain some kind of control, I'm gonna need you to knock that shit off."

"Okay," I rasp, smoothing my hands over his back and into his unruly hair. "But could you maybe...keep going?"

His head pops up, his hungry eyes blazing with desire. "Oh, I intend to," he promises, brushing a thumb over my pert nipple. "Was just getting my bearings."

"Your hands feel so much better than my own." Apparently getting my breasts suckled robs me of any decorum.

"That's because we're not asexual beings, love." His response lacks the mockery I feared the second the statement left my lips. "We were made for this. Built for breeding. It's the most basic instinct we, as humans, possess."

I nod, grinding into the piano top to assuage some of the pressure. "Will you touch me?"

Dazzling white teeth clamp down on his lower lip as he assesses my position. “Where?” he asks, though I’m positive he already knows. “Show me.”

“Right here.” I trail two fingers along my inner thigh, nearly convulsing when they meet my swollen clit.

His gaze darkens. “That’s not part of today’s lesson,” he taunts, slowly running the entirety of his tongue over one of my nipples.

Frustrated tears well in my eyes. “Aiden—I-I need...”

“To come?” he supplies, hitching a brow.

“Yes,” I rasp, circling the pads of my own fingers over that bundle of nerves without a single care for my own humility. I have never *needed* relief as I do right now. Like I might actually die without it.

“Tell ya what... It looks like you know what you’re doing.” He scrapes his lip through his teeth. “Why don’t you get yourself off?” Aiden’s hungry gaze locks into mine. “Show me how you do it, Cherry. Let me watch you fall apart.”

CHAPTER 8

“ON ONE CONDITION...”

The little minx arches a brow while continuing to roll the pads of her fingers over her clit at a slow and steady pace. Her head tips back as a delicate whimper drifts from her lips, sending a rush of blood straight to my dick so fast my head swims. “I want to see you too.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to refuse her bold request—to show her who’s boss. But the sight of Cherry trussed-up on that piano, tits out, flushed and heaving, legs spread wide and fingers barely visible behind her lace panties... Fuck if it doesn’t have me stripping down and adding my shoes and clothes to the pile.

“Cat got your tongue?” I ask when I look back in her direction to find she’s gone still as a statue. If I couldn’t hear her heart pounding, I’d be tempted to check for a pulse. “You act like you’ve never seen a dick before.”

The flush of crimson to her cheeks confirms what was only meant as an offhand remark to be the sad, sad truth.

A truth that boils my blood. Because who the hell fucks a virgin so carelessly? Not only was she a virgin, but a woman with little to no experience with men whatsoever. “How is that even possible?”

She winces at the fury I'm unable to keep hidden from my tone. "I told you we never got fully unclothed. I—it was dark, and—"

"It shouldn't have been like that," I say, stepping closer, my strangled voice bearing the weight of an apology that isn't mine to give. "You deserved better." I reach forward, tweaking both of her nipples to get her going again. There's a lecture brewing in my head on the importance of demanding her body be treated like the temple it is. But in her current state of arousal, I doubt she'd absorb a word of it.

"You're, umm—" Her eyes, which haven't left my dick, cloud over with a lusty fog. The swallow that accompanies her hooded gaze is audible. "R-rather large?"

"Haven't had any complaints," I say, lightly stroking my shaft as pressure continues to mount. "Pull those panties to the side, baby."

"I mean compared to others. This is only the second I've seen in person. Are they usually so...?" Lost for words, Veronica trails off, gesturing with her hands an exaggerated length and girth that no man could ever aspire to.

Apparently, we're going to dissect my dick before going any further.

"I'm *above average*." It's a weird thing to boast about, even for a cocky son of a bitch like me. I've never had to sing my own praises, because the women I've been with have done a great job of singing them for me.

"And pierced." She bites down on her lower lip and hisses. "That had to have hurt..."

"You have no clue..." I cringe just thinking about that barbaric experience. "It's called an apadravya. You can Google

it when you get home.”

“Can I touch it?”

My dick rises in support of her suggestion. “Not today,” I groan, impressed as hell by my own restraint. I don’t often refuse my big guy. “We’ll have a session completely devoted to my cock soon enough.”

Her head bobs, but there’s disappointment etched in the frown lines on her face.

“The panties.” My gaze narrows on the offensive scrap of material, bringing her attention back to where it belongs. “Get rid of them or I will.”

Veronica inhales a shaky breath, and her blush deepens. “I’d rather you do it.”

Pride swells in my chest at how far my prize pupil’s come already. I dip my head in agreement then hook my pointer into the front panel of lace and shred through that bitch with one quick tug.

“Oh, Cherry... You’re soaked for me.”

A shuddering, breathy moan wheezes from deep in her chest.

“Dip your fingers inside; get ’em nice and wet.”

The sight of her own special blend coating her digits has me fighting the urge to fall to my fucking knees and drink every drop of that sweet nectar straight from the tap.

“Just like that, baby.” Fisting my cock, I pump up and down at a tempo to match hers. “Now bring it to your chest,” I encourage, “and swirl it around your nipples. Imagine it’s my tongue.”

“Aiden...” She squeaks my name while pinching and pulling, while rocking and writhing into the wood beneath her.

A surge of molten lava shoots through my veins. “Do the same with your other hand, but I want you to bring that one to your clit.”

“I’m gonna come,” she whimpers, increasing her speed as she runs back and forth to sink inside and gather more wetness.

My breaths come harder and faster, my body shaking with the need for release. “Pinch your clit, Cherry.” The order is short and clipped and bordering on desperate.

The hand on her chest lowers to join the other. My cock swells to near bursting at the sight of her fingers thrusting in and out of her pussy, the sound of her wetness, and the smell of her arousal.

“Give it to me, baby.” I grip the head of my dick in a tight fist, staving off my own release until she’s found hers.

“Oh, God...oh, God...oh, oh, God,” she moans, her entire body convulsing as her pleasure reaches its peak.

“Cherry...” I warn, with just enough edge to remind her of our earlier discussion while being careful not to take her out of the moment.

“Aiden!” My name rips from her chest as she falls apart, her head thrown back, her fingers vibrating as they continue to piston into her.

As she begins her descent, I release the pressure from the tip of my cock and stagger forward. “Lay back, Cherry,” I grunt, mounting the wood bench in a split-second decision to discharge on her stomach.

“Fuck!” Relief comes hard and fast in three spurts, but I take no time to bask in the glow because my girl’s still squirming through the aftershocks of her own release.

I climb up onto the piano, straddling Cherry’s legs, and run a hand through my come, spreading it up her chest and massaging it over her tits, paying close attention to the rosy buds at their centers.

Veronica flattens her feet on the piano and arches into me, thrusting her greedy pussy against my cock.

“Gonna give me another one, sweet girl?” I lower my body, capturing her mouth with my own.

Her fingers tangle into my hair while her tongue delves mercilessly into my mouth. “You’re gonna take it.” Her words are garbled against our clashing lips. “You promised an orgasm I didn’t have to work for.”

“So I did,” I confirm, bracing my weight on the arm of my injured hand. Though I don’t know how much success I’ll have getting her there on nipple play alone, as originally intended, seeing how she’s already taken the edge off.

With a final nip and tug of her lower lip, I bring my mouth to her breasts and suck them clean, my taste buds bursting with the tang of our combined flavors.

“Holy shit...did you ju—”

“Shhh,” I say bringing my left hand to fist my cock. With measured strokes, I glide the barbell over her throbbing clit. The cool metal on her heated flesh has her whipping her head side to side, while her nails score my back.

Hers is the first cunt to ever graze my dick without a protective barrier, and despite just having gotten off, the urge to sink into that warmth has my cock hardening once more

between us. The sight of her pleasure—her eyes rolling back, teeth chattering—it makes every excruciating moment of pain in getting that piercing worth it.

When her trembling progresses to outright convulsions, I know she's on the cusp of plunging over the edge. Revoking my earlier decision to keep tonight's lesson above the belt, I thrust two digits into her heat, biting down on her nipple.

It's at that moment, while Cherry's thrashing beneath me, screaming my praises as she comes, my fingers pressed deep in her greedy cunt, that we're interrupted.

“Oh, for fuck's sake!”

Veronica's entire body goes rigid at the sound of my manager's intrusion. “Shhh,” I whisper against her sweaty forehead. “It's okay.”

“It's the farthest thing from okay,” Anika snaps.

I wait for the sound of her heels to signal her departure, but it never comes. I whip my head around to find Annie fuming and Talia frozen in a state of shock. “You two gonna stand there staring at the crack of my ass all night?”

“You're a fucking embarrassment.”

With that insult, I climb down from the piano, careful to adjust Cherry's skirt along the way to conceal her business.

My girl's hands immediately move to cover her tits.

Satisfied that she's properly shielded from prying eyes, I turn to confront the interlopers, my dick bobbing like a disappointed finger wagging in their direction. “You knew I had company.” I issue that statement as I step back into my pants, not bothering with the underwear.

“And you knew I might be bringing someone home.” Anika diverts her gaze, a move that’s entirely for Talia’s benefit, considering how often I stroll around the house in the buff.

“Oh, please,” I snarl. “My dick’s nothing you haven’t seen before.”

Talia’s eyes widen, but she remains mute as she surveys our exchange.

“So, do what you always do.” I wave a dismissive hand in the direction of her room, trying to give her the brush off. “And go about your business.”

“We need to establish some house rules.” Annie’s jaw clenches. “I have a girlfriend now. This is not okay.”

I scoop up Ronnie’s bra and top and walk them over to her. “Sounds like an Anika problem to me.” I shrug. “You should probably set a better example for your guest, too.” I huff a disappointed breath. “I’d have never pulled a stunt like this and made Talia feel so out of place in our home.”

“Yeah, okay...” Anika’s lips pucker. “And anyway, never in a million years would you walk in on me devouring her out in the open on our fucking piano.”

“First of all, that would be fucked up.” *Nobody better be doing the nasty on this thing unless I’m a prime participant.*

She throws her hands out in defeat. “And this isn’t?”

“It’s *my* piano.”

“And *our* house!”

“What do you want from me, Annie? You told me to get a girlfriend, and I did. I feel like you’re just looking for shit to bitch about at this point.”

“Hey,” Talia squeaks, finally remembering her voice. “It’s really okay.” Her eyes plead with Anika to drop it. “I didn’t mean to cause all this commotion. It was just unexpected.”

“You’re forgiven,” I say, spinning around to return to my guest when Anika roars like a rabid animal.

“It’s not fine. It’s not okay. And you don’t need to forgive her because she didn’t do anything wrong.” My best friend grabs two fists full of her own hair and tugs. “Part of growing up, *Aiden*, is realizing you can’t just fuck wherever the hell you want.”

“Again,” I say with as much patience as I can muster, “My house. *My* piano.”

“Um, eh—excuse me,” Veronica says, popping up to a sitting position now that her tits are picked back up. “I just wanted to say that we, ummm... We didn’t, you know, *have sex*.”

A hush falls over the room. When it becomes clear we’re all waiting for her to make her point, she continues. “There are doors to this room, right?”

“Yeah, but we shouldn’t—” I start to argue, but am swiftly cut off by Ronnie and the new lady balls I’ve just instilled in her.

“Aiden, we *should* respect that you two share this home. They don’t want to walk in on us anymore than we would want to walk in on them.”

“See,” I say, “that wouldn’t bother me in the least.”

“Well, it would bother me. And what just happened here, right now, *is* bothering me.” My fake girlfriend stares at her crossed ankles, swinging them in a nervous gesture. “I am *mortified*, Aiden.”

“Ah, fuck,” I groan when her lips start to tremble and a plump tear drips from her eye. “Cherry-girl...” I close the short distance that separates us and grip her chin, kissing it away. “We can use the doors if it means that much to you, just don’t cry.”

“Well, I’m glad we got that settled.” Anika gives me one final glaring look as she takes Talia’s hand. “Now we’re gonna go fool around in my room, because we’re civilized, unlike *someone* I know.”

“Have fun, girls.” I twiddle my fingers in their direction, barely resisting the urge to flip Annie the bird. But something tells me my date would not approve.

Ronnie hugs her arms to her chest. “Well, that was awful.”

“Two orgasms in one night?” I scoff. “I’d say that was pretty fucking epic, *Ms. Vanderbilt*.”

“That part *was* amazing,” she agrees. “But I think you know I’m talking about what happened after.”

The miserable look she’s wearing has me searching for some way to lift her spirits. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” She gazes up at me, curiously.

“What was the best part of your day?”

The sound of her giggle over my flipping the script and using her own tactic against her is music to my ears. “Ummm...all of what you just did to me.”

“Nope.” I hold up a finger. “Pick one thing.”

“Okay...” Her face lights up, as she mentally scans through the night’s events making me even more eager for her answer. “You cleaning your semen from my chest with your tongue.”

I gawk at her with my jaw dragging the floor. “I think you just may be a closet freak, Cherry.” I tap the tip of her nose with a finger. “And I am here for it, baby.”

“Best part of your day?” The quick turnaround is her attempt to remove the spotlight from herself. Usually, I’d poke at her embarrassment a little longer, but after the night she’s had, the poor girl has earned a reprieve.

“Feeling your tight cunt squeeze my fingers as you exploded in my arms.” My dick throbs, petitioning for his turn as I play the moment back in my mind.

Veronica’s right leg crosses over her left and she squirms in place, no doubt visualizing it just as I am right now. “Thank you,” she says after a brief silence. “F-for today.”

“It was my pleasure.” I tangle my fingers into her hair while pressing my lips to her forehead. “Thank you, Cherry, for entrusting me with such an honor.”

We stay like this for long minutes, her nails gently scrubbing over my back while I press an occasional kiss to the spot where my lips linger. This is another first for me. I’ve never hung around *after* to do the cuddling thing. I could easily become addicted to the way she quiets my demons.

I can’t help but wonder if I’ve been cheating myself—if there’s always this therapeutic calm to follow the storm. Or, if this feeling of tranquility is specific to the little tornado wrapped in my arms, which I hope is not the case. Because she, like all turbulent weather will come to pass.

“I should probably be getting home,” she says with a yawn, breaking me from my thoughts. “I have class in the morning.”

“Okay.” I retrieve my phone from my back pocket and shoot Josh a quick text to bring the car around. I don’t bother explaining what it is that I’m doing because she’s reading as I type. “Should only be a few minutes. He lives on the bottom floor.”

“Perfect.” Ronnie reaches for my hand and hops down from the piano. The sound of her sweaty legs squeaking on the varnish draws my attention to a smear of liquid gold left behind. “What’re you doing?” she asks when I run a finger through what remains of her arousal, swirling it between the pads of my thumb and forefinger before bringing it to my nose.

I take a long whiff, fully immersing myself in her distinct aroma. “Mmmm,” I moan. “Still got that new pussy smell.”

CHAPTER 9

VERONICA

“HELLOOOO, VICTORIA.” I place my older sister on speaker so Kinzy can listen in while driving us to the club. I’ve learned it’s the better option to having her ask a million and one questions about my conversations while I’m in the middle of them.

“We wanted to call and wish you good luck tonight.” Vicky’s cheery voice is followed by a chorus of well wishes from my parents and siblings. It all jumbles together, making it impossible to decipher who said what, but the garbled sentiment still brings a tear to my eye. *I really do love these fools.*

“Thanks, guys.”

“Are you ready for your big night?” Momma asks, audibly shushing the rest of the crew. “I’ve always known your gift was something special. I’m so proud of you, baby.”

Her faith in my ability went a long way toward shaping me into the singer and musician I am today. It was my mother who booked gigs for me at local church festivals and eventually weddings—the actual ceremonies, of course. Because my father wouldn’t hear of his little girl taking part in the drunken spectacles that are the Cajun wedding reception. Not even from a safe distance, as the entertainment.

So, when he chimes in after my mom with a, “Me too,” I nearly choke to death.

“What’s so funny?” Dad has the audacity to sound hurt. “Just because I’d prefer you didn’t hang out in bars and tried my damndest to steer you down a less dangerous path doesn’t mean I didn’t recognize or believe you had talent.”

“You’re right,” I say, not wanting to rehash the same old argument over his propensity to be entirely too protective. The man means well, even if he does drive me batty. “Thank you for believing in me, Dad.”

I can practically hear his smile returning when he says, “Have a good time tonight.” However, his pacified state doesn’t last long. It never does. “Just watch out for the drunks. And don’t go out into the crowd, okay?”

“Seriously?” I groan. “Not this again.” I swear the man truly believes there are predators lurking around every corner just waiting to assault one of his precious girls. There’s no question that Victor Vanderbilt was built to be a boy dad. So of course the universe decided to bestow upon him five daughters, a snafu that I’m sure Mother Nature has gotten years of entertainment from at our expense.

“I mean it. Everyone’s gonna want to get their hands on the talent... *Oh, boy,*” he groans, getting himself all worked up over the hypothetical scenarios he’s conjuring in his head.

“Oh, Mr. V.,” Kinzy starts, shaking her head as she merges onto the highway. “Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s not the drunks *in the crowd* you need to concern yourself with.”

“What are you doing?” I grit, covering the phone’s speaker with my finger.

“Something you should have already done.” She scrunches her face at me. “*Before* it hits the papers...”

“What are you trying to tell me, Kinzy Mae?” Dad’s voice softens toward my tattletale bestie, whom he absolutely adores. Probably because her big mouth makes it nearly impossible for me to keep things from him.

“Veronica has a boyfriend.” She meets my gaze briefly out of the corner of her eye, where I find not the slightest hint of remorse.

Did she have to just blurt it out like that?

“Is that right?” His disappointment is palpable.

“I was going to tell you,” I stammer. “It’s still new.”

“Remember the guy she beat in that piano duel last weekend?” Kinzy asks, adding cayenne to the gumbo pot she’s actively stirring.

Swear on all that is holy, I’m about to stuff something in the little snitch’s mouth to shut her up.

“Yeah...” Dad hedges, “The brute who got so angry he punched a wall? What was it, Adam something or other?”

“That’s the one.” Mischief flashes in her emerald irises before she rolls that bus right over me without a second thought. “Your baby girl is dating that brute, Mr. V.”

“I hate you,” I hiss, once again covering the mic. “And this time I mean it.”

“Veronica?” My name in that pitch serves as both a reprimand and a question, and I’m mentally putting a fork in my eye at the impending drama.

Before I can formulate a response, Vicky is squealing into the phone. “Shut up! You’re dating Aiden Addams?”

“Mmmhmm,” I hum, telling myself that if I don’t say the words, it technically can’t be considered a lie. “Dad, he’s a nice guy. Just very misunderstood.” That I say with confidence. “You’d probably like him,” I squeak, with a little less certainty. “I-if you gave him a chance.”

His grunt begs to differ. “Remember your morals, Veronica Rose.”

“Please tell me you’re not about to give me another lecture on abstinence?” My temple starts to throb, signaling the beginnings of a headache. “Can’t we wait to do this another time, like not when I’m about to get on stage and perform?”

“Unfortunately, not, princess. Babies don’t wait for the timing to be convenient. They’re a life—”

“Lifelong commitment,” I finish for him. “Got it. As if somehow six other siblings didn’t clue me in.”

“The guy clearly has a temper and anger problems, Ron. Just be careful. I don’t want to see my little girl strapped to a guy like that for the rest of her life.”

“He’s right,” Kinzy chimes in, saving me from losing my cool with the man who holds the purse strings. “You’re such a good father.”

“I try.” My eyes nearly roll out of my head and down the street.

“My bestie is lucky to have you, Mr. V,” she continues. “And you can rest assured she will make great choices because of the values and morals you’ve instilled in her.”

“*Kiss ass,*” I mouth as she continues to blow smoke up that domineering man’s rear. If he only knew the shenanigans she got up to...

“All right, that’s enough. Don’t upset her before the show.” I hear a brief scuffle, followed by an aggrieved, “It’s *my* phone, Dad!” There’s a beat of silence, then the sound of a door closing a little louder than necessary.

“Kinzy,” my sister drawls, “Girl, karma is gonna come for you in a big way.”

“Oh, please,” my tyrant of a friend answers with a roll of her eyes. “What’s worse? Your father hearing it from me, or him reading about it in the papers tomorrow?”

“I’d prefer him hearing about it never,” I snap. But I guess she has a point.

“Whatever,” Victoria mutters. “As your favorite sibling, I shouldn’t have had to learn about this from Madam Big Mouth.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. But now I’m even more excited for your visit next week.” Her tone perks up. “I want all the juicy details.”

“*Next week?*”

“Thanksgiving, duh. You’re still coming, right?”

Dammit. I totally forgot about the upcoming holiday. “Of course...yeah. I can’t wait.”

The thought of heading back to Louisiana—of not seeing Aiden for four whole days—doesn’t sound appealing in the least. I could try to convince myself that the sense of dread coming over me is purely of a physical nature—that it’s our *tutoring sessions* I can’t bear to miss. But that would be a lie.

It's just him. His presence. His candor. His childlike way of viewing the world.

Aiden loves to poke fun at my innocence, but to me, he's the one who seems sheltered. Whatever happened to him as a child destroyed his ability to trust. This constant need to be on guard has left him with limited meaningful relationships and an emptiness inside that's aching to be filled.

The more time we spend together, the more I find myself wanting to be the one to satiate that hunger. To teach him the value of true friendship and help restore some of his faith in humanity. But Aiden's become too comfortable in his solitude to even notice the void that's so glaringly obvious to everyone around him. The man's perpetually at war with himself and anyone who dares threaten the comfort of his little bubble—a bubble that only became smaller by the level of fame he reached at such a young age. With stardom came endless numbers of people eager to do his bidding and a lack of real-world consequences for his oftentimes questionable actions.

Now it all seems to be catching up to him at once. And what started as a no-strings agreement is quickly becoming *complicated*. At least from my side. Because even if I get everything I want out of this deal, and Brody melts like putty in my arms, I'm already too invested to walk away without a care for what happens to Aidan in the wake of an arrangement that's only a temporary fix for his problem. I need to find a way to leave him better than I found him, so he doesn't revert back to his reckless behavior and end up in a similar or worse predicament.

“Hey, we gotta go sis,” I say, interrupting whatever my sister and friend have been discussing while I was off in la-la land. “We're pulling up to the club now.”

Kinzy snorts because we still have at least fifteen minutes, depending upon traffic. But one glimpse at the severe look I'm drilling into her prevents the little from exposing me in my lie.

"Oh, okay...How much longer till the show?"

"A few hours," I answer. "But first, we have lunch with the band. It's a thing they do every Saturday with the crew and their families before the club opens. Then we start getting ready..."

"Fun!" she squeals. "Okay, just one more thing, and I swear I'll let you go."

"Yeah?"

"Did you *fuck* him?" The question is muffled, and I can visualize her cupping her hand to the speaker and peeking around to make sure no one's listening so clearly it makes me laugh.

"No..."

"Not yet," Kinzy amends. "But we're workin' on it."

"You okay?" My friend laces her fingers with mine as we near the entryway.

"Just nervous."

"They're going to *love* you," she insists, giving my hand a squeeze. "You're like...the most likable person on the planet. Relax."

"I love that you get me enough to know my jitters have nothing to do with tonight's performance." Although the two

of us only met freshman year of college, it feels like we've known each other so much longer.

“Does that mean I'm forgiven for spilling the *sausage* to your father?”

“It's *spilling the beans*.” With a hefty dose of side-eye, I reach for the handle. “And you're not even close to forgiven.”

“I'm an artist,” she says with a wry grin. “I took creative liberties with it.”

“Of course.” I yank the door open, ushering her in ahead of me.

Here goes nothin'.

“Which one'a you is Cherry?” I hear in a tiny but assertive voice as soon as I step foot inside.

Looking down and to my left, I find the most adorable little girl, with white-blond curls reaching halfway down her back. She's dressed up like Rapunzel and gripping a wand with a blingy star at the tip in one hand and steadily tapping it into the palm of the other. *She means business.*

“Hello, there.” I squat to greet her at her level, trying not to laugh at her imposing stance. She reminds me of a baseball player, with her legs spread shoulder width apart, using her sparkly scepter in the place of a bat as a means to intimidate me. “I'm Ronnie, but Aiden *insists* on calling me Cherry.”

“It's prolly cuz you have a boy name.”

I whip my head toward the source of that remark, which comes at me courtesy of a young boy who's not more than an inch taller than the little league princess with a nearly identical face. The fact I'm seeing double brings me to the conclusion that these are Nick and Raven's twins.

“Blow it up, dude.” Kinzy holds out a fist, which he swiftly dabs with his own.

“Ronnie is a nickname. My *real* name is Veronica,” I explain, giggling at his assessment. “And you must be Ava and Alex.”

“That’s our names,” the feisty little boy confirms. “Don’t wear it out.”

Well, alllllllrighty, then.

A loud guffaw erupts from my bestie’s lips. She’s wiping away tears by the time she can speak. “Who is this kid? I love him!”

“Cherry-girl!” Alerted by Kinzy’s exuberant laughter, Aiden comes rushing toward us from across the bar. “I see you’ve met my little homies.”

“I have...” I straighten my legs, rising back to my full height, and wrap my arms around his neck—*for show*, of course. Definitely not as a means to quench my insatiable thirst for his touch. “But I don’t think they like me much.”

“That so?” Holding me closer, he smooths a hand along my back while staring the little rascals down. “Y’all giving my girl a hard time?”

Ava shrugs. “I didn’t say nothin’ mean. It was all Alex.”

“Listen,” the stud in training starts, “she was complainin’ about you, Uncle Aid.” He throws his hands out palms up. “I had to defend my bro.”

“Oh, really?” His fingertips dig into my ribs, wiggling back and forth in a tickling motion until I slink out of his hold, trying not to pee myself. “What’d she say that was so upsetting?”

“That she don’t like you callin’ her Cherry.”

I gasp. “I said no such thing!”

Ava plants a sassy hand on her hip, coming to her brother’s defense. “It’s not always what you say but how you say it. Didn’t your momma teach you that?”

“Mmhmm.” Alex nods in a hard, jerky motion. “You should watch your tone more better,” he orders before raising the pitch of his voice in an attempt to imitate me. “*Aiden insists on calling me Cherry.*”

“Tough crowd.” Kinzy inclines her head at the pair in admiration. “Remind me never to mess with Uncle Aiden in front of these two.”

“Well, she has her freaking nerve,” the man in question starts, glaring at me. “Guess what nickname she gave Uncle Aid?”

“Umm, Aiden—” I try, but he pays me no mind whatsoever.

“What?” the twins ask in unison.

He bends at the waist, drawing them close with the crook of a finger and whispers so low, only they can hear.

My hopes that he came up with something less *inappropriate* are dashed when Ava screeches.

“*Sugar Balls?*” Her pale cheeks turn bright red, and she slaps a hand over her mouth. “Like these kinds of balls?” Ava points to her midsection, giggling her little behind off.

“You don’t even have balls, Ava.” Her brother rolls his eyes. “You have a *bagina.*”

“What’s going on over here?” The dark-haired beauty making her way over has to be Nick’s wife, Raven. “That tone of giggle can only mean one thing,” she says, glaring at my fake boyfriend. “*Disaster.*”

Aiden waves her away. “Now don’t you come over here starting your shit, Ray.”

Alex bites back a grin, latching onto his uncle’s leg. “Yeah, Mom,” he blurts, in hero worship. “Don’t start no shi—”

“Finish that statement,” his mother says, narrowing her sparkling green eyes at him. “I dare you.”

With a loud squeak, he clamps his lips together and hauls off in the direction of the snack table.

“Hi, Mommy.” Ava suddenly morphs from warrior to princess, her entire demeanor, from the tone of her voice to the fluttering of those impressive lashes, flipping on a dime. “Did you come over here to meet Uncle Aiden’s girlfriend?”

“Sure did.” Raven bobs her head, combing her fingers lovingly through the little girl’s tresses. “Would you like to introduce us, since it appears you’ve already beat me to it?”

“A’course.” The princess fluffs out the front of her dress. “Mommy, this is...” Her brow furrows, and she summons me closer. “What should I call you?” she murmurs.

“Whatever you want,” I whisper in kind.

“This is Aunt Ronica.”

Aunt...oh God. “I, umm. I didn’t tell her to say that,” I babble, horrified.

“*That’s* why I call her Cherry.” Aiden strokes a bent knuckle along my heated skin, beaming from ear to ear. “She hates it.”

“Gee, I have no idea why,” the woman snaps.

She steps around him, into my personal space. “I’m Raven, Nicholas’s wife and mom to those two heathens.” Her smile holds such genuine affection as she looks toward her kiddos with impressive stank eye. “What would *you* like for me to call you?”

“Ronnie is fine, or Veronica. Anything but Cherry.”

“Welcome to the crew, Ronnie. We’re so excited to have you as part of the group and even more curious to learn what it is you see in...*that*.” Her eyes flit to Aiden briefly before she opens her arms wide, inviting me in for a hug.

“I really didn’t tell Ava to—” I try to explain while returning her embrace.

“Don’t worry about that. Ava thinks all of our friends are her aunts and uncles.” She backs away with a shrug. “Probably has a lot to do with the fact that all of her aunts and uncles happen to be our friends...” She snorts. “Neither Nick nor I have any siblings.”

“Ah,” I say. “Makes sense.”

“Come on,” Raven hooks an arm through mine, “I’ll introduce you to Korie and Sammi.”

“Go on,” Aiden encourages when I crane my neck to look back at him. “I told the twins they could draw tattoos on my cast with Sharpies. Just don’t believe anything those liars say about me...unless it’s good.”

“Got it.” I giggle, sending him a wink.

“It won’t be,” Raven calls without turning back. “So, Aiden, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Okay...” She halts midstride, giving me her full attention.
“But why?”

I snort. “Are you serious?” *Is the woman blind?*

“As a heart attack,” she deadpans.

“Yeah, we wanna know too.” Two blondes suddenly flank her sides. I have no idea which one just spoke, but they’re staring at me with the same perplexed expression Raven’s wearing.

“Umm...” I say, making a conscious effort not to fidget. “Well, he’s smart...and funny....” Butterflies flutter in my tummy. “And he’s kind...when he’s not being a dick.” I snort. “And he makes me feel just so *alive* and happy.” I let out a flustered laugh. “I mean have you *seen* him?”

The shorter of the newcomers cracks a megawatt grin. “I’m Rhet’s wife, Korie.” She extends a hand in my direction. “And that was a test.”

“H-how’d I do?” I ask, accepting her offered hand in a quick shake so she won’t notice my palm beginning to sweat.

Humming ominously, she glances between her friends. “What do we think, ladies?”

As if they’d trained for this moment, Raven and Sammi respond with a resounding, “Pass!”

I breathe a huge sigh of relief that’s cut short when I realize I’ve managed to misplace my emotional support friend.

“Looking for Kinzy?” Sammi asks when she notices I’m scouring the bar in a panic.

“Yeah. Have you seen her?” Guilt threatens to swallow me up. *How could I just forget she was here?*

“Right over there.” She points to the end of the bar where she’s saddled up next to Josh.

“That girl wastes no time.” I wiggle my fingers in her direction once she finally takes a break from ogling the hulking security guard.

When she spots me, she grabs a laminated drink menu from the condiment caddy and uses it to fan herself with her tongue hanging out of her mouth. My girl has not a single fuck to give that the man she’s supposed to be trying to impress is staring right at her.

“She’s fun,” Korie says, snickering at Kinzy’s antics. “Sammi and I had a little chat with her while you were meeting Raven and the twins.”

“The yin to my yang.” I give my head a little shake before returning my attention to the wives. “Can I ask what you were looking for in my answer?” I probe, circling back around to the pop quiz they just sprung on me.

“Nothing in particular,” Korie says. “It was a plus, however, that you didn’t make a single reference to his money or fame...”

“And,” Sammi chimes, “you saved his appearance for last.”

“It wasn’t so much what you said,” Raven expounds, “but the look on your face and the light in your eyes when you said it.”

“I love that,” I whisper, mostly to myself, but it’s clear by the gooey smiles on the faces of the women surrounding me that they heard it. “He’s lucky to have you three looking out for him.”

“Don’t get me wrong...he can be a lot,” Raven warns.
“But it’s because he’s been through so much.”

“I gathered as much from our talks.”

“You’ve got to be somethin’ special to have landed that one.” Korie considers me for a moment before continuing.
“Didn’t think I’d ever see the day Aiden Addams laid his heart at a woman’s feet.”

The smile I offer feels brittle as the weight of what’s to come slams into me like a ton of bricks.

Because while Aiden and I know this was never anything more than a farce, to these women and to the rest of the world, it’s very real.

In a few months, when the walls inevitably come crashing down, they’ll remain in the dark while I take the fall. And I couldn’t care less what a bunch of strangers think of me. But these women who’ve just welcomed me into their circle, and entrusted me with their friend’s most fragile of hearts, will bear the weight of that betrayal and come to look at me with nothing but disdain.

CHAPTER 10

AIDEN

THE MOMENT I see Sammi leave, carting her professional trunk of makeup behind her, I slither back inside my dressing room. It's going on three hours now and I'm still grumbling over that woman's gall at kicking *me* out of my own sanctuary.

"You're back..." Cherry turns from the mirror to face me, and my heart drops to my fucking ball sack. "And still upset," she says, her lips dipping into a frown. "I told you I could have taken one of the guest rooms."

Wow. There aren't many times in my life where I've been rendered speechless. In fact, this may be the first. If I were a better man, I'd attempt to ease her mind on the whole dressing room mess, but I'm far too busy gawking. Besides, I made it crystal clear when she suggested getting her own that it would not be an option. I was hoping to squeeze in a *lesson* before the show, but when it became clear that wasn't going to happen, I had to pivot.

"You okay?" she asks, crossing the room in a pair of black peep-toe stilettos, revealing freshly pedicured nails painted *cherry* red. "You don't look so great."

My eyes never veer from their course, moving to her ankles, up her toned calves, and along her creamy thighs. Saliva pools in my mouth and tingles dance along my tongue as I recall the unique flavor of her pussy. If she hadn't just

spent all afternoon getting ready, I'd spread her wide on that couch and have her cunt as an appetizer before the show. "Fuck me," I grunt when I arrive at the deep neckline of the very dress she modeled for me at Posh. I'd love nothing more than to lower those thin straps and bury my face between her perky tits.

The back of her hand comes to rest against my clammy forehead, her concern damn near comical. *Not this again.* "You're burning up." Cherry leads me over to the couch, pushing me down by my shoulders, then sits across from me on the coffee table, her legs crossed between mine.

"Aiden." She waves a hand in front of my face. "What's wrong? Do you need a doctor? Sh-should I go get Anika?"

"No," I say, chuckling to myself as I reach out to finger the ends of her golden hair. "I'm not fucking sick, Ronnie." I give my head a shake. "At least not the way you're thinking."

She scoffs. "Your cheeks are red and your face is hot to the touch."

"And my dick is hard enough to break glass."

"Oh." Her eyes widen before flitting to my crotch. "You're *that* kinda hot."

"Yeah." With a groan, I rest my head in my hand to keep my eyes off her long enough to get myself in check.

"Maybe I could..."

My dick twitches at the feel of her fingers as she begins walking them along my thigh. "Absolutely not." I look up to meet her eyes. "You're a *stunning* woman, Veronica. This is bound to happen."

Her discomfited swallow is audible, her expression shrouded in doubt.

“You *are*,” I stress. “But what you are *not* is obligated to take care of every boner that arises in your presence.”

That earns me a crooked smile. “Well, I wouldn’t offer that to just *anyone*.”

“Not even mine.” I wink. “Besides, we go on stage in thirty minutes. I still need to change, and we need not mess up Sammi’s masterpiece.” I ghost the back of my hand along her jawline, careful not to disturb hours of labor.

“I hardly recognize myself with all of this.” She circles a finger around her face.

“You’re still in there,” I assure her while drinking her in. “She only highlighted your best features.” Her icy blue eyes appear more vibrant than usual, colored in gold tones and lined in charcoal. The corners are smoked out, giving off a sensual vibe. Cherry’s pillowy lips are painted glossy red to match her nails. “I know it’s more than you’re used to wearing, but it has to be in order to be seen from stage.”

“That’s what Sammi said too.”

“You’re a smoke show with or without any of this. But fuck, babe. The sight of you all gussied up literally took my breath away.”

“Yeah?” she asks, blushing.

“The dick don’t lie.”

She barks out a started laugh. “You’re very *intense*, Mr. Addams.”

“Probably why I’ve never settled down.” I give her knee a gentle squeeze before pushing up from the couch to change.

“Too much for one girl.”

“Nah,” she challenges, spinning around on the table to watch as I flip through the clothes in my closet, searching for something to wear. “For the right girl, you could never be too much.”

I grab a pair of camo cargoes and a black sleeveless tee and drop them next to her on the table. “The right girl doesn’t exist for me,” I say, stripping down to my boxer briefs while she stares attentively. “That’s what started this whole arrangement, remember?”

“Should I...*go*?”

“Go where?” I adjust my dick, poking the head through the waistband so I don’t pitch a tent. Then, just for grins, I give my piercing a twist.

To my delight, she doesn’t look away. “Out... While you, umm, *change*.”

“You should stay right where you are.” I meet her gaze while stepping into my pants. “Keep staring.” I rasp. “Fucking turns me on to see how bad you want it.”

“I do,” she admits, exhaling a shaky breath. “Which must make me some kind of masochist, because there’s no way we’ll fit.”

“You’ll be amazed how much that tight little cunt can take.” I pop my head through the neck of my tee, catching her wide-eyed gaze as I brush the hair out of my face.

“How do you say things like that with a straight face?”

I perch beside her on the edge of the table while slipping my feet into a pair of black Air Forces. “I guess I can attribute it to not having anyone around growing up who cared enough

to instill fear or shame in me when it came to sex.” I plant a hand on her knee, giving it a squeeze. “You ready to go out there?”

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be, you know,” she says, unmoving.

“What isn’t?” I tap the underneath of her chin as a gentle reminder not to chew on her lip. “You’ll get lipstick on your teeth.”

Her tongue rolls over her pearly whites, then she smiles wide for my inspection.

I give her the all clear with a nod, encouraging her to continue.

“Being taught to fear men. *Sex.*” She recoils into herself. “I know my father means well, and I love him to death, and I feel awful even complaining about him to you.”

“You’re allowed to feel your feelings, Cherry.” The sadness in her eyes is fucking brutal to see. “This isn’t a competition. Don’t tiptoe around me because you think my shitty experiences outweigh yours.”

She stares down at her lap and begins messing with her nails. “My aunt was raped in high school.” She sighs. “Horrible, right? But it sorta made my dad crazy. He and my grandmother put the fear of God into us. Thus, the all-girls’ schools. The inability to date.” She huffs out a pitiful laugh. “It still makes him insane to know I leave my dorm, and I’m nearly twenty-one years old.”

“Fuck, babe. That’s just an awful situation all around.” I can’t say I blame her father, because I’d likely be in jail for fucking murder. Knowing the reason behind the extremes he’s taken to shelter his girls certainly makes me respect him more.

“I know,” she agrees. “And it wasn’t so bad until senior year, when everyone suddenly had boyfriends. Before then, there were a couple of other late bloomers. But all anyone talked about anymore was going out and how far they’d gotten with their guy. I couldn’t relate, so I escaped into my music.” She smiles up at me. “We’re a little similar in that way, huh?”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “Seems so.”

“I loved and lost and felt passion through those lyrics.” She smiles wistfully out into space. “I guess it’s sort of like reading, how they say through books you can live a thousand lives...I get that from music, too.”

“I can definitely relate.” I scrub a hand over my face. “I’ve come to realize along the way that some simply sing while others live and breathe their music. That’s what sets the good apart from the great—why some make it, and others don’t.”

She nods. “Never really thought of it like that.”

“A dozen men can perform the same song, technically perfect, while only one of those will make you feel it in your bones.” The memory of performing with her causes a tightening in my chest. “I felt it...that night,” I rasp. “You have it...that gift.”

“Yeah?” She smiles. “Singing with you—it felt like *magic*.”

I tuck a lock of hair behind her ear, barely resisting the urge to smash my lips against hers. “And now we know why.”

“Do we?” Her eyes flutter to half-mast, her desire like a magnet for my own.

“Yeah.” Lowering my hand to my lap, I back away, effectively breaking the pull. “We’re kindred spirits.”

A breathy laugh does little to cover her disappointment over the distance I've just put between us. She gives me a knowing smile before getting back to her story. "Anyway... that's how I ended up in Nashville. I found a private college, to make Dad as comfortable as possible with my leaving, and decided I'd try to make it in music without him there to hold me back."

"And now look at you, Cherry-girl. Doing the damn thing."

"Yeah," she says, dabbing a knuckle at the corner of her eye. "Gah. Sorry. I'm not trying to get emotional." She fans her face with her hands. "I promise there's a point to this diatribe."

"Take all the time you need," I encourage, before glancing at my watch. "Or, like ten minutes. Then we have to get outta here."

A brief smile promises to hurry it along. "It's just been hard, even hundreds of miles away." She scrubs a hand up and down her other arm, as if consoling herself. "I envy your comfort with your body. With women. *Sex*. I just wish I could get past the shame. I'm scared to make a fool of myself, so I chicken out anytime things start to heat up with a guy."

"I can honestly say you're a natural."

"You think?"

I bob my head. "It's like I told ya. We were built for this shit. It's as inherent as breathing."

"That sounds so...*uncivilized*."

"Circle of life, babe. We're born. We fuck. We reproduce. We die. And so it continues. Why is it, do you think? That no one has to teach wild animals to mate. *It's instinct*." I tap the

side of my head. “Humans are the only ones who try to attach morals and affection to nature.” I stroke a finger along her thigh. “Trust your body, Cherry. It knows what to do.”

“I cannot even deal with you,” she says, getting up from the table smiling from ear to ear. “The circle of life is f-fucking?”

The ridiculous way she stammers over the word tickles me to no end. Following her lead, I leap to my feet, meeting her at the door. “It’s the most important aspect, I think. Without it we wouldn’t exist.”

She turns the doorknob then releases it without pulling and spins around. Staring me right in the eye, she plants both palms in the center of my chest. “I was trying to say thank you.”

That long winded spiel was all to say thank you. “For?”

“I’ve been here nearly three years, and nothing changed until I met you. I was still singing at open mic nights on Broadway, hoping someone might discover me. Still embarrassingly inexperienced. And now here I am, about to play with one of the most renowned country groups in the world.”

“You are,” I say, clearing my throat. “But your talent—and your courage—got you here.”

“Nah.” Chuckling, she smooths her thumb over my heart. “Your temper did.”

I cringe. “It may have played a small part.”

“All jokes aside. Thank you...for not making me feel pathetic.” Her voice hitches. “I’m not afraid w-with you.”

“You are so far from pathetic,” I rasp, yet again tempted to kiss those shiny lips. “And if I have to shackle myself to a single girl for a while to get the label off my ass, I can’t think of a better one to be stuck with than you.”

“That was kinda sweet,” she says, turning to open the door. “For a Neanderthal.”

“No need to go overboard, drama queen,” I say, reaching out to grab her ass. “Not a damn thing sweet about me.”

“Except your *balls*.” Anticipating my likely retaliation, she shuffles down the hall, resembling a freaking penguin in her haste to get away while trying not to fall on her face in those towering heels.

I hang back, letting her make it to the backstage area first.

“Aiden,” she squeaks when I arrive. “This place is packed.”

“Always is.” Her enthusiasm is infectious.

“This is really happening.” She taps her heels one after the other in her excitement as she continues peeking through the curtain.

“You’re going to do great,” I encourage in case some of that energy is on account of nerves.

“Oh, I know.” She turns to give me a wink. “But thank you for saying so.”

“Cocky suits you.”

When she whirls around the last thing, I expect to see are tears welling in her baby blues. And these are clearly not the kind that come from the laughter my little pun should have induced.

“When did you do this?” She widens the curtain, giving a clear view of the piano I had brought in to replace my keyboard while our resident stylist was dolling her up.

“Today. While you were getting ready.”

Next thing I know her arms are around my neck and she’s squeezing the life outta me. “And you say you aren’t sweet?” Cherry sniffs, pressing her tits harder into my chest.

What is she going on about? “I assure you that is the last word anyone would use to describe me.”

With a harrumph, she starts backing away. “You brought a freaking piano in so I’d be more comfortable up there.” The hand she was just using to dab beneath her eyes flings out in the direction of the stage. Her face is masked in disbelief.

My dick stiffens as thoughts of what I plan to do to her hidden behind the front panel that piano provides that my keyboard stand did not roll through my mind. “It seemed more *appropriate*.”

“Whatever,” she huffs. “It was *thoughtful*. You’re a lot softer than you let on.”

I snort, grabbing her wrist and whipping her around so her back is pressed to my front. “Hard as fucking steel,” I growl into her ear, grinding my erection into her back.

She stiffens in my hold.

“Oh, my gosh!” Lyle’s pregnant wife waddles over from around the corner. “What happened to your makeup?” Sammi grabs Veronica’s hand, dragging her off to a chair where she immediately starts applying more product. “Good thing I sent the kids home with the nanny and hung around in case you needed a touchup.”

“What’d you do to that girl after Sammi left, *Sugar Balls?*” Lyle’s elbow digs into my ribcage.

“Don’t be jealous.”

“Please,” he cackles. “You haven’t fucked till you’ve fucked a pregnant chick.” He stares like a besotted fool at his wife. “The pink parts are all...” His body shivers with delight. “So much more sensitive.”

“I’ll have to take your word on that one.” The thought of knocking a girl up—of creating a life that’s mine to ruin—has me shriveling up like a limp noodle. “Got my own methods of increasing blood flow that work just fine.”

Before Lyle can rag me any further, Anika’s voice wafts through the speakers. “Welcome everyone to Booze & Bad Decisions, stomping grounds of The Rhett Taylor Band. Who’s excited?”

Her question is met with rowdy applause.

“Well, our guys have a great show in store for you tonight. But speaking of bad decisions, we wanted to address the elephant in the room.” She pauses for a moment, allowing for their reactions to fizzle. “As I’m sure everyone is well aware, Aiden had an *incident* last weekend, leaving him with a broken hand.”

“*An incident,*” I grumble, just as Cherry returns to my side, tucking her little hand into mine.

“It just so happens that not only did an extremely talented woman by the name of Veronica Vanderbilt steal our favorite bad boy’s dignity,” Anika continues, “but she managed to do the unthinkable and capture his heart as well.”

“She run this shit by any of you?” I whisper-yell to the guys.

Each responds firmly in the negative while doing a piss poor job of hiding their amusement.

“It’s okay,” Ronnie offers, giving my fingers a squeeze. “Just play along for the sake of your career.”

“Without further ado,” our ringleader announces, “I’d like to introduce you to Ronnie, our temporary keyboardist and Aiden Addams’s new girlfriend.”

“Walk out there with me?”

“Sure,” I say, unable to refuse those pleading eyes. “Let’s rip off this Band-Aid.”

“Oh, how cute,” Anika croons as we proceed to center stage with our hands still locked firmly together. “See what I mean? These two are joined at the hip.”

“Heh,” I choke, stealing the mic. “More like joined at the *genitals*.”

“Aiden,” Cherry chastises, gritting her teeth.

“Come on, babe, she left that one wide open.”

Cherry shrugs, playing to the crowd. “I mean, she kinda did...”

“Totally did.” I pull in a deep breath before greeting the audience with my usual, “What’s up, bitches?”

Their hoots and hollers match my enthusiasm.

And I’m pretty sure that’s a pair of silk panties that just landed at Ronnie’s feet.

“I think what Anika was trying to say is *your boy fucked up*.” I foist my cast into the air for all to see. “But we’re not gonna dwell on that.” I pull my partner in crime around so she’s standing in front of me and rest my chin on her shoulder.

“We’re gonna focus instead on this beautiful woman here. Remember the name Veronica Vanderbilt,” I say, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I have a feeling you’ll be hearing it long after her stint with The Rhett Taylor Band is through.”

With that, I drag Ronnie over to the piano, taking my seat beside her while waving the rest of the band out.

Rhett gives a quick greeting.

Then Nick counts us off.

Song after song, Cherry nails it. The girl is a born performer. Pride swells in my chest while I watch her come alive behind that piano, as if I had anything at all to do with her talent.

I’m all out of sorts, with nothing of any use to do with my hands, which are tapping along on my thigh while Ronnie’s dainty fingers ghost across the keys. I’m transfixed on her lips moving ever so slightly as she silently recites the lyrics to herself.

About midway through our set, when the boredom threatens to drive me mad, I decide the time has come to put my plan into motion.

The challenge lies in the timing. All fuckery must commence between my contributions, while the spotlights are focused on Rhett.

“What are you doing?” Cherry hisses, her expert fingers not missing a beat as I trail my left hand along her inner thigh.

She’s forced to wait for a response while, bathed in orange light, I deliver my vocals on the chorus of crowd pleaser, “Pour Judgment.”

“Getting my money’s worth out of this piano,” I answer once we’re relatively hidden in our dimly lit corner. I brush my pinky back and forth along the lace covering her slit. “Shhh,” I say when she gasps. “Tonight’s lesson is on control.”

Veronica’s eyes widen, her chest heaving as she hits the crescendo of the song. Her hands glide as if on autopilot as I slip a finger beneath the elastic hugging her thigh. “If you miss a single note, I’ll stop,” I warn against her ear. “Do you understand?”

She nods, her teeth clamping down on her lower lip as I tease her slick opening.

“You’re so fuckin’ hot, Cherry. The way you play...with so much *passion*.” I groan. “It’s dripping out of you.”

Her lids lower to half-mast, and her head tips back just slightly.

“Gonna make you feel so fucking good now,” I rasp, nibbling on her lobe. “Get you off just by rubbing your sweet little cunt. Would you like that?”

“Y-yes,” she murmurs. “God, ye—”

“What did I tell you?” I withdraw my hand, leaving her to grind against the bench in search of fulfillment while I rotate the mic I’d pushed away back toward my mouth and croon along to the music.

I make her wait it out, until the start of the next song, before returning my hand to her cunt and thrusting a digit inside.

She rocks into me, her head gently rolling side to side while she undulates to the beat.

The scent of her desire reaches my nose, sending my pulse soaring as I begin circling the pad of my thumb over her clit.

“Gonna come for me, Cherry?” I goad, adding a second digit and stretching her wider. “You gonna explode on my fingers, right here, in front of all these people?”

Her head whips toward me, her teeth clamping down on my shoulder to muffle the scream I can feel building as she clenches around me.

“Heads up,” I whisper as the spotlight loops back around to our corner.

Flushed and sweating, she plays the part while her walls continue to pulsate around my motionless fingers.

“Now,” I order on my next break, ramming my fingers into her hard and fast.

“A—,” she starts before catching herself and gnashing her teeth together. Cherry’s entire body vibrates through her mostly silent release. The sexy little moans that find their way through are for my ears alone.

“Good girl,” I rasp as her cunt begins to relax, bringing the fingers soaked in her arousal to my mouth and sucking them clean. “A-plus,” I whisper to my star pupil, “for taste and execution.”

CHAPTER 11

VERONICA

I BURST through the glass doors and into the lobby of Aiden's building, where Josh is waiting to let me in, just as I was told he would be. "What's wrong with him?"

"Hell if I know." He smirks, quirking a brow, likely at my disheveled state.

"He said it was an emergency." I accept the keycard from his outstretched hand, a tad miffed by how chill he seems.

"Dude's probably just horny." His carefree laugh leads me to believe I've been duped. "I don't know if you've noticed, but he's got a flair for the dramatic."

"Great," I mutter, glancing down at my raggedy getup. His text seemed so urgent that I put no thought into my appearance, quickly throwing a university sweatshirt over my sports bra and leggings, sliding into Kinzy's hideous tie-dye Crocs, and tossing my unwashed hair into a bun. Then I caught the first available Uber over.

I tap the keycard against my palm, contemplating whether I should rush back home to change or suffer through the mockery awaiting me in that penthouse.

"Just go to him," Josh urges, reading my mind. "You look fine."

I scoff.

“Seriously, guys dig that just-woke-up, didn’t-try-too-hard thing you have going on.”

He’s not helping. “I don’t know...” My feet are inching for the exit.

“I do...being a guy and all,” he says, giving me a little shove toward the elevator. “He’ll dig it. Trust me.”

“Fine. But if he makes fun of me, I’m coming after you.”

“I’ll take you coming after me over him any day.” With a boyish chuckle, he smooths a hand over his flat stomach. “He already knows you’re here.”

“So *that’s* why you’re pretending I don’t look like roadkill.”

The flush in Josh’s cheeks reeks of guilt.

“Think I could maybe get Kinzy’s number from ya?” he asks, staring down at his feet.

On second thought, maybe it isn’t his conscience getting the better of him at all. The guy suddenly appears timid, the way I’d imagine a little boy to behave when trying to ask out his crush on the school playground. *Dammit, that’s kind of adorable.*

“Sure.” I take the unlocked phone he’s already got extended toward me and, biting back a smile, add her as a contact. “There.” I return it then sink my finger into the button to call the elevator.

“Thanks.” Josh stuffs the phone into his back pocket, making no move to leave.

“Anything else?” His hovering is making me twitchy.

“Nah. Just told boss man I’d see you safely into the elevator.” His grin is cheeky, no doubt in response to my exasperated groan.

“Just what I need, another overprotective man on my case.”

“Aiden doesn’t worry himself over much,” his friend says, jutting a foot into the elevator after I step inside to hold it open long enough to finish his statement. “But that man would go to war for those he cares about.”

A little spark of hope flickers in my chest, because I’m certain Josh just insinuated the man cares about me.

“You should feel honored to have made it onto such an exclusive list.”

“I—I am...*honored*.” And verging on speechless. There was nothing implied this time. No lines to read between. I. Am. On. The. List.

“Good,” he says, retracting his foot. “Remember that when you get up there. My boy’s in pretty rough shape.” Josh leaves me with a parting wink just as the doors seal shut.

That conniving snake.

He knew exactly what he was doing, waiting until I’d swiped the keycard to issue that little warning. I couldn’t turn around and run now, even if I wanted to, because the one and only stop this car’s gonna make opens right into Aiden Addams’s apartment.

Rough shape, I muse. What’s that even mean? It could be anything. And I have forty floors to consider more than enough scenarios to work myself into a panic by the time that bell dings, the doors slide open, and I’m brought face to face with the star of every one of them.

One glance is all it takes to erase every bit of the worry I've managed to conjure during the ride up. There's some inexplicable quality in this wild man that sets me at ease. I'm aware of how crazy it sounds; by all estimations he'd send a sensible girl like me running in the opposite direction. But Aiden calms me in a way nothing and no one else ever has.

He's blunt and unapologetic. The man's as brazen as they come and has absolutely no shame. But I find comfort in his transparency.

And let me just say that *rough* is the last word I'd use to describe the man staring back at me. He looks cozy and relaxed. And maybe even a bit relieved.

His shoulder-length hair's pulled back into a manbun with flyaways framing his angular face. Shirtless, he's left those washboard abs, tattoos, and piercings out for my viewing pleasure. A pair of gray sweats are the entirety of his attire for the evening. Slung low on his hips, they give a tantalizing peek at that book boyfriend V that has me salivating.

"You came." He opens his arms wide, welcoming me in for a hug.

"Of course I did." I drop my purse on the entryway table before throwing myself into his embrace. "You said it was urgent."

The scents of soap and bourbon envelop me as I bury my face into the bend of his neck, breathing him in. Aiden's body is still damp from a recent shower, bringing forth all sorts of naughty imagery.

"Needed to see you." He squeezes me tight while pressing a kiss to the crown of my head. There his lips linger for a beat. "You smell so good."

“You could have just said that, you know?”

“Said what?”

I crane my neck to look up at him, bringing my hands to cup his cheeks. “That you wanted to see me. You didn’t need to invent an emergency.”

“Wasn’t sure you’d come.” The forlorn look on his face sends my stomach churning.

“Why on earth would you think that?” I scrub my thumbs back and forth along his cheeks, enjoying the velvety feel of them.

“Whiskey dick.”

I flinch. Did he ju—? “Scuse me?”

“I couldn’t call you over for a lesson cuz I been drinkin’ *alllllll* day.”

“So?”

“So, I can’t get it up, and our next session is supposed to feature the gummy worm in my pants...”

I tamp down the urge to laugh at his predicament, because it’s obviously bothering him.

“Oh, Aiden...” I look him right in the eye to be sure he can see my sincerity. “Just because our relationship is fake doesn’t mean our friendship has to be. You don’t need an excuse to want to hang out.”

“I’m glad you feel that way.” His fingers run up and down along my spine while his injured hand finds respite in its usual spot, the small of my back. “Cuz I—I like you a lot,” he slurs, swaying just slightly. “And I could use a friend tonight.”

“Well, look no further.” I dip into an awkward curtsy, fanning out my imaginary skirts.

Aiden perks up, gripping my wrist and dragging me to the bar in the kitchen that’s littered with an array of liquor bottles. “Want some?” he asks, while refilling his glass with Johnny Walker Blue.

“I’ve never had straight whiskey,” I admit, afraid to waste what I know by the color of that label to be very pricey bottle.

He cracks a huge grin. “Oh, you’re in for a treat, Cherry-girl. This is the good shit.” He retrieves a second glass from the cabinet above his head and pours another. “Here,” he says, setting it in front of me. “But drink this first.”

“Water?” I give the clear liquid a sniff.

“Ice water,” he confirms. “Cleanses the pallet between sips.”

“What if I don’t like it?”

“Then I’ll make you a frou-frou girly drink.”

He watches me as I set the water down and lift the tumbler of amber liquid, swirling it around before bringing it to my nose. “Smells kinda smoky and like oranges.”

Aiden nods.

I bring the glass to my lips and take a generous sip, but not so much that I can’t hurry and swallow it down if it’s as awful as I fear.

“How’s it taste?”

Holding it in my mouth, I take a moment to savor the diverse blend of flavors bursting across my tongue. “Like

caramel and chocolate,” I say after swallowing the surprisingly smooth and creamy liquid. “With a smoky aftertaste.”

“And?” He quirks a brow at me over his glass. “What’s the verdict?”

“I think you just gave me very expensive taste.” With a wink, I take another swallow.

“Great.” He tucks the bottle under the arm of his injured hand, as well as a glass of water between his chest and cast. “Whaddaya say we take this up to the rooftop, friend?”

Rooftop? Eeeep. “Lead the way.”

I follow him down the hall to a doorway that houses a hidden stairwell. “Let me get that,” I huff when he starts shuffling things around, trying to find a way to open the door. “After you.”

“Such a gentlewoman.” He steps around me, fumbling up the flight of steps.

“Please be careful.” I follow closely behind with a hand on his back to help steady him.

“I’m fine. I’m not even *drunk*.”

“Yeah, okay... *Aiden!*” I gasp, when I surface into what I can only describe as a little slice of paradise. Hidden above what looks like any other high-rise building is a terrace walled in lush greenery. I wonder if the rest of these towering skyscrapers hold similar oases for the rich and famous. “You can see the constellations so clear from up here.”

“You think that’s cool?” He unloads his arms onto a bench then proceeds to an access panel. “Wait till you see it all lit up.” A soft buzzing follows the flick of a few switches, illuminating dozens of string lights to reveal a raised hot tub

with steam rising from its rolling water. There's a long, rectangular pool, and a fire pit encircled by white couches.

"This is incredible." I whirl around, taking it all in. Twin wood swings suspended from ropes that are attached to a thick beam dangle over the crystal-clear water. There's a cabana with a white fluffy bed covered in pillows. A bar. A stage. "This looks like something you'd find at a five-star resort."

"Annie and I spent a lot of evenings out here chilling, drinking, hiding from the chaos down below. I can't even count the number of times we've fallen asleep beneath these stars..."

Emotion clogs my throat as I voice the only possible explanation I can come up with for his melancholy tone. "You have feelings for her..."

"Sit with me?" He pats the seat beside him.

I make my way over with my heart lodged deep in my throat, unsure of why his feelings for Anika would matter to me at all. We're not a real couple. And I want Brody.

Right?

"I don't know," he finally responds when I plop down beside him, before taking a long swallow from his glass. "Told you I'm fucked up, Cherry."

"You did," I acquiesce. "But falling for your best friend isn't a crime." I smile over at him, attempting to downplay the turmoil raging inside me. "And between us, I think she's a fool not to return them."

"Never fucked her," he volunteers. "Wasn't that type of relationship."

I nod, stupidly relieved by this unprompted revelation.

“I found out about her girlfriend after our show...the night I did this.” He holds his right arm out, glaring at it with disgust.

“You were hurt.”

“I was pissed,” he snarls. “Don’t like change. I was fine with the way things were.” His pointer finger circles the rim of his glass. “Thought she was too.”

“How were they?” I rasp. “Th-things between you...”

“Comfortable. Fun. I mean, I knew she was attracted to women and that was A-OK with me, just like she was aware of my dick’s insatiable appetite.” He huffs. “Didn’t bother her in the least. No matter what—or who—we were doing, we always had each other to snuggle up in front of the television or drink ourselves into oblivion with. She was my built-in plus one.”

“Aiden...” I slap a hand down on his thigh, a little harder than intended in my enthusiasm. The liquor is clearly starting to muddle my senses. “What you’ve just described is *friendship*.”

“That’s what Annie said too. But if that’s all it was...then why do I feel so fucking betrayed?” His jaw ticks. “I never felt like this when any of the guys paired off. A little annoyed at losing another drinking buddy, sure. But this—this is different.”

“She was your person.” I give him a tender smile. “You can love someone, you know, without being *in love* with them.”

“Maybe.”

“Definitely,” I say. “You’re experiencing your first heartbreak.” I pull my knees to my chest, hugging them tight.

“Give yourself a little time to grieve.”

He shrugs, refilling both our glasses until the tawny liquid spills over the sides. “Whatever we had is gone.” His eyes glaze as he stares into the fire. “She’s got someone new, and I—I can’t even go out anymore because I can’t trust myself not to do something stupid again.” His head gives a disappointed shake. “I’m stuck in this house, left to my own devices.” He rotates his face toward mine. “Even when Anika’s here, it’s different. *Strained.*”

“Let me take over,” I say, taking the bottle from his hands. “You’re making a mess.”

“Damn,” he groans. “I thought you meant something else.”

“Tell me,” I implore.

“That you wanted to take over her role as my best friend...”

“Hey,” I say, teeming with liquid courage. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah.” He hooks a finger beneath my chin. “But you leave tomorrow.” A humorless laugh vibrates his chest. “To be with your family, where you should be.”

I deflate at his dismal tone. It never once occurred to me that my leaving might affect him whatsoever.

“Don’t worry about me, doll,” he says, stroking my chin lightly. “I’ll be fine on my own for a few days.”

“Thought you were going over to Rhett’s?”

“Yeah.” He sinks back into the pillows. “We all are, just like every year. Only this year...”

“Talia’s going?”

“Yep.” He sighs.

“Come home with me,” I blurt, not giving a moment’s thought to what my father’s reaction will be when I show up with a whole-ass man on my arm.

“What?” His droopy eyes widen with shock. “You don’t have to do this. I can’t interr”—he hiccups loudly—“upt your family holiday.”

“The only reason I didn’t ask already is because I knew you had plans,” I lie. It never occurred to me to extend the invite, but he doesn’t need to know that. “But now that I know you’re not looking forward to them, I’m asking—no—” I take hold of the hand that’s still hovering beneath my chin. “I’m *begging* you to come with me. Please, Aiden. It’d be so nice to have a *friend* around.”

“We friends, Cherry?”

“Maybe...” I give him a coy grin. “On one condition.”

He blows out a long breath. “Friendships have *condishuns*?”

My Lord. He’s three sheets to the wind. “This one does.”

A curt nod tells me he’s getting the complete wrong idea of where I’m going with this.

“You can’t just turn it off when this fake dating thing is over,” I rush out, my eyes welling over with tears. “Our friendship, I mean. Because I”—I dab at the corner of my eye—“I couldn’t bear it.”

“Nooo,” he coos. “Fuck, babe, don’t cry.”

“I’m an emotional drunk...” I let out a giggle that’s part sob. “Sorry. I’m the worst.”

“When this is over,” he says, brushing away my tears with the pad of his thumb, “We’re gonna tattoo best friend hearts on our ass cheeks.”

I snort. “Okay, that’s a little extreme.”

“You’ll never get rid of me now. BFFs for life.”

The thought spreads warmth throughout my chest. “So, does that mean you’ll come with me?” I tilt my head and bat my lashes. “Plus,” I add, laying it on thick, “it’ll do wonders to sell our little scheme.”

He scrubs a hand over his face, his eyes seeming to take inventory of my person. “I have a *con...condishunnn* too.”

“Name it.”

He reaches around, yanking the scrunchie from behind my head, then spends a few seconds arranging the tangled strands over my shoulders. “Leave your fucking hair down.”

“Okay,” I say, smiling like a loon. “I can do that.”

“And...” He holds up a finger.

“Two conditions?” I quirk a brow at his nerve.

“Don’t ever wear *those* again.”

“Aww,” I say, turning my foot side to side admiring the red, orange, and yellow splotches covering my feet. “I think they’re cute...”

“They’re not,” Aiden deadpans.

I take one off and smack him on the leg with it. “They’re not even mine.” I pop him again, giggling as he tips sideways on the couch, cowering from my weak hits. “I thought you were having a crisis and threw on the first thing I saw, which

happened to be *Kinzy's* Crocs, then rushed over here in a full-blown panic, you ass.”

“Cherry...” He can barely squeak my name out between guffaws as I drop the offensive shoe to the ground and begin tickling his ribs.

I keep after him until we're both panting for breath.

Aiden fits my body to his, spooning me from behind, with my head nestled into the elbow of his injured arm and the other wrapped around my waist. My laughter dies completely when I feel his warm breath against my ear. “Stay with me tonight?” His cold lips brush the lobe with his muttered request.

Chill bumps ripple across my skin and my heart starts beating triple time. “Aiden, I—”

“You make me happy, Cherry Girl.” His confession is sloppy and somehow sweeter because of it. “Not ready for it to end.”

“One condition,” I challenge, lacing my fingers with his, which are nestled against my chest.

“I'm too drunk for this,” he slurs, biting down on my shoulder. “What?”

“Tell me the best part of your day...”

“Easy.” He moans his contentment. “This.” My *fake* boyfriend snuggles in closer, eliciting feelings in me that are anything but pretend. “Holding you in my arms.”

His admission has me fighting the urge to pinch myself to be sure this moment is real. “Fine,” I grumble with mock irritation. “I'll stay.”

“What about you?” he laughs, the tip of his cold nose grazing my neck.

“Same.” I yawn, tugging the blanket he just flung over us from the back of the couch to my chin.

His only response is a lingering kiss just behind my ear.

“I’m happy you’re coming to meet my family,” I whisper.

When my statement is met with a soft rumble vibrating from his chest to my back, I keep going. “My dad’s probably going to hate you...”

I get a whiff of whiskey breath as a whistle wheezes out on his next exhale.

“I’m sorry about Anika,” I say, bringing our locked hands to my mouth and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. “You’re such a nice guy, Sugar Balls.” I sigh, staring out at the stars. “I hate that you’re so sad... but I’m glad we’re gonna be friends.”

“Cherry,” he groans.

“Did you just hear all of that?”

“Every word,” he grumbles.

“I was kidding about my dad,” I say, worried I might’ve made him change his mind with my big dang mouth.

“Shh.” He releases my hand and brings a finger to rest against my lips. “You’re ruining the best part of my day.”

I snort. “Just tell me you’ll still come, and I promise I’ll shut up.”

“Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

“What about overprotective dads?” I press.

“Those either.”

CHAPTER 12

AIDEN

“I HAVE A CONFESSION,” Cherry says after a quiet ride from the airport to her parents’ house. She’s been acting a little twitchy since we boarded the plane, but really clammed up once we made it into the car.

“Lemme guess?” I reach out to stay her leg that’s steadily swinging. “They don’t know I’m coming?”

With her lips pressed into a firm line; she gives her head a shake. “Sorry.”

“No worries.” I’m beginning to feel bad for accepting her pity invitation at all. “I can stay at a hotel.”

Her brow furrows. “But you don’t have Josh...”

This girl has me ready to fight someone just to show her I’d fare better than I did with that brick wall. Her insistence on my constant need for a protector is emasculating.

“Don’t need him.” I laugh. “I’m not the front man, Cherry. In Nashville, fans expect to see me. On tour, they’re looking for us. But here?” I smooth the creases on her forehead away with the pad of my thumb. “A cap and glasses will more than suffice.”

“Well, wherever you go, I go,” she says, as our car rolls to a stop and the driver pulls her door open, helping her to the

sidewalk.

“We’ll see.” I slide out behind her. “Let’s try to start off on a good foot. This is a first for me.”

“What is?” Her head whips around, her long, golden hair fishtailing through the air with the sudden movement.

“Meeting a girl’s parents.”

“Aww, *Sugar Balls...*” Her cheeks brighten with amusement. “You aren’t nervous?”

“Pshh.” I try brushing that notion away as I accept the handle of my roller suitcase from the driver. My pride takes a hit as she wheels hers up alongside me. If not for this damn cast, I could lug hers in like a fucking gentleman. First chance I have to make an impression on her father, and she’s toting her own bags. “Got sweat drippin’ down my damn taint, Cherry.”

“Well, that’s a pleasant visual.” She snorts. “Don’t worry...it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah?”

“Yup.” Her head bobs. But the movement is tense, and she doesn’t sound all that encouraging.

“You trying to convince me or yourself?”

“Both?” She glances at me over her shoulder with a crooked grin as she enters a code into the pad attached to the wrought iron fence.

Cherry gives the vine-covered gate a shove, revealing a pea-pebbled sidewalk that forms a path through a small but lush yard right up to an impressive Queen Anne style home showcasing multiple towers and turrets. It’s three stories high, the first two displaying wraparound porches with ornate wood

trim. The third has a walk-out balcony. The roof is steep and varied heights, comprised of patterned tile and trimmed in latticework.

“You coming?”

“Just admiring your home,” I say, rushing through the entryway to catch up to her. “The detail work is incredible.”

“Like the Addams family house and a gingerbread palace had a baby, right?”

“That’s scarily accurate.”

Before we reach the steps, the front door flies open. “Ronnieeee! *Oh...*” A teenaged girl with shoulder-length hair a tad darker than Cherry’s stands staring with an “oh, shit” look on her face if I’ve ever seen one. “I—is th-that—?”

“Hey, Val.” Veronica drops her bags to slip an arm through mine. “This is Aiden.” She looks up at me, her face beaming with pride. I must admit it feels good, the way she’s so eager to claim me, even if it is all a farce. “My boyfriend.”

A gasp draws my attention back to the porch, where another even smaller version of the blonde attached to my arm stands gaping.

Veronica doesn’t get the chance to greet that one before twin tornadoes with shaggy blonde curls and those same striking eyes come barreling between their sisters, down the steps, nearly knocking Ronnie on her ass.

“Oof!” She slips her arm out of mine, wrapping the toddlers up in an embrace that makes my heart lurch for the sad little boy that still lives inside me. It’s beautiful, the affection they have for one another. “Where are your pants?” their big sister screeches.

“We’re like wesselurs,” the one in Batman underwear declares. “This our cossumes.”

“Yeah. We yike our unnawares,” his nearly identical counterpart, sporting Spiderman briefs, announces.

“Speaking of underwear,” Ronnie exclaims. “Does this mean you two are finally using the toilet?”

“Not me,” Spiderman Undies proudly proclaims. “I juss yike to water the trees.”

“Only Owen pees outside.” Batman, who I now know through process of elimination to be Oliver, gives his lookalike the stank eye. “I shitted in the potty yike a big boy, sissy.”

Where I’ve been silently observing their sweet little reunion, that proclamation does me in. I’m bowled over, in hysterics.

“So?” Owen counters. “Mommy still gots to wipe you butt.”

Shaking her head, Veronica dusts off her freshly grass-stained chinos as she rises to her feet. Her eyes find mine before giving the two heathens a pointed look. “Told you they were trouble.”

“We not shrouble,” Owen argues. “We juss *coonasses*.”

I feel like I’ve entered the twilight zone. Not just because these two are complete ruffians, but because they’re being raised in the same household that produced the khaki queen herself.

“Well, I’m Aiden,” I say, squatting to introduce myself. “I’ve never met a coonass before. And tonight I get to meet two.” I shake each of their grimy little hands. “It’s an honor.”

“Are you Wonnie’s boyfwend?” Oliver folds his arms over his grimy chest.

I clear my throat, wondering if I should be intimidated by his imposing stance. “I am.”

“You yike to wessle?” He puffs up like a little rooster, primed for the attack.

“Sure.”

“Take off your shirt and your pants den, and yets get weady to wumbleeee!”

“Not gonna happen...” Veronica’s face is damn near purple when she grips the little boy by the arm, pulling him aside for a stern talking-to.

“Daddy said you have anger pwblems.” Owen’s eyes are fixed on my cast. “I don’t fink he’s gonna be happy you’re here.”

Apparently, I’ve been a popular topic around this place. Not that it surprises me. “Well, I guess I’ll just have to be on my best behavior, won’t I?”

“Good yuck,” he giggles, looking toward the house at something he finds very interesting.

I follow his lead, finding a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, a well-groomed beard to match, and a much colder version of Cherry’s baby blues lurking in quiet observation.

“Veronica Rose...” the man calls out.

“Oh, hey, Dad.” She cuts her lecture short, rushing to my side. “I brought someone along I’d like you to meet.”

I reach over and grab the hand that's nervously smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from the front of her sweater, giving her fingers a gentle squeeze.

When her father doesn't respond, she continues with the introduction. "This is Aiden...m-my boyfriend."

It's still so weird to hear someone refer to me as such.

"Funny," her father muses. "I don't remember being asked if—"

"Is that my Ronnie Rose?" An elderly woman with a full head of white hair enters the yard through an inside gate connecting it to the neighboring property. The sly look she's sporting leaves me with no doubt her interruption was strategically timed. *Awesome, an ally.*

"Maw-Maw!" Cherry abandons me in a cloud of dust in her haste to greet her grandmother.

While the women engage in a happy embrace, I complete the trek to the front porch, extending my left hand for her father's. "Mr. Vanderbilt." I nod, trying not to wince at his firm grip. The man is massive. He's got to be pushing seven-foot and built like a freaking ox. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Wish I could say the same," he grumps. "Wasn't aware my daughter was bringing company."

"It was a spur of the moment decision, sir. Ronnie invited me to come along last night." I smile, bringing my hand behind my back to flex out the beginnings of a cramp. "But I don't want to impose on your family. I'm sure I can find a hotel nearby."

"That sounds like an excellent idea to me."

“Great,” Cherry says breezily, materializing at my side like a sneaky little ninja. “It’s getting late, so just make me a list of what times you’re up for visitors. That way we’ll know when we’re permitted to swing by.”

Her dad’s back stiffens. “We?”

“Yes, *we*.” When she rolls her eyes at her father, I kind of wish a sink hole would form right where we’re standing and gobble us up. “I hope you don’t think I’ve invited my *boyfriend* home for the holidays only to send him off to spend them in a hotel by himself.”

“We would never expect you to do that.” Veronica’s mother is next to arrive on the scene. Olivia’s a willowy woman, with strawberry blonde hair and a clear distaste for her husband’s bullshit.

I like her instantly.

“The hell we wouldn—”

She cuts Victor off with a scathing look. “You will not ruin our Thanksgiving with your boorish behavior.”

“What if...” the little granny interrupts, “this handsome fella sleeps over at my house in one of the guest rooms?”

“Absolutely not.” Ronnie’s dad scrubs a hand through his beard. “I’m not going to have some strange man sleeping over at my mother’s house.”

“He’s not a stranger.” Cherry visibly tenses. “He’s *my boyfriend*.”

“Who you’ve known all of five minutes,” he counters. “And you’re already not acting like yourself.”

“Two weeks,” my girl mutters.

“I think Melba’s solution is perfect; and since he’s so concerned...” Olivia smiles wickedly. “Victor will also spend the holiday in one of her guest rooms. Then he can be there just in case Ronnie brought home an ax murderer.”

“I really don’t mind sleeping in a hot—” I start.

“It’s been settled,” Veronica clips. “You and my father will sleep over at Maw-Maw Melba’s.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I bite back a grin, giving my best effort not to laugh at the played look on Victor’s face. “Why didn’t you tell me how feisty you Cajun ladies get when you’re together?”

“A girl’s gotta have a few secrets.” Cherry fans her sooty lashes. The flirtation filling me with the urge to kiss that sassy mouth.

“Holy shiii—*taki* mushrooms!” The loud interruption has us all whirling around to find that yet another sister has arrived. This one through the front gate. Her short shorts and crop top have me doing a doubletake. Not because I’m interested, but because I expected khaki and cashmere as far as the eye could see. I was imagining a modern-day Von Trapp family from *The Sound of Music* and got a little *Meet the Fockers* thrown into the mix.

“Oh, thank God you’re here.” Cherry sighs with relief.

The strawberry blonde who resembles Olivia more than anyone I’ve met thus far cackles. “Don’t tell me Dad’s being Dad.”

“So Dad.” Cherry gives her head a shake before kissing her polar opposite on the cheek.

“Victoria.” The name serves as an exasperated greeting from the man in question. “So glad you could make it.”

She sends him a cheeky grin. “Would’ve been here sooner if I’d known Ronnie was bringing a man home!”

The girl walks over to embrace her prickly father without an ounce of trepidation.

“This recent behavior of Veronica’s has your influence written all over it,” he grunts.

“Gosh, I hope so.” She whirls around, smiling conspiratorially at my companion. “Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“Vicky, this is Aiden.” Cherry smooths a hand over my back. “*Babe*,” she says, referring to me as such for the first time and obviously as a means to irk her father, “this is my older sister, Victoria.”

“Call me Vicky,” she insists, rising to her tippytoes to wrap me in a one-armed embrace. “Don’t mind Victor,” she whisper-shouts while eyeing him over my shoulder. “He’s a whole lotta bark.”

“That’s it.” The man throws his hands out in resignation. “The rest of the girls will commute to college while living at home. These two are ruined, and all we can do is hope to save the others.”

Melba cackles. “They’re perfect angels.”

His scoff calls bullshit.

“You’ve done a beautiful job of raising ’em, son,” his mother commends. “But you gotta let these girls go out into the world and spread their wings.”

“Maybe,” he says with a harrumph. “But I don’t have to like it.”

“Mind taking my bags up to my room, Pops?” Veronica smiles sweetly at her father, like she and her girl posse didn’t just railroad the man into spending his nights at his mother’s house because he was giving me a problem. “I wanna walk Aiden next door and get him settled at Maw-Maw’s.”

He grabs her backpack, slogs it over a shoulder then lowers the handle and lifts her roller off the ground. “I’ll carry your stuff up, since your *man* is *incapacitated*.” Victor gives me a snide smirk. “But that boy can leave his bag by the door. Dinner is on the table and getting cold.”

I follow Victor through his mother’s house, a Gothic cottage, smaller in size to Ronnie’s family home but equal in opulence.

“Is this the house you grew up in?” I ask, trying to make conversation.

“Was raised in the house we live in now,” he says, inserting a skeleton key into the iron knob of the last door on the left. He gives it a twist and pops it open. “My father decided to downsize when this house came up for sale.” He ushers me in. “That was about twenty years ago, when Vicky and Ronnie were babies.”

“And you bought it...”

He nods. “I trust you know how to make up a bed?”

“I can manage.”

“Room’s been closed up for a while, but there are fresh sheets and bedding in a zippered bag in the closet.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be in the room next door, so don’t even think about sneaking my daughter in,” he warns on his way out.

I retrieve my phone to send Cherry a message, finding she’s already beat me to it.

Cherry: Still alive?

Me: Much to your father’s dismay.

Cherry: I’m sorry today was so awful.

Me: It wasn’t awful.

Cherry: No?

Me: I really enjoyed meeting your family. Especially the boys and Mrs. Melba.

Cherry: My father is a tyrant.

Me: He just loves his little girl.

Cherry: How can you be so nice? He was awful to you.

Me: Because any man worth a damn wouldn’t want his daughter to end up with me. He knows you deserve better, and I know it too. Why would I fault the guy for that? He’s just acting the way a father should.

Cherry: I wish you could see yourself the way I do. The way everyone close to you does.

“Knock knock.”

I peer up from the screen to find Mrs. Melba standing in the arched doorway, lightly tapping a knuckle on the wood frame. “Hey.” I set the phone aside, giving the sweet woman my full attention. “Need something?”

“You know how to play Rummy?”

“Sure do.”

She pumps a fist in the air. “Drink Miller Lite?”

“When there’s nothing stronger,” I tease.

“Well then,” she says, walking toward the closet. “How ’bout we get this bed made up and head down to the kitchen for some cards and weak beers?”

“Let me do that,” I insist, attempting to take the fitted sheet from her hands, but she yanks it away.

“Nonsense. You’re a guest, and one with a broken arm at that. My Victor would lose his mind if he knew I wasn’t behaving like a proper hostess.”

“I think ol’ Vic would be more than fine if you sent me out to sleep with the hogs.” I chuckle to myself.

“Victor *Senior*. My late husband.” Melba smiles over at me while tucking the top sheet between the mattress and box springs. “Been gone going on three years now. That man loved to entertain.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Me too, sweet boy.” Lost to her thoughts, she completes the task in silence, topping the bed with a patchwork quilt and stuffing two feather pillows into matching cases. “We were married fifty-three years.” She smiles wistfully. “And my gosh, no one on earth got on my nerves more than that man.” She titters. “Not even Victor Junior...and you’ve met him.”

“Ahh. He’s not so bad.”

“If you say so...” She sends me a knowing smirk. “Those Vanderbilt men mean well...” She waves me toward the door,

indicating that I should follow her out. “You in love with my little Ronnie Rose?”

Her question has me wheezing for my next breath. “Uh,” I hedge, not wanting to lie to this sweet old woman. “I mean, it’s still new. But I definitely like her a whole lot.”

“You’re honest,” she says. “I respect that. You know, honesty is one of the most vital qualities in a potential spouse.”

“Spouse?” Victor pops up behind us, saving me from a conversation that’s swiftly headed downhill. “Slow down, Momma. The two *just* met.”

“Thought your surly ass was in bed for the night,” the old woman snips.

“I was, but then I heard Aiden leaving his room with you.” His brows shoot upward as he pulls out the chair across from mine, seating himself at the table. “Seeing as I’m here to protect you from this potential ax murderer here, I figured I should make my way down too.”

“Well,” Melba sasses, opening the fridge she just shut to retrieve a third beer. “You wasn’t invited.”

“You’re my momma,” he says. “I don’t need an invitation.”

“That’s right.” Melba pops the tabs off our beers with an opener before handing them to us. “I am your momma,” she says, retrieving a wooden spoon that’s hanging by a leather strap on the wall. She holds it out, pointing the round end at him. “Don’t you think for one minute I won’t break this on your behind if you’re rude to my company.”

I laugh at the exchange between the two, happy to have the heat off myself for even a moment as I take a long pull from

my beer.

“So, Aiden,” Victor says, leaning back in his chair, “you come from a big family too?”

“No, sir.” I force a smile, the rest of my face unmoving, apart from a slight twitch in my left eye. “Just me. I, uh...grew up in foster care.”

He nods, with his lips pressed together in a frown. “Tough way to grow up.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t ideal.”

“Well, you’ve turned out all right,” Melba interjects, placing a bowl of Chex Mix on the table. “Speaks a lot to your character, that you had such a rough start and still managed to become a huge success.”

I thank her for her kind words and shove a pretzel into my mouth, crunching on it as I begin shuffling the cards, beyond ready to get this game started.

Victor eyes the deck, then me, his gaze sharpening. “You cheat?”

“Only when I know I can get away with it,” I taunt.

“Good answer.”

As play begins, the chatter mercifully moves to less serious topics.

The more drinks he consumes, the looser Victor’s tongue becomes and before long he’s even cracking a few jokes.

I’m surprised to find the man is actually quite skilled at Rummy, displaying an impressive poker face as time and again he chipmunks his cards, leading us to believe we’ve got

a shot before laying them all down at once and sticking it to us without a hint of regret.

He and Melba crack up when I explain his daughter did not inherit his valuable skill.

As we reach the end of our third game, Melba rises from her chair, stretching her arms. “Well, it’s getting late,” she says. “We should all turn in. Got a lot of food prep to do tomorrow.”

Victor nods in agreement, and I stand up as well, feeling a little unsteady on my feet. “Thanks for having me, Mrs. Melba.” I pick up my collection of empty beer bottles and toss them into the trash.

“Was a pleasure, son.”

Victor claps me on the back as we shuffle down the hall. “Ever been froggin’?” he slurs.

“Been whatn’?”

“Fishin’ for frogs,” he explains. “Going tomorrow night in the basin with an old buddy of mine while the women do their Thanksgiving cooking. I was thinking you and Ronnie might come along. That girl loves her some fried frog legs.”

I have no idea what this kind of fishing entails, but there’s no way in hell I’m refusing an invitation from the man who a few hours ago was ready to send my ass packing.

“Sounds like fun,” I say, veering off into my room.

Victor’s grin seems a tad mischievous, but it’s probably just me being cynical. “Great. We’ll head out about nine p.m.”

“That late?”

“Gotta catch ‘em while they’re croakin’,” he cackles, his bloodshot eyes creasing in the corners.

“Lookin’ forward to it,” I say, shutting the door to my room.

I strip down and climb into bed.

Remembering I left Cherry on read earlier, I fire off a quick text.

Me: Just got through playing cards and drinking with your father and grandmother. I think he might even be starting to not hate me.

Her response is nearly instant, despite it being almost two in the morning.

Cherry: Why do you think that?

Me: He invited us along to go frogging tomorrow night.

Cherry: Of course, he did...

Me: Why do I get the feeling you’re about to tell me this trip has nothing to do with bonding?

Cherry: You’ll bond, all right, while getting up close and personal with the swamp creatures.

Me: You trying to scare me off, Cherry? I’m a man. Ain’t afraid of a few slimy frogs.

Cherry: Oh, no. I was referring to the slithering variety.

Me: Not gonna let a few snakes keep me from a good time.

Cherry: Just make sure you tuck your dick in tight. That bad boy would make great gator food.

CHAPTER 13

VERONICA

“HOLY SHIT!” Aiden’s eyes bug out as he swats blindly around his face. “Fuckin’ mosquitos are the size of bats.”

“Told you to wear bug spray.” Dad gives his friend Wallace a wry grin as the old fisherman steers us in an aluminum skiff through broad-trunked cypress trees draped in thick Spanish moss. Their headlights shine like a beacon, cutting through the velvety darkness.

The beauty of the swamp is deceiving—lush greenery and tall grasses protrude from a thick blanket of mist, obscuring the algae-covered water. A light fog descends, giving off a sort of mystical feel. The further we venture from civilization through a series of canals, each narrower than the last, while dodging knobby cypress knees, the more picturesque it becomes. Mother Nature seduces us with a gentle chorus of chirping crickets and cicadas, filling the air with a calming melody. Along with the sound of the water gently lapping against the side of the boat, it could almost be considered romantic. You know, if not for the drunk, middle-aged coonasses heading this ship.

“Figured I’d just put some on when we got there,” Aiden says.

Having also warned him about the skeeters, I raise an eyebrow, retrieving one of the many cans of bug repellent

from my bag. “Hold your breath.” I give it a good shake before drowning him in a cloud of the pungent spray.

Aiden coughs and sputters, taking a few minutes to locate clean air to catch his breath. “Thanks, Cherry,” he says as the swarm of blood suckers buzzing around him begins to disperse.

My nosy father latches onto the nickname without missing a beat. “Who the hell’s Cherry?”

I shoot Aiden a warning look. “Just something silly he started calling me,” I say quickly. “You know...because I embarrass easily.”

Aiden nods his agreement, allowing his gaze to linger a little longer than is decent for present company. “Girl’s always red in the face.”

Like a blushing virgin... My cheeks flame at the recent memory that suddenly seems so long ago.

“See?” My pretend boyfriend brushes a bent knuckle over my heated flesh.

I flinch at the contact, not expecting the current of electricity that jolts through me despite sitting right across from my dad. It’s all becoming so *intense*—each time he touches me, this thing between us seems less of an act. I’m constantly reminding myself that this connection I’m imagining is make-believe and not my every dream brought to life. I don’t know how I’ll manage to just turn it off once this game we’re playing reaches its end.

Aiden’s hand remains on my cheek for a beat before he pulls it away, clearing his throat while my father looks on with his lips pinched in discontent.

The skiff grinds to a halt, breaking up the awkward moment, and Wallace instructs us to put on our gear.

Aiden and I don our lights. Then, while I fit a waterproof cast cover over his hurt arm to protect it from the elements, the old fisherman begins combing the area, pointing out frogs. “Little one over there,” he says, concentrating his beam on a cluster of lily pads. “See how his eyes shine white under the light?”

“Yes, sir.” Excitement leaps from Aiden’s every word as he too begins scouring the surrounding marsh for prey while slipping into his waist-high wader boots.

The unofficial uniform of the Cajun fisherman looks entirely too sexy on the man. If this is what we women had to look forward to, you’d find a lot more of us out here roughing it for sure.

“What you really wanna look for are the red eyes.” There’s a sharp crack of metal as Dad pops open another cold one. “Those are the real monsters.” He spreads his hands about a foot wide.

“Red eyes,” Aiden repeats, making a mental note, “got it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” I grit, glaring daggers at my father. “If you see red, *run*. Those are gators.”

“You weren’t joking?” he rasps into my ear. “Thought you were just trying to scare me with that whole ‘gator bait’ comment.”

I lean in close to him, my voice hushed but urgent. “Why do you think I’m not getting in that murky water? Or why I stopped coming along on these froggin’ trips years ago?”

He lets out an easy shrug, his eyes glinting with mischief. “Thought you didn’t wanna get dirty.”

“That’s part of it,” I admit with a chuckle. “But mostly, it’s because this place scares the bejesus out of me.”

“If it’s that bad, why’d you come along tonight?”

“To film you,” I declare boldly.

“Film me? What the hell for?”

“Your fans,” I explain, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek before taking the phone from his hand. “Can’t exactly go into the water with this.” I wink. “I’ll hold onto it for safe keeping.”

“Whatever. He rolls his eyes, rising to his feet. “Not like you can get into it anyway,” he says before leaving to join the men at the front of the boat.

That’s what he thinks...

Frogs croak incessantly from the dense bank, unknowingly boosting the morale of their predators.

The three are getting along *swimmingly*. And while I’m sure Dad and his lifelong friend have every intention of introducing Aiden to the Cajun lifestyle *properly*, I’m confident they’d never do anything to cause him physical harm. So, I make myself scarce, giving them a little of that bonding time Aiden was so eager for.

“All right,” Wallace says, making his way back toward me to man the motor. “Gonna roll up to that big one on the lilies over yonder. You watch how Victor snatches him up, boy. Next one’s yours.”

“Yes sir.” Aiden gives the grizzly man a salute, and I move a little closer for a better view of the action.

Dad feeds the newcomer instructions as we edge nearer. “Now, don’t be afraid to grab ’em tight. Those slimy fuckers

will slip right outta your hands if you don't."

"Gotcha."

Aiden looks on, fascinated, as Dad nabs a big fatty with one hand.

My father's voice is full of exhilaration as he lugs his catch over to the rectangular metal cage, demonstrating to my *not-boyfriend* how to trap them inside by pressing down on the hatch.

"Now, I don't wanna hear shit about that bum hand as justification for missin'. You just saw me do it with one."

Aiden tips his head back, guzzling down what's left of his beer. "To be fair, sir, you did use your right. Just remember, I'm not a leftie."

Dad snorts, clapping him on the back. "Well, I am."

"Fuck," Aiden groans, watching his likely excuse go up in flames. "Guess I'll just have to rely on beginner's luck, then." He chuckles, running his fingers through his hair.

I can't help but admire his casual confidence—that carefree laugh. Everything about him screams "don't take life too seriously." I wish I could be more like that—more like him.

The boat rocks as Aiden moves to the left side where Mr. Wallace points out his intended target.

"Aiden!" I call with the screen of his phone aimed at just the right angle to capture the face recognition required to break in.

"Ruthless," he blows out, laughing through a sigh. "If you're gonna go live, do it on Insta."

“Will do.” Making haste, I open the app, initiating a livestream before he can change his mind. Then, I give a brief intro, informing the thousands of fans continuously rolling in of where we are and the tomfoolery they’re about to witness.

The skiff cuts through the marshy muck, bringing Aiden’s outstretched hand closer to the massive bullfrog his sights are set on.

I zoom in, eager to capture his first attempt on video, when a swarm of wasps that must’ve made their hive in one of the mounds of moss we just disturbed fly straight at him. The lamp strapped around his head attracts them like a beacon.

“Aiden!” I scream when he launches himself overboard to escape their wrath. It takes everything in me to maintain my composure when he’s hit with the realization that the water is only waist deep. Aiden reminds me of a cartoon character running in slow motion through quicksand. Only, every few steps, he gets tripped up, faceplanting as his feet sink into the slippery sludge.

Once he’s about five or so yards out, Aiden whirls around, wet hair sticking to his forehead as he looks this way and that to be sure his attackers have given up the chase.

I can no longer contain my laughter, though I do feel a tad guilty for finding his panicked expression so amusing. “You okay?” I ask, trying to keep the camera steady while giggling uncontrollably.

“Fuck, that was close,” he pants, choking on the rank water that smells of decaying fish guts as he starts making his way back to the boat. “Hope y’all enjoyed that as much as Cherry here did.” He sends his viewers a flirty wink, reaching up for a low-lying branch for leverage to pull himself back into the boat.

“That’s a water moccasin!” Dad’s warning comes just as Aiden’s hand clamps around the snake’s belly. *Too late.*

The phone clatters against the deck, a loud clang ringing out as it falls from my shaking hands. Paralyzed by fear, I watch in horror as Aiden flings the deadly serpent out into the darkness then struggles to pull himself back in the boat now that his heavy wader boots are filled to the brim with swamp water.

Dad and Wallace launch into action, each grabbing an arm and hauling him back to safety.

With my heart in my toes, I rush to him, ignoring the soaked and rancid mess that awaits. I fling my arms around his neck, squeezing him tightly before going over his body, looking for any signs of injury. “Are you all right? Did it bite you?”

His face splits into an enormous smile. He looks every bit the junkie, eager for his next fix. “I’m fine.”

The force of his racing heart vibrates against my chest, each thump echoing the excitement and fear rushing through his veins. “You’re crazy.”

He laughs loudly in response. “Told ya I wasn’t afraid.”

“Yeah? Well, you stink.” I’m both referring to the smell and his complete lack of concern for his own safety.

“So do you,” he teases, tucking a tuft of wind-tossed hair over my shoulder with his grimy hand.

My gaze gets lost in his deep brown eyes, my thoughts swirling and then disappearing altogether. “Yeah, well,” I say finally, breaking the trance with a small shake of my head, “That’s your fault.”

He smirks, raising a brow, which causes my breath to become lodged in my throat. His eyes sparkle with mischief when he says, “I believe *you* threw yourself at *me*, doll.”

I twist my fingers into the fabric of his shirt, my voice trembling with anger and residual dread. “What were you thinking, jumping overboard like that?” I pound a fist against his chest, still coming down from my panic. “What would you have done if it was a gator instead? Don’t ever do anything so stu—”

Cold, trembling lips crash to mine, cutting off my scolding. Surprised by the sudden intimacy, I let out a little gasp before melting into his embrace. Our bodies press together, the wet fabric of our clothes clinging to every curve and contour. His muscles bulge beneath my eager fingertips, the rough callouses on his hand scraping along my skin. We’re desperate and unbridled, pouring every ounce of pent-up energy into each other.

The taste of marsh mud lingers on his lips, but it doesn’t stop me from returning his passion with equal fervor.

Aiden’s hands slide down my back, pulling me closer as our tongues dance with an intensity that leaves me aching for more.

My father’s throaty growl snaps our connection as if it were no more than a dry-rot twig. My cheeks burn with a mixture of embarrassment and desire as we swiftly spring apart. “We aren’t gonna fill many bellies with one frog,” he says gruffly, avoiding our eyes.

“Then let’s get back to it.” Aiden’s voice is hoarse with unfulfilled desire, but still holding that excited edge. “Just had to get my feet wet,” he says, making fun of himself. His gaze

drops to the water puddling around his boots. “I’m ready now.”

CHAPTER 14

AIDEN

“OH. My. God. That live last night!”

I glance up from the fryer that Victor has me watching while he skins and batters last night’s catch, finding Cherry’s older sister, Vickie, beaming from ear to ear.

“My manager wasn’t quite so delighted.” I can’t help but grin, remembering the dozens of voicemails and texts that were waiting for me when we returned home at nearly four this morning and I plugged my dead phone into a charger.

Anika was frantic. However, once I got ahold of her and she realized I didn’t die after that live cut off, the girl was furious enough to kill me herself.

She cringes. “I can imagine that for someone who isn’t from around here, that must’ve been horrifying.”

“The video cutting off with your sister’s ear-piercing screams didn’t help.”

“Sorry.” The woman in question clenches her jaw. “Think she’s gonna fire me?”

“Nah.” I smile down at her. “All anyone’s talking about is how adorable we are and how nice it is to see me so *in love*.” I try not to choke on the words for the benefit of the mission.

“That isn’t all they’re talking about.” Cherry folds her arms across her chest, pushing her tits up in the process. “I saw quite a few unflattering comments from your fans.”

“Those were directed toward you.” I give her a playful wink while nudging her shoulder. “The label won’t care about that.”

Ronnie’s jaw drops, her storm-filled eyes narrowing into an indignant expression. “Well, that’s rude.”

I press a kiss to her pouty lips. “Anyone ever tell ya you’re cute when you’re angry?”

“I’m not angry,” she lies.

“Fine,” I concede, titmatized by the rosy mounds of flesh that are heaving with her labored breaths. “You’re fucking adorable when you’re jealous.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“It was.” My teeth clamp down on my lower lip while I drink her in. “But I can do much better if you didn’t take it as such.”

Her head bobs. “Let’s hear it then, Romeo.”

Victoria clears her throat loudly. “I, uh...think that’s my queue to go check the pies I just put in the oven.” She whispers something into Ronnie’s ear, sending a rush of warmth flooding her sister’s cheeks before hurrying off.

I glance around her parents’ back yard, finding the twins and younger sisters tossing a football while her father’s still busily de-pantsing the frogs—that’s what he calls it when he strips ‘em down to the meat with one swift pull of his skinning pliers—with his back toward us. The scent of roasting turkey wafting through the air is a reminder that the older women are

still inside working their culinary magic and I'm free to flatter away my pupil's insecurities.

My breath quickens as my gaze caresses each of her curves.

The little debutante is appropriately covered in a knee-length dress, camel in color, with soft fabric loosely hugging her frame. It's not remotely indecent, but the way I've already undressed her in my head certainly is.

With a lone finger, I trace the back of her arm, my touch feather light, effectively sending a jolt through us both. I grasp a handful of her golden hair, lifting it to my nose to take in its sweet aroma. Her stare holds me captive as I declare: "You are breathtaking. A goddamned vision."

She gulps, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

Every nerve in my body jumps in response. I can't stop picturing that mouth wrapped around my cock. Imagining her body writhing beneath me.

I came here fully intending to put our lessons on hold until our return home, but who the hell am I kidding? My resolve has always been weak at best.

"You are so fucking sexy," I rasp. "I'm finding it increasingly difficult to focus on anything else whenever you're near."

"Th-that's pretty good," she says in a heady whisper. "A little excessive, but I'm all about the mush."

"I wish," I growl, tipping her face up toward mine with a finger tucked beneath her chin, "that I were exaggerating, Cherry." My chest tightens as I stare deep into her baby blues, earnest and unwavering in my conviction. My gaze travels over the curves of her face, the delicate shape of her nose, her

soft lips quivering as she awaits my next words. “No woman has ever commanded my complete attention—” I shake my head, unable to stop the word vomit. “No one’s ever driven me wild the way you do, Cherry Girl.”

“Aiden...” Her eyes grow wide and bright, shimmering beneath the sun that’s beating down on us. “K-kiss me.”

“Oh, thank God,” I rasp, welcoming the chance to shut myself up. My lips graze the soft, warmth of her cheek. She tastes like sunshine and laughter.

Shutting my eyes, I release a shuddering breath as I lay kisses along the edges of her mouth, savoring each one as it echoes with the reminder that these moments are nothing more than an illusion. I’m a goddamned glutton—torturing myself in sampling another man’s forever. But fuck if I won’t revel in this little taste of heaven while I can, consequences be damned.

My name tumbles from her lips in a winded whisper that shatters every rational thought I possess while further awakening this fierce desire to possess her. To claim and to keep her.

If I could rewrite the story of my life—change who I am at my core—and become a man worthy of something so precious, I’d leap at the chance.

To put a ring on her finger...

My baby in her belly...

“What the hell?” Ronnie’s father bellows my sentiments with regard to the intrusive thoughts that have somehow crept into my subconscious.

I release my hold on his daughter, swiping the back of a hand over my lips while my own heartbeat pounds in my ears.

Once my head has cleared, I find the irritated man, his face set in a deep scowl, scooping the forgotten batch of frog legs, now blackened to a crumbling crisp and billowing smoke, from the grease. “Shit.” I wince. “Sorry about that. Got, uh...distracted.”

Cherry’s muffled giggle tingles along my spine, adding to the confusion running rampant inside me. *Marriage and babies?* What voodoo spell has this place put over me?

“Seem to do a lot of that with my daughter around,” the man grumps. Just when I think he’s about to let me have it, Victor chuckles to himself. “Good thing we had such a bountiful catch, or these grismies would be *your* dinner.”

Now there’s a word I’ve never heard. “Gree what?”

“Grismies are what we Cajuns call the stuff that sticks to the bottom of the pan when you fry things,” Veronica explains. “That’s about all ya got left of that batch of frog legs.”

“Thanks to you,” I tease. “Too pretty for your own damn good. Go help ya momma and dem,” I say, giving my best effort at imitating the local dialect.

“Are you trying to ship me off to the kitchen?” Her tone is playful with an edge of indignation.

“If you want any of this to turn out edible.”

“Fine,” she groans. “I can tell when I’m not wanted.”

Not wanted? My dick says otherwise.

“Don’t be a drama queen, Ron.” Victor shoos her away with a swooping motion. “Give us men some time to get to know one another.”

For over an hour, Cherry’s dad keeps me entertained with a series of tales featuring his early childhood. Apparently, before

the family's big move to the famed Garden District, which came as a result of his father's oil and gas company's rapid success, Victor was a swamp rat through and through. He refers to himself as such, as if it were the highest of compliments. As he reminisces on "harder times" and growing up in a two-room shack on the levee with such fondness, I find myself wanting to purchase a place of my own in the Henderson swamp. It's clear that that marsh was and still is his favorite playground. The little taste I had last night was enough for me to understand why.

When it's my turn to share, I skip right over the depressing shit, focusing on high school and the band. On the dumb luck that Nick's washed-up rock star uncle, Jax Potter, actually came through and landed us our first record deal. From there, I explain how things spiraled out of control in the best of ways. Everyone wanted a piece of us, and we were young and hungry enough to give it to them. Deal after deal, tour after tour, we lived and breathed The Rhett Taylor Band, until only recently taking a step back and putting down roots in Nashville with the purchase of Booze & Bad Decisions.

Before I know it, the frogs are all fried to a golden crisp and we're tidying up to go inside.

"I may have misjudged you, son," Victor says as we make for the house, arms loaded down. "I've never seen my Ronnie Rose so happy."

"Yeah?" My cheeks warm as I flash him a smile. "It's mutual, sir." I gulp hard at the potential ramifications of his statement.

My stomach twists and turns as the realization hits that I may not be alone in becoming more attached to this arrangement than either of us intended. It's my greatest hope

that Victor has simply fallen prey to some expert acting on his daughter's part. Because it would kill me to be the bastard responsible for her first heartbreak.

"You've brought out a fire in my little girl that I haven't seen since she was waist high." He chuckles to himself. "She really seems to have matured since we saw her last."

Oh, she's matured all right...

"I think we each bring something to the table the other is lacking," I say. "She keeps me in line." I don't dare divulge my contribution to this unconventional arrangement.

"I can see that." He shoves the screened door to the back porch open with an elbow, then pauses in the threshold. "Whaddayuh say we call a truce?"

"Were we fighting?"

"Oh, hell yeah."

I snort. "Then, I'd like that."

He stares after me, expectantly.

I look around trying to determine what it is he's after.

"This is where you ask permission to date my daughter, boy." His words are slow, dripping with authority.

"Oh." He's not messing around. "Uh...sh-shouldn't that be her decision to make?" I ask, not wanting to involve him any deeper in our lie.

Guilt is not a sentiment I'm overly familiar with, but the more I get to know these people, the worse I feel about deceiving them.

"Of course, it's her choice." He shifts the hot pan of fried food to the other arm. "This is for my own pride. Now, show

me some damn respect so I can talk about it with all my buddies, and we can get in there and eat.”

A smile tugs on the corner of my mouth. “I would be honored, sir, to have your blessing to continue seeing your daughter.”

He throws back a hearty laugh, shaking his head. “Damn, boy. You’re sweatin’.”

“It’s hotter than Satan’s balls out here,” I argue, unwilling to acknowledge my obvious discomfort.

“What if I say no?” He cocks a salt and pepper brow in challenge.

I shrug. “Probably would make Christmas a little uncomfortable for you.”

Victor barks a wheezing laugh before sobering. “Hurt my little Ronnie Rose and you’ll be answering to me.” His tone leaves no mistake; he means what he says.

“I’d never *intentionally* hurt her.”

He’s still nodding, contemplating my response, when two cotton-topped tornadoes come careening through the back door, nearly causing us both to lose the food we worked so hard on as they whiz by.

“Hey!” Victor shouts after the twins. “Watch what the hell you’re doin—”

I take the opportunity to slip away, leaving him to reprimand his children in peace.

The most mouthwatering aromas fill my nostrils as I enter the kitchen and take an inventory of the spread. A golden, roasted turkey sits in the center of the island countertop, along with a picnic ham sliced perfectly thin, creamy mashed

potatoes, homemade green bean casserole, steaming bread rolls, and every pie imaginable.

After setting the tray of frog legs alongside the other meats, I reach for one of Mrs. Melba's Cajun candies—a delicious concoction she introduced me to this morning, comprised mostly of sugar, corn syrup, and pecans called a praline—when I feel a jab to the asshole that has me nearly jumping out of my skin.

“What the hell—?”

Cherry gives the offending finger a wiggle, her lips curling into a mischievous smile. “Serves you right.” That smug grin of hers quickly transforms into an exaggerated frown. “Shipping me off like a child.”

I move in closer, my body inches away from hers, and pin her against the refrigerator. “You're not mad at me, doll?”

Ronnie's delicate shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. She looks away briefly before refocusing her leery gaze on mine. “Depends on what you two talked about.”

“We have his blessing,” I clip with a forced smile, taking a step back when I hear the door creek open behind me, signaling her father's imminent arrival.

Cherry's face twists in anger, her eyes flashing like they're about to ignite. “He didn't?”

I nod slowly, my gaze locked onto hers, hoping she'll be able to read in my expression that I'd rather she not make a big deal out of this. “It's fine.”

“I'm so sorry.” Poor girl looks like she could blow chunks. “I can't believe he—”

“What’re you two lovebirds whispering about over there?” Victor asks, a smirk flirting with the corners of his lips as he sets his tray down on the side of mine.

“As if you don’t already know,” Cherry snaps, grabbing two plates from a large stack and handing one to me. “I can’t believe you made Aiden do that.”

Mischief dances in his eyes as he waves her concern away. “It’s a rite of passage.”

“It’s archaic and rude.” Her reaction is a bit extreme, which I’m sure is due to the nature of our situation. If we were a real couple, as her family believes we are, I don’t think she’d be nearly this upset.

“It’s no big deal,” I insist softly, but my words are drowned out by the rest of the family piling into the room, grabbing plates of their own and chattering loudly among themselves as they fill them.

Cherry and I fall in line, loading up and heading down the hall into the formal dining room, where an enormous twelve-chair table awaits. The walls are covered in burgundy paper with a gold foil design that reminds me of a fancy hotel lobby. Ornate place settings with antique sterling flatware paint a Hallmark-worthy scene.

We take our seats, labeled with fancy handcrafted name cards, courtesy of Veda, the youngest Vanderbilt daughter, and her talent in art and calligraphy, which Olivia spends a full five minutes bragging on.

“Incredible work,” I agree when Ronnie’s mom solicits my opinion. “I can’t even make proper bubble letters.”

Veda giggles, hiding behind her hand. “I could teach you your name this evening if you want?”

I send her a wink across the table. “How much patience ya got?” I ask, cracking the rest of the adults up.

“Like, a lot,” she assures me.

“Then I’ll give it a shot...as long as you promise not to yell at me.”

“Thought we was gunna wessle,” Owen interrupts, slumping down in his chair and poking his lip out.

I rear back, feigning insult that he’d assume me to be backing out. “We are...unless you’re afraid.”

“I ain’t scarred.” His beady blue eyes narrow to slits.

Melba cuts in, inviting us all to hold hands and bow our heads while she says grace.

I feel like a fraud, giving thanks to a God who’s certainly not been present in my life, but I’d never disrespect their beliefs. So, I fold my hands and lower my gaze to my lap, while trying super hard to clear my mind of any negative thoughts. Ya know, just in case she’s really in with the big guy, and he happens to be listening. Wouldn’t want to add more blemishes to my record.

The sound of silverware clinking against dishes fills the room once Mrs. Melba’s emphatic “Amen” signals the end of her prayer.

“It’s time, boy,” Victor announces, returning from the kitchen with one of the trays of frog that he explicitly forbid anyone from touching until “later.” Later, being now, I guess. “Bite it right off the bone.”

He demonstrates, holding a fat leg up to his mouth and chomping down without actually taking a bite.

“All right,” I say, laughing at the ceremony he’s making of the whole thing. “Here goes.”

Cherry stares after me, her eagerness making it impossible not to laugh as I bite into it.

“Tastes like chicken,” I say, after chewing and swallowing.

“Exactly!” Victor beams.

I shake my head, using my tongue to clean my teeth before speaking. “Then why go to all the trouble? Why not just eat chicken?”

He scoffs at my logic. “You ever had that much fun catchin’ a chicken?”

“Can’t say I have,” I admit, though I’ve never actually tried catching any of my food bare-handed before last night.

By the end of the meal, I have plans to wrestle with the twins, a calligraphy lesson with Veda, and an Insta live with Vanessa, so she can brag about me to all of her friends. It should come as no surprise that this is the one I’m most excited for. I’ve also committed to backyard karaoke with the entire family.

And I’ll get to all of that...*after dessert.*

“Take a break,” I insist, confiscating the dirty dishes from Olivia’s hands. “We’ll take care of the cleanup.”

Cherry’s head spins so fast, I half expect it to make a full circle. “Do what now?”

I move in closer, grazing my lips along the shell of her ear. “Plan to make it worth your while,” I murmur, as her body tenses against my own. “I assure you my motives are anything but honorable, Cherry.”

Her tongue darts out lightly, brushing over her full lips as unmistakable desire flares in her eyes. “Wh-what he said.”

I’m struggling to keep a straight face at her sudden one-eighty. Subtlety is not her strong suit.

“Y’all go on ahead of us and get the karaoke going.” She plants a hand at the centers of her mother and grandmother’s backs, gently nudging them toward the music and raucous laughter drifting in from the backyard, where the rest of the family have already found their respite. “We’ll be along shortly.”

“Nonsense,” Olivia argues. “Aiden, you are our guest.”

“I will be offended if you don’t allow me to chip in.” I give her my most pitiful pleading eyes. “Please.”

“Fine,” she agrees after much hesitation. “But you really don’t have to...”

“We want to,” Ronnie says, all but shoving her mother and grandmother out onto the porch. “Don’t insult my boyfriend, Momma. Dad has done enough of that.”

I chuckle at Ronnie’s brazen behavior, shaking my head as she slumps against the door she just slammed in their wake. “Think you could have been any more obvious?”

She bites down on her lip, head tipped to one side as she looks me up and down slowly. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I deposit the dishes I’m still holding into the nearby sink, while keeping my gaze on her. “I’m flattered that you’d make such an ass of yourself without even knowing what’s at stake.”

“Another lesson?” she asks, hopeful.

I nod, a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. “Oh, yeah.”

Cherry’s eyes take on a glassy look as they fall to half-mast. “On?”

“Finding opportunities in any situation.”

“Where to?” She eagerly wriggles her shoulders. “My bedroom? The bathroom?”

The thought of her father finding us together in either of those places makes my stomach churn. “Too risky.”

“Then where?”

I signal back toward the dining room. “The table.”

She gasps, shaking her head in outright refusal. “What if my dad, or my grandmother, or one of the kids walks in?”

“They’ll be oblivious,” I assure her, taking hold of her hand and guiding us back the way we came. “Sit.” I give her shoulders a little shove, then push her chair all the way in as she collapses into it.

“What are you doing?” she asks, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“Having dessert.”

“But we just had—ohhh,” she says when I drop to my knees.

“Keep quiet,” I order, planting a kiss on her rosy cheek before dropping to all fours and disappearing beneath the tablecloth.

“Aiden,” she hisses. “What will we say if someone finds you down there?”

I poke my head back out. “I dropped my pen...*is*.”

She stifles a snort of laughter. “But do you even have a pen?”

“Hell no,” I say, flashing a grin before ducking beneath the table again. “I’m down here looking for it.”

Cherry’s giggles are quickly silenced when I lift her dress and press my lips to her inner thigh, trailing kisses on my path toward her cunt. “Mmm,” I moan, inhaling her scent as I waste no time in wrenching her panties to the side. “Gotta make this quick, Cherry. Brace yourself.”

“Aiden,” she whimpers, her fingers finding purchase in my hair as I blow a stream of warmth over her silky lips.

“Shhh,” I admonish before parting her slick folds with my tongue. She tastes like fucking heaven—a delicate blend of sweet and salty with a hint of spice that bursts across my taste buds, driving me wild.

I lap at her creamy slit, licking, sucking, and fucking her with my tongue until she’s panting and bucking beneath my ministrations.

I ignore the sound of her chair creaking as her hips reach for my mouth, too turned on to care.

Her fingers pull tighter against my scalp.

“You like that, baby?” I growl, sucking her clit back into my mouth and biting down gently. “That’s it. Feed me that pussy.”

My cock throbs with jealousy as I feast upon her, wanting nothing more than to plunge inside of this sweet abyss.

It’s an ache I’ve come to know well—a yearning I’ve felt every goddamn day since I first laid eyes on her.

Fuck.

I flick my tongue back and forth until she's tugging so hard on my hair, I'm certain she'll draw blood.

"Shit," I groan feeling her grow tighter, and wetter around my fingers and my tongue. *She's close.*

"What're you doing?" It almost doesn't register that the voice I'm hearing doesn't belong...

"Vicky," Cherry squeaks. "Wh-what're you doing here?"

"Came to see if you and Aiden needed some help."

"Oh," Cherry gasps as I get right back to devouring her pussy. "N-no, we're good here. Th-thanks."

"Why are you sitting at an empty table all alone?"

Veronica hisses, trying her damndest to keep her composure. "I'm not. Ai—Aiden wanted dessert."

"Okay..." her sister drawls. "Well, where is he? He's not in the kitchen, I just came from there."

"Uhhh..."

"Down here," I mumble with a mouth full of *Cherry pie.*

The muscles in Veronica's thighs seize, gripping to my head.

"Oh, shit." Vicky snorts.

My answering laughter rumbled against her folds has Cherry gasping for breath.

"Sorry to interrupt." Victoria's voice is tinged with laughter. "I'll just go keep everyone out...enjoy that dessert, lover boy."

"Trying," I mutter, still chuckling.

“Hurry up,” Cherry moans rolling her hips with urgency. “She’s gone.”

“Ready to come, sweet girl?” I ask, slipping two fingers into her slick heat. I fuck her slowly at first, then harder and faster until she’s whimpering and begging, her entire body trembling as she explodes on my face.

I lap at her opening, my strokes long and languid, relishing the taste of her cum down to the last delicious drop.

Only then do I pop up from my hiding place, sweat dripping from my temples, my lips numb from feasting on her sweet cunt.

“How was that?” *As if I even need to ask.*

Cherry stares up at me in a daze, still panting for breath. “Best one yet,” she answers with a dopey smile on her face.

“For me too,” I admit before sucking what remains of her release from my fingers. “Your pussy is...” I pinch the fingers of my left hand together and press them to my lips. “Chef’s kiss.”

She shakes her head, laughing in disbelief. “Still can’t believe we did that...here. Can you even imagine if it’d been my father instead of Vicky?”

“For pussy that good?” I say, shivering in delight. “Totally worth the risk of being shot.”

CHAPTER 15

VERONICA

“WHAT’S the heck’s going on with you?” I shout across the empty bar when I spot Aiden perched on a stool drinking whiskey straight from the bottle. I’m relieved to find he hasn’t already snuck out of here immediately following practice like every other day in the week since we returned home from Louisiana. I’m also concerned at his choice to get plastered in public. Employees will start trickling in any time now and customers soon thereafter.

His gaze flicks up to meet mine, guarded and watchful. “Whaddaya mean?” He takes another swig before smashing old Johnny down on the bar. The fake smile aimed my way makes me feel even more like a stranger than the distance he’s wedged between us. “You haven’t touched me in a week,” I grit, the sting of unwelcome tears burning the backs of my eyes.

“Horny?” His flippant tone sends my blood boiling.

My jaw clenches tight, because I can’t deny that accusation.

Aiden grips my inner thigh, just above the knee, pulling me to stand between his legs. “This what you’re after?” He walks his fingers higher, slowly and firmly, until they’re hidden beneath my skirt. My heart pounds with anticipation as his thumb brushes the edge of my panties. He leans in closer

still, his breath tickling the skin beneath my ear. “Such a greedy little cunt.”

“Stop it,” I snap, horrified by the jolt of arousal that rushes through me despite his crude words.

My tutor snatches his hand away, reaching for the now familiar blue label with a casual shrug as if I’m of no consequence to him.

His callous disregard hurts far more than it should. I know that it’s unfair of me to expect any sort of emotional connection from this man—not to mention it’s a detriment to my own wellbeing, considering I’m already aware of how this thing ends. It’s just...I thought we’d grown closer over the holiday with my family.

A heavy hand lands on my shoulder, drawing me from my intrusive thoughts. “Hey,” Nick says, suddenly materializing at my side, “you gonna be all right alone with him?”

“What the fuck, man?” Aiden growls before I have the chance to respond. Pissed, he gives the massive drummer’s shoulder a sloppy shove. “I’ve never laid an unwelcome hand on a woman in my life.”

Nick pays him no mind. Studying me carefully, he raises a quizzical brow.

“I’ll be fine,” I assure him. “Thanks for checking.”

“No problem, Ronnie.” My champion steps forward, pointing an accusing finger at Aiden’s chest. “Stop taking whatever shit you have going on in that fucked-up head of yours out on her. She doesn’t deserve it.”

I expect him to react in kind and brace myself for an epic pissing match, but Aiden simply gives his drummer a curt bob of his head. “I’ll be on my best behavior, *boss*.”

Nick grunts. “That isn’t worth much.” Chuckling to himself, he lugs his bag higher on his shoulder and heads for the door.

The moment we’re alone, Aiden slams the bottle down on the counter and lunges forward, pinning me against it with one arm.

The force of his body against mine causes me to gasp, and shamefully, it’s not in fear. Desire trembles in my voice. “What’re you doing?”

“Smelling you,” he says, pressing his lips to the sensitive skin at the bend of my neck and inhaling deeply. His hands shake as they wander up my back.

Grabbing two fists full of his unruly hair, I pull him closer, encouraging whatever it is that he’s after.

“Fuck, I’ve missed this,” he admits, trailing the tip of his nose along my collarbone, effectively turning my legs to jelly.

“I’m right here,” I say, gripping his shoulders for stability. “Stop pushing me away.”

The scent of whiskey wafts into the air with his drawn-out sigh. “This isn’t going the way I planned.”

“What isn’t?” I cradle the sides of his face, lifting until his eyes are even with mine.

“All of this.” He looks so exhausted—as if he’s been at war for days on end. “I never expected to like you so much.”

I’d be insulted if I didn’t wholly sympathize with his plight—If I weren’t battling similar feelings myself. “We’re friends, right?”

He pauses for a beat, his jaw ticking, as if considering it. “Yeah.”

“Well, I’m no expert, but I have it on pretty good authority that most friends like each other, Sugar Balls.” I toss in the ridiculous nickname in hopes of lightening the mood.

His lips twitch as I trail my fingers down his cheeks. “I don’t think they’re supposed to constantly want to rip each other’s clothes off, though,” he teases.

I arch a brow coyly while giving him an amused smirk. “You saying you’ve been picturing me naked?”

Without missing a beat he shoots back, “All the fucking time.”

“I think,” I say, brushing my fingers over his chest, “that once we’ve satisfied the terms of our agreement, the friendship part will be easier.”

“No more lessons...”

“Exactly.” I nod, ignoring the hollow ache that thought brings to my chest. “No more playing pretend.”

His Adam’s apple dips with a hard swallow. “You’ll be with Brody.”

“Right.” I gulp down the sour taste rising in my throat. “God willing.” *Is it bad that I’m half hoping the man upstairs drops the ball on this one?*

“I will never forgive myself if I break your heart, Cherry.”

I bend my lips against their will into a frail smile. “What if I’m the one to break yours?”

He lets out a hollow chuckle, his eyes looking away briefly before finding mine again. “You’d first have to find a way to piece the mangled scraps together, doll.”

So much for leaving with my heart intact.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, desperate for a change in scenery as I slip from between him and the counter. “And do something fun.”

Aiden’s gloomy expression brightens. “What’d ya have in mind?”

I throw my arms out, palms up. “What did you and Anika used to do after a show?”

“Bottle Grounds,” he answers with a smirk and a quirk of his brow.

“Well look what the cat done dragged in!” Spotting us the instant we enter her club, the blonde bombshell, Tenacious Trixie, briefly abandons her performance, flashing a dazzling smile our way. “Bout time the little lady lets you out for some air,” she teases before jumping right back into a sultry rendition of “Toxic” by Britney Spears. Her blonde bouffant sways with her emphatic movements, her enormous breasts bouncing out of the top of her corset as she pounds the keys.

Aiden crosses his cast over his chest, a megawatt smile stretching from ear to ear. “Been keeping each other busy,” he yells for the benefit of the audience who, as usual, are captivated by his every word.

Ever vigilant, Josh steps in front of a group of women who’ve taken the rock star’s playful demeanor as an invitation to begin migrating our way. His security guard urges us toward the relative safety of the VIP section. “Mind moving the party to your playpen, Aid?”

“Sorry, ladies.” My *friend* snakes an arm around my neck, pulling me close. “The boss has spoken.”

“Do you never grow tired of the constant attention?” I ask, a bit flustered.

“Never.” He ushers me through the ropes ahead of him, offering me a chair before taking the one beside it. “I could eat this shit with a spoon. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“I believe it.” His mood has already improved ten-fold. The man truly shines his brightest beneath the spotlight.

“Here,” he says, sliding a drink menu in front of me. “Which cocktail strikes your fancy?”

I shake my head, pushing it back. “Won’t be legal till next week, on the eighth.”

His eyes roll up. “Just pick something. We’ll get a fishbowl and share. No one here’s gonna question me.”

I scan the list for the fruitiest, most sugary drink available, knowing he’ll hate it and likely slow down a bit. We certainly don’t need a repeat of the last time we were here. “Let’s try this.” I tap on something called “The Big ‘O’.”

“Right here?” he teases, reaching under the table. “Your wish is my command, little lady.”

On a long exhale, I stay his hand with my own. “Would your fingers be climbing up under Anika’s skirt?”

He pulls back, wincing with regret. “Dammit.”

“Believe me, you’re not nearly as disappointed as my weepy vagina.”

Aiden chokes, his eyes going wide with shock. “Would you tell one of your guy friends the state of your...*meat*

flaps?”

“I dunno,” I say, inclining my head, “you’re the only one I got.”

“What about Brody?” He spits his name with disgust.

I can’t help but smirk at his blatant jealousy. “Well, he’s never been just a friend, now, has he?”

“Guess not.” On that note, he signals our waitress over. “The lady’s moist folds demand we try one of these.”

“Aiden.” I give his chest a shove, while blushing furiously.

“Is that not exactly what you just said?”

I slap a hand to my forehead. “Close,” I mumble lifting my gaze to that of our amused server. “My kitty would be delighted, ma’am.”

“You got it.” She scribbles into her pad, then announces “One ‘Big O’ coming right up.” The woman stumbles back toward the bar, finally letting loose with a fit of giggles after leaving the vicinity of our table.

“I’m sure that bartender is about to get an earful,” I mutter.

“Just so you don’t give him a mouthful.” Fire blazes in his eyes as he levels me with a smolder that has my core tightening. “We may be out as friends tonight, but that pussy is mine *exclusively* for the foreseeable future.”

“Yeah?” I quirk a brow. “Well, so is that meat baton you’ve yet to let me explore, *buddy*.”

“It’s a little sleepy tonight, Cherry Girl.” His shoulders sag in defeat, as if disappointed in himself. “But trust me, the only action he’s gotten since we started this gig has come from my own hand.”

I laugh to downplay the wave of relief I'm hit with just knowing he wasn't off with random women while avoiding me. "It's fine."

"Hey," he says, covering my hand with his own. "There's always tomorrow."

"Yeah. As long as you don't go disappearing on me again." I try to keep the hurt that's still festering over his absence from my voice. "I'll be gentle with it," I tease, lowering my gaze to his crotch. "You don't need to be afraid of me."

His expression takes on a faraway look as he mutters something I'm positive I'm not meant to hear. "That's the least of my worries..."

The arrival of our beverage, much larger than my head and dripping in condensation, is just what's needed to get us back on track. We came out tonight to keep things light and here we are getting drawn into the agreement that looms like a dark cloud over our heads.

"To friendship," Aiden says, lifting his straw into the air.

I follow suit, tapping mine against his, sending a splatter of red drops across the table. "To friendship."

I pluck a Swedish Fish from the slushy concoction and pop it into my mouth before taking a long pull. I drink until my brain begins to freeze. It's then, when it feels like a million tiny daggers are piercing my head simultaneously, that I peer over my straw to find Aiden watching me with a goofy smile on his face. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just... you look so fucking sexy sucking on that straw like that."

"If you think that's good," I say, attempting to smile as I squeeze my temples, in a fruitless endeavor to alleviate the

searing pain. “Just imagine—”

“Oh, I’m imagining it,” he leans in close, his breath hot on my ear. “Your gorgeous blue eyes wide and watering as you struggle to take my cock.”

A shiver trickles along my spine, my sex throbbing with need. I’m seconds away from begging him to take me home when I become distracted by our names wafting through the speakers, immediately followed by a deafening applause.

“Whaddaya say, babe?” Aiden’s dark eyes glitter with amusement, telling me he’s well-aware that I have no clue what’s just happened.

“About?” I fan my sooty lashes up at him, trying to ignore the weight of an entire room full of stares.

“We’ve just been invited to perform another duet,” Aiden explains, reaching out to stroke the backs of his fingers along my jaw.

I clear the desire thickening in my throat before responding. “What song?”

He shrugs without much concern. “Does it matter?”

“Not really,” I say, grinning like a besotted fool. I swear I can feel little cartoon hearts bursting in my eyes as I look at him.

“The request is for ‘Let’s Make Love’ by Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, and there’s a special note begging for the two of you to perform it,” Betty provides. “I mean Trix and I could do it,” she teases, her ruby red lips widening into a playful grin. “But we like to give our big spenders what they ask for when at all possible.”

“I’m game,” I say, before bending forward to sip from my straw because a little additional liquid courage certainly won’t hurt. “But what about your hand?” I ask, coming up for breath.

“You’ll play,” my date says, reaching out to help me to my feet. “And I’ll sit on top of the piano like a showgirl, look pretty, and sing.”

“Why the hell not?” I chuckle.

Never a dull moment with this man.

The lights dim as we ascend to the stage, and a hush falls over the crowd.

“It got really quiet all of a sudden,” I mumble to Trixie as she flips through a binder for sheet music.

“You two are Bottle Grounds’ sweethearts.” She winks. “We’re all very invested.”

“You too?”

“Especially me,” she says before turning toward my counterpart, who’s already perched atop the baby grand in a sultry pose. “You good up there, hot stuff?”

“Perfect,” he says, tapping the mic Betty just gave him to make sure it’s on. “Get those lighters in the air and prepare to wave ’em like you just don’t care,” he shouts.

Trixie snatches the microphone from his hand. “Phone flashes only. Let’s not burn the place down.”

“Oh, we’re gonna burn it down, all right,” he taunts. “Panties gonna be combusting left and right.”

The ladies in the crowd go feral at this salacious prediction.

“Okay, Hugh Hefner,” I tease, stifling a giggle as I straighten my spine and position my fingers on the keys. “You ready to do this?”

“Fuck yeah,” he says, catching an airborne silk thong with the toe of his shoe, before sending its owner an air kiss. He reaches down, crumples them into a ball, and proceeds to stuff the stranger’s undergarments into his back pocket.

“You’re so gross,” I mouth, gagging behind the cover of my hand.

He responds to my outrage by bringing his fingers to beneath his nose and giving them a long sniff, eliciting a wave of squeals from the crowd and sparking an unwelcome surge of jealousy in me.

Having had about enough of his antics, I bring my fingers down hard on the keys, commencing our performance without warning. But as I belt out the first verse—as I sing of needing and dreaming of being with this man—my demeanor begins to soften.

The air between us, crackling with electricity and heavy with lust, ceases to move, as Aiden’s emotion-filled eyes stare deep into mine. All traces of humor are gone. He rolls over onto his stomach and inches to the edge of the lid, until we’re practically nose to nose.

My heart begins to race, fueled by the intensity in his gaze as I fervently plead through lyrics that ring with far too much truth for this man to make love to me until the sun comes up.

I’m shaking, my vision fogged by burning desire and some other emotion I dare not name as my part draws to an end and his solo begins.

Aiden clutches the mic in the fingers of his injured hand while reaching out to stroke the side of my face tenderly with the other. He croons of wanting and needing me, while imploring me to look into his eyes and get lost with him.

And boy do I ever.

The passion in his stare holds me a willing captive. His performance is so convincing that I find myself yearning for something I know can never be.

The music swells right along with my frantic pulse as my fingers glide across the keys, our voices marrying one another in perfect accord.

Each word we sing lingers in the space between us, a promise I feel at a cellular level. A cruel, cruel lie that has tears welling in my eyes and a pit of despair forming in my gut.

My consciousness begins to shift until we're back in our magical place. Just the two of us and the music we're making.

Aiden comes closer still, the soft timbre of his voice vibrating through me as we alternate our respective closing lines.

As the last note fades, echoing through the quiet room, I find myself slowly returning to reality.

What remains of my fantasy shatters with the audience's emphatic applause. But the emotions from our performance are still very much alive and pulsating through me.

Aiden's face breaks into a predatory grin as he leaps from the piano and reaches for my hand, entwining our fingers before sweeping me into his arms and smashing his eager lips to mine.

His palm travels along the bare skin of my back, sending a shiver rushing through me as his warm tongue begins to prod at the seam of my mouth seeking entrance.

Possessive and greedy, he grips my ass, pulling me closer. He whispers my name over and over against my lips in reverence, as if he can't believe he's holding me in his arms.

"Aiden," I whimper. There's a buzzing in my head, muffling the cheers of the crowd as we lose ourselves in each other. I can't think past the feeling of his warm wet tongue exploring every inch of my mouth.

I can feel him hardening against me as his hand dips beneath the hem of my skirt.

Breathless, I rip my lips away from his. "We can't do this here," I whisper.

"Christ on a cracker," Trixie howls into her mic. She's purposefully breathy and fanning herself with a stack of paper. "Anyone else think they might have gotten pregnant just now?"

I flush, burying my face in Aiden's shoulder as he laughs loudly. "Don't be coming after me for child support now." My body shakes from the force of him wagging his finger at our hostess.

She cackles. "Thanks for being such good sports, you two."

I peek up at her just barely, holding out a hesitant thumb before ducking away again.

"Any time," he promises before sweeping my feet out from under me and tossing me over a shoulder, his injured arm slung across the backs of my knees and his good hand gripped

firmly to my bottom. “Now if you’ll all excuse me, I’m gonna take this little lady home.”

“To my home?” I inquire, bobbling around as he rushes down the steps.

“*My* home.” The level of sheer insult in his tone when he barks back at me damn near gives me whiplash.

“But I thought—”

“Shhh,” he says, kissing my shoulder through a radiant smile. “We’re done thinking tonight.”

CHAPTER 16

AIDEN

I'M DRIFTING in and out of consciousness—my head still fogged with the remnants of yesterday's binge—when a foreign touch, both warm and welcome, brushes against my erection, jarring me awake.

Curious as to whom that limb belongs, I glance down and to my right to find the back of a familiar head nestled into the crook of my arm.

Cherry?

A vague memory of bringing her home with me from the club last night floats through my mind. I wince at my own poor judgment, because in hindsight and with less liquor flowing through my system, I can see it wasn't the smartest of moves. Not when I promised myself I'd re-establish some boundaries with the girl. But let's face it; honorable as my intentions may have been, they were doomed from the start. I mean, I'm not exactly known for making the best decisions.

Ah, well. Might as well enjoy the fruits of my own stupidity.

Long gold strands of hair fanned out along her pillow gleam beneath the rays of early morning sunlight peeking through the gap in the curtains. A gentle purring sound coming from her slightly parted lips confirms she's still out cold and

that the knee gently pressing against my cock is in no way intentional. *Damn the bad luck.*

My heart rate rises to a feverish pace as I permit my eyes a moment to linger on this woman who's come to mean far too much to me in such a short time. The very woman I've spent the last week avoiding like a gnarly case of VD.

Something shifted between us in Louisiana. I can't quite put my finger on what it was exactly. We did everything right...stuck to the plan. No sappy words were exchanged. We put on a convincing show for her parents and siblings. Yet some invisible boundary was crossed and now everything *feels* different.

I screwed up when I allowed myself to become comfortable in her space. I let my guard down because spending time with Ronnie and her family felt right. For a moment there, I lost sight of the plot. That became crystal clear when I found myself imagining future holidays spent with these people. A fucking pipe dream is all it was—as temporary as this arrangement.

The moment our plane touched down in Nashville, that realization slammed into me like a lead ball right to the gut. And every minute since, I've been wallowing over a life that was never remotely in the cards for me. *Pathetic.*

One thing's for certain, though—I was right to stay away. My only regret on that front is that I didn't try harder. Because now that I have her here in my arms and in my bed, I know I won't be strong enough to turn my back on her again.

She's rooted in my life—a fragment of the fractured heart that somehow still beats in my chest. Not even knowing that I'll soon be forced to sit back and watch while another man

lays claim to that integral piece is enough of a deterrent to keep me away.

So, I guess we're destined to remain in our own fucked-up purgatory, caught somewhere between friendship and something more. Never just friends, no matter how staunchly we might claim it. And not quite lovers, despite how intimately acquainted we've become.

I groan inwardly while peeling Cherry's leg away from my crotch. Then I slip the arm that's long gone numb from beneath the weight of her head. Taking care not to wake her, I slowly and silently sneak off to the bathroom.

I reach into the shower and set the water to warm before taking a little detour to the sink to brush away the rank taste in my mouth. Waking up with a woman who is not Anika in my bed for the first time has me scrubbing them extra hard.

Once satisfied that I won't be greeting the little complication with the hot ass-breath of a dragon, I step out of my boxers and into the steaming spray.

With my casted arm resting against the wall, out of the line of fire, I wrap the hand of the other around my rigid cock. I haven't gone without a woman for this long since...well, likely the first time I had sex.

Fucking shameful. My dick may never forgive me. And who could blame him?

Wasting no time, I begin stroking the beast up and down, up and down, imagining she's here, in front of me, on her knees. My hand is fisted in her long hair, guiding those lush lips along my shaft. That I can still smell her rose-scented shampoo lingering on my skin breathes life to my fantasy.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I pump harder and faster. My balls draw up tight as I replay the recent memory of parting her thighs and feasting on that sweet cunt of hers beneath her family's dinner table.

"Cherry," I grunt as my dick begins to twitch. "Fuck yeah, just like that." My hips go rogue, rutting into my palm. Sweet release is within my grasp when I hear a distinctly feminine gasp, prompting me to abandon my now very disgruntled cock.

Using the back of my arm, I scrub the fog from the glass, and as if my dirty thoughts conjured the scene before me, Veronica's there, lurking in the threshold, her hands clutched to the frame for support.

Cherry's cheeks are positively flaming, and her hypnotic blue eyes burn with desire. The way she's panting like a damn dog in heat lets on that she's been standing there quite a while. Her hair is a mass of tangles sticking up on all ends. My God, she's never looked more fuckable than she does right now, draped in my rumpled shirt that's practically swallowing her tiny frame.

"I...I—" The humiliation of being caught all but drooling over what was meant to be a private moment has apparently rendered her mute.

"Just gonna stand there and watch?" I jerk my head, inviting her to join me. "The view's better from in here," I taunt.

Her throat clears. "You want me to get in the sh-shower w-with you?"

"Can't think of a thing I want more," I rasp while giving her a thorough eye-fucking that has her squirming and

clenching her thighs together. “But only if you want to.” Lowering my hand, I gently squeeze my cock before gliding it along my length, twisting the piercing when I reach the head because I know how fascinated she is with that adornment.

“I do.” She shifts her weight from foot to foot. “I want to.”

I nod, increasing my pace without breaking eye contact. “That’s good, doll, cuz I really wanna see those tits.”

On shaky limbs, she lifts my tee over her head, tossing it to the floor. The move leaves her in nothing but a pair of white cotton briefs. Ronnie proceeds to slip both hands into the elastic at her hips before stretching the band and stepping out of them, baring herself completely.

“Back to the granny panties?” I hook a brow and grunt, but I can’t even muster a laugh to tease her properly because I’m far too turned on by that hot little body of hers. Her perfect C-cups and rosy nipples, pert and primed for attention, make it impossible to focus on anything but getting them in my hands and in my mouth.

“They’re more comfortable.” The flush in her cheeks migrates to her chest. “And you were ignoring me, so it’s not like I expected anyone to see them.”

“There’s a trash can under the vanity.” With a disapproving groan, I dip my head in the general direction. “Dispose of that garbage properly.”

She rolls her eyes, rooting her feet to the tile in a show of defiance.

“You asked me to turn you into a sexual goddess...one your little country club gentleman won’t be able to refuse.” I suck my tongue to my teeth, irritated by the thought of his

hands anywhere near her pussy. “Thought I made it clear that those were a no-no.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Her loud huff of breath sends the wisps of hair framing her face flying. Then, however reluctantly, she shuffles over to the bin, disposing of the offensive garment.

“Good girl.”

My pupil responds to my praise with a snort before slinking closer, until she’s standing just the other side of the shower door. Her fingers curl around the handle. Then, she goes motionless, apart from the heavy rise and fall of her chest. Her wide-eyed gaze is fixed on my raging erection.

“What’s wrong?” I bite down on my lips to mask a grin.

Veronica dips her head to one side as if in need of another angle to ensure she’s getting the full scope of my cock.

I’d be lying if I said the way she’s sizing me up wasn’t hella flattering.

“Still not a mind reader, Cherry. Use your words,” I order, prompting her to look away briefly while chewing that damn bottom lip that I’d love nothing more than to suck into my own mouth.

After another long pause, her head bobs. The movement is slow—*cautious*. “You’re very *large*.”

“You already knew that.” A smirk plays at the corners of my mouth.

“Wh-what if I choke?” Her voice pitches with alarm.

“Then you’ll back off.” I continue fucking into my hand slowly. “Or we wait until you’re ready. I’m more than capable

of finishing what I started.” I give her a slow wink. “I’ll even let you watch.”

“No,” she rushes out. Steeling herself, she gives me a determined nod. “I can totally do this.” Having effectively bolstered her own confidence, she swings the shower door open and steps beneath the warm spray.

“You can,” I agree, suddenly finding it hard to draw air with her naked body so close to mine. “I have complete faith in your ability to suck me senseless.”

A brittle giggle bubbles up from her throat, and she pinches her finger and thumb together. “I’m a little nervous.”

“Come here.” I pull her to my chest and tilt her face upward. “Start out slow, using your hands.”

She swallows hard. “Okay.”

“You don’t have to commit to anything,” I say as I move the wet strands of hair away from her face, giving myself a clear view of her rosy and emotion-filled eyes. Eyes that, despite how hard she tries to fight it at times, keep the girl honest. Eyes that are practically weeping with want yet still hold the barest hint of trepidation. “If at any point you start to feel uncomfortable, we can stop. No pressure.”

“Okay,” she whispers again as her hand departs from my shoulder, slowly trailing her fingers down my bicep and my forearm. Chill bumps burst along the path she traces over my heated skin. Her fingers graze mine just before she assumes the task of stroking my cock, and I swear I nearly cum on contact.

“It’s so smooth,” she says, “and warm.” Her fingers form a cage around the base of my shaft. “And also, *so* hard.”

Curiously, she explores the contours of my flesh, kneading my length.

“You can keep going,” I say, barely suppressing a groan as her grip tightens around me and she begins to glide over my cock from root to tip.

“How’s that?” she asks, nibbling on the corner of her mouth.

“Feels amazing. Now run your thumb over the head like this.” I lay my hand over hers and we begin working my cock together. “Play with the piercing a bit. As long as you don’t yank on it, it’ll feel good.”

“Got it,” she replies in a strained voice. “Anything else I should know?”

“Fuck,” I exhale, flexing into her hand. “Cradle my balls in your other hand and gently roll them around in your palm.”

She’s a quick study, working me with the skill of a seasoned hussy.

“So good, Cherry. You’re doing so fucking good,” I moan as a bead of cum leaks from my tip. “Feel that?” I glide her finger through the drop of liquid.

“Oh wow,” she squeals. “Did I make you orgasm already?”

There’s no help for the snort of laughter that sneaks out. “That’s just precum, baby—nature’s lube.”

“Mmmm,” she hums, bringing the digit to her lips and licking it clean. “Like an appetizer.” She smacks her lips, trying to cover the little flinch I didn’t miss when the bitter saltiness reached her taste buds. “I think I’m ready to try with my mouth.”

My balls tense in anticipation. “You sure?” I ask, knowing I’ll need to find a little respite before we go there so I don’t blow the second she wraps those pouty lips around me.

“Mmmhmm.” She nods, her tongue darting out to lick at the water dripping down her face.

“Then let’s wash up and head to the bed. Wouldn’t want you to drown.” *Or for me to nut like a fifteen-year-old getting his first BJ.*

She hesitates briefly, then nods, squirting a dollop of my body wash into her hands.

I watch, entranced, as she works it into a sudsy lather and then begins rubbing my soap into her skin. Knowing she’s going to smell like me throws my primitive brain into gear. This sudden possessive instinct isn’t a feeling I’m ready to examine too closely—especially not right now.

“Are you going to get clean too or just stand there?” she challenges with a saucy little grin. Her words hit their mark, lighting a fire under my ass as I swiftly follow suit, scrubbing myself down faster than ever before.

Cutting the water, I open the door and retrieve two towels from the shelf, wrapping one around my waist before bundling her in the other.

“Lead the way, Cherry-girl,” I murmur once we’re both mostly dry.

She draws her lower lip between her teeth, glancing up at me from beneath her long, dark lashes as fear starts creeping back in. “What if I do it wrong?”

“Not possible.” I drop my towel, aware that my dick is standing at full mast, commanding her attention. “Your mouth on me, in any capacity, could never be wrong.”

Mollified, she rolls her shoulders back and nods once before turning and heading for my bed.

As I cross the room, watching her ass sway with every slow, determined step she takes, I begin whispering the alphabet song beneath my breath, reciting it over and over attempting to make the boner I'm sporting last as long as possible. Won't be much of a lesson without the required equipment.

"Lose the towel," I order when she perches on the edge of the mattress, still wrapped up like a burrito. My tone wields authority, despite feeling like I'm the one at her mercy. "I want to be able to appreciate every glorious inch of your body while you swallow down every solid inch of my cock."

Visibly shaking, the little eager beaver returns to her feet, baring herself as the terry cloth plops to the floor. "Now what?"

"Now," I say, guiding her hand back to my erection, encouraging her to wrap her fingers around its throbbing length. "Start slow. Just like in the shower."

"How's this?" With each stroke she becomes less timid, finding her rhythm.

"A little tighter," I rasp, trying to refrain from fucking into her fist. This is a teaching moment. A time for her to familiarize herself with the male anatomy, not just an opportunity to get off. *Though I do plan to thoroughly enjoy that part.*

"Oh my gosh!" she squeaks, lowering to her knees for closer inspection. "I made you precum again!"

Not gonna lie, this level of inexperience on any other woman would be a total turnoff, but not with her. She's the

exception to every rule. “Cherry,” I hiss when she swipes her tongue over the tip of my dick, flicking my piercing for good measure. “Fuck, woman.”

She glances up at me, her nose scrunched as she forces it down. “It’s not h-horrible,” she proclaims.

The sight of her all but gagging on my jizz is fucking adorable.

Adorable? Get a fucking grip, man.

My sense of panic is overrun by desire when, without warning, she sucks the entirety of my cock into her mouth.

“Ease up, baby.” I fist a hand into her hair, slowly backing her off when my dick forcefully hits the back of her throat. “Take only what you can comfortably. It’s more enjoyable that way.”

“Sorry,” she mumbles around my cock.

“Don’t apologize. It feels real good.” *Too good*, I think to myself as I try to stave off my release with images of kittens and bunnies. “Can you go a little faster?”

Her teeth scrape along my shaft with the nod of her head.

“More tongue,” I grunt. “Less teeth.”

“Mmmm,” she moans, suddenly squirming to find friction for that greedy little pussy of hers. My dirty girl is *enjoying* it, a fact that only makes it that much harder to hold back.

“The balls,” I grunt, knowing this’ll likely send me spiraling over the edge, but also that it’s my job to teach her. “D-don’t forget to fondle the balls.”

When her delicate fingers meet with the sensitive flesh, a burst of euphoria rockets through me. I’ve had my nads

nestled more times than I could dream to count, but it's never felt quite like this. She's got me firing on all cylinders. Tingling from head to foot. Burning from the inside out.

In reality, I know the girl's not some blow-job guru on her very first attempt. That the difference between this time and all the others is entirely about the irksome connection we seem to share. But that epiphany is detrimental to the cause, so for my intents and purposes, she's a fucking dick sucking prodigy.

“Oh yeah, just like that. Fuck, baby, you're a natural.”

I'm barely holding on when she brings her other hand to the base of my dick, moving it in tandem with her mouth. The temptation to let go is strong. But the sight of her wriggling around with no way to find relief is a problem that needs an immediate solution.

I swat the hand she's using to jack me off away, replacing it with my own. “I've got this. Wanna see you rub your clit while you suck me. Come all over these wood floors.”

Whimpering, she grinds into the pads of her fingers, rolling her hips in slow circles. Her moans vibrate around my cock, making me impossibly harder.

The sight of her fingering herself while her swollen red lips glide along my shaft snaps the last thread of my restraint.

I start fucking her face. Chasing my release. It's right fucking there...

Until she pulls back on a gag, staring up at me with a worried glint in her eyes, like she somehow thinks she's disappointed me, which couldn't be farther from the truth.

“S-so good, Cherry. Don't stop.” I slide back into her mouth slowly, angry at myself for getting carried away. For

forgetting my girl is completely green and that she needs to be the one to decide how much she can take.

“Unggg.” She cries out in carnal delight when I reach down, pinching and tugging her nipple to reward her for her efforts.

“That’s it, come for me,” I growl.

She rolls her fingers over her clit, grinding into them while I continue to pluck at her pebbled peaks. The closer she comes to orgasming, the harder she sucks, bringing me past the point of return. I give a courtesy tap to the back of her head, alerting her to the fact that I’m about to blow my fucking load. Heat builds at my base as she hollows her cheeks, taking me all the way down her throat.

A sense of pride swells in my chest as Cherry proves she’s no quitter. Novice or not, she is taking that dick like a champ.

“Fuuuuck,” I groan as the world around me fades to black. Stars burst behind my eyelids as I begin shooting off into her mouth.

Veronica’s entire body tenses instantly just before she flies back, popping off my dick. I realize my mistake too late—that the girl has no clue what the hell a courtesy tap is. Still, there’s no stopping the last spurt of baby batter that’s already locked and loaded from nailing her right in the face.

“Ohhh,” she yelps, snickering as she fingers the glob of nut on her cheek. “I-I should have known that was about to happen.”

“I gave you a courtesy tap,” I say, tensing with a hint of remorse while battling with thoughts of how hot she looks covered in my cum. “The finger tap to the back of your head... it was a warning.”

“Look at me learning all kinds of new things.” She grins at me, cheeks ripe with embarrassment as she stares up, wide-eyed and bursting with pride.

“Now you’ve made me orgasm, Cherry.” I tuck a knuckle beneath her chin, where I feel her pent-up desire still thrumming wildly. “I’m sorry. I planned to wait until you’d finished, but I couldn’t hold back anymore.” My chuckle is low and throaty as I smooth my thumb along her jawline. “You’re really good at that.”

“Yeah?” Uncertainty furrows her brow, but self-satisfaction shines through in those baby blues. She’s fucking proud. As she should be.

“Oh, yeah,” I say, bending to retrieve one of our discarded towels with plans to clean my mess. “If you’ll let me, I’ll make it up to you.”

“You don’t have to,” she says, stalling my efforts to wipe her up as she scrambles to her feet.

“Are you kidding?” I snort. “It would be my pleasure, but first,” I say, holding out a finger as the most delicious idea hits, “you have a decision to make...”

“And what might that be?”

“Wipe it off?” I ask, tossing the towel over my shoulder. “Or rub it in?” I smear the pad of my thumb through the tacky substance. “I’m told ejaculate is quite good for the skin...”

“You don’t say?” Biting back a smile, she proceeds to massage my *serum* into her rosy cheek.

“Oh yeah,” I encourage. “A delicacy, really.”

“Do I wash it off after?” She pats at her face, her fingertips sticking with each pass. “Like a mask?”

“Sure.” I shrug. “But not till after I fuck that pretty pussy with my fingers.”

CHAPTER 17

VERONICA

I ACTUALLY DID IT...BROUGHT this Adonis to his freaking knees. And it wasn't even as scary as I've been imagining. It's embarrassing how much time I've spent throughout the years stressing over what has turned out to be a rather enjoyable experience.

Pride swells in my chest as I play along with his ludicrous claim, rubbing the evidence of my efforts into my own cheek.

Aiden's eyes grow dark as he watches me. His demeanor is playful but there's no hiding the way it turns him on to have marked me as his, even if only temporarily. He's such a caveman in the bedroom, and I can't help but wonder if he's like this with everyone, or if maybe I'm special. And I hate myself for wanting to be—*special*, that is.

Thankfully I'm left with minimal time to dwell on my insecurities when Aiden distracts me with an offer I can't refuse, *to fuck my pretty pussy with his fingers*.

My head gives a backward jerk. His crass language is certainly nothing new, but this is just absurd. "You think it's pretty?" A hefty dose of side-eye calls him on his bullshit. I've seen it. And while not grotesque by any means, a pillar of beauty she is not. Just your regular run-of-the-mill vag.

“Do I thin—” His mouth snaps shut as he begins stalking toward me, his advance causing me to retreat until the backs of my knees knock into the bed. When there’s no place else to go but onto the mattress, he slings an arm around my waist, easing me onto my back.

I’m so turned on I can hardly remember what’s got him so fired up as he climbs in over me, sending my heart rate beating out of control. “This pussy,” he says, gripping me by the ribs and pushing me higher so he’s straddling my knees, “is a fucking work of art, Cherry.”

Oh, yeah...*that*.

I nearly forget how to breathe as he bends my knees, placing my feet on the rumpled sheets a good three feet apart, leaving me spread wide. The urge to clamp my legs shut to avoid the way he’s staring so intently is strong. Almost stronger than my need for relief.

Almost. *But not quite*.

“Get up on your elbows, woman.”

I waste no time in following his instruction, until I get a glimpse of my business in the floor-to-ceiling mirror directly behind him. “Aiden!” My screech is one of sheer humiliation as I sling an arm across my face. “Why would you show me that?”

Tears well in my eyes. I could literally die from mortification.

“Uncover your damn eyes,” he growls. “You wanna fish for fucking compliments? You better learn to take ’em like a damn woman.”

“I wasn’t...” At least I don’t think I was. I was simply shocked to hear him refer to *that* as attractive.

“You were,” he insists. “And that’s perfectly okay. Clearly you need a boost in *cuntfidence*.” He runs a finger along my slit, causing my entire body to shiver with need “Connoisseur of cooch, at your service.”

A distressed laugh rips from my chest. I can’t decide whether I want to burst into a fit of giggles or tears.

He has become an expert at reading my emotions. “It’s okay, doll. You can laugh at me. I’m funny.”

“And modest,” I quip, earning myself a look of disapproval.

“We both know I am anything but that.” Aiden dips a finger inside, rimming my entrance as he says it. “But you are filled with enough misplaced reservations for the both of us, aren’t you?”

“Look...” I blow out a huff of air, doing my best to look anywhere but at my own reflection. “I read an article where these guys described the perfect vagina and all this talk about big versus small labia, shaved versus smooth, innies and outties... I think it gave me a *complex*.” I moan the last word as he dips a finger in and out of my slick opening.

“Innies and outties...are we talking about the clit?” he asks, seeming both fascinated and disturbed that such an article exists. “No wonder women are so fucking insecure about their bodies.”

Tell me about it.

“This one guy said it should be tucked in,” I pant, attempting to talk through his expert attentions. “Not out like a tiny *peeeee-nis*.”

“These guys sound like a bunch of douchebags still living in their parent’s *basemenntsss*.”

I damn near snort when he mocks my tone. “Maybe...but I don’t wanna look at myself,” I whine while writhing into his hand.

“Too bad.” My tormentor wrenches himself away to stuff a pillow behind my head. Then, the man delivers an impossible ultimatum. “You stop watching, I stop playing.”

I nail him with the meanest eyes I can conjure. He doesn’t even flinch.

“What’s it gonna be?” Aiden arches a brow. “You gonna let me sing this pussy’s praises or are we done with our lesson for today?”

He’s got me, and that sly smirk on his face says he knows it. There’s no way in hell I could find the will to put a stop to the magic he’s working on my body. Gritting my teeth, I fix my eyes to the glass and give a curt nod. “Proceed,” I say, grabbing his hand and returning it to my dripping sex. “Please.”

“Thought you might come around.” He winks, then bends forward to press soft kisses along my outer labia. “These lips are velvety and smooth—my personal preference.” Then he licks along my slit, and I nearly come off the bed from the sensation. “Though there’s nothing wrong with a well-maintained bush either,” he continues before moving on to lap at my clit. “A clean pussy is a good pussy. *Period.*”

He pauses and stares up at me, waiting for confirmation that I’m paying attention. Gosh, he can be so infuriating. “C-clean is good,” I repeat to appease him. “Got it.”

Aiden sends me a wink before following the path his tongue just took with his nose. My legs tense, squeezing his

head in a vise grip as he inhales deeply. “Your scent,” he rasps, “is uniquely you. Sweet and syrupy and intoxicating.”

Groaning, I push into his face, begging for more. But once again he’s gone still as a statue, waiting for me to participate in this ridiculous conversation. “N-not like f-fish?” I want to take back the question the moment the words sneak past my lips. My only defense for asking something so incredibly humiliating is that I’m not at all thinking clearly in my current state of arousal.

“Oh, sweet Ronnie.” He peers up at me from between my thighs. “Thank the sex gods you found me when you did.”

“It’s a serious question,” I lament. Because now that it’s out there, I’m gonna see this niggling worry through.

“Very well.” He thrusts a finger in me then brings it to beneath my nose. “Do you smell fish?”

“N-no,” I answer, blushing profusely. I’m hot everywhere. Radiating with embarrassment.

“Now taste it,” he urges, lowering said finger to my lips. “Your nectar is among the most pleasant I’ve sampled.”

I reach out, shoving his arm, trying to push it away, but it doesn’t budge. “I...can’t,” I proclaim in a halfhearted attempt at saving my modesty. My actions are a direct contradiction to my words though, as I nestle into his finger, my breathing growing shallower by the second.

“What better way to ease your worries?” He traces the seam of my lips and the urge to lick them hits me like a freight train. “Try it for yourself.”

The challenge in his quirked brow has me sucking his finger into my mouth, my tongue swirling around in a purposefully seductive manner. I can’t believe I’m actually

doing this...*tasting myself*. Or that the act of doing so has me so incredibly turned on.

“Well?” he prods for my official assessment while withdrawing his finger from my mouth.

I shrug like I’m not totally freaking the hell out. Like I’m not reeling over what just happened. “Doesn’t taste like much,” I admit. “Sweet and salty...and maybe a little citrusy.”

“See?” He slinks back down between my legs and licks me clean. “Fucking delicious.”

My head falls back, my body quaking as I ride his face, seeking fulfillment. Desperate to relieve the throbbing ache at my core.

“You’re not watching,” he teases, barely pausing his efforts to get the words out before diving right back in.

“I. Just,” I pant. “Ate my own vagina...” The drawn-out moan that heaves out from my chest is the end of that argument.

Mirror forgotten, he adds a second finger and pumps in and out while sucking my sex into his mouth. His expert tongue toys with my clit, lighting me up.

With both hands tangled into his hair, I grind into his face. I’m so close, my entire body convulsing, ready to erupt when there’s a loud bang on the door.

“Aiden?” Anika calls, and I instantly deflate, preparing myself to yet again be left unfulfilled.

But Aiden just growls his frustration into me, his efforts doubled as he pumps those delicious fingers with determination.

“Big Bud’s about to call your phone for that radio interview on the Morning Show. Make sure you pick up,” she warns just before the sound of heels clacking on tile signals her departure.

“Fuck,” he groans, rising to his knees, all the while continuing to glide his fingers in and out of me.

I start to scramble away when he holds me firmly in place. “I’m a great multitasker,” he says. “Think you can keep quiet?”

“P-probably not,” I answer honestly, a bit panicked at what I’m certain he’s going to suggest.

Aiden withdraws his fingers, brings them to his mouth, and sucks them clean before reaching for the phone that’s vibrating on the side table. “I think you can,” he says with a wink just as he presses the speaker button to answer the call.

My eyes about bug out of my head when he slips his fingers back in me all while bullshitting through introductions with the famous radio show host. He sounds completely unaffected. Cool. Calm. Collected. While I am anything but.

“So,” Big Bud says, “Tell us a little about the new woman in your life. I think I speak for all of America when I say that one took us by surprise.”

“Cherry?” he croons. “Man, she’s incredible. Talented—” He locks eyes with mine, then hooks his fingers in a come-hither motion toward my clit. “—in so many different areas.”

My ass lifts clean off the bed, my hands twisting into the sheets, gripping for dear life as I clench my teeth together to refrain from screaming.

“So, no hard feelings then?” the host prods, trying to dig up some drama for his listeners.

“Oh, she gives me plenty of *hard* feelings, if ya know what I mean.” Then he bites down on my nipple, and the sensation, coupled with what he’s doing to me below, elicits a yelp I can’t control.

Aiden laughs at the apology I know is written all over my face. “Mute button,” he explains.

“In that case,” I pant. “Please keep going.”

“Had no intention of stopping, Cherry Girl.”

“Harder,” I beg while the host prattles on in the background. “Yes!” I scream so loud I surprise myself as he more than delivers on my request.

“How’s that?” he grunts, sweat dripping from his temples as he slams into me repeatedly.

“J-just like that.” I’m clawing at his skin. Yanking on his hair. Shouting and damn near crying, and somehow, he manages to get me there and keep up with the mostly one-sided conversation he’s having with Bud.

“I’m coming,” I scream, no longer caring if the phone is muted or not. Or if the entire country hears me sing his praises. He’s milked every rational thought from my body.

Aiden brings his mouth to mine, swallowing the garbled nonsense I’m spewing as I reach my peak and go careening over the edge into sweet oblivion.

“Aiden,” I cry, kissing him back. Our tongues twist and tangle as he cradles my head in his hand, fingers fisted at the nape of my neck.

“Yeah,” he says, a little too loud to be talking to me. “I’m still here.”

“Did you hear anything I just said?” Bud asks, laughing off his annoyance.

“Sorry,” my rock star replies. “Was making out with my lady.”

“Aiden!” I squeak, slapping his chest.

Bud laughs at our antics. “Ahh, but she’s a beautiful little distraction, man,” he offers.

“That she is,” my fake boyfriend agrees while staring down at me with emotion sparkling in his eyes that seems far too real for what we’re supposed to be.

Or maybe...maybe I'm just seeing what I want to see.

CHAPTER 18

VERONICA

“HERE, WEAR THIS.” Kinzy tosses a professionally gift-wrapped package my way as I rummage through my closet for an outfit befitting of a twenty-first birthday celebration with a rock star. Considering I have absolutely no idea of where he’s taking me, I’m even more of a lost cause than usual.

“I told you not to get me anything,” I squeak, barely managing to catch the box with one hand while keeping the clothes I have balanced in the other arm from falling.

“It’s not from me.” She sends me a sly wink. “It’s from your *man*.”

“Of course, it is,” I grumble, though it’s impossible to keep from grinning. “Always trying to dress me.”

“As he should,” my bestie snarks. “Lord knows he’s far better at it than you.”

“Hey!” I fire a glare in her direction before tearing into the packaging to reveal a gold sequined mini dress. It’s strapless, sparkly, and unsurprisingly *sexy*.

Ronnie of two months ago would never have dreamed of stepping foot out the door in such a flimsy little thing. But the new me moves differently. She’s confident and comfortable in her skin, and every bit of that change can be accredited to

Aiden Addams. The difference he's made in my life in the relatively short time I've known him is astounding.

"Damn, he must be taking you some place real fancy," she muses, examining the goods. "Still no clue of his plans?"

"None." I drop my robe and slip into the dress. "Zip me up?"

The fabric tightens, hugging my figure like it was tailor made for my body as she pulls it taut then draws back whistling her appreciation. "You look hot." The hussy walks around me slowly, eyeing the fit. "I almost forgive that jerk for not including me in the festivities."

"I'm sorry." I apologize for what feels like the billionth time, because I really do feel bad about ditching her for a guy. "I'll call him back right now and insist we do something together."

"The fuck you will..." She runs her fingers through the hair she just blew out for me, draping it over my shoulders the way my date prefers. "We can party it up tomorrow night after your show, and your old ass can buy me drinks then. I, for one, am really hoping he has another present waiting for you at the end of the night..." She drives her meaning home with a few hip thrusts. "Like a ride on his bologna pony." My ridiculous friend then mounts an imaginary horse, lassoing a hand in the air above her head.

"One can hope." My cheeks warm with a sheepish smile just as my phone buzzes with a message letting me know that my prince has arrived and is waiting for me downstairs.

"Giddy-up bitch!" Kinzy swats me on the ass, and I'm off.

With sweaty palms and a racing heart, I make my way to the elevator. Butterflies dance in my belly on the ride down to

meet my date. Or is it a fake date? It's so hard to tell what's real anymore.

“Dayum, bestie.” Aiden’s jaw drops as he gives me a very thorough inspection complete with the most obnoxious catcall that sends heads whipping in our direction, as if his presence doesn’t draw enough attention on its own. “You look good enough to eat.” His brows waggle as he bites down on his lower lip and releases a predatory growl.

“Thanks,” I say, grinning ear to ear. “Some guy sent me this dress for my birthday.” I give a little twirl, so he gets the full experience.

Aiden smooches the tips of his fingers then opens them toward the clouds. “That guy has immaculate taste. Eleven out of ten. You should keep him around.” Then, he gives me another onceover, his eyes scanning my body with slow appreciation before gripping me with both hands at the waist and pulling me close. Aiden buries his mouth into the curve of my neck, pressing the sweetest, gentlest kisses along my collarbone.

My head lolls back, inviting him to keep going before I realize there’s something off and let out a squeal. “You’re holding me with both hands!”

“I am.” His smile’s so wide I can feel it curve against my skin.

“When did you get your cast off?” I reach for his hands where they rest on my hips and lace our fingers together. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Got it off at my appointment this morning.” He lifts his head from my shoulder and pecks the tip of my nose. “Surprise!”

“Wh-when can you play again?” My stomach drops as reality starts creeping in.

He shrugs. “I can start tinkering now. Got a week or two of physical therapy then I should be good as new.”

“Best birthday surprise ever,” I lie, hoping for the first time since we met that he can’t see right through my bull. Praying that he can’t see the tears I feel burning the backs of my eyelids.

“This isn’t your surprise, Ronnie. Just thought it would be a fun way to kick the night off.” He shakes his head, seeming disappointed in himself. His breathy laughter’s barely audible as his lips turn down into a sympathetic frown. *So much for masking my emotions.* “Don’t dwell on this tonight, huh?” He holds his hand out in the space between us. “Filling in for me was just the beginning for you, I promise.”

“I’m not upset.” But I am, and I hate myself for it. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for Aiden. He’s the one who deserves to be on that stage. But I’m also sad for me. Sad that this dream I’ve been living is ending. Sad that we’re one step closer to going our separate ways.

He wipes the traitorous tear that begins to make its way down my cheek away with his thumb as he cradles my face. “It isn’t over.” His amber irises bear deep into mine and I get stupidly emotional for an entirely different reason, because now I can’t help wishing he was referring to us and not my music. Because I’d happily give that all up in a heartbeat if I could keep this man for myself.

“I’m being silly.” I widen my eyes, trying to save the mascara Kinzy applied to my lashes. “I knew it was a temporary position going in.”

“It’s not over,” he stresses again, like there’s something he knows that I don’t.

“It’s fine, really.” I reach up to grab his wrists, lowering them from my heated cheeks. “All good things come to an end, Aid.”

With that my stomach bottoms out and I turn to head for the car.

Aiden rests a hand at the small of my back and trails after me with no further mention of music and without making any more promises he can’t possibly keep.

“What are we doing here?” I ask when the car pulls up to the front of Booze & Bad Decisions.

“What? The club not good enough for you now, Miss Thang?” His narrowed gaze is judging me harshly.

I punch at his shoulder. “I love it here and you know it. I guess I just thought since you said it was a surprise it would be some place new.”

“Trust me?” he asks, after climbing out of the open door and reaching back inside to help me out behind him.

“You know I do.” My heart sputters when he smiles down at me with the full force of that Aiden Addams charm that has had women across the globe swooning for years.

“Great. Because I can’t wait to give you your present!”

With that he tugs me toward the entrance.

The club is alive and in full swing. There’s a local cover band on stage performing “Friends in Low Places” by Garth

Brooks, and the crowd is eating it up.

When I attempt to stop and watch, Aiden yanks harder on my arm. “Just give me a sec,” I laugh. “These guys are really good.”

“I know. That’s why they’re playing tonight.” Aiden lowers his lips to my ear. “Only the best for my fake girlfriend.” Then he trails the tip of his tongue along the shell of my ear, sending a shiver to my core. “But your real surprise is in the back.” The pitiful, puppy dog eyes he lands on mine are impossible to refuse.

“Okay...” I can’t help but giggle as I follow behind him down the hall past the offices and dressing rooms which are all dark and unoccupied. Despite the ominous atmosphere, I’m practically bursting with anticipation. My date’s excitement is infectious. I love seeing him so smiley.

“Okay,” he says when we reach our destination. “You ready to be blown away?”

“There better be a puppy or a pony in there with all this build up.”

“Now,” he says, pulling open the heavy barn doors I’m only just realizing I’ve never seen closed before tonight. “Where the hell would you put a pony?”

“Bend over and I’ll show—” The threat dies in my throat as he reveals a scene that steals my breath. My words. My thoughts.

“Surprise!” a room full of familiar faces yells in unison as a sea of balloons and confetti rain down on us from the ceiling.

I glance around at the space where I’ve spent so much time recently. It’s been completely transformed for the occasion...
for me.

There are tables lined in glittery gold cloths and a cake that looks like it came straight from a magazine. It's three tiers of varying shades of pink ombré and sparkles with the number twenty-one in glittering gold to top it off. A freestanding chocolate fondue fountain that must be at least four feet tall is next to it, flanked by a buffet of fresh fruits on one side and every donut and pastry imaginable on the other.

The band is all here, along with their wives, smiles stretched from ear to ear as they watch me absorb the scene.

“Dad? Mom?” They're the last two people I expect to find hidden among my classmates and newfound friends.

“Happy Birthday!” my mother squeals as my parents rush over, sandwiching me in a hug. It's only been a few weeks since we last saw one another, but having them here on my big day is making me all kinds of emotional.

Another set of arms wrap me from behind and I whip around to see who they belong to. “Vicky!”

“Happy Birthday, bitch.” My sister plants a big smooch on my cheek. “How's it feel to be legal?”

“I don't know,” I laugh. “I haven't really had time to lean into it yet—what are you doing here?”

“Aiden flew us all in,” Momma offers, beaming. “He's really something special, Ronnie Rose.”

“Sure is,” Daddy agrees. “Got yourself a great guy there.”

I look around for the man in question, suddenly feeling his loss, to find he really hasn't left my side, but just slid a few paces over to allow for our reunion.

“He's the best,” I say, my eyes fixed on his. “Excuse me.” I slip out from their embrace and throw myself at the man

responsible for making me feel like a queen for a day.

He wraps his arms around me, bringing his lips to my ear and nibbling softly on the lobe. “Good surprise?”

“The best!”

His satisfied growl sends a rush of desire rolling through me. “That’s cuz you don’t know what’s coming next.”

“There’s more?”

“Oh, yeah,” he murmurs, returning me to my feet and retrieving a mic from his back pocket. He nods toward the stage, where the guys must’ve assembled while I was greeting my family, and the beginning notes to Conway’s “Happy Birthday Darlin’” waft through the speakers.

Aiden twirls me under his arm before nailing me with the iconic opening lines, “Hello Darlin’.”

And holy hell, if I wasn’t sure I was in love with this man before, it becomes painfully clear as he spins me through the crowd and toward the stage, while crooning his heart out in that deep timbre of his, that mine will never recover from Aiden Addams.

Halfway through the song, he hands the mic off to Kinzy—*that little liar face*—and she takes over.

“What are you doing?” I squeak, when he scoops my feet out from under me and takes off at a canter, up the steps to deposit me on a stool, center stage.

“You’ll see...”

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard as I watch my best girl put on a show for my friends and family. She’s so animated. So bubbly. A born entertainer.

“Bravo!” I shout, cheering her on as her performance winds to a close. “And thank you.” I look from Kinzy to Aiden and then to the band and back out into the crowd. “This is so special.” Tears well in my eyes. “Aiden this is...it’s everything.”

“It’s nothing less than you deserve, Cherry Girl.” Then he leans in, grips my chin in his hand and kisses me long and slow.

And with tongue.

And. I. Let. Him. I let him, knowing my parents are out there, likely gawking. Because no one’s ever kissed me like Aiden Addams. And I’d be willing to bet no one will again. So, I soak it in, the way his mouth melds so effortlessly with mine. The smell of his cologne and the taste of bourbon and mint. I savor the butterflies fluttering in my tummy and the way my toes curl in my heels.

“Ahem.” Someone clears their throat into the mic, daring to interrupt us.

On a reluctant sigh, I look up to find Anika tapping a heeled foot to the stage with a look of feigned disapproval on her face, and a rush of shame floods my cheeks.

“We get it, you’re in love.” Her eyes roll so hard, I half expect them to continue across the stage. “But it’s time to give the birthday girl her gift.”

With that, Aiden takes a step back and the guys crowd around him. “Cherry-Girl, you’ve done such a remarkable job filling in for me the past six or so weeks. Your talent has quite simply blown us all away.”

“I knew the moment I saw that viral video of you whooping this dude’s ass at that piano bar, you were

something special,” Rhett chimes in. “You’re a star.”

“It’s true. You’re the real deal, lil’ sis.” That complement is courtesy of Nick, who’s become quite the protector in my time here.

“I mean, you tamed Aiden Addams,” Lyle says, as if that alone makes me something special. “You’re fucking magic, Ronnie.”

“Oh, dear God.” Anika snatches the mic. “Let’s not give the girl a big head. I’ve got enough of you apes to deal with.” Then she blesses us all with one of her very rare smiles. A smile that lights up her entire face. “I know talent when I see it, Veronica. You were the perfect choice to fill in for Aiden,” she says, tooting her own horn in a roundabout way.

“Th-thanks,” I stammer as she returns the microphone to Aiden’s hand.

I have no freaking clue what’s going on. It’s not like they can make my position permanent, but it feels like they’re building up to something, and the anticipation just might kill me.

“Baby,” Aiden says, taking my hand into his. “We’d like to offer you a weekly Saturday night slot opening for The Rhett Taylor Band, if you’ll take it.”

Anika then starts prattling off stipulations that register, but barely. They’d like it to be an all-girl cover group. I’m welcome to choose my own members, subject to The Rhett Taylor Band’s approval, and Anika is to be my manager. The initial contract is for two years and can be extended, should all parties agree.

“Well?” Aiden says, shaking me out of a stupor. “Fuck, baby, put us out of our misery.”

“Yes!” I shout, through the tears that are running unchecked along my cheeks. “Oh my gosh. I’m just...I don’t even know what to say. Thank you. Thank you all for making my dreams come true. I won’t ever forget it.”

The room erupts in cheers, and one by one the guys come by to congratulate me. To welcome me. To wish me the happiest of birthdays.

And it is. The happiest birthday and the happiest day of my life.

CHAPTER 19

AIDEN

I LOSE sight of Ronnie when I sneak out back to the lot behind the club to check on Mr. Wallace and the other surprise he and her father are cooking up.

I'm fucking floating around on a cloud, knowing I'm the one responsible for making Cherry so happy. The look on her face when she saw her family standing out in the crowd filled my chest to damn near bursting. But it was her reaction to being given the opening gig after witnessing the pain in her face when I picked her up this evening that has me walking on air.

She *deserves* that spot.

Hell, she deserves every good thing this sick and twisted world has to offer. And though I know our dynamic will soon change, and it'll be some other schmuck's job to do so, I'll make it my mission to shield her from as much of the bad shit as I can. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her happy and smiling the way she is tonight, even if I'm forced to do it from a distance.

I'm certainly not about to sit around and depend on someone else to do it.

Nah, my Cherry Girl's happiness is worth far too much to leave in *less capable* hands.

Speaking of hands...who the fuck's the Ken doll with his arm around my date?

Molars clenched, I stride over, ready to put the prick in his place if need be. "Jesus, Cherry, I can't leave you alone for two minutes."

"Aiden!" Ronnie greets me with a wobbly smile and eyes that plead for tolerance. "This is Brody Anderson." She takes a step back, out of his hold and wraps an arm around my waist. "His Dad and my father work—"

"Work together. I know. Your dad introduced me to Mr. Anderson a few minutes ago." *I just had no clue his slimeball son was inside hitting on my girl.*

I press a kiss to the top of her head, breathing her in to try to soothe my irritation over finding them together.

"So, you're the hot shot country star, sweeping my Ronnie Rose off her feet." He extends a hand in my direction.

I take a sip of whiskey while staring at his offering until he lowers that hand right back to his side where it belongs.

"Aiden," Veronica hisses, elbowing me in the ribs. It's a not so gentle reminder that I'm supposed to be helping her land this guy.

She clearly isn't as over this arrangement as I am. And I am. Over. It. *Especially now.*

"Afraid you've got it backward, she's definitely the one responsible for sweeping my boots out from under me." I suck my tongue to my teeth, forcing myself to be amiable for her sake. Because who the hell does he think he is, referring to her as *his* anything? "A real seductress, this one...Isn't that right, babe?" I waggle my brows suggestively, thoughts of our many

tutoring sessions running on loop in my mind. “Maybe we’ll make time for that final lesson tonight, huh?”

The flush that spreads from her cheeks to her chest does not disappoint.

“Lesson?” Her admirer’s interest is peaked. “What kind of lesson?”

“Oh, nothing...” Ronnie’s long nails dig into my side. “Just boring music stuff. We don’t need to get into any of that now.” She gives me a hard look while a nervous laugh bubbles up through her chest. “Brody here was just about to tell me all about his recent promotion.” She reaches out to pat his arm, an act that has me green with envy. It’s a foreign emotion—one I don’t think I’ve ever truly experienced and would appreciate never revisiting. I can feel the last threads of my control slipping away. “Why don’t you continue?” she encourages.

The cocksucker preens before gushing over this new title—VP of something or other—that apparently has him traveling all over the world. He boasts about his salary, like we should be impressed. I don’t even bother telling him I make more than that in a week, because unlike this clown, I don’t need to overcompensate for shit.

The more he talks the clearer it becomes that he’s on a mission to sell himself to Cherry—to take my girl right out from under my nose. And I don’t give a damn that getting these two together was the original goal. *He* doesn’t know that and yet has the audacity to be so brazen. The guy’s a damn weasel and could never be good enough for her.

And I don’t like the way he’s looking at Cherry, either, like he has some claim to her. Like he’s the prize and not the other way around. That’s what finally pushes me to knock him down

a few pegs. “Imagine you had to work really hard to *earn* such a prestigious title in Daddy’s company.”

I scoff, staring into my glass before tipping my head back and emptying the contents down my throat. I may need to give up pretenses with this tumbler altogether and carry around the fucking bottle if I’m to deal with this bullshit the rest of the night.

“Probably about as hard as Ronnie here had to work to *earn* a position opening for her boyfriend’s band.”

Whoa.

Veronica gasps, rearing back as if she’s been slapped.

I step toward him, getting right in his face. “You will *not* insult my girl and especially tonight of all nights.” My tone is menacing, infused with the fury I’d like nothing more than to unload on him.

But he’s who she wants, I remind myself as my fists clench at my sides. Fuck. The thought alone of him anywhere near her has bile climbing in my throat.

“Sorry,” he amends, his demeanor softening. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, but someone has to look out for your best interests, and if your parents aren’t going to set you straight then I guess that’s gonna have to fall on me.”

“Set me straight?” She rolls her tongue over her teeth. Her eyes narrowed in what looks a lot like disgust. “In what way, Brody?”

There’s my girl.

“Sweetheart, you need to think long and hard about what it is you want from life before signing that bogus contract he handed you tonight.” He grips her chin, tilting her face up to

his, and my blood pressure shoots to the fucking roof. “I’ve waited long enough. Bid my time while you did this college and music thing. But I think you know I’ve had you pegged as my future wife for years. And the future wife of Brody Anderson will not be spending her nights singing karaoke in bar rooms.”

“I don’t sing karao—” she starts, but I lose my shit.

“Know this,” I say, grabbing that fucker by the front of his shirt and slamming him into the wall. “I will rearrange your face if you ever dream of speaking to her that way again.”

“Stop it!” Cherry’s hands fist into the back of my shirt. “Aiden, please. Put him down!”

I hear her pleas. The tremor in her voice. And I want to soothe her. To ease her fears. But he crossed the line. So instead, I’ll defend her honor and beg for forgiveness later.

“Veronica Vanderbilt has more class,” I growl, “more *talent* in her pinky than you could ever dream to have. She *earned* that spot,” I grit, getting right in his face. “And if you knew the woman you claim to want to marry at fucking all, you’d realize she doesn’t need *anything* handed to her.”

“Class?” he snorts. “She *had* class. Now she has skimpy dresses and a reputation that precedes her.” He grunts, shifting around to loosen the neck of his shirt that’s still firmly in my grasp. “All thanks to you. This is her rebellious phase. *You*. Are. Her. Rebellious. Phase.”

I loosen my grip slightly then slam him back into the wall. “You were and never will be anything more than a schoolgirl crush.”

“What the hell is going on over here?” I don’t have to turn around to know it’s Kinzy who’s happened upon the three of

us tucked away behind the fondue fountain. “Aiden, you need to let him go.”

The little spitfire wedges herself between us, leaving me no choice but to release him.

Brody stumbles back, adjusting his clothes. “This is what you want?” he shouts at Ronnie. “A drunk? Some scrappy kid from the wrong side of the tracks?” His laugh is laden with disapproval. “He’s nothing but a whore, and he’s making you into one too.”

I cock back, ready to slam my fist into his jaw, but it’s stopped mid-flight.

“Don’t do this, man,” Josh says, taking Kinzy’s place as peacemaker. “It’s Ronnie’s birthday.”

“Did you hear what he—” Red hot anger swelters in my veins. I can’t get past the way he just spoke to her. The way he just disrespected my heart.

“I heard it,” he assures me, turning a warning glare on that sorry excuse for a man. “And I also heard Ronnie burst into tears and watched her take off running to the bathroom with Kinzy.”

“Shit.” I take a look around and sure enough...she’s nowhere to be seen.

“He’s not worth it, Aiden. Cherry is yours to lose. Remember that before you go disfiguring someone she’s clearly close enough to that her parents thought it fitting to invite him to her party. You’ve already won.”

Brody has the gall to snort before storming off.

The urge to go after him is strong, but Josh doesn’t let up. “He’s nothing. Nobody.”

I nod, my jaw ticking side to side. “He’s not fucking good enough for her.”

“Well, no shit.” Clueless, Josh slugs an arm over my shoulder. “Trust me, she’s happy where she’s at.”

“Think I mighta just screwed that up.”

“Nah,” he says, guiding me toward the bathroom. “Just go in there and get your girl.” Josh gives me a little nudge when we reach the door. “Kiss and make up and all that good stuff.”

“This is the ladies’ room,” I argue, like there’s some impenetrable penis detector keeping me out.

He shrugs. “Knock first?”

“Good plan.” I pound the fist that’s been itching to connect with that pretty boy’s mug against the door before pulling it slightly open. “If there’s anyone in here besides Veronica and Kinzy, speak now or cover your coochies, cuz I’m coming in.”

“Don’t you da—” Kinzy stops short when I breeze past her to Ronnie, who’s curled up beside her friend on the settee, sobbing into a fistful of tissue.

“I can take it from here, Kinz.” I motion with my head for her to move, but she stays put.

“Look at what you did to her!” Her brown eyes blaze with fury as she stares me down. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Fine,” I say, dropping to my knees in front of my distraught date when her feral friend refuses to leave her side. “I’m sorry, baby.” I take her hand into mine, kissing along her knuckles. “Fuck. I’m so sorry.”

She sniffs, dabbing at her bloodshot eyes. “You can go,” she says to Kinzy. “I-it was nothing Brody wasn’t asking for.”

“You sure?” Her friend hesitates, like she thinks I might actually do something to make things worse.

“For God’s sake, Kinzy,” Josh shouts from where he’s apparently still guarding the door. “Give them some fucking privacy.”

“Who does he think he—” the brunette starts, jumping to her feet before wavering once again.

Ronnie laughs at her antics. “Go give him hell, bestie.”

“Oh, you best believe I will.” Then she looks to me. “You better fix this, Addams.” Kinzy pokes two fingers at her own eyes then darts them in my direction, keeping me pinned with a warning glare as she walks backward for the exit.

“She’s a bit frightening,” I admit when she disappears through the door.

Cherry chokes on a laugh. “She can be.”

“I like her.”

“Me too.” She sniffs, dabbing at the snot dripping from her nose. “You can get up off the floor now.” Ronnie pats the spot next to her.

“Right.” I scramble to my feet, dusting off my pants before taking the recently vacated seat.

“Can’t believe you followed me into the girls’ bathroom.” Her soft giggle is music to my ears.

“Pretty sure I’d follow you straight into the fires of hell at this point, doll.” I shake my head in mock shame.

Ronnie’s answer is a tight-lipped smile.

“I’m sorry for ruining your birthday.” Guilt festers in my gut. “It wasn’t supposed to go down like this.”

“You didn’t ruin anything.” She sighs. “Except maybe my chances with Brody.”

Ouch.

“Yeah, well, can’t say I’d be upset if you didn’t end up with that joker.”

“I’ve never seen him act like that.” Confusion wrinkles her brow. “He’s always been so kind and respectful. I—I looked up to him, you know?”

I reach out and dab the tears from her puffy cheeks. “You deserve better,” I say simply, before peppering kisses all over her sticky face. “You deserve a man who would make you his entire world.”

A quiet chuckle vibrates her chest. “Yeah, well...guess it’s back to the drawing board on that one, huh?”

“Does that mean no more Brody?” I try not to sound as relieved as I feel, but I know I fail miserably.

“Fuck, no.” Her face scrunches with disgust. “He’s an ass.”

I snort at her rare use of profanity. “Thank God.”

“You still owe me another lesson,” she prompts. “Before you cut me off to go back to your harem.”

Heat rushes to my groin. “That one may require a few dozen lessons.” My tone is playful, but I’m anything but joking.

“Hmm...” she hums. “I think I can live with these terms.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to let you go, sweet girl.” I gnash my teeth together before I do something stupid like beg her to be mine. Because while I know I’m better for her than

Brody, I also know I'm not half the man she deserves. "He'll have to be one hell of a guy."

"Can we not talk about that part any more tonight?" Her big blue eyes glisten with emotion she's fighting to contain. "I don't think I can take anymore sadness."

"I've got something that'll cheer you up," I say, hopping up to give her a little space to collect herself.

When I turn back to reach for her hand, her eyes are fixed to the bulge in my pants. "You can cheer me up in here before we go back to the party."

I drop my jaw for affect. "Josh is standing at the door."

"It's nothing he hasn't heard before, right?" I love it when she gets sassy and throws my own words back in my face.

"Tempting," I say, tucking my dick behind the waistband of my slacks for safe keeping. "But your father is out there, and for one, I don't want to die tonight. And two, his surprise should be ready by now, and I'm not about to be the one responsible for ruining it."

"Ugh," she grumbles, ambling by me to the sink to fix her makeup. "Fine, I'll let you off the hook on three conditions."

I catch her line of sight in the large mirror and quirk a brow. "I'm listening."

"You get me *reallllly* drunk."

"Done. It's your twenty-first birthday. Getting wasted is a rite of passage."

"Good." Her lips form an O shape as she dabs a wipe beneath her eyes to remove the mascara. Once satisfied, she balls the cloth in a hand and rests it on the counter. "And you have to take me back to your place tonight."

I take a few steps forward, molding my front to her back then grip the hair on her shoulder and pull it aside before bringing my lips to her ear. “Wouldn’t dream of taking you any place else.”

Her head falls back, finding respite on my chest as I trail a finger along her cleavage. “What else?”

“H-huh?” Fuck, but that breathy tone has me wanting to flip her around and fuck her on this vanity.

Instead, I bite down on her lobe. “You said three things.”

“Oh—I...I can’t remember.”

I trail my tongue down the curve of her neck and along her collarbone before placing a kiss at the tip of her shoulder. “Then I’ll take an IOU.”

“Sure you don’t wanna take the edge off before we go back out there?” She steeples her hands in front of her face. “That could be number three.”

“No,” I scoff. “I definitely want to.” I grind my dick into her lower back to prove just how much. “But unfortunately for you, you bring out the gentleman in me Ms. Vanderbilt.” With that I move for the door. “So, finish making yourself presentable and then join me. I’ll be just outside waiting.”

“Can’t you just wait in here?” She pokes her lip out. “I’m almost ready.”

“I’m a man with only so much restraint, Cherry.”

“Where are we going?” she asks when we head through the door behind the bar.

“Just drink your beverage and hush.”

“Aiden Addams, are you taking me to the dumpster?” Her pitch is already getting higher as the shots she, Vicky, and Kinzy just smashed start making their way through her system.

“Watch your step.” I guide her through the back door that leads out to a very modest courtyard which usually serves as a smoking area for our employees. And yes, in the far corner, is a big blue eyesore of a dumpster.

“Wait, why do I smell—” She takes a deep inhale of the spicy aroma and lets out a squeal that could wake the dead. “Crawfish!”

“Your dad and Wallace drove in because he was insistent upon giving his baby girl her favorite meal on her big day.”

“I have the besssst men in my lifffe,” she slurs before grabbing hold of my forearm. “Come on.” She gives a little tug then nearly falls on her face when her heel gets caught on the uneven ground.

“Take your damn shoes off before you break your neck,” I order, seriously starting to worry for the girl’s safety.

She whirls around looking at me like I’ve grown a second head. “I’m not walking on this filthy ground bare f-footed.”

“Have it your way, toots,” I concede before scooping her up bridal style and carrying her the rest of the way.

“Aiden,” she purrs, while combing a hand through my hair. “I kinda like it when you manhandle me.” Her strawberry breath wafts to my nose. “It makes my vaginaaa *wetttt*.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t just hear that,” her mother says, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Oh, hey, Mom.” She reaches to pat her mother’s cheek when I set her to her feet. “Sorry. I was trying to whisk—to whisssper.”

“It’s okay, honey.” Mrs. Vanderbilt can’t even look me in the eye as she gets her daughter seated in the special birthday chair she decorated in crepe paper and balloons. “Just maybe don’t say anything else that’s meant to be a secret tonight, mkay? Especially with your father a few feet away.”

Speak of the devil, Victor comes strolling over with an overflowing tray of steaming mud bugs—*Cherry would have my ass if she knew my subconscious was referring to them as such*—for his little girl. He sets them on the table then takes the seat beside her with a dazzling smile that quickly falters. “What’s wrong, Ronnie? Have you been crying?”

“What?” she chirps, while twisting the tail off her first crawfish. “N-no.” *Slurrrp*. I find myself fighting the urge to gag when she sucks the juice from the head. “What would give you th-that idea?”

He shrugs, staring me down. “Your eyes are red.”

“Happens when I drinnnk.” Her answer comes as she passes me a critter. “Look. J-just do what I do. It’s not *harrrd*.” Then she cackles as if we’re sharing some inside joke. “Hard, get it?” She stares up at me, eyes wide.

“Get a grip,” I hiss, nudging her with my knee, as I begin to peel my own crawfish at a painstaking pace.

“Veronica,” her father commands, not willing to let this go.

“Yes, Daddy?”

“Your makeup is a wreck and you’ve obviously been crying. What the hell happened? Was it Aiden?” he demands, like I’m not sitting right here beside her.

“If you must knowww,” she slurs, “Brody is a dick, mmkay?” Her eyes roll. “I th-thought I was going to m-marry him and now I’m *deffffffinitelyyy* not. And that’s it.”

“Marry him?” her mother jumps in. “But you have a boyfriend.” Her arm flails my direction.

“I know!” Veronica drops her food, holding her open palms out. “Someone sh-should tell *him* that.”

“Aiden,” Mr. Vanderbilt says. “What the hell is going on?”

I clear my throat. “Sir, with all due respect, I’d prefer not to get into this right now. It’s her birthday, and they had a little altercation. It’s all over now. She’s no longer sobbing, and I’d prefer to keep it that way.”

“In other words,” Kinzy says, plopping down beside me with a tray of her own. “Mind your business, Mr. V. Me and my man Aid here, we got it covered.”

“Is this something I need to take up with Anderson?” His eyes volley to his business partner, who is off near the boiler still talking with Mr. Wallace, completely unaware.

“No.” Ronnie sets her crawfish fat covered glass down hard on the table. “You can do what Kinz s-said and minddd your busy...busy-ness.” Then she smiles sweetly up at her father, being the bipolar drunk that she is. “Isn’t this the best party ever?”

“It’s a very nice party,” he agrees, shaking his head in defeat. “I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself.”

We stay just long enough to eat our fill and for my girl to start sobering up on the virgin drinks I discretely had our bartender switch hers out for. By the time we make it to the goodbyes, she’s even able to walk to the car on her own two feet without the threat of breaking a limb.

The ride to my place is made in relative silence. Ronnie's so quiet, I assume she's fallen asleep. Until the car rolls to a stop, that is, and her head pops right up, eyes wide and bright.

"I know what I want," she says as I assist her in exiting the vehicle, clearly having given this some thought on the drive home.

I feel like I've missed half a conversation because I have no clue what she's talking about. "What you want?" With a hand on the small of her back, I usher her through the glass doors and into the elevator.

"Mmmhmm," she grins. "My third thing."

"Ahh, yes." The bell dings as the doors open to the penthouse. "And what might that be, birthday girl?"

"My last lesson."

The finality in her statement squeezes my chest. "That sounds like work." I scoop her up and throw her over a shoulder. "Tonight is all play."

Cherry giggles the whole way to my bedroom, her tiny fists connecting with the backs of my thighs until I flop her over onto my bed. She's out of breath and red in the face. Her makeup is a disaster, her hair a wreck. And she's still the most beautiful creature I've ever seen.

I bite down on my knuckle while stealing a minute to catalog this moment to memory. I find myself doing that a lot lately—trying to memorize every one of her features. Her flaws.

"Are you gonna fuck me?" she asks, clearly annoyed with my silence.

Drunk Ronnie has a mouth on her. The thought has me chuckling beneath my breath. “No,” I answer as one by one, I begin unfastening the buttons of my shirt. “Not tonight.”

Her growl of frustration sends her wild hair flying. “Whyyyy? It’s my birfday, and I’m horny and very w-wet. I’m ready for you, Sugar Balls.”

I snort. “For a number a reasons, we won’t be having sex tonight.” I step out of my pants and climb in beside her, wearing just my boxers. “The first.” I tap a finger to her pouty lip. “You’re drunk.”

“Oh, come onnn.” Horny tears pool in her eyes.

“Two,” I say, reaching around to unzip the back of her dress. “Today you aren’t half of some stupid fucking deal. There will be no *lesson*.” I’m beginning to really abhor that word.

A lone tear drips from her eye. “But I want you so *sssoo* baddd.”

“I have never wanted anything,” I say cradling her head in both hands and bringing my lips a breath away from hers, “the way I want you, Cherry. I’m not just saying it. I mean it. I want you so bad I can’t think straight. And I will have you, but not when you’ve been drinking. Not when *I’ve* been drinking. Not on your birthday or to fulfill some commitment.”

“But wh-what?” She groans. “I don’t understand.”

I don’t understand either.

So, I do the only thing that makes sense in this moment. I kiss her. I kiss her to shut her up. I kiss her to shut myself up. I kiss her because there’s nothing else I’d rather be doing. I kiss her because I can, and I don’t know how long that’ll still be the case.

“Fuck, Cherry,” I groan into her mouth as our tongues twist and turn and our breathing becomes one. “I think...” I murmur, slipping a finger beneath the lace covering her sex. “I think I might be falling in love with you.”

“That’s good,” she pants. “Because I—oh,” she moans when I glide over her clit. “R-right there.”

“You were saying?” I press, pissed at myself for distracting her.

“Nothing, I—oh, God, please don’t stop.”

“I’ll get you there, sweet girl, but Cherry?” I still my fingers inside her.

“Yeah?”

“Right now, I’m just a man loving on his woman.”

Her back arches from the bed her tits reaching for my mouth. “Are y-you s-saying I’m yours?”

“I’m saying that *I’m* yours, and I think I have been for some time. And yeah, baby, I’m saying I want you to be mine.”

“O—ohhh,” she gasps, grinding into my hand. “Th-then I’m y—”

Just then her phone starts buzzing on the bed beside her. She shoves it away without looking at the screen, but I see his name flashing across it and my blood runs hot.

“It’s fucking Brody.”

“I-ignore it,” she says gripping me at my nape and bringing my mouth to her breasts.

“I have a better idea,” I say before swiping my tongue over her pert nipple.

“D-don’t you d-dare answer that.” She reaches for the phone that’s now clutched firmly in my hand.

“Don’t worry, doll. I’m gonna let it ring.”

“Ohhh,” she mewls, catching my meaning when I press the still-vibrating device to her clit.

“He might be calling, but I’ll be the one making you cum.”

CHAPTER 20

VERONICA

“YOU GAVE ME AN STD!” I storm out of Aiden’s bathroom with tears rolling down my cheeks. I have never had cramps this bad, not even on the heaviest day of my period.

“Wha—?” Still groggy, Aiden props himself up on his elbows. It’s an effort not to get lost in the deliciously disheveled picture he presents. No one looks better all rumply and disoriented than this man. “I did what now?”

His eyes are bleary with confusion. Well, he better wake the hell up and get *unconfused* fast because he has some explaining to do.

“Which one is it? The clap?” I pace back and forth, fear clawing at my chest. “Please tell me I don’t have blue waffles—Aiden, why are you laughing? This is serious.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, not looking the least contrite as he pounds his chest, laughing like a dang hyena. “Did you just accuse me of giving you a disease?”

I halt and nod. “A sexually transmitted one.” Still failing to see the humor in this dreadful situation, I cross my arms over my chest and glare daggers at him.

The irksome man doesn’t so much as flinch.

“Say that again a little slower.” He’s really cracking himself up over there.

Meanwhile, I’m fighting the urge to throw something at him, and I’ve never been one to lean toward violence. I guess if I bring out the gentleman in him, he must bring out the crazy in me, because I feel positively unhinged. “Why is this funny to you?” Nausea churns in my gut. “It burns so bad when I pee.”

“I’m sorry it hurts when you pee, Cherry, but babe...we *did not* have sex.”

He gawks at me silently for a beat, like he’s expecting me to catch on at any minute. Well, whatever realization he’s waiting for me to come to has long sailed right over my head. I’m far too wound up to focus on riddles at the moment.

“Sex, Ronnie. It’s kind of a requisite to spreading a *sexually* transmitted disease.”

“No, it’s not,” I argue. *How dumb does he think I am?* “You can get herpes in your mouth.” *I know that much from health class.*

“I don’t have herpes in my mouth *or any place else* for that matter.” He stretches his arm out reaching for something in the drawer of this nightstand. “Clean bill of health. Got tested for everything as soon as we started messing around.” He thrusts the papers in my direction. “See for yourself.”

I scan the results, relieved but also still freaking out. “Aiden...something’s wrong with my vagina.” My lip wobbles.

“You probably just have some kind of infection...kidney or bladder. Maybe a UTI.” He grips the front of my baggy shirt and tugs, lugging me toward him to sit on his knee. “I’ll

have Anika set up an appointment while you soak in a nice warm bath.” His fingers move to my temple where he pushes my hair aside and presses his lips to my skin. The tender gesture is a soothing balm to my system. “How’s that sound?”

“Okay,” I agree, leaning into his touch. “I’m sorry I accused you...of...you know.” I wave a hand over my midsection, feeling too silly to repeat my earlier claim.

He snorts. “Are you kidding me? Best part of my day.”

I narrow my eyes at his. “The day just started. You can’t make such a bold declaration this early.”

“The hell I can’t.” He bites down on my shoulder and snarls, before rising to his feet with me cradled in his arms. “Nothing’s gonna top this.” He starts walking for the bathroom. “Not a chance in hell.”

Rather than leave me to my own devices, Aiden fires off a quick text to Anika to get me an appointment with a lady doctor today, then tosses his phone to the counter. He holds me close, with one arm wrapped around my waist, my body pressed to his as he runs a bath in his oversized tub.

“Mind if I join you?” He’s already lifting my shirt up and over my head, leaving me completely naked.

“Of course not, but what if I’m con—”

His finger meets my lips. “You’re not contagious. And even if you were, it’s a little late to worry about that now.”

Butterflies dance across my skin as the night we just spent together in his bed plays out like a movie in my head. I have no business getting hot and bothered with a crotch that feels like it’s breathing fire, but there’s no help for it.

“Cherry?” The smirk on his too-handsome face tells me he knows exactly where my thoughts have wandered.

“I don’t mind.”

“No,” he teases, staring intently at my hardened nipples. “I don’t suppose you do.”

“No funny business,” I warn as he helps me into the tub.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Aiden’s out of his boxers and lowering himself into the water behind me before he’s finished his sentence. His big body sends water sloshing over the sides to the tile floor.

“I’m a little weirded out by how comfortable I am with you,” I admit as he slides in closer and tips my chin up. I don’t bother mentioning that I just washed my hair yesterday as he begins pouring cup after cup of warm water over my head. It won’t matter. The man always goes straight for my mane. His obsession hasn’t waned in the slightest, and I secretly hope it never does.

“Intimacy has a way of stripping away boundaries, doesn’t it?” His hard cock brushes the small of my back, and I have to fight the urge to reach back and wrap my fist around it.

Instead, I whirl my head around and smile at him, trying to look as cool and calm and unaffected by his nakedness as he apparently is by mine. “I guess.”

“Favorite part of yesterday?” he asks with a perceptive smirk. It’s his attempt at distracting me from the desire that’s running rampant in my body. Cool as a cucumber, he works a blob of his shampoo into a lather and massages it into my scalp.

“Umm...” I think hard while enjoying this VIP treatment. It’s difficult to concentrate with his naked body looming over

mine. “When you told me you thought you were falling in love with me.” My heart flutters at the memory.

“Of all things for your drunk ass to remember,” he teases, giving my tresses a tug. “You choose that?”

“It’s not the kind of thing a girl forgets.” I turn my face toward his. “I don’t remember saying it back.”

“You didn’t, but it’s okay.” He plasters on a mask of indifference, but the emotion filling his eyes gives him away.

He *wants* to hear it. And he *deserves* to. No matter what happens between us, it’s important he knows that someone truly loves him, and not as a brother or a friend but the soul-deep, rattle your bones, life-altering kind of love people spend their entire lives looking for. “I love you, Aiden. And I don’t just think it.” I reach a hand up from the water to the scruff on his cheek and stroke my thumb through it gently. “I know.”

“You shouldn’t.”

I shrug. “It’s not the kind of thing a girl can choose.”

A sad smile curves his lips. “But it *is* the kind of thing one can get over.” He angles my face forward and resumes the task of bathing me without another word on the topic.

My mind reels as he motions for me to stand and soaps me up. There’s nothing sexual in the way he’s touching me. His movements are filled with reverence as he cares for my body like some sacred temple. Like his most valuable treasure.

Actions that in no way align with his dismissive tone.

I keep quiet until after he’s finished bathing us both. Till he’s removed the plug and left the tub and the water’s screaming to the same tune as my broken heart as it circles the drain. Only then do I call after him. “Aiden?”

“Yeah?” He turns back with two fluffy towels and assists me out before wrapping me in one. Then himself in the other. Same as always.

“Is this gonna make things weird between us?” I dig my toes into the rug while standing beside him.

“Not weird, Cherry.” He takes a moment to consider his next words. “Friends can love each other, right?”

I pull my lips in, fighting the urge to cry. “Right.”

“Right,” he says, giving me a curt nod before heading out to the room.

I trail behind, mentally berating myself for reading too much into his words—words that were said in a moment of passion and after we’d both had a few too many to drink. But despite the sick feeling rising in my chest, I can’t bring myself to regret them. I meant what I said, and I’m not taking it back even if that’s essentially what he’s just done.

Aiden scrubs a hand over his face on his way over to his dresser, where he quickly dons a pair of boxers, sweats, and an Adidas hoodie.

“How’s the puss?” His signature grin’s a little frayed around the edges. He’s trying hard to ease the tension that’s now hanging over us like a wet blanket.

“The same I guess.” With a dismissive shrug, I take the matching tracksuit and panties he’s offering. I don’t know how to read his mood, and it’s putting a serious damper on mine.

“Dr.’s on her way up,” he warns, keeping his eyes anywhere but on me as I quickly tug the clothes onto my body. It’s so uncharacteristic of him not to look his fill.

“Aiden...” my voice cracks beneath the weight of emotion sitting on my chest. I don’t even know what I want to say. I just know I can’t take another moment of this strain.

There’s an understanding in his eyes as he walks over, wraps his big arms around me, and rests his chin on the top of my head. “We’re good,” he assures me, stroking his fingers in soothing circles along my spine. “We have time to figure this all out, yeah?”

I nod against his hard chest, the words I long to say dying on my tongue with the knock at the door.

When he steps away to answer it, I’m left feeling bereft—empty and more than a little broken inside. Because this *uncomplicated* arrangement has somehow turned into a complication I don’t know how to live without.

“Hi, Veronica.” The middle-aged woman extends a hand toward me. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I say, though there’s not much I find pleasurable in my predicament. “Thank you for coming over on such short notice.”

“Not a problem, dear. Let’s start with a urine sample.” She hands me a cup. “Just leave that on the counter then come out here when you’re done.”

Despite feeling like my bladder is about to burst, it’s an effort to get half an inch of liquid into the cup. Finally, I manage.

“All good?” Aiden asks when I step back out into his room.

“Yeah.” I can’t help but laugh over his hovering outside the door. “It’s not much of a sample, though.”

“You’d be surprised how little it takes.” Dr. Schmidt rises from her chair, little black bag in hand. “I’ll go take care of business in there and be right back.”

“It was my spicy fingers,” Aiden offers as soon as she disappears into the bathroom. He then curves his index and middle fingers in a come-hither motion.

“I’m sorry, what?” Though it feels like I’m literally about to crumble into a million pieces, I find myself laughing at his antics.

“The doc and I were chatting it up while you were *taking forever* in there.” He shrugs. “Literal case of the fire crotch. Official diagnosis.” He beams. “You’re welcome.”

“That is *not* the formal diagnosis,” Dr. Schmidt says, trying and failing to keep a straight face on her approach. “You have a urinary tract infection, Ms. Vanderbilt. Likely caused by the crawfish seasoning on Mr. Addams’ fingers.”

My cheeks flame. “Oh my gosh. This is so embarrassing.”

“It’s quite common. That pepper—it gets in deep under those fingernails and can wreak havoc on the vagina.”

“I felt a little numbness down there when we were...you know.”

The doctor nods.

“But I just thought it was because I was a bit tipsy.”

“Next time you plan on fooling around after a seafood boil, use gloves.” She’s looking pointedly at the man responsible for my predicament. “This antibiotic should have you all cleared up in a few days.” Dr. Schmidt slaps a bottle into my hand.

“Thank you so much.”

“No problem. No need to walk me out,” she says to Aiden when he follows her to the door. “I know the way.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” Aiden sighs dramatically after shutting it behind her. “Feeling better about things?”

“Yeah,” I say, as I start gathering my discarded clothes from around his room. But I don’t feel better. I feel like I’m standing at the bottom of a ravine and the walls are crumbling down around me. I feel like I’m waiting for the inevitable—for the moment it crushes the life out of me.

“Stop that.” He’s suddenly at my side, knocking everything from my hands. “Don’t walk out on me when shit gets hard.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” I stare up at him, at the betrayal marring his features when he stares back at me.

“Isn’t it?”

“I don’t live here.” I throw my hands out.

His answer is so simple. “You could.”

“No—No, I can’t.” Defeated, I collapse into the chair behind me. “Aiden, what are we doing?”

He parts my legs. Kneels between them. Then my hands are in his, my knuckles resting against his lips. “I don’t know.” He kisses each one in tandem. “I don’t know anything anymore except that I can’t fucking breathe at the thought of you walking out that door.”

“Well, I can’t breathe being here and pretending nothing’s changed when everything...” A sob rips from my chest. “Everything has changed, Aiden.”

He nods slowly. “I know.”

“I need to know where I stand.”

“Where you stand?” He repeats the question as if trying to solve a puzzle. “I’m yours.” They’re the same words he uttered to me last night, but he confesses them like a sin worthy of punishment.

This time I’m the one to grip his chin. “Aiden, what does that mean?”

He shakes his head, at war with himself. “You’ve got me on my fucking knees begging you not to leave.” His teeth clamp down on his lower lip. “Beyond that, I don’t know, Cherry, but I’m selfish enough to ask you to be patient while I figure it out.”

Every rational part of me is saying run. But I’m quickly learning that love is anything but logical. And oh, how I love this damaged man. The good, the bad, the broken. Everything that makes him Aiden.

“Okay,” I say, against my better judgment. “I’ll stay.”

“For good?” He perks up. The hope in his expression nearly giving me whiplash.

I snort, threading my fingers through his hair and give him the only answer I can. “For now.”

“I’ll take it.” His head bobs as he rises to his feet, extending a hand for mine. “Netflix and chill?”

“Only if I get to control the remote.”

“Deal.”

We climb into his massive bed together, and he doesn’t even complain when I put on *Gray’s Anatomy*. It’s mostly there as background noise anyway because neither of us seems to be able to stop talking.

He asks me about every scar on my body. And I tell him the mostly boring tales of falling off bicycles and burning myself with a curling iron. Of Vicky digging her long nails into my skin during our many cat fights as teenagers.

“You missed one,” I say, lifting my shirt and lowering my sweats to reveal a patch of skin slightly darker than the rest on my right hip.

He lowers his head to kiss the long-healed flesh. “What happened here?”

I perk up, finally having a tale almost worthy of mention against his knife wounds and BB-gun pocks. “I got hit by a car crossing the street when I was nine years old.”

“A car?” He gives me a nod of respect. “Break anything?”

I sigh. “Nothing more than skin and my pride.”

His husky laugh rumbles my chin where it’s now resting on his chest. “Where’d these come from?” I ask, touching my finger to two similar round marks near his collarbone.

“Cigarette burns.”

“You let your friends put cigarettes out on your neck?”

“No.” He stares up at the ceiling fan, watching it spin round for a long moment as his fingers methodically comb through my hair. Just when I think he’s going to let the subject die, his throat clears. “My mother...she, uh. She didn’t like it when I got mouthy.”

She didn’t like it when he got mouthy? “Jesus, Aiden. How old were you?”

“Can’t remember...I was seven when they took me away, so before that,” he says, rolling me over and spooning me from behind. “Seems like a lifetime ago.”

My heart physically aches on his behalf, meanwhile he's yawning in my ear as if that revelation is of no consequence. "She was a monster."

"She was. But without all that shit, I may never have found solace in my music." His lips brush the curve of my neck. "Wouldn't have been taken away and found the guys." He nips my ear lobe before rasping, "Wouldn't be here with you."

I snuggle into his hold, bringing the hand that's clutched to my chest to my mouth and peppering his knuckles with kisses. "You can trust me, you know." My words come out in a whisper. "With your heart."

"I know."

I lay there in his arms in silence, watching the TV but not really watching it as his breathing begins to even out and the faintest of snores sound in my ears. I'm still feeling sick over what he just shared when our phones start buzzing on the table beside me with an influx of text messages.

Careful not to wake him, I reach for mine and what I find when I unlock it is no less than the landslide I've been predicting.

CHAPTER 21

AIDEN

“AIDEN! What the fuck, man? Open up!”

I disregard Rhett’s plea, just like I have Lyle’s and Nick’s. Just like I’ve ignored the litany of calls and texts they’ve been sending all afternoon, focusing instead on my fingers pounding the same keys. My voice is shredded from repeating the same damn verse for hours on end. My newly healed hand is on fire from the strenuous workout it was in no way ready for.

I pause to take a swig of Johnny right from the bottle, snubbing the fists thumping against the dining room doors, then resume my melancholy rendition of “What Ifs.” Willing Cherry to come back to me with the song that started it all. Wishing like hell she’ll walk in and pick up with her lines, effectively waking from this hell.

“Dude,” Lyle says, his voice slightly muffled through the wood. “It’s not even that bad. The rest of us have been railed way fucking harder in the press.”

“Right? We can handle a made-up fiancée,” Nick adds with confidence. “Remember when the whole world thought Rhett was fucking Anika?”

“Ohhhkayyy, that’s quite enough of that.” My roommate’s irritated voice is followed by the sound of her key rattling the

lock.

Then the doors swing open, and the guys and their wives burst inside like fucking SWAT.

I can't dredge up enough energy to even look at them. My eyes have been glued to the letter Cherry left since I woke to find it on my bedside table. Right alongside the contract the band presented to her on her birthday, *unsigned*.

"Aiden?" Raven perches on the bench beside me. Her hand at my back rotating in a gesture that's meant to soothe, but only further enrages me.

Hers aren't the arms I want touching me.

"Wanna talk about it?"

I shrug her away, bringing all ten fingers down on the keys simultaneously. "No."

She flinches at the racket but isn't deterred from her mission in the slightest. "Where's Ronnie?"

Ouch. I bring a fist to my chest where the sound of her name fires into me like a bullet. "Gone."

"Is it this piece of paper you're staring at here that's got your dick in a vise?" Lyle plucks the letter from in front of me. "Bingo," he says doing a little jig before reading the words I now know by heart out loud to the group.

Dear Aiden,

I'm sorry for leaving without saying goodbye. I just couldn't bring myself to wake you because I have a very strong feeling you'd have tried to make me stay. That you'd have risked your career for whatever this is between us, something you aren't even sure of, and I couldn't let you do that.

By now you've seen the press and the terrible things they're saying about me. And I'm begging you to do whatever it takes to save the band without concerning yourself with my reputation. I was always prepared to take the fall in the end. It just came sooner than I would have liked. But then again, maybe it needed to be this way. Maybe we needed someone or something to force our hands, because

we've certainly veered off course
haven't, we?

There's so much I want to say to
you, but suddenly very little time. So,
I'll do my best to see through these
tears and to make the most of what
little I've got.

I want you to know that I will
never forget our time together.

However brief, you've changed my
life for the better. You've given me
confidence I never imagined possible.
And whether you meant to or not,
you've shown me what it means to
truly love another person. And I do
love you, Aiden Addams, with my
whole heart and soul.

I love you enough to let you go.
And if you have any feelings for me
at all, I ask that you do the same.
Nothing could make me happier than

to watch you succeed in your career and in life. To see you fall in love and build the family you've always deserved. Because anything less would be letting the monster win. And she's taken far too much from you already.

You are the most remarkable man I've ever met. The standard by which I'll measure every other for as long as I live. Please don't mistake my leaving this way as a reflection of what I feel for you... This is by far the most difficult decision I've ever had to make. But I would rather watch your dreams realized from afar than be the reason they fall apart. To be your downfall is something I simply could not bear.

Forever yours,

Cherry

“Whoa.” Lyle clears his throat, his weight shifting from foot to foot as he places the worn letter back on the stand in front of me. “That’s...fuck, man.” His head shakes. “That’s deep.”

I shrug, too afraid to speak on the contents of that letter for fear I’ll break down and never be able to stop. Somehow, it’s even more excruciating to hear aloud, more final now that I’m not the only person to have read it.

“You’re just going to let her go?” Sammi asks, her eyes rimmed with tears.

“She’s not giving me much of an option,” I snarl. “Been calling her phone and Kinzy’s nonstop. Went by her place.” I suck my tongue to my teeth. “She doesn’t w-want me.”

“Where the hell is she?” Korie hauls her purse higher on her shoulder, looking like she’s ready to do battle. Knowing her crazy ass, that’s exactly what she’s planning. “I warned her little a—”

“Hold on...” Sammi holds a palm out in her direction. “This doesn’t make sense.

What does she mean, she was always going to take the fall?”

“Wasn’t real,” I slur, the lie tasting sour on my tongue. Because somewhere along the way, this thing between us became the realest thing in my life.

“Looked pretty fucking real to me.” There’s an edge of betrayal in Nick’s tone. Of the guys, he’s the one who got closest to Cherry. Like the big brother she never had.

“It was all a game to make me l-look good.” I wheeze a humorless laugh.

“Look good to whom?” Rhet’s question sounds from the back of the pack. “Why does she think your job was ever at risk?”

“The label...” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “They were thr-threaten—”

“Here,” Anika offers, rushing forward while dialing Ronnie on speaker from her cell. “Maybe she’ll answer from someone else’s number.”

But just like the dozens of other times I’ve called, it goes right to voicemail, her sweet little voice like barbed wire squeezing my heart.

“This is Ronnie, leave a message and I might just call ya back.”

“See?” I throw back another shot of whiskey, and then another, savoring the burn. “She doesn’t wantt—*hiccup*—m-me.” As if that wasn’t clear enough when I begged and pleaded for security to let me up to her dorm to no avail. When they made it clear that they were left with explicit instructions to turn me away.

Raven digs an elbow into my side, eyeing the phone that’s still connected. “Say something.”

“Cherry,” I groan. “Don’t do this. Come back home, baby. Come back to me.”

“Dear God, this is embarrassing.” Anika reaches over and ends the call. “You’re a mess.”

“And you’re a bitch,” I snarl, not the least bit in the mood for her shit.

“Maybe,” she agrees, snatching the glass bottle from my hand. “But I’m a bitch who refuses to sit here and watch you

self-destruct. Get rid of this shit, Nicholas.”

He doesn't hesitate to take the stolen goods when she thrusts them into his hands.

“You th-think your better'n me now since you quit drinking?”

“Was better than you even before then,” that asshole taunts on his way out with my booze.

I try to flip him off and nearly fall out of my seat.

“Oh, man,” Korie cries, doing her best to hold me upright. “I think we need to get him to bed.”

“No!” I rush out, panic sending my heart racing and flooding my veins with adrenaline.

“No?” Her head gives a backward jerk. “Aiden, you need to sleep this off.”

I grip her forearm, locking eyes with hers. “I *can't*.”

“You can't get in your bed?” That question comes from Raven, who's still hovering around like a mother hen. “Why the hell not?”

My eyes are on fire as I fight back a wave of emotion. “It s-smells like Cherry.”

“For fuck's sake.” Anika storms over to snatch the letter and the unsigned contract. “Put him in my bed. I'll handle Veronica.”

“You'll handle her h-how?” Vomit climbs in my throat as I try to focus on my manager.

“You let me worry about that.” She grips my shoulder tenderly. “Clean yourself up. Sleep it off. And start acting like a man worthy of a woman of her caliber.”

I nod, then clutch my stomach as a ripple of nausea flows through me. “Be nice.”

“I’m always nice.” She gives me a wink. “Rhett, Lyle...get him to the bathroom before he’s sick all over these marble floors.” She shakes her head like she’s disappointed, but all I see in my recently estranged friend’s eyes is genuine concern. And maybe I’m imagining it, but I swear there’s a trace of guilt mixed in there too.

CHAPTER 22

VERONICA

“YOU'RE a difficult lady to track down.”

I glance to my left, squinting in the direction of Anika's familiar voice. “Apparently not.” My eyes rove over her slowly, taking in her pant suit that's so very out of place. I make no attempt to hide my displeasure over her being here, not that I think I could after the way Aiden carried on about my nonexistent poker face. “You managed to find me.”

“Yes, well, I've become quite resourceful over the years.” She beams. “Didn't take you for a whiskey girl.” The pint-sized brunette raises a brow, eyeing my glass as she settles into the barstool beside me. “Let me guess, Johnny Walker Blue?”

I give the amber liquid a swirl fighting the urge to roll my eyes. “You're a *genius*.”

“And you're an *idiot*.”

I snort a laugh. The girl certainly isn't one to mince words. “I'm gonna miss yur th-theatrics.” I loop a finger in her direction, tempted to boop her little button nose. Gosh, I really have had too much to drink.

Anika's eyes volley around the establishment, which is old and a little rundown but otherwise no different from any other hole-in-the-wall bar I've been to. But it's clear by the look on

her face that she's judging my little sanctuary hard. "What the hell are you doing hanging out at a sketchy place like this?"

"Trying to drink away my sorrows...*alone*." I clear my throat, tossing back the contents of my tumbler. "We both know you're not here to socialize or because you're concerned for my wellbeing. What do you want, Anika?"

Her head bobs in a curt nod. She seems almost relieved to have been called out. It should come as no surprise, she's not much for fanfare. "To know why this"—her witchy eyes nail me to my seat as she slams my birthday contract down hard on the bar top—"isn't signed."

My chest squeezes as thoughts of what could have been flash before my eyes. Everything I've ever wanted was right there in my grasp and then *poof*. Gone. "You *know* why."

"So it's true. You're really going to let a few gossip rags come between you and the opportunity of a lifetime?" Anika's jaw clenches tighter with every word. "Just gonna throw Aiden out like yesterday's trash?" Her hand flings out in the space between us, narrowly missing my face. "You think guys like him are just waiting around every corner?"

"I'm not throwing h-him out, because he was never m-mine to keep!" The tears I've only recently gotten under control return with vengeance. "It was all a ruse, Anika. Aiden was using me to clean up his image. To *save his career*. And I was using him for...well, that doesn't even matter." I swat at the wetness lining my cheeks. "Now I can only hope he has a career at all."

The larger-than-life brunette shrinks into herself suddenly. I have no idea what, but something I said had to have caused this drastic change in her demeanor. "His career was never in jeopardy," she mutters, shame coloring her porcelain skin.

“What?” It’s as if she’s just told me the sky isn’t really blue. Because I heard her arguing with Aiden. She made it very clear what was at stake. “B-but you sai—”

“I lied.”

I’m a little slow to respond, having drunk myself almost under the table. “I don’t understand. You lied? About what esssactly?”

She straightens her spine. “The label was never threatening to drop Aiden. And even if they had, the band wouldn’t have gone for it.” She gnaws on her lower lip briefly. “I saw the video of the two of you on YouTube. Saw the way he reacted to you on that stage.” She tips her head to the side, almost like a puppy begging for leniency. “I couldn’t have him falling apart like that. Punching buildings and breaking his hand.”

“*That’s* why you hired me...” Here I was thinking it was my impeccable skill.

“Oh, you’re good, of course,” she says, reading my face. “But I knew if I could somehow force him to be in your presence, he’d fall for you.” Her smile is a mixture of sadness and pride. “It worked.”

“Except it didn’t.” My hand moves to cover the ache in my chest. “Because it was all a game. You gambled with my life, Anika. With my heart. With *his heart*.”

“Yes,” she says, picking at her manicured nails. “I’m not entirely proud of the way I handled things.”

“Ya look pretty damn smu-smug to me.”

“It’s just my face,” she says, motioning for the bartender to bring us a round. “Classic case of RBF. I may come off as cold, but I’m not a monster. I care, especially for Aiden. I can’t

take seeing him like this.” She draws in a shaky breath. “It’s worse than when—”

“When you broke his heart?” I finish, remembering the absolute disaster he was the night we met. The night he smashed his knuckles against a brick building.

She nods. “I had to do something. He thought he was in love with me.”

“He did,” I rasp. Flashbacks of the night he confided his feelings for her to me rush back in a tidal wave.

“And now he knows he wasn’t.” She scrubs a hand up and down her arm. “Except this time he’s heartbroken for real.”

“So happy to have been part of your little love experiment.” I take the fresh glass of whiskey and drink from it, becoming angrier by the second at being an unwilling pawn in this woman’s game. “I mean, who do you thi—”

“I apologize for any pain I’ve caused,” she says, interrupting my tirade before I really get started. “But I refuse to sit here and go round for round with a drunk.”

“By all means, don’t let the door hit’cha where the good Lor—”

“Veronica.” Her hard glare works at shutting me up. I swear this woman is the queen of controlling a situation. The situation at present being me. “Part of being in the limelight is dealing with negative press. I realize this is new to you, and you overreacted because you thought yourself being noble. And I also accept that that’s mostly my fault.”

I scoff. “Entirely.”

Her answering smirk is barely perceptible. “But now that you know Aiden’s career was never in danger,” she continues,

without missing a beat, “you can come home.”

“Home?”

“To the club. To the penthouse. Just back to Aiden... whatever that looks like.”

“I can’t do it.” I shake my head. “You’ve seen what they’re saying...that I’ve had a secret fiancé all this time. That I used him. There are photos in the papers of Aiden with Brody shoved up against the wall by his throat! I can’t go back there.”

“No.” Anika rises to her feet and steps in close, shoving a bony finger right in my face. “What you can’t do is break my best friend’s heart. Not after he’s spent his entire life trying to undo the damage his blood family did to it. Because the media, Ronnie?” She huffs. “It’s nothing but lies. Lies that change from day to day. A quick press release and the script will flip in your favor.” A lone tear drips down her cheek, making her appear almost human. “But nothing—*nothing*—will undo the damage losing you will wreak on that man’s heart.”

“What about my heart?” I cry. “He’s not even sure he wants me.” I shake my head, remembering the conversation we had before climbing into his bed just this morning. How torn he was by his feelings. A conversation that seems so long ago. “He doesn’t know what he wants, Anika.”

My head whips back and forth rapidly. “No. It’s best for me to just stay away and take the fall, the way we always planned. I can’t go back there and face the public.” Just imagining the way the crowd will flay me alive has me flinching. “And I won’t survive leaving again if he ultimately decides I’m not what he wants. Nevermind being forced to work by his side because of some contract.”

“You made a commitment to the band.”

Ahh. So she’s switching tactics.

I stare up at the dust caked to the ceiling to avoid her determined stare. “They were fine before me. They’ll be fine after.”

“That’s not how this works, *princess*.” Anika finishes off her drink then slides her glass across the counter toward our server. “You are under contract, and if you’re not there Saturday, you’ll find yourself facing a lawsuit.”

Anger swells in my veins. “What the fuck is wrong with you, that you get off on messing with other peoples’ lives?”

“I don’t.”

I snort. “If that’s true then let Aiden play. He’s more than capable.”

“He’s a wreck and flat-out refusing to take that stage if you aren’t there.”

To know he’s hurting is more painful than my own heartbreak. The urge to go to him is almost stronger than my own self-preservation. “He will when it comes down to the wire. Aiden wouldn’t leave the guys hanging.”

“That’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

One look at her face tells me she’s not bluffing about taking me to court.

“Why are you doing this?” I sob. “Do you have any idea how humiliating it will be to get up on that stage?” With a cocktail napkin I dab at the snot leaking from my nose. “Do you even care?”

“Nope” she says, retrieving her purse and slinging it over her shoulder. “Guess it turns out I’m every bit the bitch everyone says I am.” Her smile is downright cruel as she slaps a few bills down onto the bar. “See you Saturday.”

CHAPTER 23

VERONICA

THE WEEK PASSES in a tear-filled blur. I don't make it to a single class, claiming a nasty bout with the flu. But I'm positive my professors have seen the news and made their own assumptions as to why I haven't been there.

It makes my stomach hurt to think of the sheer number of people who believe me capable of such deceit. But that's not what's kept me huddled in a ball, drowning myself in booze. It's the constant ache in my chest that just won't let up—the unbearable pain that can only come from a broken heart.

Though *broken* hardly seems the right word to describe the decimated organ sputtering in my chest. Because broken things...*they can be fixed*. And this isn't the kind of hurt you can slap a Band-Aid on.

I haven't bothered to clear the air with anyone apart from my family, who knew from the start that it was all a bunch of bull. What they didn't understand was why we'd go on letting the public believe the media's lies. So, I broke the promise I made to the man I love and admitted the nature of our relationship, but only after swearing them all to secrecy. And I may have intentionally omitted the part about the *lessons* because I wasn't trying to give my parents a coronary.

My only satisfaction this week came when my father called to inform me that he and Mr. Anderson had let Brody

go. I think I might've even smiled for half a second. But the sense of victory was brief because the damage is already done and I'm still drowning in the aftermath.

Before I know it, Saturday is here, and I can no longer remain in bed, swaddled in Aiden's hoodie, feeling sorry for myself. Anika's left me no choice but to put my big girl panties on and face the music. So, I choose a red lace thong, because it reminds me of Aiden and makes me feel fierce. And I need all the false bravado I can get.

Then, an hour before we're set to take the stage, I slip into Booze and Bad Decisions in a track suit, ball cap, and dark glasses. Kinzy is right by my side in a similar getup that she's anything but happy about. But she's sympathetic to my need for a few more minutes of anonymity and begrudgingly complies.

We're able to make it to my dressing room undetected, my heart nearly vibrating out of my chest at the thought of running into Aiden before the show. But there's no trace of him. And not just today, but all week, apart from the day I left.

He's just fallen off the radar.

And even though I asked him not to say a word in my defense, though I all but begged him to let me take the fall and keep the band intact, I would be lying if I said it wasn't tearing me apart inside that he hasn't done a thing to correct the lies.

It's irrational, and I feel absurd for being so upset over the man doing exactly what I asked of him, but I love him. And stupidly, I hoped that just maybe he loved me back. And I guess I thought I was living in some fantasyland where he'd choose me, no matter the cost.

Ah, the fanciful things we girls tell ourselves.

“Ready?” Kinzy’s voice draws me from my ever-circling thoughts.

“No,” I answer honestly. Because even though we’ve changed clothes, and she’s styled my hair and makeup, and I look the part...no amount of preparation could possibly ready me for what I’m about to face.

“I’m so sorry, babe. I wish I could go up there with you and hold your hand.”

“You and me both.” I catch a fit of giggles at my next thought as I pull the door open. “Probably better that you can’t, actually. I’d feel awful if you got nailed with a tomato intended for me.”

Her head shakes with a laugh as she joins me in the doorway, lacing her arm through mine. “I’ll wait backstage with you till you go up and then I’ll wrestle my way to the front of the crowd, so you have at least one friendly face to look out at.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“You deserve the best of everything, Ronnie.” She gives my hand a squeeze. “And that includes me.”

I can always count on her to bring a smile to my face. “You’re incorrigible.”

She scrunches her nose and grins. “Thank you.”

We amble slowly down the hall, judging our arrival backstage perfectly. No one has time for anything more than to exchange a quick smile. Smiles, I didn’t realize I needed so badly.

They don’t hate me, I think as I discreetly comb the area for Aiden, coming up empty.

“I bet he’s just trying not to make things awkward for you,” Kinzy says, letting me know that I wasn’t as inconspicuous as I thought.

“You’re probably right,” I say before thanking her again for being here and sending her off to the wolves.

With a lump forming in my throat, I follow the guys out onto the stage.

I don’t get far when the sight of Aiden front and center stops me dead in my tracks. Dear God, but my memory did the man no justice. He’s even more striking than I remember, with his long, dark hair hanging loosely around his face, his perfectly chiseled jawline covered in a delicious five-o’clock shadow. And in a pair of low-slung jeans and plaid button down that hugs his form, showcasing his build, he looks good enough to eat.

Then he smiles at me over the mic, and I nearly forget how to breathe. My pulse ramps up and tears well in my eyes, blurring my vision. I’m so blinded by his beauty that it takes me a minute to register the crowd jeering.

“Cut that shit out,” he growls, his voice booming through the speakers. “No one’s coming into my bar and booing the woman I love.”

“Fuck, yeah!” Lyle cheers. “*That’s* how you defend your woman, Aid.”

I whirl around to find the entire band fist pumping and sending him nods of encouragement, making my heart swell with affection for the lot of them.

The shock of seeing him starts to wear off, and Aiden’s words sink in. “You love me?” I say, but no sound comes out.

I'm not sure he notices I spoke at all until his eyes lock on mine. "I love you, Cherry Girl." He fists a hand over his chest. "And I don't just think it...I know."

My lips start to quiver. A full body tremble threatening to send me into an absolute sob fest when he shoots me a wink that damn near causes my panties to disintegrate on the spot.

Lord but the man knows just how to distract me.

"Seems everyone's waiting on my response to the media shitstorm that hit this week..." he says into the mic, his eyes leaving me to scan the packed crowd.

They go wild, cheering in the affirmative.

"Yeah, you like some good gossip, doncha? Well, get your phones out and start recording. I expect to see the internet flooded with the truth by morning."

"What're you doing?" I grit when he peeks over to see how I'm holding up.

With the crook of a finger, he beckons me toward him, and I go.

Of course I go. I'd follow him to the ends of the earth. Do whatever he asked without a second thought. It's why I left without a word. I'd never have been able to walk away from the overwhelming force that is Aiden Addams otherwise.

"We're gonna clear this shit up," he says, reaching for my hand, which I give all too willingly. "I lied to all of you," he says, "I've been lying for months. We—" he gives my fingers a gentle squeeze. "We've been lying to you for months."

I gulp, hard, choosing to focus on him rather than the sea of patrons fully engrossed with the two of us. Because he's

here, and he loves me, and he's holding my hand. Defending my honor.

“You see, I was under the impression after breaking my hand that if I didn't settle down and clean up my act, I would be dropped from the band.”

The crowd gasps and boos. It's the effect he was going for. They're all putty in his capable hands. Clearly his silence was intentional, and the display he's making now has been well thought out. Aiden knows exactly what he's doing.

“Don't worry. That was another lie.” He flashes them a rueful smile. “Turns out there's been a lot of that lately.” His throat clears. “So, here's your gossip— Veronica and I weren't really a couple.”

Hearing those words from his lips is a hard blow. It doesn't matter that I've known the truth all along. I wanted it to be real. I'd nearly convinced myself it was.

“She was simply kind enough to provide the illusion of stability I thought I needed to keep my career intact.” He pauses briefly to allow them to react before continuing with his massive confession. “That guy in the photos, Brody? Was never her fiancé. Just a blast from her past who thought he'd make a quick buck selling lies to the tabloids. But the photo of me ready to punch his teeth in? That? That was *very* fucking real.”

A frail laugh bubbles up from my chest.

“But biggest lie of all is the one I've been telling myself—that what I felt for this woman wasn't real. That I could let her go when the time came.”

He stuffs the microphone into the stand and turns toward me, taking both of my hands into his.

I'm sweating, and every limb on my body is trembling in anticipation. "The truth is that it didn't take long for this game we were playing to become all too real to me." He drops to his knees, staring up at me with emotion shining in his eyes. "Pretty sure I was a goner when you took me home to meet the family for Thanksgiving."

"Me too," I nod, tears spilling freely.

"It was the dessert for you, wasn't it?" He rolls his tongue purposely slow over his lips, and I can't help remembering the way it felt to be on the receiving end of such treatment.

The memory sends a surge of warmth flooding my cheeks. "I-it certainly didn't hurt."

Aiden's brows waggle before he schools his features, becoming serious once more. "You burst into my life, this little ray of happiness and sunshine, and effortlessly started healing everything that was broken."

I reach out to swipe the tears trickling from his tawny eyes, my chest heaving with so much emotion it's nearly too much to bear.

"You may have started with my image..." He takes my hand and places it over the center of his chest. "But you ended with my heart."

"Aiden, I—"

"Shh," he says, pressing a finger to my lips. "Let me finish. I've been practicing in the mirror for days."

I roll my eyes and smile the biggest, warmest, most enamored smile, urging him on with an inclination of my head.

“You said I taught you how to love. But Cherry, you didn’t just teach me how to love, you showed me what it is to *be* loved. And I didn’t know what to do with that gift—how to accept all that you were offering.” He shakes his head as if disappointed with himself. “Then you left. And I realized I don’t want to live any version of life that you aren’t a part of. Because that family you mentioned? It could never exist without *you*. I fucking *love* you.”

“And I fucking love you,” I say, throwing arms around his neck, nearly knocking him over in the process. When he rights himself and rises to his feet, I bury my face in his chest, breathing him in, and it feels like the first true breaths I’ve taken since the moment I walked out of that penthouse. It feels warm and wholesome and right. It feels like coming home.

“I said that I was yours, and you asked me what that meant,” he rasps into my ear, his words for me and me alone. “I didn’t know how to answer that question because I’ve never felt this way before. Baby, you own me...body and soul. You’re my first thought when I wake. The last before I shut my eyes to sleep. Fuck, you even occupy my dreams. You are the best part of every day.”

He sets me to my feet, moving his hands to cradle my face. “Be mine, Ronnie Rose. For real, this time.”

CHAPTER 24

AIDEN

“YOU GONNA FUCK ME NOW?” Cherry is the definition of a hot mess, fumbling around my room as she fights to lower the zipper at her back. Her hair’s all knotted from my fingers twisting into the strands while she sucked me senseless on the drive home. Red lipstick’s smeared from one end of her face to the other. And black mascara darkens the skin beneath her eyes from the way they watered as she took me deep into her throat.

She was so ramped up after performing, so eager to connect after spending so much time apart. *Fuck, we both were.* So, I let her have her way with me—let her bring me to the brink, cutting her off with seconds to spare. There was no way I was finishing anywhere but inside her hot little pussy tonight.

“No.” I give the same response I’ve given so many times as I walk over to offer her my assistance, stripping her down in seconds flat. “I’m going to make love to my girlfriend.” I move her hair to the side and kiss the bend of her neck, scenting her skin. She’s this perfect blend of coconuts and sweat, and I fucking love it.

“Your girlfriend...” The little siren spins in my hold. “I really like hearing you say that.” One by one, she starts undoing my buttons.

And my mind drifts to something Josh recently said, “*She’s yours to lose.*” She wasn’t when he said it, not really, but she is now, and I’m going to do whatever it takes to ensure it stays that way. “Move in with me?” I blurt, suddenly panicked at the thought of her leaving.

Her fingers freeze on the third to last button and she looks up at me, blue eyes blown wide. “You don’t think it’s a little soon for that?”

“I think,” I say, running the backs of my fingers along the sides of her face. “I want to fall asleep with you in my arms. Every night. To wake up to your makeup smudged across my pillow and your tits peeking at me out the sides of your tank tops.”

Cherry’s cheeks turn a rosy hue, and there’s no hiding her grin over the visual I just painted. But she’s clearly still in panic mode because that comment about her rogue titties deserved at least an honest giggle. “What will people—?”

I lower my mouth to hers, attempting to silence her worries with a kiss. It’s meant to be quick and chaste but rapidly gets out of hand. There’s an urgency in the both of us that’s bordering on desperation. It takes a Herculean effort to break away to finish the conversation, but I need her answer. “I only care what you think.”

She nods, stroking her palms over my chest while considering it. She’s still flustered and breathing heavy, staring at my lips as if willing them to recapture hers. “Can I bring Kinzy?”

I bark out a laugh, because the question is so unexpected and I can’t help imagining the way Anika will lose her freaking mind. *I can’t wait.* “Is your emotional support friend conditional to your acceptance?”

“You have three extra bedrooms.” Cherry fans her lashes up at me, as if I’m not already wholly seduced by her charm. “I can’t just abandon her.” She goes back to fiddling with my buttons. “Plus, it’ll make it easier to deal with your roommate.”

There’s the issue.

I heard *all* about the visit Anika paid her on the night she took off. The woman is fucking ruthless. And while I’m grateful she was able to get Cherry to the club tonight, I can’t blame her for being hesitant to move into that tyrant’s house. So, if this is all it takes to convince her, I’m more than happy to oblige. “Kinzy’s welcome to take her pick from the two empty rooms on my side of the apartment.”

“Really?” she squeals, her entire face lighting up, her perky little tits driving me to distraction as they bounce with her movement. “You don’t think you should run it by Anika first?”

“You mean the way she ran that bullshit she pulled past me?” I won’t be running a damn thing by that she-devil for a very long time.

“Right,” she says gnawing on her lower lip. “She kinda has it coming, doesn’t she?”

“Definitely.” And boy do I plan on delivering. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

“Then I would love to move in with you.” My girl’s smile is radiant, and I feel like I just won the lottery—no, better than the lottery. I feel like I just found out we went triple platinum and won a Grammy. I wasn’t even this happy on the day we got signed to the label. In all my life, I’ve never had anyone

who was mine. It's a feeling I don't even know how to wrap my head around yet. A high I may never come down from.

"I'm going to make you so happy, Cherry," I say, shrugging out of my shirt and scooping her naked body into my arms.

She yelps and giggles as her feet come off the floor. Then she winds her arms around my neck, staring at me with nothing but love and devotion twinkling in her eyes. "You already make me happy, Aiden. Just being with you...it's enough."

"It's the bare minimum," I say, tossing her onto the bed and stripping out of my pants and boxers in one swoop before climbing in after her. I kiss her ankles, one after the other. "It's in my nature to fuck up," I warn, spreading her legs so I can crawl up the space between them, licking and nipping her inner thighs along the way. "But I'm going to work harder at us than I have at anything else in my life."

I growl like a wild animal when the scent of her pussy engulfs me. I'm fucking feral when it comes to this woman. A full-blown caveman. "I'm gonna get this right, baby."

"Aiden," she moans when I run my nose along her slit. "I want—I-I want..." Her chest is already arching off the bed. The way she responds to my touch is intoxicating.

"Tell me what you want, baby." I kiss her navel then tease her nipple, tugging on the pebbled bud with my teeth before licking and sucking away the sting. "If it's within my power, it's yours."

"Kiss me..." She brings my face to hers. "I want to taste your lips... I need to-to feel close to you."

I easily follow her command, sealing my mouth to hers.

My Cherry's eager, though, and she doesn't waste a second, slipping her tongue into my mouth, where it grapples with mine in a slow and steady rhythm. "Just like this," she rasps, breathing me in, savoring every nip, every brush of our skin.

"I've missed this," I rasp. "Missed you so damn much."

Her body quakes against me, and the faintest of moans spills from her lips. "T-touch me."

"Here?" I whisper into her mouth while brushing my thumb over her hard nipple while tangling my other hand into her hair to angle her just right.

Her head shakes, our teeth clashing with the movement. "L-lower."

I trail the back of my hand the length of her torso, brushing a knuckle along her pussy.

"Yes," she says, bucking into me.

The movement causes her tits to jiggle, and I nearly come on the spot from the sight of it. *Gonna fuck those pretty titties one of these days, but first...*

"R-r-right there," she wails as I circle her clit, working her into a frenzy.

Her hand finds my cock and she wraps her fingers around me, stroking softly at first then picking up speed to match the tempo of our kisses, which are becoming more and more fevered with every passing second.

Kissing isn't something I've ever been overly fond of—until Cherry. With her, I could get lost in the act, forget to come up for air, and die in a state of complete contentment.

Cherry runs the tip of my dick along her pussy, up and around her clit, and back down, thrusting her hips upward on each pass so I just barely tip inside before slipping back out.

The sensation is enough to drive me wild. I grip her hair in both hands, bracing my weight on my elbows. Then I fuck her mouth with my tongue while she works herself over with my piercing. “Do you want me to get a condom?” I ask when she pushes me in a little deeper before retreating once again.

“No.” Her head whips back and forth as she starts to convulse beneath me. She’s damn near delirious with desire, and fuck if it’s not the hottest thing I’ve ever witnessed. “I want to feel you.”

“You’re sure?” I crane my head back to study her face—to make sure she’s not saying something in the heat of the moment that she’ll later regret.

“I’m on the pill, remember?” She smiles up at me, pleading her case with puppy dog eyes. “Let me be your first something.”

“You’re my first *everything*, baby,” I say pumping into her fist. “Everything that matters.”

Heat spreads throughout my body, my cock harder than steel, throbbing with the desire to sink into her. To finally end this months-long game of foreplay.

“I’m ready,” she rasps, releasing my shaft and bringing her hands to rest on my shoulders. “Make love to me, Aiden Addams...make me yours.”

“With pleasure.” I nip her lips, twisting my tongue around hers as I press the head of my dick to her entrance. “Fucking soaked,” I groan, already halfway to heaven. “You’re so wet for me, Cherry.”

My praise elicits a moan as I slip in a little deeper. It's a tight fit. Tighter than I expected. Tight enough to make me see stars.

"You feel so fucking good," I say, pushing in a few inches and back out before thrusting forward and burying myself to the hilt.

I still my movements so she can adjust to the fit, savoring the feel of her walls clenching around me while I swallow her cries. I drink them up while my body trembles with the need to move.

"You feel like heaven, baby." Fuck. I can hardly think straight at the feel of her velvety walls contracting around me. "Tell me, Cherry, whose pussy this is?" I slide almost all the way out of her and then snap my hips forward, "Tell me."

"Yours, Aiden." Her long nails dig into my shoulders as I slowly start to rock in and out. But when her grip doesn't let up, I start to worry something's wrong.

"Are you okay?" I ask, as her entire body tenses beneath me. "Is it too much?"

"It's perfect," she sobs, and that's when I see there are actual tears trickling down the sides of her face. "*You're perfect.*"

"Are you...*in pain?*" I start to withdraw but she wraps her legs around my waist, locking her ankles to hold me close.

"Please keep going...it's okay...I want this...I want it with you."

"I'm not going to willingly hurt you." Something's just not adding up. This has never happened. Tears of hero worship, sure. It comes with being a celebrity. Tears of ecstasy, on occasion. But pain? Not once. "Is it my piercing?"

She shakes her head, struggling to get her emotions under control to speak.

“How fucking small *was* Brody’s dick?” She’s acting like a *virgin*.

“I-I wouldn’t know.”

“What the hell do you mean you wouldn’t know?” Panic sends my heart beating out of control. “You said you slept with him.”

“I did not.” She’s full-on sobbing now, and I’m tempted to join her.

What the hell have I done?

“You said you skipped all the bases, Cherry. I remember that conversation very clearly because I’d have never agreed to steal your virginity over some bet.” Bile climbs in my throat.

“I-isn’t home a base?” *God, bless it.*

“Yes, but to say you skipped all the bases means you *went straight home*.”

“Oh...”

I’m still buried inside her, unsure of how to proceed with this epic disaster. “Fuck.”

“Wh-what’s wrong? A-are you m-mad?” she snivels.

“I wish I’d have known, is all. I would have made it special.”

“It *is* special, Aiden.” Her eyes hold mine. “You’re the man I love. The one I hope to spend the rest of my l-life with. And you’ve been so gentle with me. I’m s-sorry you didn’t know. I’m sorry I misspoke and ruined our f-first time for you, but I don’t regret this, and I don’t want you to either.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I admit, tempted to pull out and give her time to heal before trying again some other day with lots of lube and foreplay. Maybe some flowers and fucking candles. But I also don’t want to do anything that might offend her and ruin her first time more than I already have. And I know there’s no going back. No undoing what’s done.

“Please just kiss me,” she says, her voice a hoarse whisper. “Kiss me and love me and make me feel good...the way only you can.”

“I do love you,” I say, covering her lips with my own. “I’m sorry.” I cup her neck, brushing my thumb along her jaw as I kiss away every tear.

“Stop apologizing and move,” she growls, arching into me slowly.

I let her set the pace, slipping a finger between us to stroke her clit in hopes of distracting her from any lingering discomfort. I kiss down her neck, drawing her nipple into my mouth.

Her hands fist into my hair, her body writhing as I play her like the well-tuned instrument I’ve come to know so well. With every touch—every lick and nibble to her most sensitive spots—I’m driving her closer to her release.

And as much as I try to hold off, as much as I don’t want to draw pleasure when I know she’s in pain, my own climax is barreling down on me. My vision starts to drift out of focus, and my muscles tense as I try to hold off. But she’s so fucking tight, and it’s been so long...I know I won’t last. It’s probably for the best. There’s no need to drag it out. Not her first time.

“Come for me, Cherry. Soak my cock, baby,” I rasp, knowing she likes when I talk her through her climax. “You’ve

got my dick so hard, Cherry. Ready to unload in your pretty little pussy.” I pinch her clit, biting down on her nipple at the same time.

“Aiden!” she screams, her warm walls tightening around me, milking my cock as she shatters beneath me. Garbled nonsense spills from her lips as she scores her nails over the skin of my back, and the sting only serves to spur me on.

Cherry’s orgasm is the hairpin trigger that sends me over the edge, her passionate moans all the encouragement I need to keep going. Then every muscle in my body contracts at once as relief comes hard and fast in escalating pulses that leave me shuddering and bucking before resting my body lightly against hers.

We remain still for a few long minutes, each trying to come down from our respective highs. To let our heart rates level out and our breathing slow.

“That was...amazing.” My girl is glowing. “I’m so glad it happened this way and not as part of that silly arrangement.”

“Thank fuck I realized weeks ago that sex between us could never be transactional.” I shake my head. “I’d have never forgiven myself, knowing what I know now.” I roll to my side, bringing her with me, gently easing her off my cock. “I’m sorry,” I say again, moving the hair from her sweaty forehead where I rest my lips.

“Stop apologizing to me, you’re ruining my deflowering.” Her baby blues roll dramatically. “I’m fine. Seriously. It’s just a freaking hymen... an overrated flap of skin. And it was nothing more than a pinch of pain early on.”

“Lay still,” I say, leaving her resting comfortably on my pillow to examine the situation down below. “There’s blood on

my sheets, Cherry,” I report, my chest tight.

She groans. “I’ll buy you new sheets.”

“Not worried about the fucking sheets.” I bend forward, kissing her pussy lips, softly, reverently. When I swipe my tongue along her slick opening, she hisses. “Does that hurt?”

“N-no, but you don’t need to—oh,” she moans, pressing into my face. “We just...Aiden, I’m bleeding.”

“And I’m apologizing to my pussy, now hush.” I lap up every drop of our combined releases, the metallic taste of blood growing fainter with every delicate swipe of my tongue.

“Has she chosen to forgive you?” Cherry asks, grinning down at me with the most blissed-out look.

“Not sure yet,” I say, climbing back up to lay beside her. “I put her in timeout.”

Her gasp is filled with indignation. “You didn’t!”

“Most certainly did.” I pull Cherry close so her head is resting on my shoulder. “No dick for you for a week.”

“A week?” She props up on an elbow to glare at me. “Seems a bit excessive.”

“We have the rest of our lives to fuck like rabbits.”

“You’re so romantic, Sugar Balls.” Her giggle fills me with joy. “Who knew a night of drinking yourself stupid and busting your knuckles would lead to this?”

Certainly not me.

The two months we’ve spent together flash through my head in a highlight reel. The ups. The downs. I wouldn’t change a thing. “Rest assured, Cherry Girl, you were worth the shots.”

EPILOGUE ONE

Aiden

(3 months later)

I'VE GOT A RAGING boner that I'm doing my best to conceal beneath the bar as I sip my whiskey, watching my girl do her thing. The way she's commanding that stage from behind her piano in a cheeky pair of cutoff shorts and a cropped flannel top, knotted just beneath her tits, has me ready to bust a fucking nut. The cowgirl boots are doing it for me, too. Might have her leave those on when I pound that pussy tonight.

If I'd had my way, they'd be in flashy mini dresses and heels. But the girls, along with Anika, voted against me, in favor of what they called *traditional western wear*. I can admit when I'm wrong, though—it's definitely working for them. However, I just can't get behind the matching twin braids. Long, luscious locks are meant to flow freely. I'm looking forward to setting them loose later tonight. To watching her gorgeous hair cascade in waves along her bare back while she rides me reverse cowgirl. To twine my fingers into the strands...

Fuck. I bite down on my knuckles, growling beneath my breath. I've got to get a handle on my thoughts. We've got hours yet before I can ravish her the way I want. But Cherry's raspy rendition of "Strawberry Wine" is going right to my dick.

She looks out into the crowd, scanning the room. When her eyes find mine, there's no question in my mind that she's thinking of the night I took her cherry. I can see it in the flush of her cheeks. Feel it in the waves of desire ricocheting between us.

Fuck, but she's exquisite. Every note, perfectly on key. Her delivery, flawless. The emotion she evokes with that God-given instrument of hers is a talent that can't be taught.

I glance around the club at the little clusters of women who've gathered with their arms slung over each other's shoulders, singing along with the timeless lyrics, and I'm filled with so much pride. This is what Cherry dreamed of. Why she came to Nashville—to entertain. And I may have opened the door, but she's the one up there bringing down the damn house.

"All right, y'all," Kinzy says as Veronica's song winds to a close. "We're gonna wrap this set up with "Any Man of Mine" by the queen herself, Ms. Shania Twain!" She strums a few chords on her guitar then adjusts the mic in the stand. "Let me hear you, ladies!"

Kinzy's energy is magnetic. She and Cherry—along with Natalie, a friend they brought in from school, who's pounding the hell out of those drums—are a freaking powerhouse. They look like they've been playing together for years and not just a few weeks.

They couldn't have picked a better song to end with. There's not a woman in the place who isn't fully invested, singing her lungs out to what has arguably become country music's girl anthem.

"Thank you!" Cherry shouts, out of breath from the high-energy performance they just put on. "Thank you for being here tonight. That's it for us, but you'll find the Country Cuties same time, same place, every Saturday night for the foreseeable future!" She rises from behind that piano, blowing kisses to the crowd who are cheering their asses off. "Go refresh those drinks and empty those bladders. The Rhett Taylor Band will be on in about thirty minutes!"

I rush through the mob of patrons with Josh hot on my tail, probably cursing me to hell and back. We aren't supposed to wander around unattended. But in case you haven't figured it out yet, I do whatever the hell I want because I know he's always anticipating my next move. It's really a nod to my faith in him. But the grimace on his face when I look back after jumping up onto the stage tells me he doesn't see it that way.

Oh, well. He can yell at me later.

"You were amazing, Cherry." I grip her ass and she hops up, wrapping her legs around my waist.

"Thank you, lover." She captures my lips in a feverish kiss, her heart drumming against my chest faster than a hummingbird's wings. My girl is bursting at the seams with adrenaline. "Got time for a quickie in your dressing room before you go on?"

I give a dry laugh, because I'd love nothing more than to oblige. "Tempting..." I swipe my tongue along the seam of her lips. "But there's a surprise waiting for you in the back."

“Ugh,” she groans. “Not another party in my honor?”

I set her to her feet and give that round ass a firm swat. “Come on, you ungrateful brat.” I take hold of her hand, lacing her fingers in mine. “Let’s go toast to your epic success.” I lower my lips to her ear with a promise. “I’ll take care of you tonight.”

“What are you two lovebirds whispering about?” her best friend pries, walking over with Natalie to interrupt in the annoying way she’s developed a habit of doing.

Kinzy has become quite the third wheel since moving in. I couldn’t count the number of times I’ve gone to my room, ready to bury myself in my girl, only to find the two of them cuddled in the middle of *my bed* watching that depressing-ass show, *Grey’s Anatomy*. But at least I don’t have to pretend to watch it anymore. And Cherry’s happy, deliriously so. So, I’m dealing.

“None of your damn business.” I try waving her away, but she doesn’t budge. Not that I actually fooled myself into believing she would.

“I’ll tell ya later,” Cherry whisper-shouts. “We’re wanted in the back for a toast.”

“You bitches better act surprised,” I warn as we slip backstage and make our way down the long hall. “The wives went to a lot of trouble for you three. Looks like a Pinterest board threw up all over the rehearsal room.”

“Of course they did.” Natalie cracks a huge grin as we near the doors.

“Congratulations!” everyone shouts when we step inside. Red and black confetti poppers go off in every direction. They have this place decked out like a country hoedown, complete

with hay bales and boot-and-cowboy-hat balloons and galvanized buckets filled with food. Wouldn't surprise me in the least to find a goat lurking around somewhere. Nothing gets these hens going like planning a party. The kids' birthdays have turned into some Kardashian-level shit.

And sure, I make fun of them for how excessive it all is, but in truth, I love it. My birthdays, my accomplishments—none of it was ever celebrated before these people came into my life. It makes me all warm and fuzzy inside to see my little nieces and nephews growing up with more love than they know what to do with.

“Thank you so much!” Cherry both looks and sounds like someone's got a gun to her back. Seriously, she's the worst.

“You told her, didn't you?” Raven shakes her head in disgust.

“Well, at least you know she'll never lie to you and get away with it.” Korie walks over handing Ronnie and me each a glass of champagne while Sammie delivers Kinzy and Natalie's.

Anika wastes no time wandering over to the mic and tapping a knife to her glass to get everyone's attention. “Hey guys!” she says, looking unusually happy. “We don't have much time. Ladies, you're welcome to hang round back here and enjoy the treats and booze, but these boys need to get moving, so hold up your glasses and let's drink to the incredible success of our new in-house girl band, the Country Cuties!”

“Cheers, baby.” We thrust our flutes into the air then tap them together before taking a big swig. “I'm so proud of you.” I lean in and touch my lips to hers, only to be interrupted by a dinging sound coming from the stage again.

I groan, knowing what little time we have before I've got to hit that stage is dwindling down. I whirl around to find Anika and Talia standing up there together.

"What the hell?" I mutter. Subtlety has never and will never be my strong suit.

"While we're all here together, I'd like to announce that Talia and I have decided to get married." Both girls hold out their left hands, showing off massive matching rocks.

"Really?" I say while everyone around me claps and cheers. "You just had to make this announcement on their night? Couldn't have picked some other one?"

"It's fine," Ronnie hisses, elbowing me in the ribs. "Don't be a jerk."

"Aiden," Anika beams, completely ignoring my little fit. "I'd love for you to be my man of honor." She steeple her hands beneath her chin, grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

"Seriously?" I gripe. "Don't you have any other friends? I don't even like you right now..."

EPILOGUE TWO

Veronica

(6 months later)

ANIKA AND TALIA are an absolute vision in their coordinating Versace wedding gowns. I can't help tearing up as they sashay to the middle of the dance floor to take their first official spin as a married couple.

Gosh, I just *love* love. And these two have it in spades.

The ceremony was small and intimate, with the band and their families there to support Annie, and Talia's immediate family attending on her side. She was thoughtful enough to keep her guests to a minimum, knowing that none of her bride's relatives would be in attendance.

I can't even wrap my head around them refusing to show. There is nothing that would keep my parents away from me on such a special day.

Anika may never be my favorite person, but she deserves better. And to know how badly she must be hurting has my stomach twisted in knots.

I'm so glad she's found Talia, whom I've come to really like. The girl doesn't take herself too seriously, which is so

completely opposite of her new wife. It's actually funny to see them together. But also endearing. Because Anika's softer with her than anyone else. *A true case of yin and yang.*

"You did a great job," I tell Aiden as he hovers beside me, watching our roommates sway in each other's arms to "Thinking Out Loud" by Ed Sheeran. "Best man of honor ever."

"Thanks, babe." He rests a hand at the small of my back, the warmth sending a chill zipping up my spine. He's got the most tender look in his eyes as he watches them. To be loved by this man is such a gift, and he really does love her.

"What're you thinking?"

"I'm just happy." His jaw ticks, like he's biting back tears. "Glad she's found her soulmate."

I nod, snuggling into his side. "Me too."

They end their dance with a passionate kiss—one that brings tears to my eyes. The DJ gives them a few minutes to wind down before announcing it's time for the bouquet toss.

"I need all the single ladies to the middle of the dance floor," he calls, moving a spotlight to where he wants us.

"That's my cue," I say, giving him a wink as I join the handful of Talia's guests that are also unwed: An aunt, recently divorced. Two of her best friends from school. And a couple of spinster cousins.

"You've got this baby," Aiden shouts from the sidelines as Anika turns her back toward us and starts waving that bouquet to and fro, revving up to send it flying.

From the moment she releases it, everything seems to happen in slow motion. I keep my eyes fixed to that prize,

desperate to give Aiden a little shove toward popping the question. And it's right there in my sights, inches from my fingertips, when a big blob of black leaps out in front of me, snagging my coveted flowers.

“Woah,” Cousin Sherrie says, reaching out to stop me from tumbling to my ass. “What the heck?”

What the heck is right.

“Aiden Addams!” I shriek. “What the hell do you th—”

Then he drops to one knee, and I forget everything I was about to say. “Cherry,” he says, retrieving a Tiffany blue ring box from his inside pocket.

“Oh no you don't...” Anika charges over like an angry bull, fire blazing in her eyes as she yanks the back of his coat. “Get up right now. You are not about to hijack my wedding reception.”

What is happening? I don't know whether to laugh or cry or tackle the freaking bride who's about to ruin my proposal. So what if she has every right to be upset? *This is my moment, dammit!*

“Buzz off.” He swats Annie away like she's nothing more than an annoying gnat. “You owe me—us.” He flicks his eyes up at her. “Need I remind you of the epic shitstorm you put us through? Because I will.”

“Ugh,” she growls, throwing her hands up in the air as she backs away. Talia quickly wraps her arms around Anika, bringing her mouth to her ear, undoubtedly whispering platitudes to calm her.

“Go ahead,” Talia urges Aiden. “Don't keep the girl waiting.”

He nods then runs a hand through his hair before locking eyes with mine once again. “Cherry, baby... You’re already my everything. My whole fucking world.” He licks his lips. “Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?” He swipes furiously beneath his tear-filled eyes. “Be my home, angel—my family.”

I can’t even see through my tears. “Yes,” I say, nodding as he withdraws a beautiful cushion-cut diamond ring from the box and holds it at the tip of the third finger of my left hand. “Absolutely nothing would make me happier than to grow old with you by my side.”

He slides the ring the rest of the way on and then pulls me into his arms, peppering kisses all over my sticky face. “She said yes!” he shouts. “This beautiful, amazing, knockout of a woman agreed to marry me!”

“Aiden!” I hiss, my cheeks flaming under all of the attention. “Stop it.”

“Never, Cherry Girl.” He dips down and captures my lips in a kiss that’s borderline indecent. “You agreed. You said yes. You’re mine, now and forever, and you can bet your sweet ass I’m gonna scream it from the rooftops. I’m proud to call you mine, baby. And I want everyone to know it.”

This man. My lips quirk up into a grin. “I’m on board with all of that, but let’s maybe let Anika finish her wedding before I end up having to plan your funeral.”

His answering smile is radiant, and in this moment I know that Aiden was right—this is exactly where I was meant to be, and our love was absolutely worth the shots.

[CLICK HERE](#) to read a special bonus scene from *Worth the Shots*.

**Read on for the prologue and Chapter one of Pour
Judgment(Rhett & Korie's book)**

PREVIEW OF POUR JUDGMENT

Prologue

Rhett

“Oh, Rhett, yesss...”

I squeeze harder, lapping her nipple into a firm bud through her thin top. My cock stiffens as she grinds her hips to the tempo of the music, giving me a sexy as fuck lap dance. Suddenly I have this inexplicable urge to look up, letting Monica’s tit slip from my mouth. I feel smothered—like all the air has suddenly been pulled from the room.

Who is that?

“It’s fine, Nick—” She digs her heels into the floor. “No, I don’t want to meet—”

“Rhett.” My drummer, Nick, approaches, dragging the very reluctant blonde behind him by the arm. “I’d like to introduce you to my cousin, Korie Potter. Korie, this is Rhett.” He gives her a little shove, landing her on her feet, right in front of my bent knees.

My eyes peruse her sweet little body. Her long blonde hair is pulled back in a low ponytail. There’s not an ounce of makeup on her face. Her eyes are a vibrant shade of emerald, and she has the most delectable little freckles dotting her cheekbones. She’s wearing a black Rolling Stones tee—

slightly fitted, the collar ripped so it droops a little, exposing one shoulder. One creamy, slender, tantalizing shoulder. I clear my throat, reaching around the raven-haired beauty presently situated in my lap for Korie's hand.

"I'm good," she says, not reaching back, her face scrunched like she's just gotten a whiff of something foul. "Just carry on with whatever—umm *whoever* you're doing." She whirls back on her cousin, eyes flaming. "I'm gonna go get some air."

In her haste to get away, she trips over my foot and is sent hurtling face first to the floor. Like in the movies, the music stops and every pair of eyes in the room are on her.

"Oh, shit." I slide Monica to the side. "Scuse me," I rush out, blundering to my feet, the alcohol throwing off my balance as I hop around, trying to right my pants zipper before reaching her. "My fault," I say, shoving the little douche aside who's trying to help her up. "I've got it."

He throws his hands in the air, backing away.

"Are you all right?" My fingers curl around her upper arm, and inexplicably my pulse begins to race.

Then, she turns toward me, and our eyes truly connect for the first time. Fireworks burst in my chest, and I can't seem to locate my voice. The attraction is instantaneous.

Well, it is for me at least.

She visibly stiffens. "Get your hands off of me. I'm fine."

"Just wanted to make sure you were oka—"

She shrugs out of my hold, popping to her feet and righting her clothes. "I said, I'm fine." She glances around at the slew of eyes fixed on her, sneering at all the snooty females

whispering, pointing their manicured nails, and giggling in their Louboutin shoes and designer cocktail dresses. What I found hot not even five minutes ago suddenly seems pretentious and well, *boring*. “You’re just making it worse,” she grits.

“Right.” Nodding, I withdraw my hand and bring it to my chest. “You all act like you’ve never seen a person trip before,” I say, addressing the crowd. “Get back to it.” I clap my hands loudly toward the DJ, “Music!”

With an annoyed huff, she rolls her eyes and storms off in her black Converse.

Sneakers at a Hollywood party...Who is this girl?

“Don’t take it personally,” Nick says, coming up behind me and clapping me on the shoulder. “She’s Jax’s daughter.”

Jax Potter...Nicholas’s washed-up rock star uncle, who hooked us up with our agent and helped get The Rhett Taylor Band off the ground. So, that explains why her name sounded familiar. But still doesn’t account for her odd reaction toward me.

“Did I umm...Have we met before?” I stare after her until she disappears through the balcony door. “Did I offend her in some way?” I’m beginning to wonder if we’ve maybe hooked up and that’s the reason, I feel this strange connection. But I’m positive I’ve never felt like this before, and she certainly doesn’t seem like someone I’d easily forget.

“Nah, man. This just isn’t her scene. You know Jax... wasn’t easy being the one at home with her mom while he uh...did his thing.” He shrugs. “I’m honestly surprised to see her here at all.”

“Right,” I agree as Monica’s hands slink around my waist from behind. She’s shimmying to the beat of the sultry music, her breasts pressed to my back, but I’m just not in it any longer. “I’ll find you later,” I lie, kissing the tips of her fingers and sending her off to her friends.

She pouts like a child, running a hand over my chest. “Don’t forget me.”

Nick laughs after she walks off. “That’s probably what uh...what did it. She thinks we’re all like her pops.” He gives his shoulders another shrug. “Thanks for the party, man. You’re the best. I’m gonna go check on Korie.”

“Ahh, there you are,” I say, finding Korie perched on a wicker couch with a drink in hand. It’s a dark, clear night. She’s staring out at the stars, all alone on the balcony off Nick’s room. “So, I think maybe we got off on the wrong foot.” I take a pull from my beer then clear my throat. “I wanted to find you and reintroduce myself—start over again, you know, in less...*awkward circumstances*.”

Her head slowly rolls in my direction. The look in her eyes tells me she’s over this conversation before it even begins. “No need. Everyone with the internet knows who you are. You’re Rhett Taylor—bad boy of country music. Playboy. Womanizer.”

“Ouch.” I suck in a breath, bringing a hand to my chest. “Yeah...well, you see what the media wants people to see.”

She rises to her feet, closing the distance between us in a few strides. The wind blows through her hair, and I get a whiff of her floral shampoo. My dick twitches. She’s so close—

inches away. I have to stop myself from giving in to the urge to reach out and touch her again. “What I saw when I walked in was nothing less than I expected.” She plants a hand on her hip. “That wasn’t the media. That was a rock star in his natural habitat.” She taps a hand lightly on the front of my shirt. “I know it’s probably real hard to believe, but I’m not here to go gaga and fall all over you.” She smiles a lazy smile. “As disappointing as that may be for your huge...*ego*.”

Did I just imagine her eyes dropping to my crotch?

“I came to see my cousin, who I haven’t seen in years. The rest of this”—her hand circles the air—“is just unfortunate.”

She stalks back into the house, leaving me to scrape my jaw up from the floor. Something about that sassy mouth of hers only makes me want her more.

I spend the rest of the evening lurking in the shadows of my own home, stalking a girl who wants nothing to do with me. It doesn’t take her long to befriend all of the girls who were making fun of her earlier tonight, including Monica. It would seem we’re all under her spell. But for some reason she’s decided to give them another chance. Me? Well, I think she’d written me off before walking through the door.

I’m green with envy. I don’t know what it is about this particular girl that has me feeling things I haven’t felt in years... but it makes me realize just how numb I’ve allowed myself to become.

For the first time since I can’t remember when, I’m *feeling*, and even jealousy feels a hell of a lot better than indifference.

Chapter 1

Rhett

“You’re serious right now?” Anika, my manager, paces the studio in four-inch stilettos while gnawing on the back of a pen. “You want to cancel studio time to go to...to *camp*?”

She’s kinda cute when she’s all riled up like this, her pale cheeks flaming red and daggers shooting from her amber eyes. I sink down further into the plush couch, crossing my arms on my chest. “It’ll be fun. I’m in need of some fun. You said so yourself. A few days on the coast with other single, college-aged adults. Real people, Anika. A break from Hollywood.”

“I said *after* we finish the album. Not right in the middle of recording it.” Her heels clack on the wood floors as she moves to crouch before me, resting her manicured nails on the arms of my chair. Her frustration is evident in the heaviness of her breaths. She shakes her head, tossing her long chestnut braid over her left shoulder. “It’s her, isn’t it? She’s going to be there?”

“Yes,” I answer, trying to cover a smirk. “Yeah...So, there’s no way I can put this off.” I realize the timing isn’t ideal, but it’s the perfect chance to work my magic on this girl, whom I can’t seem to get out of my head.

Pushing up from my knees, she’s again wearing a hole into the floor. “She hates you, Rhett. This is a terrible idea. Not only for your career, but because you’re going to end up *disappointed*.”

What she means is depressed. My first Hollywood girlfriend did a number on me, but that was before I knew how

industry relationships worked. I keep my heart guarded now—locked up tight in a suit of armor. I just want the chance to play with my sword.

“I’m curious about her,” I say with a shrug, my mind wandering to my drummer Nick’s birthday party, about three weeks ago. To his cousin, Korie Potter. Her long, wavy blonde ponytail, faded jeans, and Rolling Stones tee. She stood out among the sequins and glitz. Her attempt to fade into the background had the complete opposite effect. Only adding to her appeal was the easy manner with which she carried herself. She had a confidence—an honesty—about her that I don’t see much in the circles I run. I can’t help but smile, remembering how unimpressed she was with everything Rhett Taylor. What did she call me again? Oh, yeah. *The bad boy of country music*. Someone’s been paying a little too much attention to TMZ.

At any rate, life gets rather boring when you can literally have anything you want. *Anyone* you want. I hadn’t realized how willing I’d become to settle until life dangled temptation, in the form of a sassy-mouthed, blonde-haired, green-eyed, fiery little vixen, right under my nose and shook things up a bit—shook *me* up a bit.

Yeah, Korie is just the challenge I need.

“The label won’t like it.”

Having had about enough of her negativity, I rise to my feet, towering over her five-foot frame. It’s not often I ignore her advice. We’ve been best friends since elementary school; she’s one of the few people in my life I actually trust. “I don’t give a damn what they like or don’t like, Anika. I’m tired. I need to rest. The boys and I *are* taking this trip.”

Her pointed jaw ticks as she stares me down, arms crossed on her chest in a stance that I'm assuming she means to be intimidating. "Does she know you'll be there?"

I snort. "Of course not."

She gives one final resigned shake of her head, blowing out a laugh. "You're gonna regret this."

"Or," I say, thumping her nose because I know how much it pisses her off, "I could enjoy it very, *very* much."

"And Nick is okay with this?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," the hulking, six-foot-three, tatted oaf himself announces, entering through the back door. "A week of tits, booze, and fun in the sun? *And* I get to watch him follow Korie around like a lovesick puppy while she hands him his balls in a sling? Sign me up for that shit."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather M. Orgeron is a Cajun girl with a big heart and a passion for romance. She married her high school sweetheart two months after graduation and her life has been a fairytale ever since. She's the queen of her castle, reigning over five sons and one bossy little princess who has made it her mission in life to steal her Momma's throne. When she's not writing, you will find her hidden beneath mounds of laundry and piles of dirty dishes or locked in her tower (aka the bathroom) soaking in the tub with a good book. She's always been an avid reader and has recently discovered a love for cultivating romantic stories of her own.

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