



*Always,  
Evelyn*

LOVE NOTES BOOK THREE  
AUTUMN REED

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# AUTUMN REED

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Cover by Everly Yours Designs.

*For my fellow former church girls.  
You be you, without apology or shame.*

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# *Playlist*

Listen to the *Always, Evelyn* playlist on [Spotify](#).

- 1: From Eden - Hozier
- 2: Perfect - Ed Sheeran
- 3: surrender - Christina Perri
- 4: California Dreamin' - Freischwimmer
- 5: Saturday Sun - Vance Joy
- 6: Broken Shadow - Karen Elson
- 7: All We Ever Knew - The Head And The Heart
- 8: California 2005 - Phantom Planet
- 9: Malibu - Miley Cyrus
- 10: Believe - Mumford & Sons
- 11: Maybe - Drew Holcomb & The Neighbors (feat. Natalie Hemby)
- 12: As It Was - Harry Styles
- 13: I Hear the Bells - Mike Doughty
- 14: Romeo And Juliet - Indigo Girls
- 15: Meet Me in the Woods - Lord Huron
- 16: I Ain't Worried - OneRepublic
- 17: Now I'm In It - HAIM
- 18: I Don't Want to Be - Gavin DeGraw



- 19: Come Around - Rosi Golan
- 20: Butterflies - Kacey Musgraves
- 21: High and Dry - Radiohead
- 22: Thank You - Dido
- 23: Brave - Sara Bareilles
- 24: Bad Liar - Selena Gomez
- 25: The Wolf - Mumford & Sons
- 26: Saint Honesty - Girl Named Tom
- 27: Any Day Now - Trousdale
- 28: Follow Your Arrow - Kacey Musgraves
- 29: Renegades - X Ambassadors
- 30: Snow On The Beach - Taylor Swift (feat. Lana Del Rey)
- 31: It Goes Like This - Thomas Rhett
- 32: Geronimo - Sheppard
- 33: Can't Help Falling in Love - Kacey Musgraves
- 34: Crystals - Of Monsters and Men
- 35: The Sound of Silence - Simon & Garfunkel
- 36: Run (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift (feat. Ed Sheeran)
- 37: Palms - Allman Brown (feat. Liz Lawrence)
- 38: Home - Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros
- 39: Tattoos (Acoustic) - Jack Botts
- 40: Searching for the Truth - Katie Pruitt
- 41: More than Words - Music Travel Love
- 42: Sweet Nothing - Taylor Swift
- 43: Sigh No More - Mumford & Sons
- 44: Rising - Julia Lester
- 45: This Is Me - Keala Settle & The Greatest Showman Ensemble

46: Downtown - Majical Cloudz

47: Honeybee - The Head And The Heart

Epilogue: At Last - Etta James

# Chapter One

*Rook*

She had an air of melancholy about her.

At least, that was how the songwriter in me wanted to describe her. Not somber or suffering or sorrowful. Not depressed or dejected or downhearted.

It had to be melancholy.

Because there was nothing off-putting about her demeanor. Quite the opposite, in fact. The beauty of her sadness called to me like a vampire to an open wound. In a room full of smiling people, her down-turned mouth was practically a beacon. Never mind her full bottom lip that seemed to give her a perpetual pout.

I fucking loved pouty lips.

More specifically, I loved watching them encircling my cock.

But imagining wrapping her luxurious dark hair around my fist while she took me in her mouth wasn't what had me so captivated. It wasn't even about her, admittedly appealing, features. Beautiful women threw themselves at me everywhere I went. No, this was something different. Something new.

I'd been observing her on and off for the past hour, and all number of emotions had crossed her face. Well, the half of her face I could see. Her hair fell over the other half like a curtain of black silk.

She'd smiled and laughed and even wiped tears from her eyes. But through every reaction to the people around her, the melancholy never disappeared. It clung to her smooth, tawny skin like a skintight dress. Nothing like the modest, flowy garment she currently wore. Unfortunately.

"Striking, isn't she?" Landon said from beside me.

How long had I been staring? Too long, no doubt. "Who?"

He laughed, and I didn't blame him. I wasn't fooling anybody.

"Are you going to ask her to dance?" he prodded.

"No."

Dragging my eyes from my mystery woman, I automatically sought out Tyler in the crowd. He stood near the bar, a glass of clear liquid tipped to his grinning mouth as he flirted with a cute blonde. Stiffening, I began to push away from the table, but Landon knocked his knee into mine, stopping me.

"Whatever you're planning on doing, don't. You'll only draw attention. Besides, Cal is handling Ty."

I allowed my gaze to stray to Calvin—our band's manager and Tyler's babysitter for the evening. He'd taken up position at a table near the bar, and when he saw me looking, he tipped his beer bottle in acknowledgment.

Tension drained from my shoulders, but only slightly. I wouldn't be able to relax until we were on a plane back to California.

Not that I wasn't enjoying King Sanctuary. The horse sanctuary-slash-record-studio owned by Presley Cole and her husbands was my kind of paradise. Out here, in the middle of nowhere, I didn't have to worry about rabid fans or paparazzi or the pressures that came with being a celebrity. It was quiet. And—apart from tonight's unofficial launch party for Sunburst Records—it was pretty damn peaceful.

I understood why Presley had decided to make Wyoming her home. The guys and I had only been here for a little over

twenty-four hours, but I already felt calmer than I had in months.

“Why not?”

Snapping my attention back to Landon, I gave him a *I have no idea what you're talking about* quirk of my left eyebrow. Though I could only lift the left one by itself, I'd been told it was an impressive—and effective—eyebrow raise. The relatively minor movement saved me a hell of a lot of words.

“Why aren't you going to ask the raven-haired beauty to dance?”

“We've changed subjects, man. Keep up.”

He huffed. “Ty doesn't count as a change of subject anymore. He's all we've talked about since . . .”

Wisely, he didn't finish that sentence. This wasn't the time or place to start in on that conversation again.

“You guys do realize this is a party, right?” Levi asked, plopping into the seat on my other side and reclining back with his feet propped on the table.

Sometimes, it was easy to forget he and Landon were identical twins. Ever since we'd all moved to California halfway through college, Levi had happily embraced the surfer look and attitude. His chin-length blond hair had a life of its own, just as he was always the life of the party. Our rise to success and fame—and our subsequent downfall—never seemed to faze him. He was the epitome of cool in every situation.

Landon, on the other hand, was the self-proclaimed father of our group. I might have been the face of Kings Gambit, but he was the head. He was a lover of order and logic, and he was the reason our band was still intact. If it wasn't for the personal pitch Landon had made to Presley, we would be without a label and a future in the music business.

Even though the twins were opposites, I loved them both like brothers. My life would suck without them . . . and Tyler. My gaze strayed to him once more. He appeared to be

behaving himself. Maybe Landon was right—I needed to relax and think about something, or someone, else tonight.

“Rook is the one who needs reminding,” Landon said, answering his brother. “Seems our boy needs a little pep talk before asking a pretty girl to dance.”

“Oh?” Levi dropped his feet from the table as he began searching the room. “Who’s the lucky lady?”

Landon discreetly gestured toward my mystery woman. “Green dress.”

Before Levi could comment, I cut in. “Don’t bother. Whoever she is, she deserves better than me.”

My life was a mess. The band was a mess. And our public image was in fucking shambles. No girl—well, no nice girl—wanted a piece of it. And I would bet my Lamborghini that this particular girl was nice. I’d spent time around enough groupies to be able to spot the difference.

Levi looked from her to me, his eyes alight with something I couldn’t quite define. “You seriously don’t know who that is?”

Unconsciously, I straightened in my chair and gave him a bored look. Again, not that I was fooling anyone. “You do?”

He shook his head, causing locks of hair to fall over both cheeks. “How can you be so famous and yet so clueless about your peers? That’s Evelyn Bishop.”

When I didn’t react, he continued. “Presley’s best friend. The super-secret writer of her songs for the past decade. Outed by Presley’s bitch of an ex-manager. Is none of this ringing a bell?”

I wasn’t completely ignorant. Of course, I’d heard about the scandal that ultimately resulted in Presley starting her own record label. Her personal experiences had caused her to take pity on Kings Gambit, giving us a chance with Sunburst Records.

But I did my best to ignore celebrity gossip, so I hadn’t known the identity of the person behind Presley’s songs. *Fuck.*

The last thing I needed was to be even more intrigued by this woman. If hadn't already realized she was more than a pretty face, this new information cemented it. After years of listening to and studying Presley's music, I could say, for certain, that Evelyn was a brilliant songwriter. And I had a feeling what had started as mild interest was transforming into something close to obsession before my eyes.

"If you're not going to make a move, maybe I will," Levi said, using his knife to check his reflection. With practiced ease, he returned his hair to its *I woke up this way* disheveled perfection.

I shook my head. Only Levi.

"Levi," Landon warned.

"What? We're not thirteen. Rook can't call dibs."

"I didn't—"

"That's not the point," Landon said, interrupting me. "Don't be a dick."

"I'm not." Levi stood. "I happen to think she's fascinating, and I'd love to get to know her."

Before he'd made it more than a few steps, Landon grabbed onto his arm and hauled him to the edge of the room.

I sighed and followed them. So much for not making a scene. It was a sad state of affairs when I was acting as the voice of reason.

Bypassing the twins by a few feet, I stopped at the dessert table and picked up the first three plates I saw. Then I handed one to each of them. "Eat."

Levi rolled his eyes but wasted no time in stuffing a chocolate confection into his mouth. Mid-chew, he said, "This is good."

His brother huffed. "Mom would have your hide if she witnessed your lack of table manners."

"We're not sitting at a table, are we?"

"I'd almost forgotten how lame you three could be."

I stiffened at the sound of Tyler's voice from directly behind me. Apparently, there was no winning when it came to him tonight. His nearness stressed me out just as much as when he was out of my sight for more than a minute.

Turning slowly, I made a concerted effort to relax my expression and stance. "Hey, man. Having a good time?"

He shrugged, looking Levi, Landon, and me over. "What is this, a middle school dance? Too scared to talk to girls, so you're skulking around the dessert table?"

An amused snort filled the air, and it took me a second to realize I was responsible for it. "You must be remembering one of your other friends from middle school. I never had trouble talking to girls, even back then."

Tyler tilted his head in assent. "That doesn't explain what you three are doing over here."

Landon started to open his mouth, but I shook my head, and he snapped it shut. Unfortunately, his brother wasn't as tuned-in to my silent communication.

Levi gripped my shoulder. "Our little Rookie can't seem to work up the nerve to approach his crush."

"I didn't realize there were any A-list actresses in the room," Tyler replied with a wink in my direction.

My empty hand curled into a fist, and I immediately started counting backward from ten. *Nine*. I couldn't let. *Eight*. Him get to me. *Seven*. Not tonight. *Six*. Of all nights. *Five*.

At that point, I shook out my fist and allowed my mouth to curve into an unaffected smile. My therapist would be proud. "I'm taking a break from actresses for a while."

He smirked. "Too bad." Turning, he began scanning the immediate vicinity, and within seconds, his gaze zeroed in on Evelyn.

*Fuck.*

Looking back at me, his smirk widened. "Thankfully, I know your type." He threw back the rest of his drink before



plunking his empty glass on the dessert table. “Don’t worry, friend. I’m more than happy to play wingman tonight.”

He held out his fist for a bump, and when I hesitated for too long, his brown eyes sparked with a hint of chaos. No matter what I did, there was no turning back now.

Tyler got his way.

Always.

I bumped my fist against his and sent up a quick prayer to the rock gods that tonight would turn out better than last time . . .

## Chapter Two

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*I met a boy today.*

*With his shaggy brown hair, green eyes, and glasses, he's what Jane would call "nerdy cute." But, to me, he's just cute.*

*I wish Jane were here to tell me what to say and wear. She always knows how to act around boys, while I only know how to be me.*

*Is it possible a cute boy could like me for me?*

*Evelyn*



“Dance with me.”

I jumped at the sultry voice directly over my shoulder. Hadn't I been giving off my best “leave me alone” vibes? Maybe this guy was oblivious.

Turning my head, I found myself almost nose to nose with a stranger. And yet, there was something vaguely familiar about his perfectly styled brown hair, sparkling eyes, and chiseled jawline. Shoulders tensing, my instincts screamed at me to get far away from the too-handsome man.

“No, thank you,” I said in an overtly polite tone while shifting to the edge of my seat, putting as much distance as possible between us without making my retreat obvious.

Not deterred by my rejection, the man rested his arms on the back of my chair and leaned in. “Sorry, babe. I can’t leave this party without dancing with the most beautiful girl in the room.”

The charming grin he shot me suggested he was accustomed to getting his way. Not that I was surprised. Beyond his good looks, his mere presence at this event meant he was a big deal in the music industry. Given the confidence rolling off him in waves, I’d guess an artist. I really should have paid closer attention to Presley’s guest list.

“I’m not sure what you’re doing with *me*, then,” I replied, adding the appropriate amount of dryness to my tone. When in doubt, self-deprecation was always the answer.

“You’re funny. I like that.”

I wasn’t trying to be. There were more glamorous, sophisticated women at this party who would be far better dance partners. I hadn’t attended a single school dance, and my only boyfriend had considered fishing at dawn the height of romance.

“I’m not that funny, I assure you. I’m also not interested.”

Genuine surprise crossed his features, followed by irritation. Moving to stand in front of me, he said, “You must not be a music fan.”

I wanted to laugh. Clearly, he had no clue who I was either, which was a surprisingly nice change. Ever since my face had been splashed across tabloids and entertainment news shows six months ago, the obscurity I’d taken for granted had become nothing but a fond memory.

When I didn’t immediately respond, he added, “I’m Tyler Hammond.” I stared blankly at him, and he groaned. “Of Kings Gambit.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

That was why he looked familiar. Although I knew the band's music well, I wasn't the type to stalk celebrities online. I was more likely to develop a crush on one of my favorite book boyfriends than some guy in a band.

Still, I should have recognized him sooner. I'd overheard Sawyer and Beckett, two of Presley's husbands, discussing her decision to sign the band to Sunburst Records. They thought the rockers were trouble. Something to do with a scandal that got them dropped from their previous label. But I made it a habit to ignore the gossip sites that had disparaged me and Presley, so I was seriously out of the loop.

Now, more than ever, I had no desire to continue talking to this guy. Invisibility was the name of the game, and being spotted with someone of Tyler's apparent notoriety would guarantee I walked away the loser.

Scooting back my chair, I stood as gracefully as possible in the three-inch heels Scarlett had talked me into wearing. "Well, Tyler, I'm sure you'll have no trouble finding another dance partner. Enjoy your night."

His eyes flicked to something over my shoulder, likely the goddess who would be my replacement. It was just as well. Hopefully, no one had noticed him speaking to me.

Skirting around the famous rocker, my attention snagged on Scarlett across the room. If anyone could save me, it would be her. Though I'd only known the beautiful lounge singer for six months, she'd already managed to insert herself into my life, and heart, so completely, I considered her more than a friend. She'd become family, just as Presley had been for most of my life.

"Wait," Tyler said, gently grabbing me by the wrist to stop my trajectory and turning me toward him.

I unconsciously shrank away from the contact. It wasn't anything personal. I'd just never been a fan of people touching me, especially strangers.

Noticing my reaction, he loosened his grip. “I’m sorry for manhandling you.” Fully releasing my hand, he lifted his to his chest, that charming grin of his reappearing. “I vow to be a complete gentleman from now on.”

My lips twitched. Somehow, I doubted this man had ever been, or ever would be, any type of gentleman.

“If only you’ll agree to one dance with me,” he continued slyly.

It was almost enough to make me laugh. Almost.

Unable to resist discovering what, or who, had caught his attention moments before, my gaze strayed in that direction. Instead of a leggy blonde in a skintight dress, like I expected, I found three pairs of eyes trained on us. It didn’t take a genius to figure out I was looking at the rest of Kings Gambit and, strangely enough, they seemed to be looking back at me more than their bandmate.

That’s when it hit me—of course. I was some kind of a challenge or even a bet. Why else would Tyler fudging Hammond be so invested in a dance with me? It was just like a group of bored rock stars to entertain themselves by playing with the quiet church mouse hiding in the corner. Not that I knew from experience, but I’d read my share of romance novels.

Before I could reject him once again, Tyler raised a hand to stop me from speaking and batted his lashes. Was he wearing guyliner?

“Please know that I can be persistent when I really want something.” He dropped to one knee in front of me. “And I’ve been told I give amazing serenade.”

My heart started racing as I glanced around us. A few people were already looking our way, and as soon as he opened his mouth, we’d draw a crowd for sure. Tingles of heat trailed up my spine to the back of my neck before flooding my cheeks. There was nothing I hated more than being the center of attention.

Tyler's brown eyes sparkled with the threat of a scene, and I knew I had only one choice. "Fine," I hissed as I subtly waved for him to stand. "One dance, but no singing."

He hopped up, his smug expression telling me he'd never doubted my acquiescence. "No singing. Got it."

Placing a palm to the small of my back, he led me to the dance floor just in time for Nicki Minaj to be replaced by Ed Sheeran. I attempted to ignore the flutter in my stomach from the heat of his hand against the relatively flimsy material of my dress as he pulled me in close, our chests mere inches apart.

The scent of his undoubtedly expensive cologne should have made my nose wrinkle, but I found myself inhaling an extra whiff as I lifted my hands to his shoulders. Tobacco, something sweet I couldn't identify, and was that ginger? All I knew for sure was that the combination suited him. Spicy with just a hint of sweet.

Unsure where to focus my gaze, I let it drift around the room, breathing a sigh of relief when I realized no one seemed to be paying us any special attention. Except for the other members of Kings Gambit. They hadn't moved from their spot near the dessert table. Must have decided it was the perfect vantage to determine whether Tyler followed through on . . . well, whatever he was doing with me.

The reminder made me long to pull away. But the way too-alluring man holding me chose that moment to lower his head to my ear, where he began quoting the chorus of "Perfect." He spoke the lyrics softly, his voice somehow musical, though he was technically keeping his promise of no singing.

His warm breath brushed over the shell of my ear and down the exposed skin of my neck, making me shiver. I hadn't been this close to a man in years, and I didn't want to admit—even to myself—how amazing it felt. In this moment, it didn't matter that none of this was real. That he was merely using me for his own amusement. My response to Tyler Hammond was a reminder that I was still a woman with needs and desires, no matter how effectively I'd convinced myself otherwise.

When he got to the last line of the chorus, he lifted his head, peering into my eyes while he told me I looked perfect tonight.

My heart stuttered, almost believing him. Darn that Ed Sheeran for writing such a romantic song. The last thing I needed was to get caught up in a fantasy. Fairy tales and happily ever afters were for other women. I was too damaged for any of that nonsense.

Tyler swept my hair off my left shoulder, making every cell in my body come to a standstill. I'd been so caught up in the moment, I'd forgotten about covering my face. That had to be a first.

His golden-brown eyes slid to the blemish on my left cheek, and I sucked in a breath, waiting. Would his reaction be the one I'd spent all these years waiting for?

He cupped my jaw in his hand as he studied the over two-inch long, pink and jagged scar that ran from my hairline to the center of my cheek. When his gaze drifted back to mine, I saw it in the depths of his eyes—pity. Tyler didn't have to say the words for me to know what he was thinking. *If it wasn't for that scar, she would be so pretty.* For most of my life, I'd heard them whispered, and some people had even spoken them to me directly.

I had been stupid to hope he would see me differently. Plenty of men were willing to look past the flaw. I knew that. But I couldn't help but want more. To be admired with my scar, not in spite of it.

“What happ—”

“I have to go,” I said, cutting him off as I dropped my hands from his shoulders and stepped back. There was no point in having this conversation. An hour from now, he would get on with his life and forget he'd ever met me.

“Wait.”

He encircled my wrist again, but this time, I had no qualms about shaking him off. “Good night, Tyler Hammond of Kings Gambit.”

*Have a nice life*, I thought as I beelined for the exit.



## Chapter Three

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*There's a certain amount of notoriety that comes with being a pastor's daughter. That sounds dramatic, I know. It's not like I'm one of the Bush twins. But, sometimes, it feels like I might as well be.*

*Wherever I go, people are watching me. Waiting for me to stumble.*

*Like today. I snapped at one of the girls in my cabin when she refused to get out of bed in time for morning chapel, and the rest of the girls immediately started gossiping about it. As a junior counselor, it's my job to make sure the girls get up and ready on time, but I should have been gentler with her.*

*That's what my father expects of me. It's what the world expects of me.*

*Evelyn*



I woke to the low murmur of voices and the sense that I'd slept longer than usual. Turning onto my side, I glanced at the clock on the nightstand in Presley's guest room, shocked to see that

it was after ten o'clock. I hadn't slept this late in . . . well, years. A decade, perhaps.

According to my father, "thou shalt not be slothful" was the long-lost Eleventh Commandment. I'd never gotten him to explain how Moses missed that one, but the lack of a scriptural reference never stopped him from quoting it. Suffice it to say, sleeping in wasn't allowed in the Bishop household, especially on Sundays.

During my formative years, I'd counted on sleepovers at Presley's house to indulge my lazy streak. My parents only allowed me to stay over there one night a month, since they seemed to think we spent all our time watching teen dramas, listening to forbidden music, and eating junk food in our pajamas. Which, of course, we did. Thankfully, Presley's gran covered for me with tales of the "proper" activities we'd engaged in. Despite her tendency for crankiness, that woman had been as good as an angel in my eyes.

With a groan, I rolled out of bed before making my way to the attached bathroom and into the shower. Though I probably shouldn't have taken the time to wash my hair, there was nothing like scrubbing off the day before, especially when it included an abundance of hair product and male attention.

In spite of myself, I allowed my thoughts to drift to Tyler Hammond. A smile played on my lips as I remembered him dropping to his knees and threatening to serenade me. Although I was eternally grateful that he hadn't made a scene, a secret part of my heart wished he'd made good on the threat. It was the same part that longed for romance and an epic love story like the ones I read about.

Thankfully, my brain was adept at pushing such inclinations aside. I'd learned my lesson when it came to following my heart, and I had no intention of making that mistake again.

After dressing, I made my way downstairs and followed voices toward the kitchen. As soon as I turned the corner, the room fell silent as too many eyes to quickly count fell on me.

Self-consciously, I glanced down at myself. Bra? Check. Loose-fitting blue sweater? Check. Jeans? Check. So, this wasn't a "showing up naked" nightmare come true. That was a relief, but I still didn't know what had caused the surge of attention. I was accustomed to walking into a room, any room, without notice.

"Is this an intervention? Because I only ate one piece of cake last night, I promise."

Presley's laugh was obviously fake. "You're such a goof. Can I get you something for breakfast? Or, I guess, lunch?"

"Oh, um, no thank you." Unconsciously, I pulled my hair over my left shoulder, so it would cover my cheek. "What's going on?"

Now that I'd confirmed my lack of nudity, I had no trouble quickly identifying everyone in the room. Presley and her husbands—Beckett, Clayton, and Sawyer. And Scarlett and her fiancés—Wyatt, Carter, and Brady. Under normal circumstances, the uncommonly tall, attractive men would overshadow the two women, but Presley and Scarlett held their own. It was probably why they each managed to juggle multiple partners. It took a certain level of confidence that someone like me could never pull off.

Scarlett stepped forward and yanked me into a tight hug. "We're all here for you. You know that, right?"

"Yes?" Though I'd meant it as a statement, it came out more like a question. Seriously, what was going on?

Pulling back, she gave me an encouraging smile before turning to Carter. "Show her."

Without a word, the handsome blond handed over an iPad. Confused, I accepted it while searching his face for answers. After the months spent living at his hotel in Texas, I knew I could count on him to give it to me straight. But his expression betrayed none of his thoughts.

Sighing, I glanced down at the tablet . . . and promptly dropped it.

A horrified squeak flew from my mouth as the iPad clattered to the floor, but I wasn't sure if it was because of the damaged device or the photo on the screen. The photo of me in the arms of none other than Tyler fudging Hammond.

"I'm so sorry," I croaked, too startled to say anything else.

Carter chuckled as he leaned down to retrieve the tablet. "Don't be. It's Wyatt's."

A distinctly Wyatt-sounding grunt came from somewhere behind me, but I couldn't bring myself to turn around. In fact, I couldn't move at all. I wouldn't be surprised to discover my feet were now permanently affixed to Presley's beautiful, reclaimed-wood floors. This exact spot would be my home from now on. At least it was in the most stunning kitchen I'd ever seen. There were much worse places to live out the rest of my days.

It was just as well. Ever since I'd revealed myself as Presley's songwriter to the world six months ago, I'd been feeling more and more unsettled. As much as I loved being around Scarlett and her family, I couldn't stay in Hastings forever. But I also didn't know where else to go. The thought of returning to my tiny hometown of Cody, Oklahoma, brought me no peace. It was the one place I'd always assumed I would stay, and now, it seemed too small. Too confining.

Familiar, comforting arms wrapped around my torso as Scarlett said, "Maybe we should sit down."

She led me to the breakfast nook, proving my earlier assumption to be false. Was it odd that I experienced a pinch of disappointment at abandoning my spot? I'd been almost looking forward to my future as a kitchen ornament. Like a garden gnome, minus the beard and pointy hat.

A glass of orange juice and a plate of assorted pastries appeared on the table in front of me, and I looked up just in time to see Brady backing away with a small smile. He was a born caretaker, which made his position as an elementary school teacher the perfect fit.

Scarlett waited for me to eat an entire croissant before setting the iPad back in front of me. I grimaced at the twin cracks obscuring the edges of the screen, but when I shot Wyatt a regretful look, he merely shook his head at me. Logically, I knew I had bigger things to worry about, but I couldn't help feeling bad.

The tablet was still open to an article, but the photo I'd glimpsed earlier was no longer on the screen. Which made the whole thing a bit easier to ignore. If I never read it, I could pretend it didn't exist. Right?

Presley plopped into the chair next to me. "It's like pulling off a Band-Aid, Evie. You just gotta do it."

She was right. I knew she was. And yet . . .

With a sigh, she plucked the iPad from the table and began reading aloud.

*"Has music's favorite bad boy, Tyler Hammond of Kings Gambit, found the queen—or, in this case, bishop—to his knight? Say it isn't so!"*

*"If a picture paints a thousand words, this one paints 'taken' across Tyler's forehead in neon letters. We've spotted him with models, actresses, pop stars, and even an honest-to-god princess. But we've never seen him quite like this."*

*"As much as I hate to admit it, he looks smitten . . . with none other than Evelyn Bishop. If you don't remember fair Evelyn from a scandal last year involving Presley Cole, type her name into the closest search engine. Not gonna lie—her confessional video with Presley makes me tear up every time."*

*"Still, don't go weeping into your Cheerios just yet, ladies. An inside source claims—"*

"Okay," I practically shouted, before lowering my voice. "Thank you, Jane. I get the gist."

Presley rolled her eyes, undoubtedly knowing that my use of her given name was a show of irritation on my part. Passive aggression for the win. My mother taught me well.

If only she'd also provided a road map to dealing with the media before she'd passed. The absurdity of that notion almost made me laugh. Picturing my prim and oh-so-traditional mother taking on the paparazzi was beyond my scope of imagination.

Scarlett squeezed my shoulder, drawing me out of my wayward thoughts. "You okay, sweetie?"

Tears welled in my eyes from her empathy more than anything, and I blinked them away. "I'm okay. It's just a silly article."

Truthfully, I wasn't sure how I felt. This was different from last time, when my face had been splashed across media outlets around the world. Revealing that I'd been Presley's secret songwriter for over a decade was the kind of scandal few could come back from. But while I'd been hiding away in Hastings, Presley had started a record label, making her own way in the industry she loved.

I wasn't thrilled that accepting a dance with Tyler last night had thrown me back into the spotlight. But I also refused to let this small setback consume me. I'd been photographed with a notorious playboy. Who cared? So had dozens of other women. As soon as he was spotted canoodling with some heiress or social media influencer, I'd be all but forgotten, just how I liked it.

So, yeah, I was okay.

Clayton stepped forward and ran a hand through his slightly graying, dark hair. "I apologize, Evelyn. I was in charge of security last night, and even though all cell phones and cameras were to be confiscated at the door, one obviously slipped through. That photo never should have been taken, much less sold."

I gave him my best encouraging smile. "Don't apologize. There's nothing else you could have done."

He nodded but still appeared unsure, so I glanced between all the men in the room. Because of my friendship with their

women, they were protective of me. It was sweet, but in this case, also unnecessary. “Seriously, guys. I’m okay. Promise.”

Sawyer, who was the least chatty of Presley’s husbands, cleared his throat. “Did that Kings Gambit asshole make you uncomfortable? Because if he did—”

“No,” I interrupted with a shake of my head. “I mean, he did threaten to serenade me, but that was all.”

Presley grinned. “Do tell.”

My cheeks heated, and I threaded my fingers through the ends of my hair. Why had I shared that part? Now, she was going to blow our single dance way out of proportion.

“Don’t tease her,” Scarlett scolded gently.

“I don’t know,” Beckett said, inserting himself into the conversation for the first time. “I think we’d all like to hear how ‘music’s favorite bad boy’ seduces lovely young women. I, for one, am always open to new methods.”

Presley tore off a piece of blueberry scone and chucked it at his head. Laughing, he ducked just in time and sent me a wink. “That’s okay. You can tell me later.”

I bit back a grin. The fun-loving Beckett always seemed to have that effect on me.

When Wyatt suddenly strode forward, a glower on his face under his ball cap, my almost-grin faded. This couldn’t be good.

He crossed his muscled, tattooed arms over his chest and growled at me, “I’d rather hear about your stalker.”

A shiver ran up my spine.

Son of a biscuit. I’d been found out.

## Chapter Four

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*Invisibility. That's what I would choose as my superpower.*

*The problem is, I'm already invisible. Not literally, of course. People stare often, mostly at my damaged cheek.*

*But the real me is invisible. My peers only see who they want to see—the shy, scarred, goody-goody church girl who spends most of her time sitting at the piano.*

*They don't see the me who snorts when she giggles or the me who likes to scarf down kettle corn with M&Ms while talking about boys. They don't see the me who wants so badly to find someone who gets me.*

*I thought that would finally change this summer. That, out of anyone I've spent time with, my fellow camp counselors would be the most likely to accept me.*

*If only . . .*

*Evelyn*



“Stalker?” Although I’d intended to express surprise, even I could hear the guilt in my voice.



“Stalker?” Scarlett parroted, glancing from Wyatt to me and then back to Wyatt. “What stalker?”

“No stalker,” I interrupted before he could answer. When he shot me an incredulous look, I forced myself to keep going. “Just some creepy fan messages. It’s not a big deal.”

“How creepy?” Presley asked.

I shrugged, doing my best to feign nonchalance. “Oh, you know. The usual ‘we belong together’ kind of stuff that anyone who has spent five minutes in the spotlight receives. I’m sure you’ve gotten hundreds of them over the years.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t think there’s anything *usual* about this.” Wyatt strode to the table and dropped a stack of papers in front of us.

On top was a printout of a detailed black-and-white drawing that depicted me chained to a cross, BDSM-style. Except, the cross was a perfect replica of the one affixed to the front of the church I’d attended most of my life. Oh, and did I mention I was naked?

Deep cuts had been added to my chest, spelling the word “mine” with bloodied letters, providing the only color to the otherwise stark palette.

Even though it was some pervert’s imagining of my body, knowing that Wyatt had obviously seen this caused heat to travel up my cheeks. And he’d printed it out. Maybe this was a naked dream coming true, after all.

“How did you find these?” I asked him as I snatched the entire pile from the center of the table.

“You remember when Micah borrowed your phone to play Retro Bowl last night?”

My stomach twisted, already knowing where this was going. Since Scarlett had told her younger brother and ward to leave his cell behind for the party last night, he’d begged to borrow mine when he got bored. I was a sucker for his charming grin, which meant it had only taken seconds for me to give in.

When I nodded, Wyatt continued. “Well, he apparently screenshotted something in the game to message himself and happened to see a folder labeled *creepy*. In typical teenage boy fashion, he’d investigated further and found your collection of screenshotted emails and showed me. Don’t worry. He didn’t see any nudity, hand drawn or otherwise.”

That was a small relief, at least.

Scarlett turned wide eyes on me. “Who cares how Wyatt found them? I want to know why you were keeping them a secret.”

Because I refused to bother her or Presley with more of my problems, and I didn’t have anyone else. But I couldn’t say that aloud. So, I replied with the only thing I could think of. “I honestly didn’t think they were a big deal.”

Even that wasn’t quite true. Ever since I’d discovered them last week, I’d been having trouble sleeping. None of the messages included direct threats, but the underlying message of “you’re mine” made me more than a little uneasy.

Still, I would have been more worried if they’d seemed at all racially motivated. Due to the fact that I’d been abandoned on the front steps of my adoptive parents’ church as a baby, I didn’t know anything about my ethnicity. But my almost-black hair and eyes and darker-than-white skin had exposed me to plenty of racist comments over the years.

Presley plucked the papers from my hand and began flipping through them. “Wyatt’s right—these aren’t normal fan messages. Considering the number of drawings here, most of them disturbing, I’d say you’ve got yourself a legitimate stalker.”

“Agreed,” Wyatt grunted.

“How did you receive the messages?” Brady asked.

“Through email. After I was outed as Presley’s songwriter, I stopped checking the account.” I’d been using that same email address since high school, so it hadn’t taken long for it to be shared publicly. “But I stupidly signed in last week to

skim for any legitimate messages and came across over twenty of them with *mine* as the subject.”

“And you don’t know who sent them?”

I shook my head. “They were all sent from different email addresses without any identifying information.” Whoever my . . . er, stalker was had taken the time to cover his tracks. “But I can’t help thinking they’re from someone I used to go to church with. The, uh, cross in that one drawing is exactly like the one attached to the building. And there are random details in the other drawings that suggest the person knows my hometown.”

“That’s a place to start,” Clayton said. “Should I call the sheriff?”

“I doubt there’s much he could do,” Sawyer answered. “The department doesn’t have the resources to track down internet stalkers.”

Carter was already pulling his phone from his pocket and heading toward the door leading to the wraparound porch. “I’ll call my PI. He should be able to recommend someone to help us out.”

“You don’t need—” But he was already closing the door behind him.

Scarlett patted my arm. “Don’t bother. He’s a man on a mission, which means there’s no stopping him.”

I tapped my fingers against the tabletop, itching to get them on the nearest piano keys. *This*. This right here was exactly why I hadn’t told anyone about the messages. The last thing I wanted was to be a burden, and somehow, Scarlett, Presley, and their respective guys were involved now.

“What’s the plan?” Beckett asked the room, his earlier lighthearted mood absent. “Maybe Evelyn should stay here for a while. Living in the middle of nowhere does have its benefits, and we have plenty of room.”

“It’s a good idea,” Wyatt replied. “Although we take security seriously, we can only do so much at the hotel, with people coming and going all the time.”

“We’ll add to our regular security team here,” Clayton said, also reaching for his phone. “What do you think? Two extra guards per patrol?”

“What about a personal escort for Evelyn? A woman, preferably.”

“Guys,” I interjected, but Clayton just kept going.

“Good thinking. And it wouldn’t hurt to add some extra cameras around the property.”

“Guys . . .”

Wyatt nodded. “What about a Taser? Surely, those are legal in Wyoming.”

“Guys!”

At my version of a shout, they finally turned to look at me. I released a shuddering breath. “I appreciate everything you’re doing, really. But don’t you think all this is a bit overboard? This guy has been sending messages for months, and nothing has happened to me. I didn’t even know he existed.”

“We’re not taking chances with your safety,” Wyatt said in his *don’t you dare argue with me* tone. “And just because you didn’t know about him doesn’t mean you weren’t in danger.”

“What if I offered an alternative?” Presley asked, her big, blue eyes amused. About what, I wasn’t sure.

The tension in my shoulders released slightly. “As long as it doesn’t include a personal bodyguard, I’m on board.”

“I’m so glad you said that.” Her mouth tipped up into a pleased grin with a touch of mischief. “You know how you’ve always wanted to visit Newport Beach?”

I nodded. Of course, I knew. *The O.C.* was only my favorite show of all time. I’d daydreamed about the Cohens taking me in like they had Ryan, and if I was the type to take vacations, I would have visited Newport long ago.

“Well, now’s your chance.” She tossed her long blonde locks over her shoulder. “All you have to do is babysit four sexy rock stars.”

Wait. *What?*

## Chapter Five

*Levi*

Sprawled on the couch, I watched while my twin scurried around the living room, a white cloth in one hand and a bottle of all-purpose cleaner in the other. He sprayed the window and wiped it clean before moving on to another.

As much as I was enjoying the show, I couldn't resist asking, "What're you doing?"

He turned to scowl at me. "Don't tell me you've forgotten what cleaning looks like."

"No, but I am wondering why *you're* cleaning. We have a team of people who get paid to do that for us."

Yes, I realized I sounded like a spoiled rock star. But not having to scrub our eight thousand square foot beachside home was one of my favorite things about having obscene amounts of money in the bank. After growing up with a single mom who struggled to pay the bills, I could truly appreciate my luxurious lifestyle. Why spend time doing something I hated?

"I'm making sure we're ready for our houseguest."

I glanced around the spotless room, including those damn windows. That was Landon for you. Even perfect wasn't good enough for my older—by thirteen minutes—brother.

Resting my arms on the back of the couch, I smirked. "Funny. I don't remember you stressing this much the last time Mom visited."

“That sounds like a you problem.”

I laughed. “Seriously, bro. If I didn’t know any better, I might think you were trying to impress this girl.”

He shrugged, not bothering to look up from where he was running his cloth over the baseboards. The baseboards—I kid you not. “Not everything is about fucking.”

“Who said anything about fucking her?”

“No one is fucking Evelyn,” Rook announced, appearing like the stealthy son of a bitch he was. “That’s the last thing we need.”

“Sex?” I asked innocently. “Sex is the last thing we need? Because I beg to differ.”

“She’s here to do us a favor,” he replied, ignoring my comment. “Which means no screwing around.” He gave me a pointed look. “We are going to treat her with the respect she deserves but otherwise leave her alone.”

I raised my hands in surrender. “You know me. I have *all* the respect for the ladies. Every single one deserves to be worshiped like the queen she is.”

Despite my teasing, screwing around wasn’t my style. I was all about monogamy and long-term relationships. Sadly, those were difficult as fuck in this business, which meant I’d been single for way too long.

If nothing else, it would be nice to have some estrogen around this place. My roomies weren’t into relationships. I couldn’t even remember the last time there’d been a woman in the house who wasn’t flashing her tits to try to get with one of us.

Landon finally abandoned his maid act, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned against the window he’d just cleaned to stare at Rook. “No one says we have to go through with this harebrained scheme you and Presley cooked up. I can’t see how having Evelyn here will end in anything but more scandal, which is, in fact, the last thing we need.”

I hopped up from the couch, my limbs tingling with the anticipation of her arrival. Call it intuition or merely wishful thinking, but I had a good feeling about Evelyn Bishop. Our band—hell, our friendship—had been primed for a shakeup for months. Longer, really. And her presence was destined to shake things up. Of that, I had no doubt.

“Stop being such a Landon Downer. My twin tingles are telling me it’ll all work out.”

He rolled his eyes. “Stop saying ‘twin tingles.’”

“Whatever, bro. You know you love it. Peter Parker has Spidey-Senses, and we have twin tingles. We’re practically superheroes.”

“More like superdorks,” Rook muttered.

I ruffled his perfectly styled hair. “You’re just jealous.”

“You’re so right. Being a world-famous lead singer of a Grammy-Award-winning band isn’t enough for me. My life will never be complete without twin tingles.”

I pointed at him and nodded sagely. “You get it.”

“Can we get back to the original topic?” Landon asked. “Why are we going through with this? Thanks to that photo from the party, rumors about where Tyler’s been should die off for a while.”

Rook shook his head. “It’s not just about the rumors. Ty needs an image overhaul, and this one practically fell into our lap. Dating Evelyn will give him the kind of good press he so desperately needs. That we all need.”

“Fake dating Evelyn,” I coughed into my hand.

He ignored me, again. “Not to mention, Presley is counting on us to keep Evelyn safe. She’ll be here any minute. So, what do you want to do, Lan? Throw her out on her ass?”

“Obviously not. But it’s not like moving in with us is her only option. She could just as easily stay in Wyoming.”

“Yeah, but then she wouldn’t be doing as that favor, would she?”



My brother didn't respond, but I had no trouble identifying his surrender in the loose set of his shoulders and lack of grimace on his face. In fact, I'd bet he was as on board with Evelyn's presence as I was. He'd just needed to play devil's advocate to make sure we were making the decision that was best for all of us. It was his way.

All three of our cells buzzed or rang out with an alert at the same time, and I waggled my eyebrows. "She's here . . ."

Rook shook his head as he clicked the security app on his phone to check the camera before opening the front gate. "Remember what I said."

It was cute that he still thought he could boss me around after all these years. Didn't he know better by now?

"Sure, Dad. Favor. Respect. No screwing around. Got it."

I jogged to the front door, wanting to be the first to welcome Evelyn. I'd lamented the fact that I never got to talk to her at the party and had spent the three days since anticipating her arrival.

Opening the door with a flourish, my mouth stretched into a grin as soon as I caught sight of our new roomie. She wore loose-fitting jeans, a simple white shirt, white sneakers, and a floral-patterned backpack. Her face, free of makeup, was partially covered by her long hair, which fell over her left cheek and shoulder. In this light, I could tell it was a rich, dark brown, instead of black, like I'd assumed when I'd watched her from a distance.

Even though I knew her to be in her mid-twenties, she could have passed for eighteen in her unassuming outfit. Or maybe it was the way she constantly shifted her gaze, looking at anything but me. Wanting nothing more than to snag her attention, I began with the absurd.

Assuming my best posh British accent, I said, "Afternoon, milady. How may I be of service?"

Confusion swept across Evelyn's face, but at least she finally locked those eyes on mine. Framed by long, dark lashes, they somehow sparkled despite their deep brown color.

They widened as she studied me, and she parted her plump, pink lips, an action that shot straight to my groin. God, she was beautiful.

*Innocent* was my first thought, followed by *disenchanted*. I wasn't sure what led me to the latter conclusion, but there was something about her that radiated heartache. It was an interesting dichotomy, and if I hadn't already been fascinated by her, I sure as hell would have been now.

She swallowed harshly. "You're Levi Kerr, right?"

Oh, fuck. That voice. Its raspy, whisper-like quality made me think of long nights tangled in the sheets while she murmured my name. And it wasn't just the sound of my name causing that reaction. I had a feeling every word she spoke would turn me on.

"I am," I replied, dropping my phony accent. "It's lovely to meet you, Evelyn Bishop." I barely resisted the urge to lift her hand to my mouth, which was odd, since I'd never kissed a woman's hand in my life.

"You too."

Yeah. Every single damn word. Might as well get used to embracing my new life as a walking hard-on.

"You plan on inviting her in, or are you going to make her stand on the front porch all day?"

My brother's half-amused, half-irritated voice snapped me out of my lust-filled haze, and I stepped aside, waving her inside. When she reached for the handle of her suitcase, I lurched forward to take it from her. "Is this all your luggage?"

I glanced behind her to Malcolm, who stood next to his black Mercedes SUV, waiting on additional instructions. He was the head of our security team, and we'd put him in charge of making sure Evelyn remained safe while in our care. When he shook his head discreetly, I knew she hadn't arrived with any additional bags.

"Scarlett is having the rest of my things shipped."

"Right. Of course."

Lifting her suitcase over the threshold, I elbowed Landon in the side to urge him out of the way. Evelyn followed me, her steps timid. Once inside, she folded her arms across her stomach and took in her surroundings, excluding Landon and Rook. So, I wasn't the only one who made her uncomfortable. We'd have to work on that, first thing.

Rook stepped forward and offered his hand. "Welcome to our home, Evelyn. I'm Rook."

As she gingerly placed her small hand in his, I focused my attention on him. He kept his expression welcoming, but I noticed his jaw tick with tension. We'd been friends long enough for me to recognize it as tension of the sexual kind.

I bit back a grin.

This was going to be interesting.

## Chapter Six

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*I should miss my parents.*

*That's what I keep thinking when the girls who are away from home cry at night. No matter how much fun they're having, there are always one or two who get homesick right before they fall asleep.*

*I don't miss home at all.*

*I take deep breaths and feel my chest expand and my shoulders lift, and I just feel . . . light. Free.*

*Then I remember how lucky I am to have a family who loves me, and I wonder, what's wrong with me? I should probably scribble this out . . .*

*Evelyn*



I clenched my hand at my side, as though the slight action could dispel the tingling left behind by Rook Alexander's touch. His eyes—which I would have sworn were dark brown if I hadn't caught the bursts of reddish-gold rimmed by dark green from a foot away—tracked the movement, and I ducked my head. What must he think of me?

Not that focusing on the dragon tattoo running up his forearm that seemed to come alive as his muscles flexed was helping me regain my composure. But it was still better than studying his messy black hair, piercing eyes below thick eyebrows, and several days' worth of stubble surrounding a perfectly formed mouth.

If I'd thought Tyler's flirty demeanor at the party was overwhelming, that had nothing on being encircled by the other three members of Kings Gambit at once.

Although I'd looked up each of them online to learn their names and a bit about their backgrounds, I hadn't been prepared for *them*. They were celebrities, sure, but I didn't care about that part. I'd never been particularly impressed by fame. Instead, it had everything to do with their presence— together and individually.

I could already tell Levi was going to be a troublemaker. As soon as he'd opened the door, his ice-blue eyes shining, and thrown me for a loop with his fake British accent, it had taken everything in me not to return his infectious smile. Everything about him screamed laid-back California guy, from his chin-length dark blond hair with lighter streaks from the sun to his colorful board shorts and graphic tee.

Landon, however, was still a mystery. Even though he'd yet to speak, it didn't take a genius to recognize that his shorter haircut wasn't the only difference between him and his twin. He was closed to Levi's open. Somber to Levi's enthusiastic. And standoffish to Levi's approachable.

Ironically, those qualities were exactly what made me the most comfortable around Landon of the three men. He wouldn't push me for more than I could give. Best-case scenario, he'd ignore me altogether.

Thankfully, Presley had told me that Tyler wouldn't be around for the next couple of weeks, so at least I would only have three of the guys to contend with for now. It didn't matter how big this house was; it would never feel big enough for all of Kings Gambit, plus me.

When too much time had ticked by without anyone speaking, Levi knocked his shoulder into Landon's. "And this guy is my brother, Landon. Don't worry if you can't see the family resemblance. Few people do."

My lips twitched, but I didn't allow a smile to form. I wasn't ready for that yet. But I did need to find some words before this encounter got even more awkward.

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you. Thank you for inviting me into your home." There. That sounded normal, right? Or, at the very least, polite.

"Trust me, the pleasure is all ours, Eve," Levi said with that disarming grin. "May I call you Eve?"

I opened my mouth to tell him no but then closed it. When Presley had talked me into moving to California to play house with Kings Gambit—which I still worried was a terrible idea—she'd proclaimed it a chance for a fresh start. Even though I'd argued that I didn't need one, I hadn't believed a word of it. At the top of the long list of things I needed was a new beginning.

So, why not treat this as one?

"Sure," I answered Levi.

"Why don't we give you a tour?" Rook offered. "Then you can get settled in before dinner."

Dinner? Did that mean I was expected to eat with them?

Or did they want me to cook? The only man I'd ever lived with was my father, and he hadn't lifted a finger in the kitchen. Maybe they assumed I would prepare the meals. Not that I minded. It was the least I could do to chip in.

But I should have thought about this earlier, so I'd be prepared. Did they have special diets or any allergies? What about preferences? I had no idea what rock stars typically ate, but I had a feeling it differed greatly from the steak-and-potato type of meals my father preferred.

Anxiety pooling in my stomach, I asked, "Should I go to the grocery store?"

Rook narrowed his eyes. “Why? Is there something specific you need? Our fridge is fully stocked.”

“No, um . . .” I rubbed my hands on my jeans as I tried to figure out what else to say. “I just wasn’t sure what you had or what you’d want me to make.”

“Make?”

“She thinks we want her to cook for us,” Levi said before turning to me. “Sweetie, you’re here as our guest, not our housekeeper. You don’t need to do a thing.”

Heat crept up my neck to my face. “Oh.”

His smile turned mischievous. “But if you want to wear a French maid’s costume, just for the hell of it, I wouldn’t be opposed.”

Landon smacked him on the back of the head. “You’re an idiot.” Finally addressing me, he said, “We were planning on ordering in for dinner tonight. Depending on what we have going on, we typically rotate between going out and eating meals that just need to be heated up. If you give me a list of your likes and dislikes, I can pass it on to our personal chef, who drops off food a couple of times a week when we’re in town.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want to be a bother. I’m used to cooking for myself.”

“It’s no bother, but you’re also welcome to use the kitchen, if you want.”

“Thanks.”

“Now, about that tour,” Levi said, heading toward what appeared to be the living room. “I hope you like the ocean.”

“Actually, I’ve never been.” I wasn’t counting the, albeit spectacular, glimpses of the coastline I’d gotten on the drive here.

He stopped dead in his tracks and spun around to gape at me. “Never? Not even to the Gulf of Mexico?”

I shook my head. My parents weren't big on non-church related trips, and I'd ended up following in their footsteps. I couldn't explain why, other than not wanting to travel alone. Over the years, Presley had offered more times than I could count, but I hadn't wanted to be seen with her. I'd been clinging to my secret too tightly.

Now, it didn't matter. The whole world knew my secret—well, that one.

My backpack straps suddenly slipped from my shoulders, and I twisted my neck to find Rook standing behind me. He set my bag on the floor before lightly pressing his palm into my lower back. “No time like the present.”

By the time we'd made it halfway down the hall to the main living area, which included a dining room, kitchen, and living room, all I saw was the reflection of the yellow-and-blue sunset on the water through a wall of windows. We were that close to the ocean. So close, I felt like I could reach out and touch it.

Levi was already sliding back the doors that totally disappeared into the wall. He waved me forward with a smile, and with tentative steps, I walked out onto a massive covered patio with luxurious outdoor seating. Past that, I paused at the edge of the pool, the far side of which acted as a barrier between the house and ocean. The sound of water gently lapping against what appeared to be a private dock instantly put me at ease. It was like my brain, my soul, recognized something it had never even known.

Something so wonderful, I'd swear it was necessary.

Tears gathered in my eyes, but I didn't bother blinking them away. I was too busy soaking up the scent of salt in the air, the faint breeze on my skin, and blue as far as I could see.

“What do you think?” a low voice I was fairly certain belonged to Landon asked from behind me.

Without turning, I replied, “I'm speechless.”

“I know what you mean. Sometimes, I still can't believe I get to live here. That this is my life.”



At that, I couldn't resist looking at him. He stood with his hands tucked into the front pockets of his casual gray pants. A faint smile graced his face, drawing attention to his high cheekbones and pronounced chin. Strands of dark-blond hair fell over one ice-blue eye that seemed to see straight through me.

Maybe I'd been wrong about Landon. He might be the most dangerous of them all.

"It's beautiful." My words didn't do this house, this view, justice, but it was the best I could come up with.

He nodded, still looking at me. "It is."

I shifted on my feet and tapped my fingers against my legs as my eyes scanned the patio and then the living room behind it. No sign of Levi or Rook. I'd been hoping one of them could save me. Which was crazy, since I didn't know them any better than the man in front of me.

"They went to get drinks," Landon said, apparently reading my mind. "Do you want to sit?"

"Sure."

I chose a chair facing the water and was happy to discover it both swiveled and glided. Perfect for someone with my fidgeting tendencies. I pulled my cardigan, which had been a little too warm when leaving the airport, tighter around me. Now that the sun was about to dip behind the horizon, even the Southern California weather felt chilly.

Landon lifted the top of the large ottoman, doubling as a coffee table, and retrieved an oversized plaid blanket, offering it to me. "Here you go."

Taking it, I draped it over me from chin to feet. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

The other two guys reappeared, carrying drinks and a basket of random food items. "Can't watch the sunset without snacks," Levi declared. "We have beer, lemonade, or water. What's your poison?"

“Lemonade, please.” He handed me an ice-cold glass bottle of a brand I’d never seen before. “Thanks.”

Turning down Rook’s offer of food, I returned my gaze to the view and snuggled even deeper under the blanket. The soft yellows and blues from earlier had transformed into a symphony of deep pinks, purples, and oranges. I wasn’t normally one to take pictures everywhere I went, but I couldn’t resist digging my phone from the small crossbody still hanging over my shoulder and snapping a series of them. This was a moment I would want to remember.

Seeming to sense my awe, the guys stayed quiet until the hues had faded to a dull gray. Not surprisingly, Levi was the first to speak, making me jump slightly in my seat. “Better than Oklahoma?”

I swiveled in my chair to face him. “Oklahoma has its own charms, including beautiful sunsets.”

The words tumbled out more from obligation than anything. Don’t get me wrong—my home state had plenty going for it. But I was more than ready for a change. For however long I stayed here, I would soak up the scenery the way only a small-town girl from a flyover state could.

“Not as beautiful as their girls,” Levi said with a wink.

Idly, I wondered if flirting came naturally to him, or if it was a skill he’d had to develop. Either way, I knew not to take it seriously. He likely charmed the panties off most girls he spoke more than a few words to. I was fine being the exception.

Not that I thought he was trying to charm *my* panties off. I just happened to be the only female in the vicinity. The banter was probably instinctual for him.

“Don’t let my brother fool you with his whole surfer dude look,” Landon said. “We grew up in rural Pennsylvania, which probably isn’t that different from where you’re from.”

“Unlike this guy,” Levi said, tipping his head toward Rook. “His family is practically Philly royalty. Well, his and Ty’s.”

“You all grew up together?” I found myself asking.

“No.” Rook cleared his throat. “Ty and I have known each other since we were kids, but we didn’t meet the twins until college.”

“And the rest is history,” Levi said dramatically.

They’d skipped a few details. I wanted to know more but didn’t feel comfortable prying. If nothing else, I could always read up about them online. Something about that felt wrong, though. I didn’t want other people relying on gossip to learn about me. Shouldn’t I afford these guys the same consideration?

“Speaking of history . . .” Landon stood and set a small stack of papers on the ottoman in front of me. Where had those even come from? “Before we get into more of ours, we need you to sign a non-disclosure agreement.”

My throat closed up.

This wasn’t the first time I’d heard those words. Not by a long shot.

## Chapter Seven

*Landon*

“What the fuck, Lan?” Rook asked, shooting a scathing look my way. “We talked about this.”

I leaned forward in my chair. “You talked and I disagreed.”

“That’s not how we make decisions around here, and you know it.”

“It is when you’re ignoring the best interests of the band.”

He scoffed. “According to who? You?”

“Me and our lawyers. We keep them on retainer for a reason.” I forced myself to relax back against the cushion of the outdoor sofa. “Besides, you’re the one always so intent on protecting Tyler. This is how we achieve that.”

Levi shook his head. “Bro, I don’t think—”

“I’ll sign it,” Evelyn said. Her voice was so naturally soft, I wouldn’t have noticed her interruption if I hadn’t been keeping one eye trained on her. “Once I have my attorney look it over tomorrow, if that’s okay?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“You don’t have to,” Rook said, his eyes still stormy as he stared at me, daring me to contradict him. “Trust goes both ways. You need to be able to trust us just as much as we need to trust you.”

He wasn't wrong. But we'd also just met this woman. There was too much at stake to rely on her seemingly good nature. The band's reputation had already taken a big enough hit. I wasn't sure if we'd survive another one.

Evelyn twisted her hands in her lap. "It's fine, really. It won't be my first NDA."

Right. Because she'd kept her songwriting a secret for over a decade. No wonder she'd gone pale when I'd mentioned the contract. It probably brought up bad memories for her.

Not that I knew how any of that had gone down. The fact that she and Presley were still so close suggested that Presley hadn't treated her badly. Maybe it had even been Evelyn's decision to keep her songwriting a secret. I knew better than to jump to conclusions, especially when it came to this business.

Rook stood and began pacing behind my back. "If you're going to force the issue, Lan, I guess I'll have to do the same." To Evelyn, he asked, "What do you know about why we were dropped by our last label?"

She shook her head. "Not much. Only that it's the reason Presley took you guys on."

I watched her suspiciously. Although nothing about her demeanor suggested she was lying, I couldn't imagine that she truly didn't know. Not unless she'd been living under a rock.

"According to gossip, Ty and I got into a fight over Sharla Winters."

Her eyes widened. "The actress?"

I wasn't sure why she bothered asking. Everyone in the world knew Sharla Winters. Between her girl-next-door beauty, natural talent, and sweet, Southern persona, she made most other A-list actresses look like trolls. She was also fake as off-brand boxed mac and cheese and happened to be Rook's ex.

"Yeah. She was attending a charity ball as my date and was caught in a compromising position with Ty. I confronted him, and we ended up in a fight that instantly went viral."

“Oh.” Evelyn’s eyes, still wide with surprise, grew darker with what looked like sympathy. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. The fight actually had nothing to do with Sharla.”

“Rook, no,” I said, my voice pleading. Without that signed NDA, he shouldn’t keep going. No matter how innocent Evelyn might appear, we didn’t know her. Couldn’t trust her.

Ignoring me, he said, “We fought because Ty was so wasted, an hour later, he didn’t even remember hooking up with my girlfriend, now ex-girlfriend. We were supposed to perform, and he couldn’t walk in a straight line, much less sit at the keyboard. I called him out, and things went downhill from there. We left the event without performing, and the next day, we canceled our upcoming tour. That’s the real reason we were dropped . . . because our label was out a bunch of money and didn’t want to deal with the band possibly breaking up over a woman. And I don’t blame them.

“What they didn’t know—what only a few people know—is the real reason we canceled the tour.”

“Rook,” I warned, trying one last time. But he ignored me. Of course, he did.

“Ty is in rehab.”

The words hung thick in the air, and I clenched my jaw to keep from snapping at my best friend. He could be so damn stubborn when he set his mind to something. And, clearly, he’d gotten it into his head that Evelyn could be trusted.

A sad smile crossed her face. “I’m so sorry to hear that. Is he okay?”

Her obvious show of sympathy surprised me. Maybe it was because of her religious background or because I’d spent too much time around people in the industry, but I’d expected judgment or even some kind of smug acceptance. Concern, on the other hand, I didn’t know what to do with.

“He’s getting there,” Rook answered. “But that’s why Lan is being so adamant about the NDA. We’ve managed to keep Ty’s treatment a secret for the last seven weeks, and he only

has two to go. It's imperative that you don't tell anyone. Other than a few people on our team, Presley is the only other person who knows."

She nodded solemnly. "Absolutely. I would never say anything, with or without an NDA."

"Thank you," I said, hoping she would understand that I hadn't pushed the contract for selfish reasons. "We—and Tyler, especially—appreciate your discretion."

"So, that's why you want me to publicly date him? To distract the press from his release from rehab?"

"What did Presley tell you?" Levi asked her.

"Not much. Only that your PR team thinks Tyler should date someone 'wholesome' leading up to the launch of your first album with Sunburst Records." Evelyn shifted in her chair, obviously uncomfortable. "I don't really know how I'll help his reputation, given my own scandal, but she insisted, and I owe her."

Levi laughed. "Trust me, sweetie. You're already the best thing to have happened to Tyler's reputation. Haven't you seen all the positive hashtags over the photo of you two?"

She shook her head. "I try to avoid social media and sites with celebrity gossip."

Something we had in common. If I wasn't so determined to stick to my plan where Evelyn was concerned—keeping her safe from her stalker and making sure she kept our secrets—I'd be tempted to ask her out right here and now. I had a soft spot for girls who had no interest in fame. Not that I'd encountered many of those since Kings Gambit hit the big time.

"What Presley told you is correct," Rook said. "Before we checked Tyler out of rehab just for the party the other night, our PR team was already working on a list of possible women for him to date. But as soon as that picture of you two surfaced, their focus shifted to you."

Wanting him to stop talking before he revealed too much, I butted in. "I know coming here to fake date Tyler is probably

the last thing you wanted to do, but it's the best-case scenario for us."

"Okay." She lifted a shoulder, like she still didn't quite get it. "I'll do what I can."

"And you'll be safe here," Levi added, proving that he did have a responsible side. "We have a top-notch security system, and we'll take private security along anytime you leave the house with one of us."

"Or have them escort you, if you want to go somewhere on your own," I said. I didn't want her to feel like she was a prisoner here. The least we could do was offer her a security detail after she'd uprooted her life to help us out.

Despite what I'd said to Rook and Levi earlier, I was grateful she'd agreed to the fake-dating scheme Presley and Rook had come up with. Under the circumstances, Evelyn was a much better match for Tyler than any of the A-list celebrities on the list our agent had passed on to us. She wasn't trying to get ahead in her career by being seen with "music's favorite bad boy." As far as I could tell, she didn't want anything from him. From any of us.

In return, we'd do whatever necessary to protect her. And she'd be safer with us than in Wyoming, since there was only so much that could be done to secure the ranch. Unlike our house, which had its own gate within a gated community. Technically, the back could be accessed by water, but it would take a sophisticated criminal to step foot on our property without setting off the alarms.

Noticing that Evelyn had pulled the blanket so tight around her, she was practically a burrito, I suggested, "Why don't we go inside and show you the rest of the house?"

The sooner she was able to start viewing our place as home, even temporarily, the more comfortable she'd be. At least, I was hoping so. Because the tense lines around her eyes hadn't eased even a little bit since the moment she'd stepped in the front door.



“Okay, sure.” She rose and folded the blanket with intense precision before handing it to me.

A perfectionist, I guessed.

Another thing we had in common.

The four of us made our way inside, and I watched Evelyn while she took in the large living room with two oversized sofas and two chairs facing a fireplace with a TV above it, hidden behind a panel that doubled as artwork. From there, she walked into the kitchen, running her fingers over the island’s marble countertop. Since it was large enough for six barstools, we tended to eat there instead of the more formal dining room. When we didn’t eat in front of the couch. We were bachelors, after all.

As Levi gave her a tour of the butler’s pantry, her eyes widened with something akin to awe. I smiled. It was a joy to watch her marvel over what had started to feel mundane.

It wasn’t that I didn’t appreciate the house or the ocean view. We were lucky sons of bitches. There was no doubt about that.

But, after a while, the luxury became commonplace. Expected.

Fuck. When had I gotten so spoiled?

Rook came to stand by my side. “The way you’re looking at her right now, it’s hard to believe you were being such an ass to her not fifteen minutes ago.”

Though he’d kept his voice low, I still tugged on his arm to draw him farther away from where Levi continued showing Evelyn around the main level. “I wasn’t being an ass.”

“You were. If you were going to spring an NDA on her, you could have at least done so while she was still at the ranch, so she could talk to Presley about it and wouldn’t feel ambushed.”

He had a point.

I shoved my hands into my pockets. “Maybe so. I thought it would be better coming from us directly, but now, I see how

it wasn't my best idea."

The hurt in those beautiful, dark eyes flashed in my memory, and I cringed. More like a terrible idea.

"She's not going to say anything," Rook said with so much confidence, I almost believed him.

Still . . .

"How do you know?"

"Because she's one of us."

I finally tore my gaze away from where she stood, nodding, while my brother talked at her, to look at Rook. "What does that even mean?"

"She's been through as much shit as the rest of us. Maybe more." He ran a thumb down the dragon tattoo along his forearm, a sign that he was deep in thought. "Can't you feel it?"

Rook should know better. I was a man of reason, not emotions.

That thought didn't stop my heart from beating faster when I turned back to Evelyn to find a smile gracing her lovely face.

*Lovely?*

Who the hell was I right now?

# Chapter Eight

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*Every Saturday, we say goodbye to one group of campers and hello to a new one. It doesn't take long to turn everything around. We sweep the cabins, clean the bathrooms, straighten up the waterfront.*

*It's imperative, the directors say, to stay active. An idle mind turns to sin . . . They look at each one of us when they say this. Last time, they stared at me for a long time, and when I looked away, the boy—the cute, nerdy one—was watching me. I wanted to bury myself in the sand, it was so embarrassing!*

*Anyway, idle minds . . . it fits with my father's eleventh commandment. I wouldn't be surprised if the director lifted it directly from one of his sermons.*

*Ugh! That boy must think I'm the weirdest, most awkward girl in this entire camp.*

*Evelyn*



“And here’s your bedroom.” Levi opened the door and stepped aside, waving me in.

I only made it a foot inside before stopping short. The wide-open space was way larger than I'd expected, as was everything about it . . .

This was definitely the nicest bedroom I'd ever seen, but it wasn't the California king or the fireplace giving off gentle, orange light that kept me frozen in place.

It was the sound of the ocean. The gentle, rhythmic movement of the waves outside. The spacious, white interior with high ceilings and exposed beams was lovely, a blank canvas that I knew would be breathtaking when a sunset spilled purples, pinks, and blues into the room.

As an Oklahoma girl, the ocean would never cease to hold me spellbound. Walking over the light-colored wooden floors, past the bright white settee at the foot of the bed, I stood in front of floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the harbor. Two chairs, upholstered in the same soft-looking material as the settee, invited me to sit, and I could see myself doing just that.

Turning to Levi, I said. "I don't understand. Isn't this the master?"

"Yep. Technically, it's Ty's room, but decided to give it to you. With Ty's blessing," he added.

"I can't. Do you have a guest room?" I thought back to the tour we'd just completed. He'd pointed to the basement stairs but hadn't taken me down there. "Or even a couch that's out of the way? I don't need much."

Levi lifted his hands, hovering them above my shoulders as his eyes asked permission. When I didn't move away, he let them drop and squeezed me lightly. "Look, Eve. We all get that you're doing us a huge favor by being here. The least we can do is offer you our nicest accommodations and as much privacy as you desire."

He had a point. Between the bed, couch, TV, desk, outdoor seating area, and what I assumed was a luxurious bathroom, I could easily live in here. All I needed to survive was a case of bottled water and a few boxes of protein bars.

That realization caused some of the tension I'd been carrying in my shoulders all day to loosen. By giving me the master bedroom, the guys were ensuring that I could spend most of my time hiding from them. Maybe they were even *hoping* I'd stay in here and out of their way. If so, it was fine by me. I was used to being alone, and in a house this big, I wouldn't be surprised if I could go days without bumping into any of my new housemates.

Another squeeze of Levi's hands reminded me that I still hadn't responded, so I gave him a quick nod. "You've persuaded me. I'll take it."

"Good." His smile softened, and I could have sworn his blue eyes dropped to my mouth, causing goose bumps to rise on my skin.

With a jerk, I stepped away from him. "If you don't mind, I'm going to rest for a little bit before dinner."

*Rest? What was I, eighty? I could have at least gone for, I need to make a few calls.*

"Sure. Come find me if you need anything."

"Thanks."

Once he'd closed the door behind him, I dropped onto what had to be the thickest, softest down comforter in the world. Maybe I would treat myself to one when I moved back home. Not that I knew where home was anymore. Could I really see myself returning to Cody and the house I'd grown up in?

After so many years of assuming I'd never leave, imagining anything else for my life was still a shock to my system. But I had to admit that I didn't feel like the same woman Presley had found in my house, hiding from the paparazzi, over six months ago. The only problem was, unless I moved near Scarlett or Presley, I had nowhere else to go.

My FaceTime ringtone sounded from beneath me, and I shifted on the bed to retrieve my cell from the small crossbody I'd been wearing all day. Not surprisingly, Presley's name

filled the screen. She was the only person who called me regularly.

I pressed the “accept” button, and the theme song for *The O.C.* began blaring through the speakers. Through the webcam on her laptop, I watched Presley bopping her head and heard her singing along, adding an extra layer of harmony. Scarlett appeared next to her and shook her head at Presley’s antics, making me laugh. But we both waited until the end of the performance before trying to speak.

“So, is Orange County everything you always dreamed it would be?” Presley asked with a grin.

“I haven’t seen much of it, but so far, yes. You would not believe this house. I hate to say it, but it’s even better than the Cohens’ mansion.”

She dropped her jaw in feigned shock. “Sacrilege.”

“I know, I know. But look at this.” I stood and walked around with my phone, showing them the bedroom and view.

“You’ve made the big time now,” Scarlett teased. “Remember me when you’re traveling the world in a private jet.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, right. This is a purely temporary situation.”

“Mm-hmm. We’ll see.”

Ignoring her comment, I asked, “How’s the recording going? I want to hear all about it.”

After the party last weekend, Scarlett had stayed on the ranch to record her first album. Since I’d written over half of the songs that would be featured on the album, I was excited to hear how it was going. Maybe more nervous than excited. Back when I’d started writing for Presley, there had been no expectations. We’d been teenagers with nothing more than a love of music. Unlike my best friend, I’d had no dreams of stardom. I’d written for myself and later, for her.

But now there were expectations. This was Scarlett’s first album, and I hated the thought of her being disappointed.

What if it tanked because she'd chosen to include so many of my songs? I should have tried harder to convince her to work with more songwriters.

"Amazing," Scarlett answered. "I thought I would be nervous, but it's been so much fun."

"Wait until you hear the first track." Presley grabbed her phone. "We finished it this afternoon."

Even over the video call, Scarlett's incredible vocals on a song I'd written caused chills to break out on my arms. It reminded me of when I'd listened to Adele's debut release, "Hometown Glory," for the first time. I'd never even heard her name before that moment, but I'd instantly known she was something special. One of a kind.

Scarlett had that same unique quality that could make her a star. Except, she had no interest in living on the road or performing for stadiums of people. All she wanted was to fulfill a lifelong dream of recording her own album.

"Perfect," I said after the final notes played. "I love that you went with the stripped-down accompaniment. It really showcases her vocals."

Presley crossed her arms over her chest. "I do listen to you, you know."

I lifted my hands in surrender. "Never said you didn't. I just know how unusual it is to produce such a simple sound these days."

"Is that a dig at my pop-country princess sound?"

Despite her narrowed gaze, I knew she wasn't actually upset. "Not a bit. Because of that sound, I've made millions."

"That you donate to charity," she muttered.

Time to change the subject. "How are Micah and Montana getting along?"

I'd spotted Scarlett's younger brother dancing with Presley's stepdaughter at the party and couldn't help wondering if something was brewing there. At fifteen, Montana was a year older than Micah, but he'd grown at least

a couple of inches since I'd met him and was starting to fill out his skinny frame. Beyond his floppy hair and adorable smile, he was sweet and charming. I didn't know Montana well, but I wouldn't blame her for being interested.

Presley snorted. "According to Clay, they're getting along a little too well. He's not ready for his little girl to start dating."

Scarlett tried to hide her smile but didn't quite succeed. "He may have to get used to it. Micah already asked if he can work on the ranch this summer. It seems he's developed a sudden interest in—" she coughed "—horses."

"I think they're cute together," Presley declared. "But a lot can happen in five months. By June, one or both might have moved on."

We continued discussing everything going on at the ranch, and they asked me way too many questions about the Kings Gambit guys. As though I had much to say after only being here for a couple of hours.

Eventually, Presley turned to Scarlett. "Do you mind if I speak to Evie alone for a few minutes? It's a confidentiality thing."

"Say no more." To me, Scarlett said, "We'll talk again soon. And Wyatt wants me to remind you to lock your bedroom door."

Presley rolled her eyes. "Sawyer said the same thing. I swear, they could be twins."

Scarlett laughed. "Except, Evelyn has actual twins to drool over."

"No kidding. If my men didn't keep me *completely* satisfied, those two would make my spank bank, for sure."

"Presley," I practically shouted as a blanket of heat covered my skin.

"Does the term 'spank bank' even apply to women?" Scarlett asked, her expression thoughtful. "Pussy purse, perhaps?"



Presley tittered. “According to Gav, it’s a ‘finger vault.’”

“Stop,” I pleaded. “I beg of you.” The last thing I needed to hear was any more of Presley’s personal-assistant-turned-manager’s thoughts on female, uh, self-pleasure.

Scarlett wagged her eyebrows at me. “Should I send you some *ménage à trois* book recs with twins? That way, you can use your imagination.”

I cleared my throat. “That’s not necessary.” Too bad she’d already put those thoughts into my head. Levi and Landon were dangerous enough on their own, but together . . .

Nope. I wasn’t going there.

“If you say so.” She leaned in close to the webcam. “Love ya, girl. And try to have some fun, will you?”

“I’ll try.”

Once Scarlett had left the room, Presley’s expression turned serious. “Are you sure you feel comfortable staying with Rook, Landon, and Levi? It’s come to my attention that I might have pressured you into it.”

I laughed. “You might have?”

She shrugged. “I still think it’s a win-win, but I’ll send my plane right back out there for you, if that’s what you want. You don’t even have to stay the night.”

It was tempting, and Presley had to know that. My instincts screamed at me to do the safe thing, and I wasn’t referring to my “stalker.” But I was getting tired of safe.

“I mean, I’m already here, so . . .”

“Right.” She smirked. “It would be a waste to fly all the way to California without even going to the beach.”

“Exactly. I might as well experience that whole sand-between-my-toes thing before jetting back to Wyoming.”

Her expression sobered. “Besides, the guy Carter hired still hasn’t found anything. He’ll be monitoring your email account, so you don’t have to worry about that. Still, you need to be careful.”

“I will.” Pulling my hair over my shoulder, I played with the ends. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Should I be offended that Landon asked me to sign an NDA? Rook told me about Tyler, anyway, but my first reaction was hurt.”

Her smile dropped. “I’m not going to tell you how you should or shouldn’t feel. But I will say that I wouldn’t hesitate to sign it in your shoes. They’re just trying to protect themselves, and that’s something we both understand.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Which is why I told him I would sign it once my attorney looks it over. I don’t even know why the thought of it bothers me. It’s silly.”

“It’s not silly. The NDA you signed when we were teenagers was intended to protect me, and this one is to protect the band. But who is protecting you?”

“I’ve never thought about it that way.”

Presley leaned forward, as though we were across the table from each other instead of in different states. “I know you don’t have any deep, dark secrets to hide from the world, but if you want me to have an NDA drawn up on your behalf for the guys to sign, I will.”

My gut clenched at her words. No secrets. Right.

Although my instinct was to assure her it wasn’t necessary, I found myself saying, “That would be great, actually. Thank you.”

It wasn’t in my nature to put myself first. But, in this case, it made sense to protect myself just as much as the guys were protecting themselves.

“Consider it done.”

“Thanks, Presley.”

“You’re welcome. Just promise me one thing? Well, two?”

Never a good sign. “What?”

“Don’t feel guilty that you didn’t have time to visit your dad before flying to California. You’ve spent most of your life catering to that man, and he’s never appreciated you.”

I didn’t bother asking how she knew I’d been struggling with guilt. Presley had been around during my formative years, when I’d constantly felt like I wasn’t enough for my super religious parents. Ever since my mother died and my father had a stroke that put him in a nursing home, I’d been visiting him almost daily . . . until I moved to Texas six months ago. But I’d still been close enough that I could drive back to Oklahoma once a month to see him. Now, who knew how long it would be before I made it back there.

“Okay,” I agreed, knowing it wasn’t quite that simple. Guilt wasn’t something I could just turn on and off like an oven. “What else?”

“Listen to Scarlett and have some fun while you’re out there. You only live once, Evie.”

*You only live once.* It was a cliché for a reason. I was almost twenty-seven years old, and what sort of living had I done?

Although I was successful by most people’s standards, I hadn’t gone to college or even moved away from home. The only guys I’d dated in the last decade were ones my parents had picked out for me. And even that had been considered “courting” instead of dating. Other than my time spent in Texas with Scarlett and her family and in Wyoming with Presley and hers, I hadn’t done any traveling. Until tonight, I hadn’t even seen the ocean.

Scarlett and Presley made it sound so easy. Like I could just force myself to enjoy myself and “have fun.” For me, the concept was anything but easy. Still . . .

“I promise.”

With those two words, I was practically sealing my fate. I’d never been one to go back on a promise.

## Chapter Nine

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*Something happened. It's not a big deal, but it kind of feels that way. I don't know. The boy from the other day—the one I was certain thought I was a weirdo? The one I couldn't think of without cringing?*

*The directors told us to put the ropes and buoys out in lake so the boats don't come too close to where the campers swim. I took one rowboat, he took the other, and we paddled to the right place, then apart, and dropped the anchors. The problem was, his end got tangled around his oars and pulled them right out of his boat. He stood up, which we all know not to do, but for some reason, he did it anyway, flipped his boat, and it sank. I wish I could fully describe what it looked like when he fell—arms windmilling, and he made the biggest splash.*

*I wasn't sure if I should pretend I hadn't seen it, but when he came out of the water, he was laughing.*

*He wasn't mad or embarrassed or awkward. It was sort of funny. He just floated on his back, and when I rowed over to him, he looked at me and said, "I knew you'd save me."*

*Then he climbed in and somehow didn't manage to swamp us or anything. I don't think he sank the rowboat on purpose, because why would he do that?*

*He rowed for us, and the wind was blowing my hair out of my face. I tried to keep it in front of my scar, but every time I*

*lifted my head, he was watching me. Not my scar, though. Just me. And every time our eyes met, he smiled at me. It made my stomach hurt.*

*But in a good way.*

*Evelyn*



I sat straight up in bed, unsure what had startled me awake until there was a knock on my bedroom door. Except, no, not *my* bedroom—Tyler Hammond’s.

Sleepy confusion overloaded me as I peered down to find the tank top and shorts I’d thrown on after my shower covered by a soft navy blanket I’d never seen before. What time was it? The only light came from the cracked door to the bathroom. I ran my hands over the bedcovers, searching for my phone. Locating it, I was surprised to discover that it was after six . . . in the morning.

Which meant I’d fallen asleep shortly after my call with the girls and had slept right through dinner. I groaned. What must Rook, Landon, and Levi think of me? If only I’d gotten a normal amount of sleep the last few nights, instead of staying awake, anxious about this move.

“Evelyn?” a deep voice called through the door.

I scrambled off the bed and pulled the blanket around me like a shawl. Cracking the door open, I found Landon standing on the other side, his hands shoved into his pockets. “Hey,” I said, my voice raspy from sleep. “Is anything the matter?”

“No, no,” he assured me. “We just wanted to take you somewhere for a little bit. Make sure to grab a sweatshirt. It’s chilly out.”

“Oh, yeah, okay. Just give me a few minutes to change?”

“Of course. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

After closing the door, I flipped on the overhead light and dashed to my suitcase to grab a pair of jeans and a hoodie. Where did they want to take me this early in the morning? Weren't rock stars supposed to sleep until noon?

So much for the idea that I would be spending all my time alone.

Not knowing how soon they wanted to leave, I made quick work of getting ready, though I took an extra minute to brush my hair until it was shiny. Just because.

When I arrived in the kitchen, Landon was waiting for me with two travel mugs. Before I could tell him I didn't drink coffee, he asked, "Hot chocolate?"

"Yes, please." I took a sip of the decadent liquid and sighed. "How did you know?"

"Rook procured a list of your likes and dislikes from Presley after you seemed resistant to the idea of telling us yourself last night." He inclined his head toward the front of the house. "Shall we?"

I followed him, surprised when he led me to the stairs going to the basement. Maybe his idea of "taking me somewhere" didn't necessarily include leaving the house. However, as soon as I reached the bottom step, I got it. This was no ordinary basement. It was a garage housing at least ten vehicles so luxurious, I couldn't even identify any of the makes, much less the models.

"Wow."

Landon chuckled from beside me, making me realize I'd frozen at the bottom of the stairs. "Excessive, don't you think?"

"More like expected. I mean, aren't all rock stars into fast women and even faster cars?"

"I don't know. Aren't all pastor's kids maladjusted hellions?"

"Touché."

“Over here,” Levi called from next to a charcoal SUV with blacked-out windows. I hadn’t even seen him. The space was that enormous.

As I approached, he opened one of the back doors for me. “You can sit back here with me.”

Ignoring the flirtation in his tone, I ducked into the back and gave Rook a small wave when he glanced at me from the driver’s seat. I was such a dork.

Once Levi and Landon were buckled in, Rook drove up a ramp that reminded me of something Tony Stark would have, and the garage door opened just in time for us to zoom through it. Spending time around Presley and then Carter, whose family had practically built the town of Hastings, I’d thought I had a decent grasp on luxurious lifestyles. But this was an entirely different level.

Vaguely, I wondered how a band that had only made it big a few years ago could amass this much wealth. Not that it mattered.

As Rook pulled onto an oceanfront highway, I could just make out the rise and fall of sea-foam in the soft gray light, suggesting that the sun would begin rising soon. About ten minutes later, he pulled into a nearly deserted parking lot right by the beach.

When the guys piled out of the SUV, I followed, watching in amazement as Landon retrieved several blankets and a cooler from the cargo area.

Was this . . . a picnic?

I had to stifle a giggle at the thought of three of the bad boys of rock waking me up before dawn to take me on a picnic. It was ludicrous.

Without explanation, they began leading me toward the beach.

“You’re not worried about paparazzi?” I wasn’t sure that I wanted to encounter them on my first full day here.

“Nah,” Rook answered. “They don’t expect celebrities to be out and about at this hour.”

At the edge of the sand, I paused, wondering if I should remove my shoes.

Once again reading my mind, Landon stopped next to me. “I suggest waiting to go barefoot until we get closer to the water. Too much risk of broken glass or other litter this close to the parking lot.”

“Oh.” That made sense.

As my sneakers sank into the deep sand, I was surprised by how awkward it was to walk in. It was such an obvious thing but not something I’d spent much time thinking about. How did people run in this stuff?

When we were about halfway to the water’s edge, the guys stopped and laid out the blankets before plopping down. As Landon began removing food containers from the cooler, realization hit. Something was happening here that was even better than breakfast in bed—a beach breakfast.

“Are you going to sit?” Rook asked with a crooked smile.

“Oh, yes.”

I gingerly sat in the open space between him and Levi. Although I was curious about the food, my gaze drifted to farther up the beach, where the sky was starting to lighten with gentle yellow, pink, and blue hues.

“Although the west coast is known for sunsets, I’ve always been partial to sunrises. There’s nothing quite like soft, simple beauty.”

When I turned my head to respond to Rook, I found that he was looking at me instead of the sky. Despite the cool air washing over my skin, yet another flush rose to my cheeks. I skirted my attention to my mug of hot chocolate.

Unsure what to say, I went with the inane. “I wouldn’t have taken you for a morning person.”

“I didn’t say I watched them often.”



“Yeah,” Levi added. “This is a special occasion. Since you missed our welcome dinner, we figured we’d try for a welcome breakfast instead.”

“I’m so sorry about that. You should have woken me.”

He grinned so brightly, the creases along his cheeks and mouth created their own sort of dimples. They fascinated me. “You looked too cute all curled up on top of the covers to wake you.”

Darn it. At this rate, my face was going to wear tomato red, as though it was the newest fad in foundation. “I guess I have you to thank for the blanket?”

“What can I say? My momma raised me to be a gentleman.”

Landon rolled his eyes. “Funny. I don’t remember the lesson about taking unauthorized photos of a sleeping girl.”

At my gasp, Levi’s eyes widened, and he shook his head. “It wasn’t like that, I swear. I just wanted to show them, so they would understand why I didn’t wake you.”

“So, you’ve deleted the photos?” Rook pushed.

Levi’s smile turned down at the edges. “Well . . .”

“Do it, now.”

“It’s not like I was going to share them with anyone,” he muttered. But he still withdrew his phone from the pocket of his lightweight hoodie and handed it over to Rook.

Although the thought of being photographed while sleeping kind of creeped me out, I had to admit that I was also flattered that Levi had wanted to keep the evidence. My left cheek had probably been pressed into the mattress, so he could pretend my scar didn’t exist.

The thought caused me to realize I’d been in such a hurry to get ready, I hadn’t taken the time to style my hair over my shoulder, letting it fall down my back instead. Instinctively, I reached for it and pulled it far enough over my face to cover my cheek. I noticed Landon tracking the movement with his eyes, but he didn’t comment.

“Anything look good?” he asked, and I finally noticed everything he’d been unloading.

I stared at the containers of fresh fruits, mini quiches, scones, and individual yogurt parfaits. “Everything.”

Now that food was directly in front of me, it occurred to me that I hadn’t eaten since breakfast yesterday, which had consisted of a granola bar and a few pieces of cheese. Would these guys think less of me if I ate one—or more—of everything? I wasn’t sure I even cared.

Landon filled a plate to the brim and handed it over. “What about a mimosa?” He suddenly looked uncertain. “No pressure. I, uh, wasn’t sure if you drank alcohol.”

I arched an eyebrow. “So, you don’t think I’m a hellion, after all?”

“What?” Levi sputtered. “Who would think that? You’re too sweet. Angelic, even.”

“Says the man who keeps calling her ‘Eve,’” Landon replied dryly. “And, no, I never thought you were a stereotypical pastor’s kid.”

“I don’t drink very often, but a mimosa actually sounds good,” I said, hoping to distract them from the topic of my dominant personality traits.

Not wanting to eat in front of the others, I waited until they filled their own plates and then dug in. The food was amazing and tasted fresh. As in, I was pretty sure one of them had visited a bakery this morning. I’d worked at one long enough to recognize the difference.

An unexpected warmth filled my chest. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had put in this much effort for me. It didn’t matter that Rook claimed to love sunrises. There was no way even he would be up at this hour, if not for me. I had little doubt about that much.

By the time I finished my meal, the sky was mostly blue with a few splashes of pink, and a few surfers were beginning to arrive. As much as I was enjoying the view, I couldn’t wait to dig my toes into the sand.

“Thank you so much for the delicious breakfast,” I said. “Do you mind if I walk along the water for a few minutes before we go?”

“That’s why we’re here,” Rook answered. “Take your time.”

Standing, I slipped off my sneakers and rolled up my jeans as far as possible, given the skinny legs. As soon as I stepped off the blanket, my lips curled into a smile. The sand was cooler than I expected and, obviously, grainy. But it still somehow felt incredible.

Levi hopped up and held out a hand for me. “Come on. You can’t experience your first walk on the beach alone.”

Hesitantly, I placed my hand in his larger, warmer one. It was rougher than expected, which I found strangely comforting. Like he was a normal guy rather than a worldwide heartthrob.

He led me to the edge of the water before stopping. “Are you ready for this?”

Watching a wave coming our way, I nodded.

Seconds later, cool water splashed over the bottoms of our legs. I squealed and then laughed when I started to sink into the previously hard sand beneath my feet. Gripping Levi’s hand tighter to improve my balance, I lifted one foot, laughing even harder at the way the sand squished between my toes.

This. This was what I’d been missing for way too long.

The lightness of my heart in this moment reminded me of the innocence of my youth. Back when all it had taken to enchant me was a new batch of homemade slime or running through a sprinkler in Presley’s backyard.

Levi dropped my hand, and before I had time to process the twinge of disappointment, he’d moved in front of me. As if in slow motion, I watched as he lifted one leg and kicked water at me, soaking my jeans and sweatshirt.

I stared at him in shock for a few moments before running into the water after him and retaliating, Presley’s words

pounding out a rhythm in my head.

*You only live once.*

## Chapter Ten

*Rook*

Evelyn was a mystery.

Every morning began the same way. She was this shy little snail, curled up in her shell. She came out of her room, hair hiding her face, gaze fixed on the floor, but within minutes, she stretched out her neck, looked around, and saw it was safe.

It kicked up something protective in me, not dissimilar from what I felt for my friends.

Call me defeatist or cynical, but this feeling was coming on too soon and too strong. Despite her having signed Landon's NDA, and Presley's vouching for her, I needed to stay wary.

Careful.

I didn't know much about Evelyn, except that she'd kept her creative brilliance hidden from the world like a dragon guards its gold. If her secrets could hurt my friends . . . I couldn't risk it.

A week had passed since our picnic. We'd fallen into a routine of fragile friendliness. Wake up. Breakfast. Write. Record. Lunch. Meetings. Dinner.

Evelyn took over the kitchen, staying busy in a way that felt like payment for the place we gave her to stay. The scales were even, though, because I had no idea what Tyler was

going to be like when he was released. Everything we'd seen suggested he was making progress—sticking to the program.

How was this going to work? Tyler and Evelyn? The unknown of it all made me clench my hands into fists.

I was fighting a five-day tension headache the day I found her in the kitchen again.

Landon and Levi had stormed out of our practice session after I snapped at them for the fiftieth time for something I had done wrong. My mind wouldn't stay on the music. My fingers ached, and I was making stupid mistakes when I played. After an hour of sitting alone with my bad mood, I finally left the studio.

Levi lounged against the counter next to Evelyn, watching her as she rolled dough back and forth in front of her. "Evelyn's making biscuits," he called when he saw me. He held my gaze too long.

I hummed low. "Why?"

"For dinner," she answered in that raspy, sexy voice that filled the kitchen like smoke. I could almost see it, winding around Levi and then trailing toward me.

If I wasn't careful, it would fill my lungs.

"Chicken and biscuits and gravy." She had just a hint of an accent, a rolling softness that was so different from my hard Philly vowels. Though she might have only written Presley's lyrics, I bet she had a hell of a voice.

"Family recipe?" I asked. "Something your grandma passed down?"

Her shut down was instantaneous. "No."

In that instant, looking at Evelyn was like looking in a mirror.

"I learned it from someone I used to know," she went on in a tone that was too soft to be natural.

Her careful expressions and instinct to make herself unassuming could have been a page taken out of my own

history. I recognized someone who was deflecting and hoping the other person didn't notice.

Who was this girl?

Her gaze got distant as she rolled out the dough and cut it into circles. "Presley's gran, actually."

It took me a minute to catch up. Levi, glaring, pushed away from the counter to approach me. "Dial it back, Rook."

Letting out a breath, I watched him go. When it was just the two of us, I pulled out one of the chairs nearby and sat down. "You and Presley have been friends a long time."

She nodded, placing each biscuit on a cookie sheet. "Yes."

I waited for more—a story about sleepovers or how they performed in a talent show together—but she didn't give anything else away.

"I don't know why I told you that."

Idly, I peered at the dragon on my arm, trying to figure out what to say to her. It was rare I was tongue-tied, but Evelyn said things I understood all too well. "You don't have to share anything you don't want to."

"I won't be here very long," she answered. The unspoken part of that sentence hung in the air—*so it's not worth getting to know me*. Her long, dark hair fell in front of her face, hiding her profile from me.

"I won't tell your secrets," I said.

She stilled, staring down at the pale circles of dough.

Moving carefully, she slid the tray into the oven, set the timer, and slowly turned to face me. "The world already knows my secret."

The tone of her voice was off, and as someone who was knee-deep in lies, I knew one when I heard it. But I didn't push.

Not yet.

She could keep those secrets, unless they hurt my friends.

Then, all bets were off.



## Chapter Eleven

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*There aren't many books that my mother and father approve of. I'm not even allowed to go to the library without my parents. They read every title. I can't tell you how many times my father has held up a book and asked me seriously, "Do you think this is godly, Evelyn?"*

*It's not worth the effort or argument, because I don't know. How can I know if a book is godly if I've never read it?*

*My new friend has lots of books. He has ripped paperbacks piled next to his cot, and he brings them with him when we meet.*

*Without a chaperone.*

*Sometimes, early, early in the morning, when the fog hovers over the lake, I meet him next to the water. We sit there, and last time, he brought a book for me.*

*Only Cowgirls Get the Blues.*

*He said it reminded him of me, because I'm a cowgirl from Oklahoma. I had my hair braided, and he tugged on one end. "See?" Like a braid made me a cowgirl.*

*I was quiet and he got quiet too.*

*"Did I hurt your feelings?" he asked.*

*He didn't, but he got in my head. No one has ever told me what they think about me before. It made me wonder why he*

*was thinking about me at all. Did he think I was weird? Silly?*

*I didn't know what to say. I just sat there and sat there, and he moved, and I thought, that's it. He's going to leave because I make things awkward.*

*But he didn't.*

*He touched my pinky with his pinky, then he put his hand on top of my hand.*

*He held my hand until my palm was sweaty and my stomach was a jumbled mess of butterflies.*

*I walked back to my cabin with the torn copy of Only Cowgirls Get the Blues and my father's voice rattling around my head. "Do you think this is godly, Evelyn?"*

*Evelyn*



Why had I told Rook about Presley's grandmother? What did it matter if the recipe for biscuits came from a box or a person?

I crossed my arms and glanced down at my phone. The minutes were ticking away.

Rook had left, leaving me alone with my baking and my thoughts.

Presley's gran would have tanned my hide if I let people think her biscuits came from a box. It made me smile just to imagine it.

Facing the big picture windows, I stared out at the water. There was a song in here somewhere, if I could find it. Lyrics raced across my mind, along with a melody. It was there and gone in a second. Something about a cowgirl and being out of sorts or a fish out of water . . .

*A cowgirl in Cali. . .* I drummed my fingers on the counter. It had potential.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Eve?”

Levi’s horrible British accent startled me, chasing everything out of my head. “Nothing.”

His bright smile dimmed, then he shook his head. “I wanted to help with dinner.”

“I can do it.” It was a little thing, and it wasn’t like I was making some gourmet meal. Chicken and biscuits and gravy.

But half his body was already in the fridge as he took out vegetables: carrots, leeks, celery, onion.

“Levi,” I called out. “Really. You don’t have to.”

He turned on the water to rinse off the vegetables and didn’t answer. “I like to cook.”

Removing a cutting board, knife, and peeler, he set up his workstation and got to work.

*Holy cow.*

Levi chopped like a pro. He moved around the kitchen with way more confidence than I had, even in my own home.

“Are you a chef?” I asked. “Never mind. Dumb question.”

He shrugged. “I could have been. In college, I minored in nutrition.”

“I didn’t know nutritionists were accomplished chefs,” I replied.

He drizzled olive oil in a sauté pan and dumped in a handful of onion and celery. With a few flicks of his wrist, he coated the vegetables. In no time, the smell of cooking onions filled the kitchen. “When we’re on tour, it’s easy to get into bad habits. You can’t eat every day the way restaurants cook, with everything smothered in butter or cream. I try to make sure everyone stays healthy.” He was quiet, then added, “I’m only mildly successful.”

Bad habits. I wondered if he meant Tyler. But what his bandmate was dealing with was more than a habit. What made Tyler want to disconnect from the world so badly that he’d risk hurting himself with alcohol?

I cut off my train of thought at the knees. Tyler's history was none of my business. "I didn't mean to pry."

"You're not." He flicked his hair out of his eyes and smiled at me. It was easy, but a little too wide and toothy to be genuine. "Were you going to make gravy?"

I nodded, but he went back to stirring the vegetables and wasn't watching me. "Yes," I answered, and then, thinking about what he said about being healthy, I admitted, "I don't know how to make it healthy, though."

His smile relaxed. "If you want to take care of the chicken, I could try the gravy. It'll be a team effort."

I liked that and caught myself smiling back at him. And then, I didn't want to stop. It was just cooking. I didn't need to hide behind walls of stone.

We spent the rest of the afternoon cooking but decided halfway through preparing the vegetables to change the menu. We roasted the chicken, had the biscuits on the side, and used the vegetables to make a gravy that—I dared to venture—teetered on the edge of not-so-bad-for-you.

While we cooked, Levi talked.

At first, the conversation was stilted.

My fault.

I overthought every answer, even though Levi asked questions that were, on the surface, uncomplicated.

What instrument did I prefer? Did I write lyrics first and then music? Did I fit lyrics to music? Had I branched out into other genres?

I answered those with the bare-bones basics: Piano. Yes and yes, but occasionally, yes. And sort of. For more than a decade, I'd only written for Presley. But now I was writing for Scarlett too, which meant a distinct change, since her album fit somewhere between Lana Del Rey and Adele.

I could tell my brief answers disappointed him and maybe even hurt his feelings. But music was my secret, and I was used to keeping it that way.

For so long, the music that beat in time with my heart was something I hid. I hid my journals. My notebooks.

In public, I played what my parents asked. None of it was what could be described as, “*Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; Break forth and sing for joy and sing praises.*”

I hadn’t been connected to the music I played when accompanying the choir at church or worship service or youth group. I’d disengaged.

“Where’d you go?” Levi asked.

I shook my head. “I was thinking about music and got a little lost.”

He sniffed. The question was there on his face. Why would thinking about music make me go quiet?

“Do you like playing?” he asked after a long moment. “And writing?”

“Yes,” I answered immediately. “It’s the only thing I really like.”

He pushed his hair out of his face. “Then why don’t you talk about it? We’re a house full of musicians. We have every instrument you can imagine—”

I cut him off. “Tuba?”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Yes, actually. Tyler wanted to dig deep into a New Orleans sound at one point, so we have a brass section. Tuba. Trombone. Trumpet.”

“Flute?”

He gave me a long, slow blink, pursing his lips against a full smile. “We don’t have a flute.”

“Yeah, we do.” His brother strode into the kitchen, breathing deep. “It smells delicious.” He sniffed again. “With a hint of burning.”

A hint . . .

“Oh no!” I’d put the biscuits in to warm and totally forgot about them.

Levi slid past me, opened the oven, and removed the smoking, tinfoil-wrapped items from inside. “Damn.” He dropped them into the sink and wiped his hands on the sides of his jeans. “I was looking forward to Gran’s biscuits.”

Well. Now I had nothing to contribute to dinner. Levi had made everything, and I’d wasted the ingredients for the biscuits. A sense of embarrassment way out of proportion to the situation rose inside me, heating my neck and cheeks. Flicking my hair from behind my ear, I let it cover my face. “Sorry.”

“No big deal,” Levi answered. Then he asked his brother, “Why do we have a flute?”

“No idea.” Landon opened the oven again, grabbed a slice of potato, and juggled it from palm to palm until it was cool enough to pop into his mouth. “I’m starving. Do you want to see it?” he asked.

Wrinkling my nose, I stared at him. No, I didn’t want to see the potato in his mouth. He covered his lips and said, “The flute, the other instruments, and our practice studio.”

Like they had a mind of their own, my fingers tapped against the sides of my thighs. I could feel the cool keys beneath my fingers and imagined letting the music flow from my body out into the world.

“That’s okay.” I wasn’t ready to play. Not away from home and not in front of anyone.

Not yet.

Once the food was done, Rook joined us, and we carried several platters—minus the burned biscuits—to the table on the patio. I wasn’t sure if the guys ate outside when I wasn’t around, but they seemed more than happy to defer to my first choice of dining spots. I couldn’t help it. Though the sun had already set, I couldn’t get enough of the outdoors. I loved the sound of the waves and the lights winking along the shore. Even the slight breeze swirling my hair around my face didn’t bother me.

“Thanks for dinner, Evelyn,” Rook said halfway through the meal.

I shook my head. “It was more Levi than me.”

“Well, then, you two make a good team.”

“Hell, yeah, we do.” Levi shot me a wink. “Next, I’m going to get you out on a surfboard.”

Choking mid-chew, I grabbed for my water and washed it down. After several coughs and the rest of my glass of water, I faced him. “Thanks, but I’m perfectly happy on land.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun, and I’m a great teacher.”

Rook chuckled. “Says who?”

“Says me. Are you forgetting the time I taught you how to beatbox? Or how about when I showed you how to eat with chopsticks?”

“Yes, because those are such valuable life lessons,” Landon said dryly.

“Not to mention, they didn’t require me to take my life in my hands.” Rook set down his fork and leaned back in his chair. “If Evelyn isn’t interested in surfing, you can’t force her.”

Levi shot him a mocking glare. “I wasn’t trying to force her. I was merely suggesting that, to have a real SoCal experience, she should take to the waves.”

A typical woman would have probably taken this opportunity to assert herself into the conversation and remind these men that she could speak for herself. Since I’d never been typical, I had no problem sitting back and letting them argue on my behalf. Hopefully, Rook and Landon would talk Levi out of his crazy idea without me having to utter another word.

“I don’t surf, and I’m a permanent SoCal resident.”

“That’s because you’re you.” Levi waved his hand at Rook dismissively, as though the words and gestures explained everything.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He tucked a strand of his dark blond hair behind his ear and shrugged. “Just that you’re the broody, skinny-jean-wearing, hang-out-in-coffee-shops type of guy, while Lan and I are the surf-and-sand type.”

“And how do you know Evelyn isn’t the type to hang out in coffee shops rather than on the beach too?”

Landon cleared his throat. “I think we can easily resolve this.” He turned to me. “Evelyn, what do you think? Do you have any interest in learning to surf?”

I wiped my hands on my jeans, suddenly feeling more nervous than the situation called for. Levi was quickly becoming a friend, and I hated to disappoint him. But I also had zero interest in surfing. What I’d said earlier was true—I was more than happy to appreciate the ocean from land.

“It’s probably not a good idea. I haven’t gone swimming since I was a camp counselor at sixteen.”

Landon quirked a brow, Levi’s already-bright eyes gleamed, and Rook leaned forward. *Gingersnaps*. Why had I brought up that, of all things?

“Please tell me you wore a forest green polo with super short shorts,” Levi said.

His twin tossed a piece of potato at him. “Keep your camp counselor fantasies to yourself, bro.”

My skin heated as I tried not to think about why I would appear in any of Levi’s fantasies, tiny shorts or no. “It was a church camp, so no shorts for girls allowed.”

He grimaced. “That’s just a crime.”

*Tell me about it.* I didn’t dare mention that, even when hiking, we’d only been allowed to wear baggy T-shirts over the most hideous culottes in existence. There had been nothing even remotely appealing about the girl counselors’ uniforms.

“Why no swimming since then?” Rook asked gently.



This question was an easier one to answer. There was no mystery to it. “I haven’t had a reason to.”

He gestured to the pool not ten feet from where we sat. “Seems like that’s reason enough. It’s heated, so even with the relatively cool weather we’re having, it’s the perfect temp.”

I nodded, not wanting to reveal that I hadn’t packed a swimsuit. Didn’t even own one.

“It’ll give you something to do while we’re gone,” Levi said.

“Gone?”

He looked to his brother. “Yeah, I assumed Lan told you that we’re headed to New York for the rest of the week. Press tour.”

My stomach sank, and I couldn’t even say why. I should be relieved I’d have the house to myself for a few days . . . shouldn’t I?

“Our security team is going to stay here with you,” Landon said. “I’d feel better if you remained at the house, but if you need to go out, they can accompany you.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary. I hate for you to go to any extra trouble on my behalf.”

“It’s no trouble, and Presley insisted before she knew we’d already taken care of it.”

I considered arguing, but if Presley was in agreement, there was no point. “Okay. Thank you.”

“Of course. And if you change your mind about using the studio, feel free. Just look for the door next to the black Bugatti in the basement.”

Levi must have noticed my blank expression, because he faux-whispered, “It’s the one that looks like a sexy batmobile.”

“Gotcha.”

Because, who wanted to be Bruce Wayne when you could be a rock star instead?

## Chapter Twelve

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*I have a friend at camp, and not one I expected.*

*My father would have a fit if he knew about Isaac—my nerdy-cute friend who is a boy. I made sure not to write “boyfriend,” because he isn’t that. He’s showing me all these things I never knew about.*

*It’s an awful thing, but I wish my family worshipped the way his does.*

*He can listen to different types of music, and he only has church twice a week. I know it’s different because my father is a pastor, but it doesn’t seem fair. He doesn’t get lectures about purity and godliness. I told him about the youth minister’s wife the other day. She pulled all the girls into a group and walked up and down the mess hall, pointing out ways we could make a boy “fall.”*

*We have to be better. My father preaches about Adam and Eve, but there was something meaner about what the youth pastor’s wife said. She had a lot to say about me. I started braiding my hair back, even though I want it to cover my face. She said my hair made me too prideful. She also accused me of wearing makeup, even though I wasn’t.*

*I think it’s wrong what she said, and I think that my father is wrong for saying women are more likely to sin.*

*There. I said it.*

*I think it's wrong to blame Eve for Adam eating an apple, and not only because "Eve" is part of my name. I don't think wearing a long skirt that makes me look like a rectangle will keep a boy from sinning. We make our own choices.*

*I'm choosing for Isaac to be my friend. He's my second friend, after Presley. He's nice. Even though I didn't like the book he gave me, I still like him.*

*And I'd rather have a friend my father doesn't approve of than be godly and alone.*

*Evelyn*



I hated to admit it, but these last few days without the guys had been lonely. How had I gotten so accustomed to their presence in the mere week we'd spent together?

It didn't make sense. I should have been reveling in my alone time in their beachside mansion. Don't get me wrong—I was loving every minute of what was turning into a safe haven, of sorts. To make life easier for my security detail, I'd been spending most of my time in my room. But that was far from a hardship. Whether I sat right inside the doors or outside on the balcony, watching the waves lap against the dock was becoming one of my new favorite pastimes.

For the first time in longer than I could remember, there wasn't anything I *had* to do. No early mornings at the bakery, and then later, the kitchen at the Hastings Hotel. No church choir practice or services to attend. No volunteering or visiting my father at his nursing home. And Presley wasn't even expecting me to produce songs for her anytime soon. Though she'd hired me as a staff writer for Sunburst Records, she wasn't putting any pressure on me. Instead, she gave me the freedom to send her new songs in my own time.

All this freedom was both a good and bad thing. For the first few days, I hadn't done much more than relax and soak

up the sunshine. While Oklahoma was experiencing the harshest part of winter, I'd been enjoying clear skies and highs in the sixties every day. I'd even started swimming laps daily, since the guys had arranged to have a variety of swimsuits delivered the day they left—all in my size. I tried not to think about how they'd known what to order. Really, I was just grateful that one of the suits had been a relatively modest one-piece.

Despite the time spent in the sun, I was already getting restless. Even if it didn't mean being escorted by personal security, I wasn't the type to spend my days going to the spa or shopping. I needed to find something useful to do with my time. At this point, I would even settle for *something* to do, useful or not.

The alarm on my cell rang out, reminding me that it was almost time for the *Good Morning USA* segment. With a yawn, I plopped down on the couch in the “sitting area” of my, temporary, bedroom and grabbed my laptop. Since I'd promised Levi I would watch the show—well, the part featuring Kings Gambit—live, it was only a little after five on the west coast.

While waiting for a news update about the latest natural disaster to end, I found myself scrolling back through my texts from the last few days.

Levi: In case you're missing Wyoming . . .

To that message, he'd attached a photo of a person walking around the streets of NYC in a horse costume. Actually, now that I looked closer, it had to be two people.

Later that day, another random message had come in.

Levi: New York or Chicago?

Me: Should I know what you're talking about?

Levi: Pizza, obviously.

Me: Then, neither. Neapolitan, all the way.

Levi: That's fair. But New York style cheesecake is the best. You can't argue with that.

Me: I wouldn't dare. What's your favorite flavor?

Levi: Classic with fresh strawberries on top. What about you?

Me: I'm a sucker for peanut butter. Add some crushed Reese's to the batter, and I'm a goner.

Levi: Glad to know what gets you going . . .

At the sight of his winking face emoji, I couldn't help but smile. Levi was an outrageous flirt, obviously. But I kind of adored that about him. Because he was so over-the-top about his teasing, it never made me feel uncomfortable. He wasn't putting me on the spot or coming onto me. He was just being his usual, playful self.

I could learn a thing or two from Levi Kerr.

After skimming through the rest of his messages, which generally consisted of more of the same, I switched to his brother's. For the most part, Landon had checked in regarding my security detail to make sure they were living up to his standards. But our conversation had gotten a little more interesting last night.

Landon: Guess what song is playing right now?

Me: I need more information. Are you at a club?

Landon: You obviously don't know much about me if you think I'd spend my evening in a club. I'm at the hotel bar, nursing my second beer.

Me: Then, "Gangnam Style," obviously.

Landon: I wish. Try again.

Me: Let's get it on?

My cheeks heated from what I knew was coming next. Why, oh why, had I guessed that song? My usually impeccable filter had dissipated over text.

Landon: Why, Miss Bishop, I never expected you to be so forward.

Me: Just to be clear, I meant the song, “Let’s Get It On” by Marvin Gaye.

Landon: If you say so. Now, do you have any guesses from this decade?

Since I’d been dying of embarrassment, it had taken me too long to come up with a response. Ultimately, I’d answered with the only thing I could think of. Because, yes, I’d wanted to dive under the covers and never come up for air. Still did, now that I thought about it.

Me: Okay, okay, I’ve got it. “As It Was.” Harry Styles. That song is everywhere.

Landon: Closer, but not quite.

Landon: I’ll put you out of your misery. The answer is, “It’s Simple,” which happens to be one of my favorite songs.

Me: Yeah, well, Presley’s vocals were killer on that one.

Landon: Don’t do that.

Me: Do what?

Landon: Discredit your contribution. You’re an incredible songwriter. One of the most talented songwriters creating today.

My stomach flipped as I read the words for what must have been the tenth time in less than twelve hours, most of which I’d spent sleeping. He’d been right about the discrediting part, at least. Ever since I’d been outed as Presley’s songwriter, I’d done everything in my power to distract people from that fact. I was adept at taking compliments aimed at me and turning them around to praise the arrangement, musicians, producer, or Presley herself.

What I couldn’t handle was accepting a genuine compliment that was meant for me. Over the years, I’d secretly reveled in the awards and other accolades received for songs I’d written. Secret, being the operative word.

Besides, it had been simple enough to assign the songs’ success to Presley. It was her voice, hard work, and grit that sold albums. She was the one who had to smile for cameras

and dance around stage in mini dresses and stilettos, performing for tens of thousands.

Before, there had been a wall of separation between what I did and the result of it. My words and little melodies stayed mine, somehow.

Now, that wall had crumbled, and I didn't know how to deal. It was more than the attention. It was the loss of my privacy mixed with guilt and a healthy dose of imposter syndrome.

In short, I was a mess.

Cate Campbell welcoming Kings Gambit to *Good Morning USA* drew my attention back to my laptop. As soon as I'd found out the guys had agreed to interview with the TV journalist who had ambushed Presley on live TV last summer, I'd called my longtime best friend, expecting her to be upset. Turned out, the band had intended to refuse the invitation, but Presley had been the one to insist they accept.

According to her, their willingness to let Cate interview them would prove to their fans that they had nothing to hide. She was convinced it was the first step toward restoring their reputation, but I wasn't so sure. That woman was a viper in sheep's clothing. It was why she made such compelling television.

As I watched Rook, Landon, and Levi join Cate on the stage, my heart did a little flip, and I wanted to shake myself. There was absolutely no point in developing a crush on any of my housemates, much less all three of them. Even if the entire world didn't currently believe I was dating Tyler, I was a timid, scarred, almost-hermit. They could have any woman they wanted. Why would they ever want someone like me?

The mere thought was laughable.

Still, I couldn't deny the way Levi's bright smile made me smile. Or how Landon's deep, smooth voice sent a thrill through me. Or how Rook's intense gaze seemed to find me through the camera and thousands of miles.

After a minute of pleasantries, Cate got down to business. “I’m sorry that your fourth couldn’t be here today. Where is that rascal Tyler Hammond?”

Rook chuckled with practiced ease. “Haven’t you heard? Our boy is infatuated with his new girlfriend, and we couldn’t pull him away from her.”

Girlfriend—ha.

In truth, I’d been surprised when the guys told me that Tyler wasn’t going along for the media tour. I found it strange that they’d been willing to check him out of rehab for Presley’s party and not for a bunch of press events. But Landon had explained that Tyler’s sponsor had advised against it. He needed these last couple of weeks in treatment to focus on himself and prepare for returning to life outside the facility.

Cate arched a delicate brow. “Is that so? Sounds serious.”

Rook gave her what appeared to be a genuine smile, but now that I’d spent time around him, I wasn’t so sure. “I won’t speak for them, but I can say that they make a cute couple, something I’m pretty sure half of America agrees with.”

She reached into what must have been a shelf built into her desk and held up the photo of me and Tyler from the party. My stomach churned as the camera zoomed in until it filled up the screen. I could almost disassociate myself enough to pretend that was some other dark-haired woman in an emerald dress gazing into the eyes of one of the most famous men in the world.

“I assume you’re referring to this photo?” The camera zoomed back out to show Cate’s smug face. “For our viewers who missed the story, this photo from a party hosted by Presley Cole leaked a couple of weeks ago. Tyler is with Evelyn Bishop, who is a close friend of the country music star and has recently been credited with writing all of Presley’s songs.” Returning her attention to the guys, she smiled a little too wide. “I have to know, if the couple is so *infatuated*, where have they been? Neither has been spotted since this photo was taken weeks ago.”



I ground my teeth at the intrusiveness of her question. She was insinuating something, but I wasn't sure what. Did she suspect my relationship with Tyler was a farce? Or was there something even more sinister lurking beneath her polished examination?

"They're lying low right now," Landon replied. "I'm sure you can understand their wanting privacy while they get to know each other better."

"Of course." She leaned forward. "With two such talented songwriters spending so much time *alone* together, can we expect a collaboration?"

"Evelyn's talent is undeniable, and I know we'd all be honored if she chose to collaborate with us," Landon said smoothly, clearly having prepared for that question. "But, for now, the band is focusing on our next album."

From there, the guys managed to keep Cate focused on their career rather than their missing bandmate's love life. Not that it mattered. The potential damage was already done. Even with what little I knew of public relations, I understood that Cate Campbell had just thrown down the gauntlet. If Tyler and I didn't show our faces, and soon, we were going to have a problem. We might already have one.

Once the interview was completed, I was too amped up to go back to bed. So, I got dressed and headed to the kitchen. After my text conversation with Levi about food two days ago, I'd had the ingredients for cheesecake delivered yesterday. The guys were supposed to get back early this evening, so I would have plenty of time to get it baked and chilled by the time they arrived home.

While I followed the steps I had many times before, my mind kept wandering back to the interview. It was widely acknowledged that the price of fame was the loss of privacy. But that was easy to say when you weren't the one experiencing it. It was a lot more difficult when every move you made was photographed and scrutinized and splashed across the internet.

Even seeing some of it from Presley's perspective over the years hadn't prepared me for being thrust into the spotlight. And my short stint with notoriety was nothing compared to what the guys had to deal with. Regardless of what happened with the band, for the rest of their lives, people would recognize them on the street. They would want to know them, want to talk about them, want to use them.

In my opinion, the price of fame was more than the loss of privacy. It was the loss of self. Because who could really be themselves while the whole world observed? Judged? Obsessed?

I mindlessly watched as the stand mixer beat the sugar and cream cheese. *Beat until smooth.* That was the instruction, because no lumps were allowed. But who decided lumps of delicious cream cheese were a bad thing?

For that matter, who decided that flaws were a bad thing? My many readings of the New Testament only told me that Jesus had embraced every flawed individual he met.

Striving for perfection was a nonstarter. It was impossible. A myth.

Turning off the mixer, I rooted around in the kitchen until I found a notepad and pen. My hand didn't seem to work fast enough as lyrics spilled onto the page. I wasn't even sure where I was going with them, but that wasn't important. This wasn't about thinking. It was about putting myself in Tyler's shoes. In Landon's, Rook's, and Levi's. In Presley's. It was about feeling what they must feel every day. The intrusiveness of the media. The pressure to live up to an unreachable standard. The understanding that most people would never know or love them for who they were, only what they did.

Even if the world couldn't see past their flaws, I would, if only in song. I would embrace their mistakes and struggles and imperfections.

And, maybe, in the process, I could find a way to embrace my own.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

*Levi*

“How about, the next time someone suggests a media tour, we just say no?” Rook suggested as he pulled into the garage.

Home sweet home. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so relieved to see this place. And it wasn't like we were returning after months on the road. No, we'd been gone three days. Three.

And yet, it had felt like weeks.

Acting like the perfectly happy little band after everything was exhausting. It didn't help that we'd been forced to lie more times than we could count. Thank god Tyler would be released from rehab in the next week or so.

I just hoped we could all find a way to get along. Tyler had a way of holding a match to every stick of dynamite in the room. As much as I loved the guy, I also worried about him. His sobriety. His emotional well-being. His ability to pull his shit together enough to finish this album.

“You know that's not an option,” Landon said diplomatically. “We need to play nice with the media now more than ever.”

“Oh? Like Cate Campbell played nice with us this morning?”

“We knew she would ask where Ty's been.”

Rook rested his head against the steering wheel. “That didn’t make it any better. I hate to say it, but we might not be able to wait for Ty to be released. Maybe we can check him out for a day, just long enough for him and Evelyn to be seen together?”

“That seems a little overboard.” I moved to the middle of the back seat to stick my head between the two of them. “Why can’t they just be seen separately?”

I wasn’t sure why I was so resistant to the idea of them together, but I did know that I hated to put Evelyn through unnecessary shit when she’d already been through so much. She was clearly a deeply private person, and now we were exploiting her for our own gain. It hadn’t bothered me at first, but now that I was getting to know her, I didn’t like it.

“Valentine’s Day is coming up,” Landon said. “It’s the perfect time for them to be seen together and shut down the doubters once and for all.”

“There’s no shutting them down forever,” I argued. “It’s not like the whole world will be satisfied after seeing pictures of them together one time. How long are we going to force Eve to keep pretending to be Ty’s girlfriend?”

“For as long as it takes.”

Rook cut off any response I might have had by opening his door. “Can we finish debating this later? I need a shower and a beer.”

Sounded good to me. I was more than ready to check in on our pretty houseguest.

We’d only made it a few steps away from the SUV with our suitcases when Landon stopped suddenly. “Do you hear that?”

I paused, waiting. After a few seconds, the lilting sound of piano notes drifted to me. It had to be coming from our studio. A grin split my face. Evelyn was playing.

Leaving our bags behind, we made our way to the room and stood outside it, listening through the closed door. I didn’t recognize the melody she was playing, but the almost

imperceptible sound of her low, husky voice singing along made my heartbeat pick up.

Needing to hear better, I opened the door as quietly as possible and peeked inside. From her place behind the grand piano, Evelyn was in profile, her fingers flying across the keys while her eyes stayed trained to the legal pad propped up in front of her. For once, she'd thrown her hair into a messy bun rather than leaving it down to shield her face. A slight smile graced her full lips as she paused to scratch out something on the page and then write words or notes below it.

I felt the press of Rook and Landon behind me, but I didn't dare move for fear of attracting her attention. This moment was too raw, too pure, to disturb. For the first time, I felt like I was seeing the real Evelyn. I'd already known she was more than the demure good girl she projected. But I hadn't fully comprehended her talent. She was a damn music legend in the making.

And she had no fucking clue.

It was perhaps the best thing about her. Evelyn Bishop was wholly unaware of her appeal. She'd written more chart-topping songs than I could fathom and yet remained down-to-earth and humbler than should be possible. She was sweet and generous. And she was one of the most gorgeous women I'd ever met. No matter what she believed, that scar didn't detract from her beauty.

We continued to stand there, observing her process like she was Michelangelo painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. She kept running through the same section of the song, stopping often and making minor adjustments. At first, I was too distracted to pay attention to the lyrics. But the longer I listened, the more they sank in.

*Why can't you love me for who I am,*

*Rather than what I do,*

*I'm more than those Grammys sittin' in plain view,*

*Or millions of followers on Instagram.*

They continued from there, speaking to what it was like to be a famous musician. I would have assumed she was penning the song for Presley, but something about that didn't ring true. The sound was different—more folk rock than country pop.

Was Evelyn writing this for . . . us?

A glance over my shoulder at the startled looks on Landon's and Rook's faces confirmed they were thinking the same thing.

As I turned back around, I knocked my elbow on the door hard enough for it to creak farther open, alerting Evelyn to our presence. She jerked away from her notepad and swiveled to face us. Pink flooded the apples of her cheeks as she stared at us, wide-eyed.

I pushed the door the rest of the way open and waltzed into the room, bringing my hands up to applaud. "Incredible. How long have you been working on that song?"

She glanced at the cell phone sitting on the stool next to her. "Sorry. I didn't mean to still be in here when you got home. I guess I lost track of time."

"Don't worry about it," Landon said, moving into the room. "I told you you're welcome in here anytime."

She nodded but still gathered up her notebook, phone, and an empty water bottle. "Guess I should start on dinner."

"You'll do no such thing." Rook stepped forward until he was at my side. "We're taking care of it." He nodded toward the piano. "Will you play the whole song for us?"

Evelyn clutched her notebook tightly to her chest and shook her head. "What you heard . . . that was nothing. I was just messing around."

"Funny, because it sounded like a hit song in the making to me."

"I really don't think—"

"Please," I interrupted, batting my eyelashes at her dramatically. "I won't bug you about going surfing anymore."

A piece of Levi wisdom for you: If all else fails, harmless blackmail is always the answer. I've been using it to successfully bend Landon to my will for our entire lives.

She bit down on her bottom lip, considering, and my mind conjured an image of rescuing her poor mouth with my own before offering up my dick for her to abuse in the best way. Maybe I shouldn't be thinking such filthy things about a pastor's daughter, but I'd never claimed to be a saint. Not that even a saint could resist the temptation that was Evelyn Bishop.

"Okay," she finally said. "But I'm not a singer, so no laughing."

I nodded solemnly and made an X over my chest. "Cross my heart."

With timid movements, she returned to the piano and leaned the notebook against the music desk before tugging the tie holding up her hair so it would fall around her shoulders. She needed to hide. I didn't fault her for it. For most artists, their work was deeply personal. Sharing it with anyone was often reminiscent of standing naked under spotlights.

I'd experienced that exact feeling plenty of times.

"Come on," Landon said quietly, leading me and Rook over to the couch on the opposite side of the room.

The move was a good idea. Now, Evelyn would have to intentionally look beyond the raised lid of the piano to see us. I doubted she would forget about our presence, but this way, our hovering wouldn't be a constant reminder.

When she began singing, her already-quiet voice was almost too low to hear. But halfway through the first verse, she seemed to gain a bit of confidence as the words flowed out of her in a husky yet pretty tone. Evelyn might not be able to pull off the kind of booming vocals that would win competition shows, but her claim of not being a singer was a lie. Just like everything about her, her voice was soft and a little bit sad.

Before the song had even ended, Rook had retrieved one of his acoustic guitars from the wall and was strumming along. I

could tell Landon was itching to do the same, but he remained seated, waiting.

After the room fell silent, Rook walked over to Evelyn and asked, “Do you mind if we join in?”

Since I still couldn’t see her face, I had to rely on her tone to decipher her reaction. It sounded shy but not unwilling when she replied, “I don’t mind.”

He stayed by her side while Landon went for a banjo, and I took my place behind the drums. Under Rook’s guidance, the three of us riffed a bit to get the right sound, and then we started from the beginning.

Reading from Evelyn’s notes, Rook began singing with her, and damn, they sounded good together. Looked good together too, I admitted grudgingly as I took in their almost matching shades of dark hair and equally pretty faces. Yeah, I was man enough to admit that Rook was a pretty guy. So what?

We stopped at the beginning of the chorus to discuss a few changes to the accompaniment before starting again. And then we repeated the steps again and again while trying to perfect what was already amazing.

As she contributed to the conversation, Evelyn seemed to come out of her shell right before my eyes. In the midst of working on her creation, the timidity she’d shown when we entered the room was extinguished. It might sound silly or even condescending, but I was proud of her. I hated that she’d questioned herself for even a moment. Like Rook had said to Cate Campbell, Evelyn’s talent was undeniable. Well, undeniable to everyone but her.

Maybe she just needed someone to convince her.

Maybe she just needed us.



## Chapter Fourteen

*June, Camp Shining Light*

*I'm learning guitar.*

*It's not difficult, not after the piano, but it does hurt my fingers. Eventually, the tips of my fingers will get harder, tougher, and it won't hurt so much. Right now, though, I can only play for a little while before I have to take a break.*

*This is going to be a surprise for Jane. If I can talk my parents into buying me a guitar, then we'll be able to play together.*

*I wish I could tell Isaac about writing songs for her, but it wouldn't be fair to Jane. Not after I made her swear not to tell anyone. She's lying—for me.*

*Isaac played an album for me, Rights of Passage. It was his dad's, he said, from the 90s. They're a folk-rock duo called The Indigo Girls. Their voices weren't pretty, sort of low, and raspy, and not in a country way. It's hard to explain. But the lyrics and the harmony . . . I was swept away.*

*I'll never be able to own the album or listen when I get home, but Isaac plays it as many times as I want. One of the songs is called "Romeo and Juliet" and is a cover of a rock song.*

*I could listen to it a thousand times. I find myself humming it, and I'm trying to learn it for the guitar. The lyric about the*

*dice being loaded from the start sticks with me, running over and over in my head. I love it.*

*Evelyn*



If losing track of time had been a problem before Levi, Rook, and Landon entered the studio, that was nothing compared to how it flew after. They'd startled me when they'd shown up hours earlier than expected. Turned out, they were right on time, and I'd practically written the day away.

At first, I'd hated that they'd caught me working on this, of all songs. Though I could argue that I'd written it about any generic musician, they'd inherently known better. It was about, and because of, them. What I hadn't expected was for it to become *for* them.

After today, I would have happily tossed it into the pile of "never to be seen again" songs. Sometimes I wrote just for me, and that's what I'd been doing. My mind wouldn't let go of the lyrics and melody that had popped into my head while baking. So, eventually, I'd given in and tucked myself away in the studio to let it all out.

But as I sang with Rook and played with him, Landon, and Levi, I couldn't say I regretted that they'd caught me. Ever since Presley moved away from home to pursue her dreams in Nashville, songwriting had become a solitary affair. Sure, we'd spent many hours working over FaceTime, but it wasn't the same.

Collaborating with three-fourths of Kings Gambit was . . . well, it was inspiring. Gratifying. Fun.

I had a feeling this wasn't what Scarlett had in mind when she'd told me to "try and have some fun," and I was okay with that. Running through the same few lines over and over just to start the process again wouldn't sound like fun to most people.

But most people didn't get to experience the satisfaction of creating something beautiful. There was nothing like it.

And now I knew there was nothing quite like doing it with a team.

"Can we stop for tonight?" Levi asked after what had to be hours of work. "I'm starving."

"Yeah, we should." Rook dropped the fallboard, probably so I wouldn't be tempted to continue playing. "Evelyn, you must be exhausted."

Now that he mentioned it, yeah, I was.

After getting up at the crack of dawn to watch the *Good Morning USA* segment and then baking and working for the rest of the day, I wouldn't be surprised if I fell over before making it upstairs. I hadn't even stopped for lunch.

I nodded and stood slowly, stretching my aching back. "I could use a break."

"What will you call it?" Landon asked, seeming to appear at my side from thin air.

"Call what?"

"The song. Do you have a title in mind?"

"Oh." I unconsciously fiddled with my hair so that it would cover most of my scar as I debated whether to admit what I'd been thinking. Hiding was second nature, but I'd already let them in this much. Didn't they deserve a bit more? "I was thinking 'Love Me.'"

He smiled, his ice-blue eyes brighter than usual. "It's perfect."

A warm sensation filled me from my toes to the top of my head. Presley was always excited and effusive when I wrote new songs, but this was different.

"Good." I nodded my head once. Then, afraid the words came out too proud, I dropped my gaze.

"I'm wasting away over here," Levi called as he walked out of the room. "I flew across the country, and then you

worked my fingers to the bone, Eve. Feed me.”

Even though I’d only made dessert, I headed into the kitchen. As I passed by Levi, he snagged my hand. “Dining room, milady,” he said in that same horrible accent he used when I first arrived.

Something came over me, and I pressed my fingers to his lips. “This accent—”

He lifted his brows, but those blue eyes danced as he waited.

“This accent is so bad. I feel like I’m doing you a disservice by letting you continue to use it.”

He snagged my hand, brought the back to his mouth, and blew a raspberry against it. “How about this one, eh?”

I stared at him, for the life of me unable to identify what accent he was using now.

“Canadian,” Landon offered. He rolled his eyes. “Don’t encourage him.”

“Sorry,” Levi called out. But it sounded like *sore-y*.

Chuckling, I let Levi lead me into the dining room. In the time we’d spent playing, someone had set the table with fine porcelain plates and gleaming silver cutlery. All of it was placed on golden rattan placemats, tying in the beach and the clean lines of the rest of the house.

In the center of the table was a vase full of green and gold seagrass. I never imagined using grass as a floral arrangement, but it worked.

Landon pulled a chair away from the table, waiting for me to take a seat. I should have expected such a gentlemanly action from him, but it made me self-conscious. Holding myself an inch from the seat, I waited for him to push in the chair and thanked him in a voice barely above a whisper.

There were so many parts of myself I wished I could change. I wanted to hold on to the moments I’d had earlier when I sang with them. I’d felt like a partner and not this mouse.

My hair had fallen over my cheek, and a warm hand suddenly pushed it away from my face and over my shoulder. I glanced up to see Rook leaning toward me. He opened his mouth to speak but changed his mind and settled back in his seat.

Four servers, each dressed in white pants and button-down shirts appeared with bowls of fragrant soup. They placed the bowls in front of us at the same time, then stood back, and as one, disappeared into the kitchen.

Hints of bay and sage filled my nose as I breathed in. I dipped my spoon into the soup and lifted it to my lips. *By the great pumpkin*, that was good.

The guys chatted easily with each other, not ignoring me, but not inundating me with attention.

Which was good.

The past few days, I'd missed their voices filling the air and their presence making the empty house feel like a home. But there were moments, like having four professional servers place soup in front of me like I was at Downton Abbey, that reminded me of what different lives we lived, and that for me, this was all temporary.

I half-listened to the guys talk about the trip to New York and the interview with Cate.

I didn't like that woman. I understood that it was part of celebrity to rub elbows with whoever you needed to if it helped your career, but it wasn't right. It seemed like a reward, letting Cate interview them and ask questions about Presley, after she'd been so horrible.

So horribly horrible.

I thought about appearing in public, putting myself in the limelight, just for people like Cate, and all the good feelings I had after playing music the last few hours disappeared.

"Evelyn?" Rook asked next to me. "Are you okay?"

I'd placed my spoon next to the soup and was staring at the empty bowl. I didn't even realize I'd finished.

More than aware of the servers and chef in the kitchen, I nodded. I had questions that couldn't be answered with a house full of people. They couldn't know all of this was fake.

*Fake.*

Was all of this—them being kind, Levi's silly flirting, Landon pulling out my chair—only pretend? I didn't think so, but I didn't trust myself to know the difference.

The soup churned in my stomach. Standing quickly, I pushed back my chair. "I don't feel well. I'm sorry."

Like the coward I was, I hurried out of the dining room and into my—Tyler's—bedroom. The sun was low in the sky. Grabbing the throw from the bottom of my bed, I flung open the doors and went outside. Wind smacked me right in the face, but it was what I needed. I gulped it in, let it fill my lungs, and shut my eyes.

It was cold and burned my nose, but it felt so good.

I had to remember why I was here. It wasn't just for Tyler. Whether or not my stalker was as dangerous as people seemed to believe, it was for my own protection as well.

And Kings Gambit was separate from Rook, Landon, and Levi. Kings Gambit needed me to pretend to be Tyler's girlfriend, but Rook, Landon, and Levi had set up security for me. They'd given me this room close to the ocean. They'd let me play their instruments and made music with me.

They hadn't done anything that showed me I couldn't trust them. It wasn't their fault I expected the worst from people. It wasn't their fault I was damaged goods.

The handle on the door clicked as someone shook it. I took in one more breath before turning around. Rook stood half-in, half-out of the room, holding a plate with two slices of cheesecake. His serious eyes were narrowed, studying me.

I didn't say anything.

With a sigh, he came out onto the veranda. "I sent everyone away. It's just us."

My surprise must have shown, because he laughed. “I watched you get quieter and quieter when I hoped you’d join in. Then, I remembered, you’re not used to this. You’re not as adept at having a forward-facing persona, so you turn off.”

Turn off.

That was a good word for it. “I was afraid of saying something wrong.”

He held the plate between us and offered me a fork while digging in with his. We both took a bite of the cheesecake at the same time, and he moaned. I almost smiled. It was pretty good, if I did say so myself.

“Landon has everyone who works for us sign NDAs,” he said, after devouring his dessert. “They heard us playing, Evelyn. There are a dozen things they can leak to the press if we wouldn’t sue them at the end. They won’t, though. I—we—wouldn’t put you in that situation here, in our home. It’s the one place you should be able to relax.”

I caught the part of that he didn’t say. They wouldn’t ask me to put on a show here, but they would in public. They were asking me to do that.

And I’d agreed to it.

“I wanted to talk to you about Tyler,” he said when I didn’t answer.

“Okay,” I replied.

“We just got a call from Cal, our manager. Ty’s being released for a couple of days this week. It’s part of his recovery plan . . . getting a taste of being challenged by his old life. It would be a good opportunity to be seen in public. With you.”

I nodded. “Where?” They wouldn’t want to make it too contrived. The press knew the difference between a couple being trotted out in public by their press team and a real one. If they wanted this to look real, they’d have to work harder at it.

“An indie release party happening at the same venue where we got our start. They asked us to show up a while ago, and

we declined. But Cal spoke to them earlier, and they'd love to have us do a surprise performance. It's a small enough venue that security will be tight, and the surprise aspect should help on that front. What do you think? Are you comfortable with appearing in public?"

Ignoring the little food I'd eaten churning in my stomach, I nodded. "Of course." There hadn't been any new email messages from my "stalker," and even if there had been, I wasn't worried about me. Not my safety, at least.

Besides, this was what I was here to do—be Tyler's fake girlfriend.



## *Chapter Fifteen*

*Tyler*

Valentine's Day. When Calvin told me the plan for tonight, he kept referring to "Thursday." It was only now occurring to me why he hadn't mentioned the date. Because, of course, I would catch that it wasn't the fourteenth of any old month. It was the fourteenth of February. The date dreaded by men worldwide.

It was bad enough that I was being paraded in public with Evelyn by my side, but doing so on Valentine's Day? That made it so much worse.

Not because of Evelyn. She seemed like a perfectly nice, and extraordinarily pretty, woman. But we'd spent not even five minutes together almost three weeks ago, and she'd been a bit prickly, to say the least. It wasn't like she was going to fall into my arms the moment she saw me. I wasn't that lucky.

Under normal circumstances, I was a damn fine actor, if I did say so myself. But there was nothing normal about tonight. It was my first truly public appearance in months, and at a club, no less.

For me, clubs meant booze and girls and an occasional recreational drug. Usually, there was some schmoozing with important people and catering to rabid fans. No big deal.

What there wasn't? Me, appearing to be smitten with my new girlfriend.

I didn't do girlfriends. Hadn't had one since college, and even she had decided she preferred Rook to me. Big surprise there. Girls always went for the lead singer.

"You're fired," I groused to Calvin as I sipped on some sort of too-sweet, non-alcoholic pink punch. It was that or sparkling water, and I hated that shit. It was so bitter and disgusting. I had no idea why people liked it.

"I'm the band's manager, which means you can't fire me."

"But I can try. I've never had much trouble getting Rook or Levi on my side, and the three of us make a majority."

He laughed, not at all concerned. Not that he should be. Calvin had been with us since the beginning, and he was damn good at his job. Unfortunately, he considered irritating the fuck out of me part of that job.

I looked at my watch for what had to be the twenty-eighth time in the last seven minutes. That's how long we'd been sitting in the back parking lot of the club, waiting for the rest of the band—and Evelyn—to arrive. "Is it so difficult to be on time?" I muttered, more to myself than to Calvin.

But that didn't keep him from responding. "Patience, young grasshopper. They'll be here any minute." He smirked and ran his fingers through his thick blond hair. "Should I hazard a guess as to why you're so anxious this evening?"

"If your guess is that it's because I'm going to have to avoid alcohol and women throwing themselves at me all night, then, yes."

"I was thinking it has more to do with the woman the boys seem so taken with."

I shook my head. He was always calling us "boys," even though he wasn't even a decade older than us. "I doubt they're 'taken' with her."

"I wouldn't take that bet." Calvin pushed open his door and hopped out of the Cadillac Escalade limousine. "From what I hear, they're already collaborating with her. See you in there," he added with a grin before shutting the door behind him.

Collaborating?

I frowned. The only collaboration we did was with each other. None of that featuring-whatever-new-pop-artist-would-sell-a-few-singles shit. And we wrote our own songs. Together. As a band.

I was still ruminating on this newest development when one of the doors to the back of the limo opened, and Levi stuck his head in. “Ty, my man. Long time, no see.”

“Hasn’t been *that* long.”

He merely grinned and practically dove into the back. Crazy SOB. Though I would never admit it aloud, I’d missed him.

Rook followed, his entrance startlingly less dramatic. “Ty,” my best friend since we were kids said with a nod.

So, he was still pissed at me. That was fair. Didn’t mean I hadn’t been hoping he’d miraculously warmed since Presley’s party. It had only been three weeks, but it seemed that a lot had changed in those weeks.

*“The woman the boys seem so taken with.”*

Was it possible that Evelyn Bishop had somehow managed to wrap the guys around her delicate fingers in mere weeks? If so, what did that mean for me? She was a pianist and award-winning songwriter. With her around, did they even need me anymore?

Before I had time to ponder the answer, Landon was helping Evelyn into the limo. Of course, he was. Always the gentleman I’d promised to be the night I’d met the dark-haired beauty. She’d seen right through my game, something I’d found intriguing. Still did, if I was honest.

As she carefully perched on the seat next to me, I took in her shapely body encased in a simple, knee-length black dress that flared out at the waist. Between the long sleeves and modest hemline, the dress should have been boring. Matronly, even. But the wide neckline that dipped into a V, showing off the barest hint of cleavage, ensured that my gaze wouldn’t be safe tonight. Even without the glittery red belt defining her

slim waist and matching stilettos, I had a feeling every eye in the room would be drawn to her.

There was just something about her that attracted attention. Maybe it was because she tried so hard to avoid it. Like the last time I saw her, her long hair draped over one shoulder, doing a satisfactory job of disguising the scar I now knew graced her left cheek.

I wanted to tell her that I was the last person to judge someone based on a scar. I had plenty of them. They just happened to be marring my soul rather than my skin.

“Before we go in, we have something for you,” Rook said.

At first, I thought he was speaking to me, but then I realized his gaze—along with the twins’ gazes—were trained on Evelyn.

Rook removed a small black box from his jacket pocket and dropped it into her hands. She stared at it as though a scorpion waited inside instead of what was likely an expensive piece of jewelry.

“Go on,” Levi said. “It’s not going to bite.”

Without looking up, she nodded before opening the lid with shaky hands. Inside, a heart-shaped ruby topped with a round diamond, both of which were set in what appeared to be platinum, lay on a bed of black velvet.

Evelyn didn’t speak. She didn’t look up or appear to react at all. Instead, she just stared at the necklace, as though in a trance.

Landon cleared his throat. “If anyone asks, it’s a Valentine’s gift from Tyler, but it’s really from all of us.”

Finally, she glanced up, and I would swear tears glistened in those dark eyes. “I don’t know what to say. It’s gorgeous, but you shouldn’t have.”

Rook reached forward to lay one of his hands over hers. “It’s just a small token of appreciation for everything you’re doing for us, so please accept it.”

“Besides, every woman needs some bling on Valentine’s Day,” Levi said, his playful tone enough to break the tension in the vehicle. “It’s the law.”

Her luscious mouth curved into a small smile. “Well, then, I guess I can’t refuse it.” She looked at Rook, Landon, Levi, and lastly, me. “Thank you.”

Half-expecting one of the guys to jump in and tell her I’d had nothing to do with the gift, I took the box from her hands. “Here. Let me help.”

Slowly, she turned, lifting her hair up to bare her neck to me. It took me several tries just to get the clasp undone before I could drape the chain around her neck. Though I’d seen this particular move in plenty of movies, I’d never tried it myself. Why would I have? Again, I didn’t do girlfriends.

After getting the chain re-clasped, I let my fingers linger on her soft skin a few extra seconds, just barely keeping myself from placing a kiss along her nape. Her *nape*, for god’s sake. Apparently, my months of celibacy while in rehab were finally getting to me. Next, I was going to get hard from the sight of a woman’s ankle.

“Thanks,” Evelyn said as she slid back against the seat, seeming to purposely not meet my eyes.

Landon didn’t have the same problem. He scowled and mouthed, “Don’t fuck with her.”

I responded with a raised brow, which only seemed to irk him further. What did he think I was going to do? Drag her into the bathroom and fuck her senseless?

At the thought, my cock stirred, and I mentally cursed myself. Evelyn was way too sweet to let even my mind go there. Normally, there would be a simple enough fix. I’d just hook up with some girl at the club and move on with my life.

But tonight wasn’t about that. I was still officially in recovery, and that meant no one-night stands or other reckless behaviors. Though I’d been resistant to rehab at first, once I made it past my first month of sobriety, I’d turned a corner. My life had been on a destructive path for too long, and I

wasn't going to risk any of that to stick my dick into some random pussy.

Not to mention, the guys would probably kick my ass for "cheating" on Evelyn. If I was completely honest with myself, I wasn't so wild about messing around on her, either. Though I barely knew her, I wanted to know more. And that wouldn't be an option if I was caught fucking someone else.

It was the last thing my image needed. The last thing I needed.

The limo began moving, and after the driver navigated around the block, we were stopping in front of the club. Flashes were already going off from the paparazzi camped outside, waiting for our arrival.

"Levi, Lan, and I will get out first," Rook said to Evelyn. "Then, Ty will help you out, and the two of you will walk in together. Okay?"

Eyes wide, she nodded.

"Feel free to duck your head," Landon instructed. "Just concentrate on making it inside, and we'll take care of the rest."

"You got this," Levi added.

Evelyn merely nodded again, watching as Rook, Landon, then Levi exited the vehicle. When it was our turn, I took her hand. As those wide brown eyes blinked up at me, my stomach twisted with something unfamiliar. Something that made me want to protect her from the onslaught that waited for us out there.

"Just hold on to me."

With the softest, sultriest voice I could imagine, she replied, "Okay."

Maybe acting like I was smitten with Evelyn wouldn't be so difficult, after all.

## Chapter Sixteen

*July, Camp Shining Light*

*I guess the cat's out of the bag. All those early mornings at the waterfront were too good to be true. This morning, I caught whispers from my campers. "Evelyn with Isaac . . ."*

*It's color wars, and another counselor was out early, hiding flags, and saw us. The news—as if it was news—spread like wildfire, and by the end of the day, I was called into the director's office. I walked in, and there was the director, the youth pastor, and the youth pastor's wife. I got a lecture for the ages. One about men being visual beings and easily tempted and that I shouldn't tempt my brothers in Christ into sin.*

*It was mortifying, especially since we hadn't done anything except talk about music and books and life. But as I sat there, getting a lecture from the pastor's wife about keeping my T-shirt tucked in on purpose to show off my curves (gross), I realized that maybe people saw something I didn't. It wasn't until they told me that Isaac and I weren't allowed to be alone at camp, and that our schedules would be redone so they didn't overlap at all, that I got sad.*

*I hadn't appreciated what I had while I had it. Isaac made me feel interesting and unique, and that was all going to disappear.*

*And that really, really stinks.*

*Evelyn*



With my head buzzing from the shouts of paparazzi and bright flashes of light obscuring my vision, I forced a pleasant expression on my face. I wouldn't allow their invasiveness to get to me. I couldn't. If I let the panic in, even for a second, I'd end up right back where I'd been six months ago. Scared. Anxious. And alone.

No matter what happened tonight, I'd lived through worse. I'd survived involvement in one of the biggest scandals to ever hit country music. I could handle a measly release party on the arm of Tyler fudging Hammond.

We'd made it halfway to the door when my heel caught on something, and I stumbled. Before I could fall, Tyler captured me around the waist and hauled me against his side.

"You okay?" he asked, the warmth of his hand along my side seeping through the thin material of my dress.

I nodded. "Thanks."

"Of course."

Keeping one arm firmly wrapped around me, he led me the rest of the way inside. Once the door closed behind us, I released a shuddering breath. I would never get used to paparazzi surrounding me. Shouting questions at me. Taking photographs of my every move.

It would have been so much easier to sneak into the back of the club. But that would have defeated the entire purpose of this outing. Tyler and I needed to be seen together, so that's what we were doing.

"Are you good, Eve?" Levi asked.

I responded with a self-deprecating laugh. "If you don't count almost falling on my face in front of twenty paps, sure."

"More like fifty," Landon said with a half-smile. "But who's counting?"



Levi shoved his elbow into his brother's side. "You, obviously."

Ignoring him, Landon said to me, "If you need a break at any time, come find me. There's a private room in the back we can use."

Tyler, who still hadn't released me, seemed to tighten his hold. "No need for that. I've got her."

Landon narrowed his eyes on his bandmate but didn't otherwise respond. There was clearly some tension there, but I didn't know if that was normal or not. I'd gotten so used to the dynamic between Landon, Levi, and Rook, I wasn't sure what to make of the addition of Tyler. He almost felt like an outsider, but was that only because he'd been away?

Tyler peered down at me. "How about we go get a drink?"

"Ty," Rook said, his tone admonishing.

His body tensed. "Non-alcoholic for me, obviously."

Suddenly feeling the need to be a peacemaker, I plastered on my best "everything is great" smile and tipped my head toward the bar. "A drink sounds great."

Without another word, Tyler loosened his hold on my waist and took my hand, leading me away from the others. Holding hands with a man who was still virtually a stranger should have felt awkward. But I found the calluses along his warm skin oddly comforting. Maybe because they reminded me that there was more to him than stylish clothes and perfectly swooped hair.

As we weaved toward the bar, I was grateful to discover that this club wasn't at all what I'd had in mind when the guys told me where we were going tonight. I'd pictured flashing lights and people grinding on each other to earsplitting EDM. Instead, indie-rock music played at a reasonable volume while small groups gathered around high-top tables. Though there were people out on the dance floor, they all appeared to be dancing for the sake of it rather than imitating the bedroom tango.

All in all, it was a pretty chill atmosphere, though I had a feeling it wouldn't be quite so tame once Kings Gambit took the stage in the center of the room.

We stopped in front of a long bar, and Tyler turned to me. "What would you like?"

"An amaretto sour, please."

My knowledge of cocktails was extremely limited, but Scarlett had made me one a couple of times, and I'd enjoyed it. The plan was to nurse it for as long as possible before switching to water.

As Tyler flagged down the bartender, it suddenly occurred to me that maybe I was being insensitive. Placing a hand on his arm, I moved in close to say, "I can just have a Sprite, if that'll make you more comfortable." Though no one was standing on either side of us, I didn't want to risk being overheard.

He peered down at me, his brown eyes hard and assessing. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, but eventually, they softened. "Thanks, but I'm going to have to get used to being surrounded by it without partaking. That's part of what tonight is about. To find out if I can handle it."

"Well, if there's anything I can do to help . . ." I trailed off, not sure where I was going with that sentence. This was Tyler's battle, not mine.

Mine was pretending like I didn't want to run out of this club in my designer heels and never look back.

After the whole Presley scandal had blown over, I'd promised myself I would never give the media another reason to be interested in me. And, yet, here I was, asking for their attention once again. Why had I agreed to tonight? Or to fake dating Tyler at all?

Distractedly, I reached for the pendant hanging at my throat and stilled when my fingers met the smooth stone shaped into a heart, of all things. Logically, I understood that it was the natural choice for a Valentine's Day gift. But the

secret, mushy part of me that had never had even a date on this holiday longed for it to mean something more.

My mind wandered to dinners on the patio and our sunrise trip to the beach. To the hours in the studio spent perfecting my song, which now felt like ours. To all the times Levi had made me laugh, Rook had held my gaze, and Landon had read my mind. To the dance with Tyler that had started all of this.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. Now I was just being silly. None of that meant anything. I was doing them a favor, so they were being nice. That's all.

Tyler grasped my arm lightly, drawing me back to the present. "Don't worry about me. Just try to have fun, okay?"

I nodded absently. He sounded like Presley and Scarlett when they'd FaceTimed me earlier to psych me up for tonight. They'd insisted that I would have fun, if I only relaxed and let go a little. But they didn't understand. There was no relaxing while I was on display. I might as well be up on that stage, under a spotlight, for how exposed standing next to Tyler Hammond made me.

Already, people were taking notice—staring and whispering. Well, not so much whispering as speaking loudly, since there was no reason to keep their voices lowered in this venue.

Once the bartender delivered our drinks, I took a sip of the sweetly tart cocktail and watched Tyler down half of whatever dark liquid was in his cup.

A blond man who looked vaguely familiar appeared suddenly and stole Tyler's cup to take a drink of it. Handing it back to Tyler, he said, "Dr. Pepper. Good."

My fake boyfriend rolled his eyes. "I could have told you that without you contaminating my drink."

The man shrugged. "You know me. Always going above and beyond in my work." Turning to me, he stuck out a hand. "Calvin Cash, the band's manager and all-around miracle worker."

"Evelyn Bishop," I said, accepting his handshake.

“It’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve been dying to ever since you caught Ty’s eye at Presley Cole’s shindig.”

That’s why he looked familiar. I remembered spotting him at the party while I’d been hiding in the corner, people-watching.

“You mean when the other guys made some kind of bet with Tyler to pay attention to me?” I found myself saying.

Both men appeared utterly confused.

“What bet?” Tyler asked. “There was no bet.”

*Huh.* So much for that theory. I’d been sure that was the only reason he’d been so adamant about getting me on the dance floor.

Tyler’s lips twitched. “You really thought that’s why I asked you to dance? Because of a bet?”

I lifted a shoulder. “It made sense, especially when I caught your bandmates watching us.”

He laughed, the sparkle from that night returning to his eyes. “Oh, Evelyn, no. You got it all wrong. The twins were trying to convince Rook to man up and go talk to you, since you’d caught *his* eye.” He pressed a hand dramatically to his chest. “I valiantly volunteered to talk up Rook to you, but you ran off before I had a chance.”

Oh. *Oh.*

A blush rose to my cheeks as I imagined the four of them standing around, watching me. Discussing me. Was it possible Tyler was telling the truth? That Rook had wanted to approach me?

My eyes darted around the room, searching him out. Even in the dim light, it took only moments to locate his head of messy, dark hair. He was tall—several inches over six feet—but that wasn’t why he stood out so much. It was because he was surrounded by women in skimpy, sparkly dresses. And when I said *surrounded*, I meant it. They’d created a circle around him, enclosing him in as they smiled and simpered up at him.

I looked away, ignoring the way my stomach tightened at the sight. There was no reason to be jealous. Even if Rook had been interested in talking to me at the party, things had changed. Now I was living with him, and the world believed I was dating one of his best friends. Nothing was keeping him from doing whatever with one—or more—of those girls.

“You two know the game plan for tonight, right?” Calvin asked. “Mingle. Act lovey-dovey. Smile lots.”

Act lovey-dovey? No one had said anything about that.

As though reading my mind, Tyler took my hand again before pressing a quick kiss to my temple. Okay, well, that wasn't so bad. Kind of sweet, actually.

“We've got it under control.” Tyler squeezed my hand, as though silently reassuring me of that fact. “Go do whatever it is you do at these things.”

With a salute, Calvin sauntered off, and I bit back a smile. The guy was charming, that was for sure. And handsome, if you liked the Ken doll type, with thick blond hair, broad shoulders, and sculpted cheekbones.

“No, just no,” Tyler said, and I snapped my head up to look at him.

“What?”

“No girlfriend of mine is going to crush on Cal. I won't allow it.” Though his tone was serious, I caught the laughter in his gaze.

“Girlfriend?” I squeaked.

*Gum drops*, that wasn't what I'd meant to say. Of course, he'd meant *fake* girlfriend. Why was my brain so muddled? I was blaming it on the date. Curses to Valentine's Day and all it represented.

I was fine being single. Really.

Tyler dropped his head so that we were eye-to-eye. Lips-to-lips. “Yeah, Evelyn. My girlfriend. We might not have gotten here the usual way, but we might as well enjoy it while we can, don't you think?”

And then he kissed me.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Landon*

Tyler kissed Evelyn.

Jealousy, hotter and thicker than anything I could have imagined, dumped into my blood. I gripped the drink in my hand, closing my fingers around the cool glass, and brought it to my lips.

*Breathe.*

The cool gin and tonic spilled down my throat, but it did nothing to the heat coursing through my veins.

*Be cool.*

Easier said than done. Her lips would be sweet from her drink and smooth from the gloss she'd traced over them before she left the house.

It took a moment, but Evelyn's eyes fluttered closed. The hand holding her glass wobbled, and if Tyler hadn't wrapped his hand around hers, she would have dropped it.

Tyler was sweeping her off her feet right in front of me, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it, even if I'd wanted to.

*I've lost her.*

Where the fuck did that thought come from? I hadn't lost her. She wasn't mine. She wasn't even Tyler's, despite the fact

that they were still kissing. *For Christ's sake, Ty, let her up for air.*

“You need a refill.” Levi took my glass and replaced it with another. I brought it to my lips, gaze still on the pair across the room, and threw it back.

“Jesus, Levi! Is this Coke?” The carbonation burned, and I had a sudden, very real fear of burping so loud the entire room would hear it. I swallowed hard and brought my fist to my mouth.

“You don't need alcohol clouding your judgment or making you lose control.”

“Ha!” As if I would ever let that happen.

But Levi wasn't smiling. For once, his eyes were serious, and there wasn't a hint of humor surrounding him. “I'm serious, Lan. You're staring daggers, and our goal is not *girl breaks up band.*”

“She wouldn't break up the band.” It had never crossed my mind that my feelings would lead to that. I wasn't upset when Levi cooked with her or when Rook pushed her to play her music. All this time with Evelyn had felt natural. She fit into our group like she'd always been there.

It was here, with Tyler, that things were going wrong.

Not wrong. Different. It was different with him. As much as we were all equal partners in this band, Tyler had a way of drawing attention away from the rest of us. Due to his suave good looks and party boy personality, many saw him as the face of Kings Gambit even more than Rook. That was why this was so important.

With that realization, I forced my shoulders to relax. There was a reason for all of this.

Evelyn stepped away from Tyler, and when she opened her eyes, she stared at him with an expression I had never seen on her face.

“I think she's pissed,” Levi whispered.



Was that it? Her gorgeous skin was flushed, but her eyes were narrowed, and that lush mouth was tense, her lips pressed together. He might be right.

As we watched, Evelyn brought her drink to her lips and wrinkled her nose. Placing it on the table nearby, she turned her back on us.

“What do we do?” Levi asked.

*Go to her.* But that wasn't the right answer. We weren't supposed to swoop in and make a scene. We were supposed to let the paparazzi get all the shots of romance they could ever want. We were supposed to let Evelyn save our reputation.

“Nothing,” I answered. “She's playing it right, and so is he.”

As if my words made it happen, Evelyn faced Tyler. Her eyes were softer, though she wore a little frown, and I swore I saw her gesture to her drink. Tyler was shaking his head, then touched her chin, thumb drifting across her lips.

“Fuck.” Levi spun and laughed. His long hair was loose and skimmed across his jaw as he shook his head. “This is harder than I thought it would be.”

*Agreed.*

I wished I could hear what they were talking about. Evelyn's lips were moving, her hands gesturing with such animation . . .

Tyler leaned forward, replying, and then something magical happened. He laughed. I didn't have to hear it to know it was a real laugh. It surprised the shit out of him, too, because he stopped in the middle of it, eyes wide. Evelyn stepped closer to him, smiling, and he smiled back.

A real smile.

A real smile, and a real laugh.

And just like that, that fire burning in my belly cooled, like it had never existed to begin with. This might be for show, but if Evelyn could make my . . . friend . . . real again, then I wasn't jealous.

I was grateful.

## Chapter Eighteen

*July, Camp Shining Light*

*The thing about feeling like everyone is against you is that it brings you closer together. The night after the camp director, youth pastor, and his wife gave me an epic talking-to, Isaac found me. I put the campers to bed, then I snuck out. It wasn't my plan to see Isaac. I needed some space to breathe. I was mad and embarrassed, and part of me blamed him. I never got in trouble. Never.*

*And now, here I was—Camp Shining Light's very own Bad Girl.*

*If I couldn't act as a moral example to the campers, then the director would be forced to call my parents. Maybe I was seeing things, but I think all of them enjoyed threatening me. They had that look, that sad, yet intrigued face.*

*I went into the boathouse, climbed into one of the canoes hooked to the dock, and just sat.*

*I heard Isaac before I saw him. He has this way of walking, kind of shuffling his feet. I think it's because he's tall and lanky.*

*He sat in the canoe with me, quiet. When he finally asked me what happened, I spilled the whole story. It rushed out of me, and—I hate this part—I cried. Ugh. I hate crying when I'm mad. It makes me feel like a child.*

*Isaac scooted forward in the canoe and hugged me. The canoe bobbed in the water, but he kept his arms around me. I let him, because it felt so good to be held.*

*After a while, I realized he was shaking, and when I asked what was wrong, he told me how angry he was. How much he hated what had happened to me. “We didn’t do anything wrong,” he said.*

*Then he kissed me.*

*My first kiss.*

*Evelyn*



I caught the attention of a passing server. “Can I get a Sprite, please?”

I licked my lips, tasting both my lip gloss and a hint of the alcohol I’d drunk. Tyler hadn’t shoved his tongue into my mouth. He’d kissed me sweetly, reverently.

Not at all what I would have expected from him.

But when I pulled away, all I could think about was the alcohol on my breath. Tyler studied me, and I had to drop my gaze, unable to hold his any longer. When the server returned, he handed me the soda with ice and took the cocktail away.

“You don’t have to do that,” Tyler said. He frowned, dark brows drawing together.

“It has more to do with me than you.” Sipping at the soda, I let the carbonation tickle my mouth before I swallowed. “I didn’t know there would be kissing.”

As soon as the words flew out of my mouth, I wanted to take them back. I’d intended them as an explanation for why I’d initially ordered the cocktail, but he might not take it that way.

Glancing up at him from under my lashes, I watched his face clear. “You don’t want me to taste the alcohol,” he said, sounding surprised.

With a shrug, I took another sip. “I don’t really drink, anyway. I like the taste of that drink, but not enough to . . .” I trailed off, uncertain of how to finish.

Tyler did for me. “Not enough to threaten my sobriety.” He let out a sigh. “Hopefully, I’m strong enough not to fall off the wagon at the first hint of liquor.” Staring at the stage and the crew getting ready for the band, I thought I heard him whisper, “hopefully,” again.

“I have faith in you.”

Why had I said that? I barely knew this man. But even a rock star needed at least one person to believe in him and tell him so.

He shook his head, causing a lock of dark hair to fall over his forehead. I itched to reach up and put it back in place, but he beat me to it. “You wouldn’t say that if you really knew me.”

“So, tell me something about yourself.”

“My family despises me.” He squeezed his eyes shut, as though he couldn’t believe he’d spoken the words aloud. “Sorry. Forget I said that.”

I took his hand in mine and squeezed. “Trust me, I get it.”

His lashes fluttered open, and he stared at me like he could see straight through me. “I can’t imagine you being anything other than the apple of your father’s eye.”

I bit back a sardonic laugh. “You’d be wrong about that. But this isn’t about me. What are your parents like?”

“Rich. Stuck-up. Self-important. My father is a United States senator for the state of Pennsylvania, and my mother is a socialite. My older brother is the perfect one, and he’s currently taking after our father and running for office.”

“Oh, wow. I had no idea.”

Tyler shrugged. “They don’t exactly advertise their association with me, but they’re all more than happy to remind me not to be an embarrassment—well, more of one—whenever I speak to one of them, which isn’t often.” He removed his hand from mine and straightened his hair again and then his jacket. “They’re the reason for the big secret.”

The big secret. Rehab. Of course.

I thought back to what Rook had told me my first night in California about why Kings Gambit had been dropped by their previous label. They’d canceled their tour over what appeared to be the band falling apart over Sharla Winters, the actress, Yoko-Ono style. In reality, it was because Tyler had checked himself into rehab.

As a private person myself, I hadn’t thought too much about why he hadn’t wanted anyone to know. But now, I really understood. He hadn’t wanted the public to find out because his family would consider it—him—an embarrassment.

Memories from my own life assailed me, and I found that I couldn’t say anything else on the topic. It was too hard. Too close. Instead, I chose to change the subject. “Who’s opening?”

He smiled, and it was a real one. It lifted his lips and made his eyes crinkle. “You’re going to love them.” Then he shrugged. “Maybe. Actually . . .” He straightened the cuffs on his sleeves. “I’ve only heard them when I was wasted, so now I’m second-guessing all of this. But Rook and Landon wouldn’t promote a band that sucked, right?” His look was so worried, big brown eyes wide in a puppy-dog gaze, that I laughed.

He smiled at me. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I took a sip of soda. “The world questions not only your judgment, but your taste?”

He threw his head back to laugh. “Oh god, no. Not my taste. The horror of showing up in a *Wear This, Not That* article. Anything but that.”

I hid my answering smile behind my glass. There was more to Tyler than met the eye, that was for sure. He might look like a sophisticated character, all skinny tuxedo pants and velvet suit coat with perfectly styled hair, but beneath all that was someone deeper.

The fact that he was struggling with sobriety was a giveaway that there were depths to him I couldn't fathom.

Across the room, the crowds parted as Rook and Calvin headed our way. A moment later, Levi and Landon approached us from the other direction, and it was like a spotlight focused right on us. I could feel the gazes of everyone in here, and it took all the strength I had not to wilt beneath the heat.

"The four of you are going to introduce the band. Make it a little bit VH1 Storytellers, and then give them the stage." Calvin pulled a card from his pocket and gave it to Tyler. "Read this ahead of time. I don't want you to wing it."

Tyler scanned the card before he handed it to Rook. Levi and Landon looked over his shoulder, eyes dancing as they read whatever was there.

"Short and sweet," Landon said, fixing Tyler with a stare. "Good."

"They're playing three songs, then intermission while they reset the stage for you. You've got one song, and that's it." Calvin stared at each one of them, and as nice as he'd been earlier, I wouldn't have been able to stand being his focus. This was the business side of Calvin. All that seriousness reminded me of my father and a million expectations I could never meet.

The music blasting through the speakers faded, and the emcee walked on stage. "Thank you, everyone, for joining us tonight. Here to introduce our opening act is a band that needs no introduction . . ." The smatter of applause became hoots and hollers, whistles and stomping.

A change came over the guys. As one, they transformed from individuals into Kings Gambit. They were focused, but distant. The world seemed to disappear to them, like

everything was dark except for them. If I hadn't watched Presley for years, it would have hurt, because it left me behind.

It was stage presence. Performance.

It was a show.

Tyler stepped up to the microphone, his smile easy as he studied the crowd. There were so many sides to him. The performer. The man who loved the spotlight. The man who was trying to turn himself into someone better.

Each one of them said something about the waiting band, and though the statements had been written out earlier, not one of them sounded rehearsed. Whatever Calvin had put down, they agreed with it.

"They're naturals," Calvin whispered.

I eyed him, taking in how intently he stared at Tyler while he spoke.

"He's doing a good job," he said a moment later, meaning Tyler.

I nodded. I expected the band to join us again, but they went backstage. The new band came out, and I realized it was probably a smart move. It would be impossible to focus on someone else while Kings Gambit was around.

The band they introduced was good, really good, but nowhere near the caliber of Kings Gambit, let alone Presley or Scarlett.

The same server came around again, and I placed my glass on the tray, shaking my head when he asked if I wanted another.

Leaning toward me, Calvin asked, "You don't like them?"

I didn't *not* like them, but they needed more work. They were a little unformed, trying to be something they didn't believe in. But their musicianship was spot on. They played well, the melody was catchy, and the lyrics . . . fine.

But it wouldn't top the charts.



“They’re young,” I finally answered. “How long have they been together?”

Calvin bobbed his head in time with the beat. “Not long. The lead singer? He was part of another band that broke up when they weren’t making any headway in the industry.”

Trying to pay attention, I found my focus drifting. I glanced toward the back of the stage and around me.

I caught Calvin studying me. “What do you really think?”

“They haven’t found their sound yet,” I answered. “They can play this—” I waved my hand toward the stage. “This indie-pop meets the Grateful Dead, but it’s not a fit. I mean—for goodness’ sake—the guitarist has been jamming at least a full minute.”

And he was losing the audience.

“Will they be upset?” I asked, meaning Kings Gambit. They were sponsoring this band, after all, giving them a shot, and this was what they came in with?

“Nah,” Calvin replied. “They want to give bands a chance, but they’re not going to pave the way for them.”

The song morphed from the Dead into something cleaner, tighter. Now, this? This was good. The music slowed, and the guitarist took a violin from a nearby case and began to play. The first stroke of the bow across the strings took my breath away. Okay. I got it now.

I listened, holding my breath as the band picked up the melody and the lead singer began to weave a tale that had me clutching my fingers together.

“That’s it,” I said.

“Yeah,” Calvin answered. I forgot he was next to me. He stared at the stage, eyes bright, and bit his lip like he was trying not to cry. “That’s perfect.”

As the band ended the song, the audience erupted into applause. Unfortunately, they launched right into another number and gave me whiplash.

Next to me, Calvin groaned. “They almost had it.”

Almost.

The applause following this song was much more subdued than the last, and when the members of the band bowed and left the stage, there were no calls for an encore. A little part of me felt bad for them. This was their big chance. But another part of me recognized that they hadn’t blown it; they just had to work a little harder.

An arm slid around my waist, and the sultry tobacco scent that I was coming to associate with Tyler wafted to me. Tilting my head to the side and up, my nose grazed his jaw, and his gaze lowered to my mouth. I inhaled a sharp breath. Was he going to kiss me? Again?

My pulse thrummed as I stood, frozen. A gold I hadn’t noticed before brightened his brown eyes, reminding me of dark chocolate swirled with caramel. I licked my lips at the thought, and his chest reverberated with a low groan.

Still, he didn’t kiss me, and I wasn’t about to make the first—er, second—move.

On shaky legs, I took a step back from him. “I, uh, thought you’d still be backstage.”

“We won’t go on for twenty minutes, so Lan suggested I come out and keep you company.”

The reminder that this was nothing more than a farce hit me like a dodge ball to the face. Tyler hadn’t kissed me because he wanted to; he’d done it to further his cover story. He didn’t care about me, didn’t even know me. So, why was I acting like a lovestruck teenager around him?

I forced a smile. “Landon seems to enjoy his big brother role with me.”

A laugh burst from Tyler. “I’m sure Lan would just love to hear that you view him as a brother.”

Before I had a chance to ponder his meaning, a man with graying hair and wearing a neon orange polo tucked into black slacks approached us—well, Tyler. If his attire hadn’t already

given him away as *not* the intended audience for this event, the woman following him with a professional camera would have.

“I’m Mark Wallace with Newport Brew,” he said, offering his hand to Tyler, who shook it. “We’re sponsoring the event tonight and would love to get a photo of you drinking our newest IPA.”

He held out a dark brown bottle with an orange label, and I stiffened. This was the last thing Tyler needed, especially tonight. I moved closer to him, hoping he would feel my silent support.

My date gave the promoter an easy grin. “Sorry, man. That’s not why I’m here tonight.” He wrapped an arm around my waist once again and pulled me in tighter than ever. “I’m with my girlfriend.”

*Fake girlfriend*, I reminded myself as his smooth voice washed over me. *Fake. Fake. Fake.*

Mark barely spared me a glance before continuing, as though Tyler hadn’t spoken. “We’re a local microbrewery, and in the last two years, we’ve won awards for our top three sellers. By teaming up, our company would be able to bring much-needed positive publicity to your band.”

I held back a snort. Right. Because *Kings Gambit* needed the publicity, and not the other way around.

Holding out the bottle once more, Mark gave Tyler an overly wide grin. “At least, try it. I insist. I’m sure you’ll love it.”

When Tyler’s grip on my waist tightened, I found myself jumping in. “I’m sorry, but now isn’t a good time. Maybe you could reach out to Cal, the band’s manager, about future promotional opportunities?”

Mark’s grin faded as he turned on me, his gaze roaming down my body and back up to linger on my neckline. I clenched my fists to keep from covering the hint of cleavage on display. Even though Presley had convinced me that no one would even blink at the low-cut—for me—dress, I couldn’t help but feel half-naked under the man’s scrutiny.

Pulling out his wallet, he withdrew a twenty and shoved it into my hand. “Why don’t you go buy yourself a margarita on me while we men talk business?”

I wished I still had my Sprite from earlier, so I could throw it in his face. Not that I would have done it, but it was a nice fantasy.

“Hey, man,” Tyler said, gently shoving me behind him. “Don’t speak to her that way. Actually, don’t speak to her at all.”

Mark shook his head. “Never thought I’d see the day a bad boy rocker like you would choose a piece of Mexican ass over booze and—”

Tyler swung out with his left arm, cutting off the rest of the man’s vile words with a punch to the jaw. Startled, I stepped back, only for my stiletto heel to catch on something, causing me to lurch backward.

The sensation of falling was the last thing I knew before everything went black.

## Chapter Nineteen

*Rook*

Marshall, the head of our security team, burst into the small green room backstage, his expression grim and breaths labored. “We’ve got a problem.”

My stomach twisted. I’d heard those words one too many times in my life, and with Tyler out of my sight, part of me didn’t want to know more.

Landon was the first to react. “What’s going on?”

“Mr. Hammond appears to be in some sort of a showdown with a man over Miss Bishop, and I’m worried it will escalate. Should I have my team step in?”

Before he’d even finished the question, I was rocketing out of my chair and sprinting toward the door. “I’ll take care of it.”

Son of a bitch.

Tyler assured us he would be on his best behavior tonight, and I’d been the one who’d convinced Landon that we should take him at his word. That he’d changed during these past months in rehab. That he wouldn’t screw us over. Not again.

If I wasn’t using all my breath to make it to the club floor in record time, I might have laughed. History was repeating itself, and there was very little I could do to stop it. Levi and I often teased Landon about his need for control, but right now, I got it. Feeling powerless sucked.

Knowing I would only make a scene of my own if I dashed into the crowd, I forced myself to slow to a brisk walk as I pushed through the door to the main part of the club and began weaving through bodies. Not for the first time, standing taller than most everyone else in the room served me well, and I spotted Tyler with little effort.

Immediately, I knew Marshall had interpreted what he'd observed correctly. Tyler was holding Evelyn behind him with one arm while the other was clenched at his side. Though he was smaller than the older man who stood across from him, wearing a bright orange shirt, the fierce expression on his face proved that he was anything but intimidated. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn we were back in fourth grade, and he was taking on Jeremy Woolsey after the bully pushed down a girl at recess, causing her to smash her face into the metal playground equipment.

And just like that day, I darted toward him, only to arrive moments too late.

Time played out in slow motion as Tyler caught the man in orange with a left hook, which should have been the worst thing to happen tonight. Hell, this month. But it was the sight of Evelyn plunging backward toward the floor that had my heart jumping to my throat.

Without a thought to who I was shoving out of the way, I made it to Evelyn just in time to watch her head bounce off the concrete floor before her eyes closed and body went limp.

“Fuck.”

As I knelt beside her, I heard Marshall and the rest of the security team creating a perimeter around us, but I didn't bother looking up. Instead, I kept all my attention focused on the unconscious beauty before me. Her usual quiet strength was gone, leaving her looking so delicate, I was almost afraid to touch her.

Leaning over her, I pressed my shaky fingers to her neck, attempting to check her pulse, not really knowing what I was doing. I was just grateful to feel a faint heartbeat and warm breaths puff against my cheek.

“Oh, fuck,” Tyler said, dropping to his knees on her other side. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” I growled, unwilling to look at him. If I did, there was a good chance I’d be the one swinging next.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he muttered, continuing to repeat the word.

*How could you, Ty?*

Before the thought had time to make its way to my mouth, Evelyn’s eyelids fluttered then opened fully. As her fathomless brown eyes met mine, a ragged breath whooshed out of me. I couldn’t remember being that scared . . . well, ever.

“Eve, honey, are you okay?” I brushed a thumb over her pale cheek, lingering only slightly on her scar. It felt smoother than it looked, and I couldn’t help but thinking she would never allow me to touch it if she wasn’t so out of it.

With a sigh, she closed her eyes and shook her head. “Please don’t tell me I just passed out in the middle of a nightclub?”

“More like you were knocked out. You hit your head pretty hard.”

She groaned. “Because I tripped on my own darn feet. Yeah, that’s not any better.”

I bit back a smile at her use of “darn.” She was so fucking cute.

“Do you think you can sit up?”

“Assuming melting through the floor isn’t an option, yes.”

Instead of replying, I hooked my arm around her shoulders and gently lifted her torso. She tried to hide a wince at the movement, but I still caught it. “Do you want us to take you to the emergency room?”

“No, no. It’s just a bump on the head.”

Maybe, maybe not. She could very well have a concussion and needed to be looked at by a professional. Thankfully, we

kept a concierge doctor on retainer for incidents just like this one.

Finding Marshall standing to my side, I said, “Get Cal, and make sure the back is cleared of paparazzi before we head out that way.”

He nodded and then immediately started speaking into his radio as he walked away. Thankfully, the club music was still loud enough that not everyone in our vicinity was catching every word out of our mouths, but it wasn’t so loud that I couldn’t hear myself think.

“Oh my god,” I heard Levi say, followed by a curse from Landon.

Okay, the music wasn’t loud enough to cover *them*.

As the twins hovered over Evelyn, asking what happened and if she was all right, I finally allowed my gaze to drift to Tyler. He hadn’t spoken a word since Evelyn woke up, and if I didn’t know better, I would have thought he was the one with a concussion. His eyes were glassy, his skin sallow, and he was holding a fist to his mouth, as though he might vomit.

Some—but not all—of my anger faded. He obviously felt like shit over Evelyn getting hurt. Still, what the hell had that guy done to provoke Tyler? Despite all his irresponsibility in the past, he knew how important it was to rehabilitate the band’s image. That was the point of this whole dating Evelyn charade to begin with. We couldn’t afford to be dropped by another record label, especially before we’d even managed to record one damn album with Presley.

Oh, god. Presley. When she heard about this . . . I shuddered to think. She was going to lose her shit when she found out we’d allowed her bestie to get injured on our watch.

My mind was reeling with all the possible repercussions of this incident when Marshall reappeared, ready to lead us out the back. Landon helped Evelyn stand and then tucked her under his arm. I thought about objecting—the last thing we needed was photos surfacing of those two seemingly cozying up—but decided to let it go. The gossip sites would already



have so much fodder from tonight to obsess over, one more rumor wouldn't matter.

Tyler moved forward suddenly, stepping right in front of Evelyn. "I'm so, so sorry." Then he kissed her on the forehead and started to move away, but Landon caught him by the wrist.

"Don't even think about leaving right now. You need to escort Evelyn out of here, and you need to appear the devoted boyfriend you clearly are not."

Tyler flinched, whether from Landon's words or the venom in his tone, I wasn't sure. Instead of arguing, he merely nodded and moved to Evelyn's side. "Lean on me," he said so quietly, I almost missed it.

She peered up at him, her mouth downturned. She didn't look mad . . . just sad. I didn't blame her. I was feeling damn somber myself.

At least Tyler's apology, though insufficient, had been earnest. I'd seen him fake sincerity enough times to know that wasn't what he'd been doing. But that didn't mean she—or any of us—should accept his apology.

When it came to my best friend since childhood, I'd always believed in endless second chances. That was friendship, right? Forgiving and forgetting the bad while helping to inspire the good?

But maybe I'd only been fooling myself by continuing to believe the best in Tyler. That he'd grow up. He'd change.

That he'd fight for his friends as hard as we fought for him.

## Chapter Twenty

*July, Camp Shining Light*

*What is being in love? Is this it? Sneaking around and feeling like my skin isn't my own? Is it stomachaches and a throat so tight I can barely swallow?*

*I don't know if it is. I thought, if I was in love, I would know. Like a strike of lightning or a bone-deep knowing.*

*But when does imagination ever live up to reality? This isn't a Disney movie. This is real life, and what happens with Isaac is real.*

*He tells me he loves me. He says it before he kisses me and when he pulls me onto his lap, and I feel . . . you know.*

*I can't even write it.*

*I don't know what I'm doing at all. I just know that Isaac loves me, and he thinks I'm special. There are a dozen other girl counselors at this camp, but Isaac said, the minute he saw me, he knew I was different. He tells me I'm beautiful and that nobody in this world understands him like I do.*

*Evelyn*



By the time I sank into the lush leather of the limo's back seat, the walk through the club was nothing but a blur. Tucked tightly against Tyler and with what seemed like a horde of security and bouncers surrounding us, I hadn't seen much more than Rook's taut back as he led the way.

Now, I'd somehow found myself snuggled up against Levi while he gently ran his fingers through the ends of my hair. Ever since the guys and I had ducked into the limo, no one had spoken a word, and I couldn't decide if that was a good or bad thing. Given the way Tyler kept his eyes averted from everyone as Landon bored a hole into him with his gaze, I had a feeling, once the bottle was uncapped, talking would quickly escalate into shouting.

Still, the tension was so thick, there's no way you could cut it with a knife. You'd need a machete or maybe a lightsaber.

I jolted when the door opened and Calvin climbed in, his expression grim. It was no wonder. What had started out as a great night had turned disastrous.

"You spoke with the event organizer?" Rook asked as the limo started moving.

Calvin nodded once. "Don't ask what I agreed to in order to make up for tonight."

It took a few seconds for his words to sink in, but when they did, I sat up quickly, my head throbbing in protest. "Wait. You guys didn't perform. You have to go back."

Levi snorted. "Yeah, that's not going to happen. The damage is already done." He kissed the top of my head, as though to soften his statement.

"I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Your fault?" Landon asked. "What are you talking about?"

"I never should have gotten in the middle of that guy's pitch to Tyler."

Tyler finally lifted his head to look straight at me. "Don't. You can't blame yourself, not for any of it. You were trying to

protect me.”

“What do you mean, protect you?” Rook asked, sounding half-angry and half-worried. “And who was that guy you punched?”

Tyler shook his head and then turned away again. Clearly, he didn’t want to talk about it, and as I leaned back into Levi’s side, I decided he had the right idea. With my adrenaline wearing off, the events of the last fifteen minutes were hitting me hard. What had started out as a mild ache in the back of my head now felt like someone had taken a bat to it, and my entire body seemed heavier than usual.

Snuggling even deeper into Levi’s side, I closed my eyes. Almost immediately, a hand on my shoulder and a soft voice urged me to reopen them. I blinked to find Landon leaning over me. “I don’t think we should let you fall asleep. You might have a concussion.”

Although I wanted to object, the concern in his ice-blue eyes stopped me. “Okay.” I sat up slightly, knowing that was the only way I had any hope of staying awake. Even so, Levi didn’t let me get far, drawing my back into his chest so that I could relax against him.

The rest of the drive to the guys’ house was blessedly silent. I had a feeling they were holding themselves back for the sake of my headache, which I appreciated. But I also worried they would wait until I was tucked away in my bedroom before placing all the blame for tonight’s incident squarely on Tyler’s shoulders.

No matter what he said, I still attributed some of the blame to my own actions. As we pulled into the driveway, I decided to make my opinion on the matter known. Rook, Landon, Levi, and Calvin needed to hear the whole story, and they needed to hear it from me.

Staring at my hands, I began. “For the record, that Mark guy from Newport Brew was in the wrong. He wanted to photograph Tyler drinking one of their IPAs, and when he refused, Mark kept badgering him. I tried to step in, but he didn’t take it well and ended up making

some . . . discriminatory comments about me. Tyler overreacted, yes, but he was provoked.”

I looked up to find the man in question watching me, his eyebrows arched in surprise. Had he not expected me to defend him?

“What kind of discri—” Calvin began to ask, but Landon cut him off.

“Thank you for clearing that up, Evelyn. Now, let’s get you inside so our doctor can check you over.”

Wait . . . doctor?



In spite of the guys’ insistence that I stay in bed all day, by noon, I was going stir-crazy. Dr. Thomas—the concierge doctor who the guys kept on retainer, as I’d learned last night—had diagnosed me with a mild concussion. He’d told me to take it easy for a few days, but he hadn’t said anything about bed rest. And, since the pain in the back of my head had lessened to a dull ache, I didn’t see the point in hiding myself away, especially with everything that was going on.

Other than my short texting conversation with Presley, mainly so I could assure her I was fine and explain what happened, I hadn’t had any contact with the outside world. I had no doubt the internet was losing its collective mind over another scandal revolving around “music’s favorite bad boy.”

Surprisingly, I couldn’t muster much interest over what was being written about me. Blame it on my concussion or the fact that this wasn’t my first—or second, for that matter—rodeo, but I didn’t even care to know.

Gossip could only hurt me if I let it.

For someone like me—someone who had always been too aware of what people thought of me—that was a revelation.

After a long shower, I pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a slouchy sweatshirt and padded to the kitchen on bare feet. I

was reaching into the refrigerator for a jug of orange juice when a deep voice cleared behind me.

Spinning a little too fast, considering my recent head injury, I came face-to-face with Rook. Actually, it was more like face-to-collarbone, since he was considerably taller than me.

“Slow down, honey,” he said, taking hold of my shoulders to steady me.

Honey? He’d called me that last night, too, hadn’t he? I’d been too out of it to fixate on the pet name then, but I was fixating now. Just like I was fixating on the warmth of his touch, even through my sweatshirt, as he gently rubbed my shoulders.

“Come on.” Rook guided me to the closest barstool and slid his hands down to my waist to lift me onto it. “Now, tell me what you want to eat, and I’ll make it for you.”

I blinked at him with what had to be a “what the fudge was that” expression on my face. “You don’t need to do anything for me. I’m fine, really.”

He propped his elbows on the counter and leaned in until I could make out the dark green rim of his irises. “What if I want to do things for you?”

I sucked in a breath and self-consciously licked my lips. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

His gaze, having followed the tracing of my tongue along my lips, lingered there. He was close enough that, to kiss me, all he had to do was lean in a few inches more. My pulse sped with anticipation mixed with something my brain was too muddled to identify.

“Eve, you’re up, finally,” Levi said, striding into the kitchen with a grin. “It’s so boring around here without you.”

Rook smoothly drew away and headed back to the refrigerator. “What are you feeling, Evelyn? There’s a chicken meal in here from the chef, or I can make sandwiches or omelets or something.”

“Oh, Rook makes the best omelets,” Levi said, taking the barstool next to mine.

“Okay, sure, sounds good. And a glass of orange juice, please?” I felt silly asking for it, since I was perfectly capable of pouring myself a glass of juice. But there was no reason to start something with Rook when he’d made it clear that he wanted to do “things” for me.

He gave me a knowing grin before getting to work on our breakfast for lunch. My mind wandered back to that moment I’d been almost certain he was going to kiss me, and that’s when I recognized what had been mixed with anticipation—guilt. Just last night, I’d kissed Tyler, and moments ago, I’d been ready and willing to kiss his best friend.

What had I been thinking?

That was the problem, though, wasn’t it? I hadn’t been thinking. I had been feeling.

Feeling like I wanted to experience the brush of Rook’s mouth against mine. Like I wanted to skim my palm over his scruff and dig my fingers into his already disheveled hair to mess it up even more. Like I wanted the warmth of those big hands moving down, down, down my body.

I squeezed my legs together, annoyed at my weakness over these men. For years, all thoughts of sex had been banished to when I was alone. My favorite book boyfriends had kissed me, touched me, made love to me sweetly, and pounded into me against a wall. I’d considered the daydreams harmless, because they would always be just that—dreams.

This was different. Rook was a flesh and blood man, and I was living in his house. I couldn’t use him to scratch an itch, even in my mind. It was a slippery slope between imagination and reality. Once I crossed that line, the walls I’d so carefully built over the last decade would crumble to the ground.

I couldn’t let that happen—could I?

A snap, followed by, “Hello to Eve,” yanked me out of my musings, and I turned to look at Levi. “You don’t seem very with it today. Do we need to get Dr. Thomas back over here?”

If even Levi was concerned, I really needed to get my act together. “No, sorry, my mind was just wandering.”

“Oh, yeah?” He waggled his eyebrows. “Please tell me you were fantasizing about me.”

A flush crept up my neck to my cheeks, and I gulped down half of my orange juice. He was much too close to the truth for comfort. I could have just as easily been thinking about running my fingers through his hair, and that was disconcerting, to say the least. Was there something about being surrounded by men that made hormones go out of whack? I needed to research this possible phenomenon. It would explain so much.

Then again, if I was honest with myself, there were more than hormones at play here. I genuinely liked Levi . . . and Rook and Tyler and Landon. And liking them made them so much more dangerous. Attractive men did little for me. But actual *attraction* based on kindness, shared interests, and chemistry? That just might be my kryptonite.

“If anything, she was fantasizing about cutting your giant ego into bite-sized pieces,” Rook said dryly.

Levi placed a hand over his heart. “You wound me.” With a wink aimed at me, he added, “Besides, Eve darling is way too sweet for such metaphorical violence.”

“The last thing we need is more violence, metaphorical or otherwise,” Landon said, walking into the kitchen.

Tyler followed, appearing more like an ordinary guy than I’d ever seen him. Not that he wasn’t still hot. There was no disguising that. But his brown hair was wet and combed back, missing its signature swoop. Instead of one of his overly stylish outfits, he wore a loose pair of jeans and a faded band T-shirt. If I saw him on the street, I would take a second look, but not because he might be someone famous.

His gaze quickly found mine, and he gave me a tight smile. “Can we talk?”

“No,” Rook answered for me. “Her omelet is almost ready.”



I shrugged at Tyler, not wanting to create any waves. Well, any *more* waves.

“After?” he asked.

Landon jumped in this time. “After we eat, we’re all going to sit down and have a talk.”

“You can hear me, right?” I asked. “No one put me on mute?”

His lips twitched, as though holding back a smile. “Yes, we can hear you.”

“Why is it that you and Rook keep answering for me, then?” Not giving him time to respond, I smiled at Tyler and continued. “Whatever you have to say to me, I’ll be happy to hear it after I’m finished with my meal.”

Levi snickered and Landon lifted his hands in a gesture of surrender. With an extra flourish, Rook placed my omelet and silverware in front of me and then gave me a jaunty salute.

Though I was grinning as I took my first bite, my mind was fixated once again . . .

Why was Tyler here and not back at rehab?

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

*Tyler*

As promised, the minute Evelyn finished eating, she climbed down from her barstool and followed me to the patio. Even though I'd been trying to figure out what to say for hours, the words didn't immediately come. I'd never been adept at apologies, something I blamed on growing up in a political family. My father was a master at evasive statements masking as remorse, and I'd been a quick learner.

Not that an apology was enough. That was something I'd learned as part of my addiction recovery plan. Words could only do so much; actions were what mattered. The problem was, I didn't know how to make amends for screwing up last night. Not when it came to Evelyn.

She didn't deserve to be linked to my scandal, but since I couldn't go back in time and stop myself from punching that asshole, there was no way to separate her from what had happened. There were too many witnesses and photos of the incident.

“Are you done with rehab?”

Her soft, raspy voice drew me out of my thoughts, and I looked past the outdoor coffee table to where she sat across from me. Her still-damp hair fell down her back in soft waves, leaving her face, scrubbed clean of makeup, in full view. It was the first time I'd been around her when she wasn't

ducking her head or pulling her hair over her cheek, and damn, she was gorgeous.

Given the way she'd run away after I caught sight of her scar that first night, she'd probably assumed I'd been repulsed by the sight of it. But that couldn't have been further from the truth. I'd been surrounded by women who spent inordinate amounts of money on their appearances my whole life, and after a while, they all started looking the same. One girl with perfect hair, body, clothes, makeup was the same as the next. I was a dick for even thinking it, but I could be honest with myself—I was a dick. At least, I had been. For the last couple of months, I'd been trying really hard to overcome that particular affliction, but Rome wasn't built in a day and all that.

When I'd caught sight of Evelyn's scar, I'd been intrigued. How had she gotten it? When? Had she ever considered plastic surgery? If no, why not? I was certain every woman—hell, person—I'd known since childhood would have done everything in their power to disguise what they would see as a flaw.

Even more, I wanted to know how the rough, uneven skin would feel under my fingertips, my lips. And I wanted to know how it would feel to her. Would the sensations be muted or heightened?

Before spotting her scar, I'd enjoyed her brand of quiet and slightly snarky shyness as I'd flirted with her and eventually cajoled her into dancing with me. But the scar . . . that was the thing that made me long to know more. To know her.

I had no idea what that said about me, but a therapist would have a field day with it, I was sure.

Finding Evelyn watching me now, I had to remind myself of what she'd asked me. Oh, yes, rehab. "I spoke with my sponsor, and since I'm so close to being finished with the program, he's agreed to virtual sessions for the next few days."

Considering my upcoming announcement to the guys, the old me would have happily found any excuse to run away,

even if only back to rehab. But the new me understood that running wasn't the answer. It would only delay the inevitable.

"That's good." Evelyn twisted her hands in her lap. "You'll want your bedroom back, of course. I'll move out today."

"No," I said a little too harshly. Lowering my voice, I tried again. "Please, don't move out. It's yours for as long as you want it. I'll take the guest room."

Her mouth twisted into something resembling a smirk, but on her, it was more cute than smug. "I knew there had to be a guest room in this place."

"We all wanted you to have the master, and that hasn't changed just because I'm back."

She nodded, though her expression proved she wasn't fully convinced. That was something I'd have to deal with later. A quick glance through the patio doors to where the guys waited told me that I didn't have much longer until they joined us.

"Listen, Evelyn, I wanted to apologize for last night. I feel horrible about how it all went down, and I feel even worse that you got hurt. I know better than to allow my temper to get the best of me, and yet, it did. I'm sincerely sorry."

I shook my head, angrier at myself than she could ever know. Last night had been my first major test, and I'd failed, miserably. "I've been trying to figure out a way to help make up for the hit to your reputation, and the only thing I can think of is hiring a public relations manager for you. Is that something you'd be okay with?" When she didn't immediately respond, I kept going. "I mean, you can, of course, work with the band's PR team, but I figured you might like your own. It's important that you're getting advice that will benefit you specifically, and not only the band."

Had I just been rambling? Son of a bitch. I didn't ramble. Not ever.

Smashing my lips together to stop myself from continuing, I waited. Evelyn adjusted in her chair, her hand straying to the left side of her chest and arm. Then, as though just realizing it

wasn't already there, she tugged her hair over her shoulder and positioned it so it fell against her cheek.

"You're forgiven, though you don't have anything to apologize for. Like I said last night, I don't blame you for what happened. That guy was wretched, and I only got hurt because I tripped."

Forgiven. Was it really that simple? It didn't seem possible.

"And I don't need a PR manager. In case you haven't noticed, I don't have any interest in being a public figure, so there's no point in trying to save my public reputation."

"Are you sure?" I asked, still needing to make up for my hotheaded actions. "Maybe you should talk to Presley about it before deciding." Though Presley was invested in the reputation of the band, she was undoubtedly more invested in her best friend.

"Talk to Presley about what?" Landon asked as he, Levi, and Rook joined us on the patio.

"About hiring a PR manager for Evelyn," I answered. "On my dime, of course."

"That's a . . . good idea."

He said it like he was surprised I was thinking of someone other than myself. Though the response caused a twinge of pain, I couldn't blame him. Landon had accused me of being selfish a hundred or more times, and he'd been correct, on every count.

I'd been living as an entitled rich boy who put my desire for fun, partying, and basking in the limelight above everything and everyone else. It had taken a lot of self-reflection these past months to understand that it was time to move past all that and finally be a man.

While Landon and Rook spent the next few minutes trying to convince Evelyn of the wisdom of my suggestion, I walked to the edge of the patio and stared at a sailboat anchored just off the shore. It was lucky. It could drift to its heart's desire, and yet, it had the certainty that, to steady itself, all it had to do

was drop its anchor. There was no threat of floating aimlessly forever, and to escape being enveloped by stormy seas, it merely had to find safe harbor.

Oh, to be a sailboat.

And now I was jealous of an inanimate object. I was at the top of my game, clearly. Maybe I just needed to turn my wacky thoughts into song lyrics. Then, people would consider me poetic rather than crazy.

“Ty,” Rook said, and unsure how long I’d been peering at the boat, I returned to my spot on the outdoor couch.

“What did I miss?” I asked.

He gave me a funny look. “We were getting ready to discuss what to do about your relationship—your public relationship—with Evelyn.”

“Right.” I stood back up, and now, everyone was looking at me like I’d lost my mind. Just wait until they heard what I was going to say next. “Before that, there’s something I need to tell you.”

Stuffing my hands into the back pockets of my jeans, I paced to and from the edge of the pool a few times before forcing myself to stand still. Now would be the perfect time to sip on some bourbon or down a tequila shot or even chug a bottle of beer. My throat burned from the mere thought, reminding me why I needed to keep going. No time like the present.

“I’m quitting the band.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

*July, Camp Shining Light*

*I asked Isaac what will happen when summer is over. He still brings his guitar, but he doesn't play it anymore. He just presses his fingers to the strings as he moves from one chord to another.*

*When I asked him, he dropped his guitar and looked at me. And looked. And looked. And didn't say a word.*

*It's been on my mind.*

*It's almost the end of July, and we have two more weeks in August before we all go home. I'll go home to Oklahoma, and he'll go to Kansas.*

*"I have a car." It took him a long time, but that was what he said. The way he said it, it kind of dragged out of him, and I couldn't tell if he was saying that because he planned on driving to see me, or because he was informing me that people could travel by cars.*

*"My parents don't let me date." I don't know why I said that. None of our parents let us date, and what he and I are doing? It's so so so beyond what I'm allowed to do.*

*Holding hands. Kissing. Sitting in a boy's lap.*

*We've never said out loud that we're together—boyfriend-girlfriend. We've always seemed more than that, above labels, maybe. He tells me he loves me, so of course, I'm his*

*girlfriend. And I don't want to break up with him, but I don't see how this will work out.*

*"I love you."*

*He waited for me to say it, and I did, but it sounded weird. I don't think he heard it, because he kissed me again, and somehow, we ended up on the ground, on my beach towel.*

*He whispered, "I love you," a hundred times in just a few minutes.*

*I don't know what to do.*

*Evelyn*



*Tyler is leaving Kings Gambit?*

I looked from him to Rook, who was running a thumb along his dragon tattoo as he stared at Tyler in disbelief. Landon's expression wasn't much different, his brows drawn together in some combination of confusion and anger. Levi threaded his fingers through his chin-length hair and reclined in his chair, his posture deceptively relaxed as he flexed and unflexed his fist over and over.

Obviously, I wasn't the only one struck speechless, and a bit dumb, by this news.

"Can you repeat that," Rook demanded rather than asked.

Tyler's shoulders slumped, and a sigh escaped his lips. "I'm sorry, but it's time. I should have done it before rehab. I just couldn't see the full picture then. Now, I can."

"What's the full picture?" Landon asked.

"I'm not good for the band, and the band isn't good for me."

"That's fucking insane," Rook interjected. "This band never would have happened without you. You wrote most of



the songs that made us a success. Without you, we're nothing but a group of musicians. We don't have anything to say."

"And we can keep writing together, if that's what the three of you want. But no more performing, going on tour, or attending events for me." His gaze shifted to mine on the last part of his statement. "If I hadn't already decided, last night would have cemented it. This is the right—the only—choice."

I linked my hands together to keep myself from stretching out to Tyler. Not that I could even reach him from here. But my instincts were screaming at me to offer him comfort, and for whatever reason, my body insisted that physical comfort was the way to go.

"Is this because of something someone said to you at rehab?" Rook stood and started pacing. "Because there are other options for helping you stay sober. We can hire a sponsor to go on tour with us, and we'll get rid of all the alcohol on the bus. We can also—"

"Stop," Tyler said, interrupting. "It's not about any of that. I mean, it is. Touring is difficult enough, even when I spend half of it drunk. But my decision is about more than my sobriety. I don't like the person I've become." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "Not that I've ever been a peach, but it's gotten worse since the Kings hit it big. Being a rock star gives me an excuse to be a selfish, fame-obsessed, party-hard, self-destructive manwhore without consequences. At least, most of the time. You know I'm right. How many times have you warned me I was going down a harmful path?" he asked Rook, who just remained stone-faced.

He turned to Landon next. "How many times have you scolded me for putting my needs and wants before the band's?"

"Too many," Landon replied.

"Precisely." Turning to Levi, Tyler asked, "And how many times have you attempted to distract me from my destructive behaviors with . . . well, significantly less destructive ones?"

Without giving him a chance to respond, he continued. “I’ve been a fuckup, and I’m owning that. I wish I could go back and fix everything I’ve broken, but I can’t. All I can do is focus on what’s best for all of us moving forward, and that’s leaving the band.”

“But is that what you want?”

It wasn’t until all eyes were on me that I realized I’d spoken aloud. I shouldn’t have. This was none of my business. I should have left as soon as Tyler made his announcement. I’d been too surprised to move then, but I wasn’t now.

“Sorry,” I said, standing. “I’ll let you guys discuss this alone.”

“Don’t leave,” Rook said. “You’ve earned your spot at this table, so to speak. Not to mention—you’re right. Ty needs to tell us what he wants instead of only focusing on what he thinks the rest of us need.”

“Please stay,” Tyler said. “Whether you wanted to or not, you’ve become one of us. Every choice made here today affects you.” He waited until I sat back down to continue. “And to answer your question, yes, it is what I want.”

Rook paused in his pacing to comment. “I don’t believe you.”

Tyler laughed, the sound surprisingly genuine. It didn’t seem he was offended in the slightest. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Why are you laughing?” He glanced from Tyler to the twins. “And why am I the only one freaking out right now?”

“My freak-out is on the inside,” Levi said, his voice and expression unusually dry.

I had no idea what possessed me, but I found myself speaking up again. “Maybe it would help to hear why Tyler doesn’t want to be in the band anymore.”

Though mediating had never been my thing—I preferred to avoid confrontation altogether—I couldn’t seem to help myself with these guys. They needed someone who wasn’t so

emotionally involved to step in, and since I was the only outsider, the job had landed in my lap. Besides, I felt for all of them. Breaking up a band as successful as Kings Gambit was a huge deal, but Tyler had to do what was right for him. I got that.

“Do you know why I wanted to join the band in the first place?” When no one responded, he said, “To spite my family. Not for the love of music or performing. To rebel. That’s the beginning and end of it. And, yeah, I grew to love writing and playing and performing, but that’s all incidental to my main goal, which was always about rebelling.”

I thought about what he’d told me at the club. That his family despised him. Though I hoped that wasn’t the case, what he said now made sense. By turning against everything his politics-and-image-driven parents and brother stood for, he’d snubbed their way of life, and in turn, them.

“Who cares?” Levi asked, finally diving into the conversation. “You might have jumped into this to spite your hoity-toity parents and their friends, but that’s not what it’s about anymore. So why not let the past go and focus on the present instead? Otherwise, what was the point of getting sober? You’ll never be happy doing anything else, and you know it. We all know it.”

“I don’t expect you to understand, and that’s okay. I’m not sure I fully understand it myself. But I know—” he pressed a fist to his stomach “—in here that it’s what I need to do. And I feel—” he moved that fist to over his heart “—here that it’s what I want to do. It fucks up the band, and I’m sorry about that. Sorrier than you’ll ever know. But I’ve made up my mind, and there’s no changing it.”

The space fell silent once again, but there was a lightness to it that hadn’t been there when he’d first declared he was quitting the band. I had a feeling it would take the other guys time to process his decision, but at least they weren’t screaming at him or throwing things. That’s how I’d always imagined something like this going down. F-bombs dropping left and right. A smashed guitar or two. Someone getting shoved into the pool.

Rook finally stopped pacing long enough to strip out of his shirt and jeans, leaving him in only a snug pair of black boxer briefs. O . . . kay. My brain screamed at me to look away from his long, lean body and the outline of his, uh, package. But I couldn't seem to get my eyes to obey. As he strode to the edge of the pool and dove in, I noticed the way his back muscles flexed above the globes of his butt and had to hold back a girlish giggle.

I wasn't completely wrong about someone ending up in the pool, after all. At least there wasn't any shoving involved. Instead, the sight of Rook's almost-naked body would be burned into my brain for all eternity.

"Eve, you got a little drool right here," Levi said, pointing to the corner of his mouth with a grin, and Tyler snickered.

Unable to handle my embarrassment, I covered my face with my hands and groaned. Even though I was twenty-six years old, right now, I might as well have been back at Camp Shining Light as a thirteen-year-old, spying on the high school boys during their "boys only" swimming time. And getting caught by the head counselor.

Standing, I quickly said, "I think that's my cue . . ." before rushing into the house and toward the stairs.

I'd almost made it when the sound of heavy footsteps behind me made me turn. Levi jogged toward me and wrapped me in a hug. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I wasn't thinking. The last thing I want is to embarrass you."

My first thought was that Levi smelled like the ocean, but not in a bad way. Like sun and saltwater and sand. Had he gone surfing this morning?

My second thought was that he gave good hugs. No, not good. Amazing. He held me against him, but in a comforting rather than a sexual way. His chest was warm without being suffocating, and his voice was soothing as he hummed the chorus to "Thank You" by Dido. It was the Goldilocks of hugs.

When was the last time I'd been held like this? Never, I realized. I'd never experienced this kind of peace in someone else's arms. Well, peace mixed with undeniable attraction, but I was ignoring that last bit.

"You're into nineties music, huh?" I asked when we finally parted.

"Will you think less of me if I maintain the nineties was the best decade for music? I know everyone says the sixties, but what about Nirvana, R.E.M., Pearl Jam, Weezer, The Black Crowes? I could go on."

"You sound like Presley, except she's all about nineties country. Especially the women in country."

He nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, yeah. Shania, Reba, Faith, Martina, Trisha," he said, ticking them off on his fingers. "No last names needed. They were all powerhouses."

I couldn't have stopped the smile that crossed my face even if I'd wanted to. This was a new side to Levi, and I liked it. The way his light blue eyes glistened reminded me of Elsa's ice castle, and his smile spread wide, as though it was taking over his entire face.

For the first time since I moved in with the men of Kings Gambit, I seriously questioned my decision. They were supposed to be bad boy rockers who wanted to use me for their own gain. But when I looked at Levi, I couldn't find a single bad thing about him. He was sweet and fun and made me laugh. And, as my gaze zeroed in on his lips, I wanted to bang my head against a wall, which Dr. Thomas likely wouldn't condone. This was bad.

The only one of the four I hadn't fantasized about kissing today was Landon, and that was probably only because I hadn't spent any time alone with him. I needed to get myself under control before I did something stupid. Well, something more stupid than moving in with rock stars and agreeing to being Tyler's girlfriend. Fake girlfriend. And kissing him.

A sound I recognized as the front gate bell chimed through the house, and Levi took my hand in his. "Great. Our guests

are here.”

“Guests?” I asked while he led me to the front door.

He merely grinned in response and opened the door as a dark SUV pulled into the driveway. Seconds later, a familiar blonde bounded out, followed by a more subdued but smiling Scarlett.

“Evie,” Presley shouted, rushing forward and throwing herself into my arms. “I missed you.”

I laughed. “It hasn’t even been three weeks since we saw each other.”

“So? I can’t still miss you? And how’s your head?”

“It’s fine. Just a bit achy.” Turning to Scarlett, I gave her a hug before asking, “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but what are you two doing here?”

Scarlett shrugged. “We thought you could probably use a friend or two right now.”

“Plus, Scarlett wants to talk to you about her album,” Presley added, pouting a bit. “It’s like she doesn’t trust my judgment.”

I laughed again. It was so great to see them.

Besides, if anyone could tell me how to navigate my growing crushes on multiple men, it was these two.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

*July, Camp Shining Light*

*I talked to Jane on the phone today, and I didn't tell her about Isaac. There she was, going on and on about the movie star she's dating while I kept my mouth shut about my own boyfriend. And I don't even know why. Sure, I've always been private, but she's my best friend. I should be able to tell her anything.*

*Maybe it's because I just want to keep him my secret for a while longer. Or maybe it's because I still don't know what will happen next month when this is all over and we go our separate ways.*

*Those are good enough excuses, but I have a feeling there's something else going on that I don't want to admit—guilt.*

*Guilt over my behavior this summer. I never thought I would let things go so far with the first boy who showed me interest. I care about Isaac. Really, I do. But is that a good enough reason to throw away the values that have been drilled into me my entire life?*

*Sometimes, I wish I could run away from camp in the middle of the night and never look back. Maybe then I could pretend like this summer never happened.*

*Evelyn*



While Levi greeted my two closest friends, I noticed they hadn't arrived alone. Beckett and Wyatt had also exited the SUV and were hanging back, watching their women with varying expressions. Like almost every time I'd seen him, Beckett wore an easy smile, while Wyatt's face appeared blank under the shadow of his ball cap. But after six months of living in Hastings, I'd learned to read the tattoo-covered man better than that. On closer inspection, his dark blue eyes were attentive and shone with mild amusement. And when I looked closely, I saw the edges of his lips lift ever so slightly.

Walking the few steps to the men, I smiled. "I'm surprised to see you two here."

Wyatt grunted, and Beckett looked at him, shaking his head. "Can you understand why I've started calling this guy and Sawyer 'the dour duo'?" he asked me, referring to his older, and much surlier, brother. "They needed to be separated for the sake of my sanity."

I bit back a laugh, but just barely. "Wyatt isn't so bad, once you get used to him."

The man in question crossed his arms over his bulky chest. "Not so bad, huh?"

"Yep." I angled my head toward the front porch, which was now empty. "Guess we should go in."

"We'll grab the bags and then meet you in there," Wyatt replied.

Apparently, they were all staying here. Though I was surprised, I wasn't at all disappointed, since that meant more time with Scarlett and Presley.

Inside, the girls were *oohing* and *aahing* over the house and the view out the back. Landon came up beside me and said quietly, "I hope you're okay with the surprise. When I called Presley last night to tell her what happened at the club, she was worried about you, and I invited her out here." He rubbed



the back of his head. “I thought you might, uh, want some female companionship.”

His thoughtfulness, mixed with his unexpected uncertainty, made my chest swell. “Normally, I’m not much for surprises.”

He nodded. “I guessed that about you.”

I smiled in response. “But this happens to be a good one, so thank you. I appreciate you opening your home to not only me but my friends as well.”

“You’re lucky to have so many people who care about you.”

Letting my gaze drag to Presley and Scarlett, as well as Beckett and Wyatt, who had joined them, I knew he wasn’t wrong. I’d thought Presley was crazy when she’d suggested that I go live in Hastings after the scandal broke. But it ended up being one of the best things to ever happen to me. Partly because it brought Scarlett, Wyatt, Carter, Brady, and Micah into my life. And partly because, if I hadn’t left my hometown six months ago, I never would have had the courage to come to California.

Clearing my throat, I said, “It’s a new thing, so I’m still getting used to it.”

“Oh?”

Landon’s tone suggested he wanted to know more, so I returned my attention to him. “Apart from Presley, I’ve never really had close friends.” Shrugging, I added, “It’s the fate of a wallflower, I suppose. To observe rather than participate.”

He laughed, the sound more amused than befit my comment. “You’re no wallflower, Evelyn.”

I straightened my back. Who was he to tell me what I was or wasn’t? “I don’t think you’re qualified to make that judgment.”

“Maybe not, but I stand by my statement. You’re reserved, yes. You don’t talk just to be heard. You wait until you have something to say. But I don’t believe you’re shy. You weren’t too shy to accept Ty’s offer for a dance at the party. You

weren't too shy to convince the world that you were his girlfriend last night or to defend him to that asshole. And you weren't too shy to jump into a heated conversation between the four of us earlier to remind Ty—and me, Levi, and Rook—that what he wants does matter.” He reached up to brush my hair off my cheek, the slight touch making me shiver. “Maybe you’ve been acting the wallflower, but I don’t think that’s who you are. You, Evelyn Bishop, were meant to shine.”

The words were like a punch to the gut. Was he right? Not about the shining part—that was a stretch. But the part about observing rather than participating being an act instead of a necessity . . . that struck a chord.

Looking back, I hadn't always been so withdrawn. Quiet, yes, but only with strangers. I'd had plenty of friends—even if only surface-level ones—at school and church. Socializing was an unavoidable part of life, so I'd adapted. And, at times, I'd truly enjoyed it.

It wasn't until the last couple of years of high school that I'd begun shutting myself off from everyone. Even Presley. Sure, we'd spoken often, but our conversations had usually revolved around our songs. Probably because, whenever she'd asked about what was going on with me, I'd told her nothing had changed. When, in truth, everything had.

I hated to admit it, but Landon's uncanny ability to see too much was hitting a nerve this time.

“So, Evie, have you hit any of the landmarks yet?” Presley called from the kitchen, where she was helping herself to a glass of lemonade.

Grateful for the distraction from Landon and his insight, I made my way into the kitchen, where Tyler, Levi, Beckett, and Rook—who was back in his clothes, his hair damp—were already seated. Scarlett and Wyatt stood a few feet away, her back leaning into his chest. They were too cute.

As I sat next to Rook, he asked me, “What kind of landmarks were you wanting to see? The Hollywood Walk of Fame or maybe visit Paramount Studios? Shop on Rodeo Drive?”

Presley laughed. “Those sound fun, but I was talking about landmarks from *The O.C.* It’s Evie’s favorite TV show.”

Tyler snorted, and I leaned forward to glare at him. I wouldn’t tolerate any negative comments aimed at the one show I’d watched so many times, I’d lost count. But before I could scold him, he spoke to me. “You and Rook might be soulmates.”

Rook aimed his own glare at his friend. “I thought you agreed to never speak of that?”

“Pretty sure that promise expired after a decade.” Tyler gripped Rook’s shoulder before saying to the rest of us, “Back in the day, I caught this guy crying like a baby while watching an episode of *The O.C.* He had to streak through the gym during a pep rally to keep me quiet about it.”

All the guys in the room started cracking up while Presley and Scarlett emitted matching “aww” noises. Too busy taking in Rook’s reluctant grin and the accompanying sparkle in his hazel eyes, I failed to react at all.

“To be fair, it was the scene where Ryan left to go back to Chino,” he said, his voice softly entertained.

I nodded, immediately understanding. “And with ‘Hallelujah’ playing in the background? Who wouldn’t cry?”

“Exactly. But back to the original topic, not much of the show was filmed in Newport Beach so much as the surrounding area.”

“What about the diner on the end of the pier the characters always went to?” Presley asked. It might have been my favorite show, but we’d watched it together as tweens.

“That’s actually a coffee shop in Redondo Beach, but we could go to Ruby’s Diner at the end of Balboa Pier. I’m sure it was inspiration for the location they used in the show.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Wyatt said. “Even if only Evelyn, Presley, and Scarlett go with security, they’re going to attract too much attention. And the paparazzi are going to be hungry for shots of Evelyn after what happened last night.”

Rook slid off his barstool and withdrew his phone from his jeans pocket. “I know the owner. Let me see if I can work something out.”

Presley shot me a mischievous look. “How *nice* of him.”

Since there was no way I was taking the bait in front of a room full of people, I merely nodded and said, “Yep.”



Three hours later, the nine of us, plus five bodyguards, exited several vehicles a short distance from the pier. Even though Presley was wearing a dark brown wig and the twins wore ball caps, our group was more than a little conspicuous. If anyone figured out who we were and posted about it online, paparazzi would show up in droves.

Wyatt narrowed his gaze as he took in our surroundings, lit by streetlamps. “I’m still not sure about this.”

“Don’t worry so much,” Tyler replied. “Thanks to Rook, we’ll have the diner to ourselves. Besides, it’s a Thursday evening in February. Not exactly the height of tourist season.”

He had a point. Though I spotted a few people out, running or walking their dogs, the beachfront was mostly empty. No one had even glanced our way thus far.

Our oversized group had only made it a few steps when Scarlett pointed. “Oh, look, a cute, little bookstore. And it’s still open.”

Presley took a step in that direction. “Let’s go in. We have a few minutes before the diner is expecting us, right?” she asked Rook.

He nodded before turning to me, as though he was silently asking if I was good with going inside. My stomach flipped at the gesture. Even though I was probably reading too much into it, I couldn’t help feeling that he was communicating something with that look. Something that suggested he was seeing me and him as an *us* in that moment.

I tugged on the ends of my hair. “I wouldn’t mind picking up a few books.” Though I’d brought my e-reader to California with me, I longed to sit outside and listen to the waves crash with a paperback open in my lap.

Scarlett took my hand and practically dragged me with her, probably because she knew that, if we kept standing there, Wyatt would find a reason to object. Inside, I followed her to the romance section. When I’d moved to Hastings, we’d quickly discovered that we shared a love of all things romance, especially novels. If I couldn’t experience it in real life, I’d have to be happy reading about it.

While I scanned the shelves, Scarlett immediately reached for the newest Jennifer L. Armentrout book. “Have you read this one?”

I checked the cover. “Not yet, but I’ve heard good things.”

She tucked it under her arm. “Getting it, but I’m limiting myself to three. My TBR stack at home is already about ready to topple.”

“That’s the great things about e-books. You can add as many books as you want without looking like a hoarder.”

“I know, I know. I just spent so many years going to the library for all my books, reading on a device isn’t the same.” She sighed dramatically as she added another paperback to her stack. “You know?”

“Absolutely.”

Dragging a random book from the shelf, I skimmed the back cover. The words “billionaire,” “bad boy,” and “rock star” jumped out at me, and I hid a little grin. This sounded like my kind of book.

“Whatcha got there?” Presley asked as she suddenly appeared behind me and lifted the paperback from my hand. When she got a glimpse of the front cover, where a bare-chested man covered in tattoos leaned against a woman, holding her hands above her head, my best friend’s eyes widened. “Well, well, Evie. I’m surprised at you. What happened to those sweet little romances you used to read?”

My hackles rising, I retorted, “In case you failed to notice, I’m not thirteen anymore. I like sexy books.” I reached for *Neon Gods*, a book I’d read several times, and flashed it at her. “I even like books with public sex. I have needs just like every twenty-six-year-old woman, and it’s not like I’m even a virgin.”

As soon as those last few words spilled from my lips, I covered my mouth with my hand and shook my head. I hadn’t meant to say that aloud. I’d only intended to make a point and had revealed one of my biggest secrets instead.

Presley’s mouth dropped open, but not in a way that conveyed shock so much as hurt. She had to be wondering why I’d never told her, and I didn’t blame her. Over the years since she’d left Oklahoma, she’d tried to talk to me about guys, but I always shut down that line of questioning as quickly as possible. It was no wonder she’d been surprised to see me with a steamy romance novel. She’d probably assumed I was asexual.

Eventually, she moved forward and pulled me into a hug. “I’m sorry, Evie,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to offend you with my teasing.”

“No,” I sighed. “I overreacted. It’s just a sore subject for me.”

*Understatement of the millennia.*

She nodded, though her frown told me she was still confused. “Maybe we can talk about it later?”

“I’d like that,” I replied, surprised to find that I meant it. After bottling things up for so many years, the idea of finally sharing this part of my past was a relief.

“Good. Now, finish picking out your sexy rock star books so we can go eat. I’m ready for a cheeseburger and strawberry shake. And I’ll take that.” She plucked the copy of *Neon Gods* from my hand and waggled her eyebrows. “Sounds kinky.”

Once she’d sauntered off, Scarlett caught my gaze, and we both shook our heads with matching grins. There was no one quite like Jane Presley Smith.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

*Rook*

“Anyone need a refill?” Levi asked the group. “This round is on me.”

The twins, Tyler, Wyatt, Beckett, and I were gathered around a bar-height table in the back of Joe’s, an old coffee shop my bandmates and I frequented. Because of its age and general lack of style or fancy, Starbucks-style options, it was the kind of establishment that only attracted regulars, none of whom gave a flying fuck about our rock star status. I already dreaded the day our low-key hangout spot got leaked to the paparazzi. We’d officially have nowhere else to go.

Today, it felt more like a haven than ever. After the entire group of us went to the diner last night, the girls had insisted on staying at the house for a “no boys allowed” pool party, so we’d needed somewhere to go that wasn’t a bar, out of respect for Tyler. Otherwise, we’d all probably end up with our noses pressed to the glass as we drooled over our respective women in their bikinis.

Not that Evelyn was mine . . . yet.

After Levi finished playing waiter, Beckett asked, “So, I know I shouldn’t ask, and you can totally tell me to fork off, but is the band staying together? Clay is a huge fan, as you might remember from meeting him at the label party, and he’s dying to know.”

“Fork off?” I asked to distract Beckett from the fact that I was looking between Tyler, Levi, and Landon, silently asking for permission to share the news. They all gave a nod of assent.

“We have a teenager at home,” the cheerful cowboy answered with a laugh. “Have to keep the swearing to a minimum.”

“Got it.” Tapping my fingers against my mug, I thought out my next words carefully. “Anything we may or may not say about the band is off the record, okay?”

He nodded immediately. “Absolutely. I know better than most how damaging rumors are in this industry. I would never do anything to hurt you guys. Not to mention, my wife would murder me.”

“Same,” Wyatt said. “As in, my fiancée would dig the hole after Presley bludgeoned me with the shovel.”

My lips twitched, thinking that sounded like the plot of a country song that would make the country star millions. “Right, well, we probably should have broken the news to Presley first, but . . .” I rubbed my palm over my rough stubble, delaying the inevitable—the moment I’d have to say the words aloud for the first time.

Even though I’d had twenty-four hours to absorb Tyler’s announcement, I still hadn’t even begun to process it. Part of me wanted to keep arguing with him. He could change his habits without quitting on us. Kings Gambit would—could—never be the same without him. But another part of me was trying really hard to see the situation from his perspective. If leaving the band was what he felt he had to do, who was I to tell him he was wrong?

Still, no matter how many times I made that argument to myself, I struggled to accept it.

“I’m retiring,” Tyler said, saving me from having to utter the words . . . for now, at least. “But you can tell Clay not to worry. My boys here will keep the Kings going.”



“Well, shirt.” Beckett took a long swig of his iced coffee. “Now I feel like an asshole. I thought you were going to tell me I was crazy for even asking.”

“You do realize the teenager in your house knows exactly what those stupid non-curses are referring to, right?” Landon asked with a half-smile.

Levi punched him in the shoulder. “Don’t be an asshole.”

Beckett shrugged, his grin back. “It’s a habit now. Anyway, I really am sorry for bringing up the whole band breaking up thing.”

“It’s fine,” Tyler replied. “Although I’m sure these three are still mad at me, there’s no point in avoiding the subject. I mean, we do live together.” He laughed self-deprecatingly. “Unless they decide to kick me out.”

I perked up at that. “You’re not planning on moving out?”

He tipped his head to one side. “No. Why would I?”

His surprise acted as a balm to my frayed nerves. Maybe what I’d been struggling to process had little to do with the band. Instead, it was the idea of Tyler no longer being in my life. Though there’d been times over the years when I’d wanted to strangle him, he was my oldest friend. My brother, really. I couldn’t imagine him not being around anymore.

“As far as I’m concerned, you’re always welcome,” Levi said, lifting his mug.

Tyler tapped his bottle of water against the mug. “Thanks, man.”

Landon took his turn next. “Since you paid for half of that ridiculously overpriced house, I guess you can stay.”

With a laugh, Tyler said, “I can always count on you to give it to me straight, Lan.”

As all eyes turned toward me, I couldn’t help the smile spreading across my face. Raising my own mug, I said, “You don’t ever have to ask, Ty. You’re my brother, and I’ll always have your back.”

Tyler glared at me. “Fuck, dude. Are you trying to make me cry?”

“Maybe. Call it payback for all the shit you’ve given me about *The O.C.*”

He wiped at his eyes dramatically. “That’s fair.”

Wyatt cleared his throat. “Since you four seem to be in a sharing mood, now might be a good time for you to spill about your intentions toward Evelyn.”

Just the mention of her name made my cock come to life. It had been doing that ever since overhearing her conversation in the bookstore last night. I hadn’t gone in there intending to eavesdrop. In fact, I’d merely wanted to pick up a book I’d read an article about earlier this week. But as soon as Presley began teasing Evelyn about whatever book she’d picked up, I hadn’t been able to resist listening in. And, damn, had I heard more than I’d bargained for.

Although I hadn’t assumed she was a virgin, I’d known she wasn’t very experienced. Her innocence wafted off her, and the mixture of that innocence with her declaration that she had needs and liked reading about public sex was fucking heady. My mind had been so full of the images Evelyn’s words had conjured, I’d had to jerk off in the shower twice after we got home last night and once this morning. And, given my current state, there was a cold shower in my immediate future.

“No offense, Wyatt,” Landon replied, “but I don’t think that’s any of your business.”

Wyatt leaned back in his chair, his expression unchanged. “Think what you want, but it is. Before she moved out here, I was responsible for her protection and well-being. She’s become like a sister to me and to Scarlett. She’s family, and that means she is my business.”

“I, for one, would love to date her,” Levi said, his excess energy being tapped out through his fingers against the table. “But I wasn’t sure if that was allowed.”

“Allowed?” I asked.

“Well, yeah. There are four of us and one of her. It seems simplest if we all keep our hands off her.”

His hangdog expression gave away that he liked that idea as much as I did. But he was right. Everyone involved would likely be better off if Evelyn remained off-limits.

“If you don’t mind some input from someone who knows, making a pact to stay away from a woman like Evelyn doesn’t usually work out well,” Wyatt said. “I’m sure Beckett knows what I’m talking about.”

Beckett nodded emphatically. “I was determined to let Sawyer or Clay have Presley. Thought both of them deserved her more than I did. Things would have gone a lot smoother if the three of us had just talked it out from the beginning and admitted that sharing was our only option.”

“You’re saying you think we should all date Evelyn?” Levi asked, his face brightening.

I was a little surprised he seemed so enthused about the idea. Although I knew he’d been crushing on her since she first arrived, Levi was a long-term relationship kind of guy. He must be imagining a future with Evelyn if he agreed that a polyamorous arrangement was the answer.

Not that I totally disagreed. The band had already been through too much this year. I wasn’t sure we could handle fighting over a girl. And the vibe coming off the twins told me they had no interest in staying away from her. Tyler . . . well, I wasn’t so certain about him.

“I’m saying, be careful,” Wyatt said. “Evelyn is special, and she deserves to be treated with the utmost respect. Learn from the mistakes Brady, Carter, and I made with Scarlett and Beckett, Clayton, and Sawyer made with Presley. If you’re all falling for her and think she may return your feelings, be open and honest about it. Talk amongst yourselves, and when the time is right, talk to Evelyn. Her two closest friends have paved the way for a relationship with all of you not being completely shocking or unthinkable. No one has to get hurt.”

Beckett gaped at him. “That’s the most I’ve ever heard you speak.”

“I save my words for when they’re necessary.”

Tyler leaned forward on his elbows. “You do realize Levi, Lan, and Rook dating Evelyn isn’t the same as Presley or Scarlett having multiple partners, right?” His eyes seemed to turn accusatory as he looked between me and the others. “They’d be putting her in the position to be hated by women around the world. The threats she’s received would be nothing in comparison to what would be thrown at her. If we really want to respect Evelyn, we’ll leave her alone.”

“That’s easy for you to say, since you get to kiss her and pretend to be her boyfriend in public,” Landon shot back.

“I was only doing what we all agreed to.”

“No one agreed to kissing.”

“This is what I’m talking about,” Wyatt interjected. “Unless you plan on sending Evelyn back to Texas or Wyoming, staying away from her completely is already off the table.”

“Are you saying you’re not interested in her?” I asked Tyler, though I already had an inkling of the answer. He wouldn’t be trying to talk the other three of us out of dating her if he didn’t care. Whether he was ready to admit it or not, Evelyn had already gotten to him. He just needed more time to sort out his feelings.

“No, but she deserves better.”

Beckett snorted. “Now you sound like me.”

Tyler glared at him. “The difference is, when it comes to me, it’s true. We’ve been on exactly one fake date, and thanks to me, it created a media frenzy. Can you imagine what would happen if we got together for real?”

Landon downed the rest of his coffee. “Why don’t we table this discussion for now? It’s after five, which means we’re allowed back at the house now.”

Wyatt stood so quickly, I barely saw him move. That guy was fast—and oddly quiet—when he wanted to be. “Let’s go.”

Although the rest of us gave in, the look that passed between me, Levi, and Landon reinforced that we’d be talking about this again.

And soon.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

*Levi*

“What is that?” Wyatt asked from the front seat of the Range Rover.

As Rook slowed in front of our gate, I leaned forward, trying to figure out what Wyatt was talking about. Most of the time, I didn’t mind being stuck in the third-row seat. Right now wasn’t one of those times.

“What is what?” I called, impatient for more information.

Instead of answering, he opened the front passenger door and jumped out. When no one else immediately moved, I squished my way up and out the back door. Wyatt was standing a few feet from the gate, glaring at something on the ground.

“What’s going on?”

With a shake of his head, he stepped aside. “Take a look,” he growled.

On the ground sat a wooden cross about two feet long, all the ends reaching gradual points. It would have looked like any old cross if it weren’t for the word “mine” hand carved into the crosspiece with what I hoped was red paint dripping from the letters.

“Creepy.”

Wyatt looked at me, his expression even harder than usual. “You don’t know the half of it.”

The rest of the guys piled out of the SUV, swearing as they got a look at the “gift” that had been left practically on our front porch.

“How much has Evelyn told you about her stalker?” Wyatt asked.

“Nothing,” Rook answered. “All we know is what Presley told us before Evelyn moved out here, and that wasn’t much.”

“Well, without betraying her confidence, I can say, without a doubt, this is from her stalker.”

My stomach churned. Presley had warned us that Evelyn wasn’t taking the situation seriously enough, and I was only now realizing that I hadn’t been taking it seriously enough, either. None of us had been. We’d just taken her to a crowded club last week, where anything could have happened to her. Thank god it had been a surprise appearance rather than a publicized one.

“Fuck.” Landon turned in a slow circle, as though studying our surroundings for anything or anyone out of place. “How did he get to us?” he asked, voicing the question that was running through my head.

Tyler dragged his fingers through his hair, mussing the usually flawless locks. “Security for the community is good but not infallible. At least he left it here rather than at the front door. Then I’d be really worried.”

“Let’s go check the camera feeds,” Rook said, taking a step back toward the Rover. “Hopefully, that’ll tell us what happened.”

“What should we do with this . . . thing?” I asked. “Should we even show it to Eve? It seems like it would just freak her out.”

“Maybe she needs to be freaked out,” my brother replied. “Her blasé attitude about her need for protection had me convinced that this whole stalker thing wasn’t a big deal. But

now that we know better, we have to do better. Give me your hoodie,” he said to me.

I tore off my sweatshirt, leaving me in a thin tee, and handed it to him. Landon used it to wrap up the cross and deposited it in the back of the SUV. I could tell by his expression that he’d rather throw it into the ocean. Not that I blamed him. The thought of showing that disgusting thing to Evelyn made bile burn the back of my throat. She was way too sweet to have to deal with something like this. If I could protect her from all of it, I would.

And if I ever got my hands on the prick who’d been harassing her, I’d strangle him with his own intestines. The thought stopped me in my tracks. Violence wasn’t my style. Never had been. I’d been thrown in detention for pulling pranks, not fighting. And yet, when it came to Evelyn, I had a feeling I would fight with everything I had to keep her safe. Happy.

After the six of us guys filed up the stairs from the garage, the scent of baking chocolate led us into the kitchen. Evelyn was sprinkling what looked like mozzarella over a dish while Scarlett chopped vegetables and Presley sat at the bar, watching.

“What’s all this?” Beckett asked.

Presley spun around on her barstool. “I tried to convince Evie that we could just order in, but she insisted on making dinner.”

I sniffed the air. “What’s baking?”

“You’re such a cutie,” Presley said with a wide grin. “You look like a puppy, sniffing for treats.”

“I’m pretty good at begging too.” Walking around the island to Evelyn, I offered her my best puppy dog eyes. “Will you give me what I want now?”

She laughed. “Depends on what you want.”

“A hug.”



Her laughter died on her lips as she set down the bowl of shredded cheese and turned to me. “Okay . . .”

Despite the confusion in her tone, I wasted no time wrapping her in my arms. Her body fit perfectly against mine, her soft skin and warmth reminding me that she was here. That she was okay. Though I’d known we’d left her in capable hands with our security team this afternoon, as I’d walked into the house, part of me had worried that she’d have somehow disappeared. That the sicko messing with her had taken her.

Still, if it were up to me, I would drag her to her bedroom, help her pack a bag, and then take her somewhere better than here. Somewhere her stalker would never think to look for her. And if there happened to be a little kissing needed to distract her, all the better.

Seriously, where were all these alpha, macho thoughts coming from? They were so unlike me.

Eventually, she withdrew from my arms and peered up at me, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth. “You okay, Levi?”

I wanted to laugh. She was the one with a stalker, and she was asking if I was all right? Of course, she didn’t know about what we’d found outside yet, so I probably seemed a little—okay, a lot—off.

For maybe the first time in my life, a blush crept up my cheeks as I took a few steps back. Before I had a chance to come up with something to say, the oven timer went off, saving me. When she turned her back to me to retrieve whatever was in the oven, I rounded the bar and attempted to disappear behind Rook.

“Smooth,” my twin muttered as I passed him.

“Fuck off.”

He chuckled, but seeming to suddenly remember what was wrapped up in my hoodie, he stopped suddenly. “Maybe you were right. We don’t have to tell her.”

I shook my head. “No, you were. She needs to know what’s going on, and she deserves the truth from us.” It was

already difficult enough trying to hide how much I wanted her. I couldn't stand the thought of hiding one more thing from her.

Scarlett must have noticed that I wasn't the only one of the guys acting strange, because she pointed her knife at the lot of us. "Is someone going to tell us what's going on?"

Wyatt leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the mouth, not seeming bothered by the knife poised at his chest. "Missed you."

"Nice try, but you're not going to distract me."

Presley nodded as she looked us over. "Yeah, you're right. Something is definitely up with these guys." She looked at her husband. "Beck? Got anything to say?"

He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Who, me?"

She snorted. "That was as good as a confession. I'm guessing whatever it is can't be good." Eyeing the glass baking dish Evelyn had just removed from the oven, she added, "At least we have Evie's famous double fudge brownies to console us."

Landon stepped forward, placing the hoodie and its contents on the island, far away from the food. "I think it's time you tell us more about this stalker of yours, Evelyn."

Then, he unwrapped the sweatshirt.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

*July, Camp Shining Light*

*It's my last day. It's my last few minutes here, actually. I'm waiting for the director, Sharon, to pick me up and take me to the bus station.*

*Mom called this morning, and since there's only one phone that goes directly to the director's office, it took them a while to find me so I could talk to her.*

*Dad had a stroke.*

*I'm afraid he's going to die.*

*What if it's my fault?*

*Evelyn*



I stared at the cross, unblinking, for so long, my eyes started burning. Though it was only a couple of feet long, it seemed to take up all the space in the room. As I studied the word “mine” in the wood, images of those same letters being carved into my skin sprang to mind, and a shudder ran through my body.

For the first time since I'd discovered the “mine” emails, the possibility that I might be in danger sank in. This wasn't

normal . . . not even close.

“Where did that come from?” Presley demanded, snapping me out of my daze.

“It was left outside the gate.” Landon covered it back up, as though the image wasn’t already branded on my brain for eternity.

Rook led the head of the security team into the room. As Marshall inspected the present left for me and asked the guys questions, I returned to putting the finishing touches on the lasagna and tuned everyone out. Ever since handing my email account over to the private investigator, I’d been avoiding all thoughts of a possible stalker like a champ. Out of sight, out of mind.

Unfortunately, my avoidance game was over. While some of the drawings attached to the emails had been disturbingly graphic, they hadn’t seemed quite real. The cross, though, was a little too real. If I wanted to—which I absolutely did not—I could pick it up. Hold it in my hands. Run my fingers over the jagged letters that dripped with red.

Another shudder raced through me, but this time it didn’t stop. Before I knew what was happening, my entire body was shaking so violently, I could barely hold on to the pan of lasagna in my hands.

“Here, let me take that,” Tyler said, his voice soothing as he seized the dish and slid it into the oven. “Should I set a timer?”

Wrapping my arms around my waist, I nodded. “Forty-five minutes.”

He punched the numbers into the oven timer before grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge and placing a hand on my lower back to steer me to the open patio doors. Feeling the pitying stares on me, I kept my eyes fixed on the floor. One foot in front of the other. That was the best I could do right now.

“Sit,” Tyler gently commanded when we reached the closest chair. “And drink this.”

Kneeling, he held the water to my mouth, poised to feed it to me like a baby's bottle. I wasn't so out of it that I was going to let that happen, so I took it from him and tipped my head back to take several large gulps before handing it back to him with shaky hands.

"I never pictured you as the nursing type."

He laughed softly. "Probably because I've never nursed anything but hangovers. But I've received plenty of nursing myself. That's the thing about being an alcoholic—your friends tend to get stuck taking care of you."

"So, you're telling me Rook's the real hero here?"

"Definitely. That man has been taking care of me almost my entire life. I don't deserve him."

"Do any of us really deserve that kind of devotion?"

Tyler brushed my hair off my shoulder, exposing my face. I inhaled sharply, waiting for him to react like he had when we'd been dancing and he'd done the same thing. But this time, his gaze didn't stray from mine even a little bit. "Normally, I would agree, but you deserve that kind of devotion and more."

I released the breath I'd been holding. "You don't even know me."

"Maybe not, but I know Presley, Scarlett, Beckett, and Wyatt would do anything for you. I know you've only been living here for weeks, and my bandmates already feel the same. I know you defended me when you had no reason to." He brushed his thumb lightly along my jaw. "Let me—let us—take care of you because we want to. And because you do deserve it. Take it from someone who knows."

Tears pricked at my eyes, and I blinked to keep them from falling. Blame Tyler's too-kind words or the shock starting to wear off, but my emotions were crumbling faster than a week-old peanut butter cookie.

Unable to produce the right words, I nodded.

“Good.” He stood and smirked. “Looks like there’s a line of people wanting to talk to you.”

I turned my head to peer over my shoulder. Presley and Scarlett were waiting at the edge of the patio, and behind them, Rook, Landon, and Levi were still in the kitchen with Marshall, but all three glanced my way within seconds.

Tyler began to walk away, but before he’d made it more than a few steps, I said, “Ty,” his nickname falling from my lips like I’d spoken it hundreds of times. “Thank you.”

His mouth split into a wide grin. “Anytime, sweet Evelyn.”

“Sweet Evelyn,” Presley parroted as she dropped onto the sofa across from me. “Seems like you have a full set of rock star admirers.”

I shook my head, though warmth infused my skin. “He’s just being nice.”

She narrowed her blue eyes on me. “You do realize grown men aren’t nice to beautiful women for no reason, right? If he’s being nice, it’s because he’s into you.”

“Beckett, Clayton, and Sawyer are nice to me for no reason.”

“Nope. They’re nice to you because they’re into *me*.”

I looked to Scarlett, who had taken the chair next to me, for help. “Tell her she’s being ridiculous.”

Scarlett smiled and shrugged. “Sorry, girl, but she does have a point. I haven’t met many men who are that thoughtful without some kind of ulterior motive.”

“Even Brady?” I shot back.

“Okay, well, Brady might be the exception to the rule. But I doubt Tyler is.”

*Beautiful woman.* “Well, it’s surface, then, because I’m a mess.” I laughed, then put my face in my hands. I had brought crazy right to their doorstep. Any physical appeal I had would wear off pretty quickly when their entire lives were turned

upside down because I happened to drag a nutjob out of the woods.

“Evelyn.” Presley scooted across the sofa, perching on the end, and reached for my hands. In the softest, kindest voice, she informed me, “You’re being stupid.”

Bristling, I opened my mouth to argue, but she held up a hand. “Seriously. Listen to me. First off, you’re my best friend in the world, and not just because we happened to grow up together. If proximity equaled friendship, then our lives would have diverged years ago. Second, you are worthwhile. As a person. As a friend. A daughter. A musician. A stalker?” She blew out a raspberry. “That’s my Wednesday. I wouldn’t think twice about spending every last bit of money I had to keep you safe or cancel an album or whatever . . . because I know you’d do the same for me.”

I had no response.

“You have no idea how kind and funny and talented and interesting you are. *And* beautiful. But all of that wrapped up in the Evelyn package?” She winked. “Kings Gambit doesn’t stand a freaking chance.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to argue with her. She was obviously looking at me through rose-colored glasses, but when I slid my eyes toward Scarlett, she nodded at me. “Listen to your girl.” Her dark eyes sparkled as she crossed her legs. “The question that really matters, though, is how do you feel about them?”

*Them.*

I didn’t even realize I was glaring until Scarlett smiled sugar sweet. She had me there. *Them.*

“I like them.”

“Mm-hmm.” Scarlett waited, and a quick glance at Presley revealed a similar posture of interest.

It was funny how saying that aloud sounded underwhelming. From Landon’s protectiveness and Levi’s fun-loving nature, to Rook’s caution and Tyler’s honesty, I was

hooked. I wanted to spend time with them and learn more about them.

That was what friends did, right?

I rolled the word around my mouth but couldn't say it. "Friends" wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth, either. Presley knew me well enough that she'd hear the false tone in my voice if I said what I felt was merely friendship.

"I'm not like you," I finally got out. "Look at you two. You're the kind of women who men fall in love with. You're the kind who can keep them. You're brave and unique. And you're good—down to the bone good." And I wasn't.

Scarlett peeked at Presley, who held my hands even tighter. "Evelyn . . ." Presley trailed off. "What in the world makes you think I'm better than you? I lied to the entire world—"

I cut her off. "Because I asked you to! I was afraid, and I made you lie, and because of me, you nearly lost everything." I was so sorry for that. No amount of apologizing would ever make up for the risk I forced her to take on my behalf. My whole life had been governed by fear and denial. "I don't want to live with secrets anymore."

Scarlett leaned back, propped her elbow on the arm of the couch, and lifted her eyebrows. "Then be honest. How do you feel about them? All of them?"

I let out a breath. She was right. I thought about what Landon had told me when I said I was a wallflower. He'd straight up laughed at me. So, okay. Time to be brave.

"If I want them . . ." Presley sat back, lifting both hands to her mouth to cover her growing smile. I felt an answering smile begin on my lips. "How do I do this?"



## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

*Landon*

Outside of Evelyn's bedroom, I raised my hand, ready to knock on the partially open door. Ever since Presley, Beckett, Scarlett, and Wyatt had left yesterday morning, she hadn't been around much. And I'd . . . well, I'd missed her. She'd only been living with us for a few weeks, and I was already attached. It was a dangerous realization, but that didn't make it any less true.

It probably didn't help that this whole stalker scenario was making me want to keep her close every minute of the day. Unfortunately, the video surveillance hadn't caught anything more than a figure in a black hoodie walking past the gate, so we had zero leads.

The sound of her soft, raspy voice drifted through the gap in the door, and I dropped my hand. At first, I thought she might be talking to herself. The cadence of her speech didn't suggest that she was speaking to another person. It was too lyrical. But then I heard her say, "I'm sorry, Dad."

I knew I should walk away—eavesdropping was inexcusable—but there was something in the resonance of her voice that kept me rooted to the spot. She sounded choked up. Like she might be crying. So, instead of leaving, I moved even closer, pressing my ear to the opening.

"It used to be so simple," she continued. "I would get up at an unholy hour to go into the bakery. I'd hide out in the back,

making cupcakes and croissants and cookies all day, and then when I got off work, I'd go to your new home and read to you." I smiled, wondering if she'd intended the alliteration of baked goods, or if it had just come naturally to her. "After that, I'd go home and make dinner for one and then spend the rest of the evening reading or playing the piano. Sometimes, I'd work on a new song for Presley. And then I'd go to bed before getting up early and starting the routine all over again.

"But it isn't that simple anymore. Home hasn't felt like home for a while. You know what Presley said to me when she showed up in Cody after all those years? She told me the lyrics of my songs suggest that I have dreams. The big kind. Not the *live in my tiny hometown for the rest of my life, hiding from the world* kind.

"I argued, of course. I know myself better than anyone, right? But her words have stuck with me, and now I'm not so sure. What if she's right? What if I've been holding myself back?"

Evelyn paused for so long, I assumed she'd cut off the conversation. When she did start speaking again, I could barely make out her words. "You may not even be listening, and I know that, even if you can understand me, you don't approve of my choices." Her soft laugh sounded watery. Now, I knew she was crying. "Maybe that's okay. I've already wasted a lot of years—too many—obsessing over your opinion of me. I love you, Dad. I do. But I'm never going to live up to who you want me to be. I'm sorry for that, but also, I'm not."

After that, her voice did get too low for me to understand her. So, I waited, my heart hammering. I was such an ass for eavesdropping, but I had very little remorse. Her one-sided conversation with her father was breaking my damn heart. And pissing me off. Though I knew nothing about the man, he clearly didn't deserve such a wonderful daughter. Because what kind of man wouldn't approve of Evelyn?

Before she'd shown up, I'd been ready to write Tyler off. He'd burned us too many times, and I wasn't known for giving second—or tenth—chances. But watching him with Evelyn

made me believe there might be hope for him after all. Levi and I hadn't been able to bring out his gentler, unselfish side. Even Rook had failed. Evelyn, though, had found a way to reach his soft underbelly just by being herself.

And Tyler wasn't the only one deeply affected by her presence. If he'd announced he was quitting the Kings a month ago, the house would likely be destroyed by now. Rook would have lost his fucking mind, and I would have gloated about how I'd told him so, many times. Levi would be spending all his time surfing just to escape the chaos, and who the hell knows what Tyler would be doing now. At best, he'd still be in rehab, trying to finish his program. At worst . . . well, I didn't even want to go there.

Maybe it was an exaggeration to say that Evelyn had saved us, but her presence had mitigated the damage, at the very least.

When her voice raised enough for me to hear her say, "Goodbye, Dad," I finally stopped lurking and let myself into her bedroom. With the curtains across the balcony doors open, I had no trouble spotting her curled up on one end of the couch. Although she'd likely been up for hours, she still wore an oversized sweatshirt over barely visible pink pajama shorts. She'd piled her hair into a bun, with long tendrils falling over her ears and down her back.

As beautiful as she'd been on Valentine's Day, this was the look I liked best. Comfortable. Natural. Unguarded. It was also one I hadn't seen on her before.

Maybe I should have felt guilty about ambushing her like this, but I couldn't muster the emotion. Sometimes, pushing was the only way to make progress.

As I crossed the room, she glanced up before turning her head away to wipe under her eyes. "Hey, Landon. Do you need something?"

Not waiting for an invitation, I sat next to her on the couch. "Want to talk about it?"

"About what?"

She was still avoiding eye contact, so I lifted her chin with my fingertip. “About the call with your dad?”

Her eyes, rimmed with red, widened. “You were listening?”

“A little, yeah.”

Evelyn shrank away from my touch and crossed her arms over her chest, her back rigid. “What did you hear?”

“I heard you questioning whether you’ve been holding yourself back.”

“Is that all?” she demanded, her gaze on something over my shoulder.

My jaw ticked as I remembered what had come next. It still pissed me off. “And I heard you say that he doesn’t approve of your choices, which I can’t imagine. Has he met . . . well, everyone else in the world?”

At that, her posture loosened, just a bit. “If you knew my dad, you would understand.”

“Introduce me to him, then.” When her startled gaze returned to mine, I added, “Not literally. Tell me about him.”

She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me, Evelyn.” I took her hand in one of mine and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I want to know you.”

I expected her to resist more. Ask me why I cared, perhaps. But she didn’t. After a long pause, she withdrew her hand and then began speaking.

“He’s a pastor of a small church in my hometown. Well, he was. He had a severe stroke a couple of years ago and lives in a nursing home now. But before . . . well, he was strict.”

“Strict how?” I had a feeling that, if I didn’t keep her talking about him, she might stop altogether.

“Strict in all the ways you’d think and some ways you probably wouldn’t. Everything about my life was controlled by my parents. The way I talked and dressed and styled my hair. Where I went and with who. What movies I watched and

the music I listened to.” She laughed, though there was little humor in it. “And, yeah, that doesn’t sound that bad. But think about the realities of it. My appearance was expected to be modest, which meant skirts to my ankles and my hair either down or in a braid. No makeup . . . not even lip balm. No showing my shoulders, arms, or collarbone. My speech was expected to be demure and always respectful. No curse words or curse-adjacent words.”

I had to interrupt her there. “Curse adjacent?”

“Yeah. Like *darn* or *holy cow*.”

I couldn’t help it. My lips twitched. “I can see why. Holy cow . . . how scandalous.”

She rolled her eyes but kept going. “I was encouraged to learn to play the piano, because I could use that skill for the glory of God by playing at church. But that was the only reason. If I wasn’t practicing hymns, my mom or dad would walk into the room and make a bunch of noise until I switched. I could barely even get away with playing the classical pieces assigned for my lessons.”

I stared at the woman next to me, just now realizing how incredible it was that she’d written many of the top songs in country—and pop—music over the past decade. It was impressive before. But after hearing how she’d been raised, it was downright unbelievable.

“Then, how did you get into writing, uh, non-church songs?”

Her responding smile was finally real. “Jane Presley Smith.”

It took a few seconds to sink in, and then I laughed. “Wait. Presley Cole’s real name is Jane Smith?”

“Ironic, huh? The most plain Jane—literally—name in existence, and she turned out to be one of the least plain people in the world.”

That was true enough. Presley was one of those rare artists who had hit the ground running in her teens and never stopped. In spite of the scandal around Evelyn writing her

songs, hers was a household name. She was beloved worldwide. It was like she'd looked the doubters in the eye and said, "I'll show you how cool Jane Smith can be."

"Didn't you know the title of the duets album she's putting out? *Songs With Jane*?" Evelyn asked.

"No. I mean, I know we're supposed to be working on a song with her for the album, but I didn't know the title of it. I like it."

"It's very Presley. Jane. Whatever. I never know what to call her anymore." She shook her head. "Anyway, Presley and I became fast friends when we were little, and the fact that her gran was a long-time member of my dad's church meant that I was allowed to play with her. I remember my mom giving Gran a list of dos and don'ts for every time I went over to their house, which was often, and Gran would throw it away every time. She was strict in her own way, but it was different. Her rules were meant to make Presley better, not hold her back.

"And, damn, did that woman love country music."

I gasped. "Did you just curse?" Though I was teasing her, it was the first time I'd heard her say something stronger than "damn." Never would have guessed even that was forbidden in her house.

"It happens."

"Gran sounds like a good woman," I said, wanting to keep her on topic.

I was fascinated.

Because Evelyn Bishop was fascinating.

I wanted to know more.

I wanted to know everything.

"She was. I feel bad saying it, because I know my mom loved me, but Gran often felt like the mother I needed. Neither Presley nor I would have become who we are without her. She was the one person who championed our friendship, and without that . . ."

Evelyn didn't have to finish the sentence. "I know what you mean."

As easy as it was to get caught up in all the drama and the pitfalls that came with being celebrities, at the end of the day, Kings Gambit was nothing but four friends with relatively small talent and huge dreams. If we hadn't come together, none of us would be where we are today. Except Rook, probably. He was the definition of star power, and he could easily be killing it at a solo career.

"Enough about me," Evelyn said suddenly. "What about your parents? Are you close with them?"

Of course, she would turn it around. And I didn't blame her. I'd been digging up bones that were probably better left forgotten. Wait a second . . . weren't those lyrics to a country song? Was Evelyn rubbing off on me from proximity alone?

I know I'd sure like to rub her off—

*Stop it, Landon.* That's not what this was about. I was being a friend. That was all.

"I don't have that much to say. My dad ran off when Levi and I were eight, and our mom took care of us. She's a nurse, and she worked her ass off to provide for us. That meant leaving us with babysitters and taking extra shifts. Even though she wasn't always around, I always knew she would do anything for me, and isn't that the best any kid can ask for?"

Evelyn nodded, her dark eyes soft. "That's beautiful. Does she still live in Pennsylvania?"

"She does. Levi and I have tried to get her to move out here, but she's content where she is. And she recently started seeing someone, and it sounds pretty serious, so there's no changing her mind now."

"What about your father? Do you ever see him?"

My gut clenched. The last thing I wanted was to talk about that son of a bitch. Not that there was much to say. I hadn't seen him in almost twenty years. "No, and that's how I prefer it." Deciding to take my chances that she had warmed up to

me enough to answer my next question, I turned to her and asked, “Will you tell me why you were crying earlier?”

Her back straightened once more, but she didn’t look away. “I feel guilty, and before you ask, I don’t really know why. Maybe because I used to visit his nursing home every day, and before this morning, I hadn’t even called him in weeks. That makes sense. But it feels like more than that.” She raised her hands to pull at her hair before remembering it was in a bun and stuffing both hands under her thighs. “I think I feel guilty because I’m not feeling all that guilty. Here I am, living the good life on the beach, while he’s confined to a bed, with very little ability to move around or communicate, and he’s barely been on my mind. Does that make me an awful person?”

Unable to resist touching her again, I reached for one of the tendrils of hair falling across her cheek and slid my fingers over the silky strands. “Even if he’d been the best father in the world, taking time for yourself wouldn’t make you an awful person. We all deserve to be selfish sometimes. Don’t waste time on guilt. It benefits no one, especially when it’s unwarranted.”

Something flashed in her eyes. “I’m working on it. What used to tie me up in knots still does. It’s hard to rationalize something that’s been drilled into me.”

I got it. All of us were trying to overcome our pasts. I thought about Tyler leaving the band and how, with each passing day, the pit in my stomach unclenched.

“All we can do is try,” I said, both to myself and to Evelyn.

“Try . . .” she repeated, her voice so low, I barely heard it.

There was a flash in those fathomless eyes again, and then she was shifting onto her knees and moving toward me. I never made a conscious thought to embrace her, but somehow, she ended up in my arms. One second, we looked at each other, and the next, she was pressed against me, her sweet body flush with mine. I might be a lot of things, but stupid wasn’t one of them.



I pressed my lips to hers, tasting her. She was warm, and these closed-mouth kisses were driving me nuts, but I wasn't going to push. Evelyn could go as fast or as slow as she wanted. I was here for the ride—the passenger princess to whatever destination she chose.

But, holy shit, was she perfect. About then, my brain fizzled, because she opened her mouth, her tongue gently pushing past my lips into my mouth.

It took every bit of self-control I had not to pull her onto my lap, roll my hips, and drop my hands from her back down to her juicy ass.

*Juicy ass?*

Synapses were definitely *not* firing right now, except to scream, *closer, deeper, harder*.

Time slipped away. Maybe we stayed there a minute. Maybe an hour. It didn't matter. All that mattered was that the world began to shift and what had been fantasy re-formed into something real.

Evelyn was kissing me.

She'd made this move.

When she drew back, I kept my eyes shut. If I saw regret, I didn't know what I'd do.

No, that wasn't true. I did. I'd wait it out. I'd take my time. But I wouldn't pretend this hadn't meant something to me.

Bracing myself, I met her gaze, and what I saw there would've floored me if I hadn't already been seated. Those deep brown eyes held mine, and her lips curved at the edges. She gave me one last soft peck before asking, "Was that okay?"

Jesus fucking Christ. She wasn't real. Was it okay? It left okay in the dust and rounded the corner to supernova.

My brain was slow in coming back online, so the most I could do was hold her stare and nod. Whatever she saw was right, though, because that smile turned big and real, and she buried her face in the crook of my neck. "Good."

I trailed my hand down her spine, noting that it shook and praying she didn't notice.

Evelyn had just changed everything, and she wasn't sorry.

A knock at the door filtered toward me. In a daze, I looked beyond Evelyn to where my twin stood in the open doorway, hair a mess, with a wide smile. Across the room, our gazes met and his grin disappeared momentarily before returning, bigger and brighter than I'd ever seen it before. "Fucking finally."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*August, Cody, Oklahoma*

*I'm home and everything is the same. No one seems to notice I'm different. In my rush to get packed, I left everything Isaac gave me behind. The Tom Robbins book, the Indigo Girls CD. I couldn't read it here, or play it here, and they'd only make Mom and Dad ask questions I didn't want to answer.*

*Dad is recovering. Mom and I both spend most of our time at the hospital. Dad wanted to pray last night, and Mom just about cried. But his hand, when I held it, felt different. Frail. It shook and, for the first time, I really saw how old my parents are—compared to everyone else's my age. For a second, it made me so mad. Why do I have to deal with stuff like this when the girls in school don't? I came into the hospital with my hair in a ponytail, and no one noticed. It wasn't until later, after Jane's gran left, that I realized how I looked. I fixed it quick, but it made me so mad.*

*I want things to change, and I HATE that I'm too scared to do it myself.*

*Evelyn*



Landon and Levi stared at each other, but it was Levi's, "Fucking finally," that loosened the knot of tension that had begun to form in my chest.

Presley and Scarlett had told me that, if I was having thoughts about all of them, they were probably having them about me.

Now it was real, though.

As I released my hold on Landon and plopped back onto my butt on the couch, Levi came inside the room, shutting the door behind him. His eyes were bright, and when he sat on the coffee table right in front of me, he smelled like sun and salt, as though he'd come straight from the beach.

I leaned forward, touching his cheek, and sure enough, a layer of sand over sunscreen lightly scratched my fingers. "You were surfing."

"It's a gorgeous day," he said offhandedly. He studied me, then shifted his gaze to his brother. "I never thought you'd be the first to make a move."

"He wasn't," I interrupted. This was all me, and I was going to own it, even if I was totally misreading this situation. I couldn't see Levi turning around and being pissed at Landon, but just in case . . .

"Good." Just one word, but Levi said it with more seriousness than I'd heard him utter before.

The three of us sat there, watching each other for a long moment. I waited for the heaviness to descend, but it didn't come.

Levi lifted his eyebrows, then faced Landon. "I wanted to see if I should make dinner tonight, or if you wanted to go out. I'm afraid Rook is going to offer to cook, and—" He shuddered, like the idea of their bandmate preparing a meal disturbed him down to his soul.

There was nothing mean-spirited about it, though, and I realized it was because this was a family. A *real* family. One that was flawed but working on it. They treated each other with grace—something that had been sorely lacking in my

family. My mother and father had rarely assumed best intentions. Everything was sinful, and everyone was trying to get away with something.

How beautiful and just . . . I let out a breath. I might have been holding that breath since I was five years old and my mother made me wear a T-shirt over my bathing suit. My chest opened, and the weight of my parents' expectations slid from my shoulders.

I had never, ever experienced this freedom before.

I was a sixteen-year-old with a driver's license, getting her first taste of independence.

A college freshman staying out all night with no one to answer to.

A newly turned twenty-one-year-old ordering a glass of champagne without a care.

Lyrics about a butterfly breaking through her cocoon—lyrics I would undoubtedly later decide were too cliché to ever use—flitted through my mind. For the first time in my twenty-six years, I was choosing to spread my wings and leap off the nearest branch. If I was destined to fall instead of fly, then so be it.

I could pick myself up.

Fear would no longer be my ruler.

I'd spent too many years answering to others. My parents. The church. My hometown. Even the fans who hadn't known I existed a mere year ago.

This was my life. If I didn't grab it by the proverbial horns, no one would.

Standing, I took Levi's hand, smiling as he gave me his full attention. He and Landon had continued to talk, but I hadn't processed one word they'd said to each other since I'd sloughed off the invisible chains that had been keeping me from me.

Landon was right there, and I met his eyes as I gripped Levi's hands to pull him up to me before linking them behind

my back.

It was the second-best hug of my life.

I shut my eyes, rested my cheek on his chest, and let his warmth sink into me. This was right. And it was my choice.

*My choice.*

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

*Levi*

The scent of baked goods lured me to the kitchen, where I found Evelyn frosting cupcakes. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she wore her pretty floral apron—a gift from me and the guys—that made her look like the cutest, sexiest little baker in history.

“If you keep baking like this, you’re going to end up with four chubby rock stars on your hands.”

She paused to smile up at me, her dark eyes shining. I spotted frosting smeared on her jaw and leaned over the island to suck it off. Feeling her sharp intake of breath, I smiled to myself. Though I’d promised Landon I would take it slow with her, I had to keep her on her toes. Couldn’t have her thinking I’d lost interest. But I also wasn’t going to force our first kiss. After Landon had gotten his yesterday, I was prepared to wait for the time to be right.

Settling on the barstool directly in front of her, I snagged a cupcake and bit off half of it. “Mmmm,” I murmured around enthusiastic chewing. “I don’t know what that is, but it’s delicious.”

“It’s a tres leches cupcake,” she answered, her cheeks rosy. I had a feeling that had a lot more to do with the fact that I’d had my lips around her skin than the compliment.

“Is that a family recipe?” I asked, before popping the second half in my mouth.

She froze. “What makes you ask that?”

Suddenly realizing I may have made a stupid mistake, I swallowed so quickly, I almost choked. “Oh, um, sorry. I guess I assumed you’re Latina, but if not, I apologize. I didn’t mean to offend.”

Evelyn shook her head. “I’m not offended. It’s just . . . I’m adopted. I thought you knew, but now that I think about it, how would you? You’ve never seen photos of my parents, and it’s not like I go around wearing an ‘I’m adopted’ T-shirt.

“The truth is, my ethnicity is as much a mystery to me as it is to you. As a baby, I was dropped off on the steps of a church during a Sunday evening service. The pastor and wife of that church took me in temporarily and, as the story goes, fell in love. They were older and never had any children of their own, so they ended up adopting me.” She shrugged with what I had to assume was forced nonchalance. “The rest is history.”

“Wow,” I whispered. “I had no idea.”

This woman never failed to astound me. I’d gathered that she had a conservative upbringing, but I hadn’t bothered to dig. Now, hearing that she’d been abandoned as a baby . . . well, I didn’t even know how to react to that information. It was the kind of story you heard about on the news but never imagined happening to someone you knew. How had she turned into such a talented, caring adult?

“It’s not that big of a deal,” Evelyn said. “I never knew any different than my parents, and it’s not like I bounced around foster homes or anything.”

I got up and walked around the island until I was next to her. Taking the bag of frosting from her hands, I set it on the counter before gripping her hips to turn her toward me. The temptation to untie the apron from her neck and waist was tempting, but I managed to resist. Barely. The damn thing was too similar to a sexy dress for my raging libido.



“I’m not going to tell you how to feel. It’s your life, which means it can be as big or little of a deal as you want. Either way, there’s no need to downplay the effect of something that’s undeniably life-altering.”

She blinked up at me. “What did you study in college again?”

It took me a few seconds to change course. “Major in music performance and minor in nutritional science—why?”

“I was just checking to see if you were psychoanalyzing me.”

A laugh burst out of me. “That’s something I’ve never been accused of.”

She poked me lightly in the chest. “There’s a first time for everything.”

*Yes, there is.* I didn’t say the words aloud, because I had a feeling they would reveal too much. Evelyn knew I liked her. She had to. I’d made it obvious. But she didn’t know how *much* I liked her. More than I’d ever liked anyone, and that was saying something. I’d had a lot—and I did mean *a lot*—of girlfriends in my life. And yet, I’d never been able to imagine forever.

Not until recently. Very recently.

Capturing the hand she’d used to poke me, I pressed it to my chest. “Speaking of firsts . . .” I wagged my eyebrows, hoping she’d assume the worst of me, and given the way she barely held in her shy smile, she did. “Let’s do something unexpected.”

“Unexpected?” she croaked.

“Yeah. We need to get you out of this kitchen. What’s something you’ve never done but have always wanted to? And before you say learning calligraphy or how to knit, just don’t. Those are perfectly fine hobbies, but I want you to dig deeper. I know there’s an adventurous Evelyn in there somewhere.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, and I inwardly groaned. It was like she was asking for me to take over nibbling on that

succulent lip. I would happily do it too.

“I’ve always wanted to go stargazing.”

“Bzzzz.”

She scrunched her cute nose at me. “Did you just buzzer me?”

“I wasn’t aware that *buzzer* is a verb, but yes, I did.” Unable to resist, I kissed her on the nose before forcing myself to retreat. “Not that stargazing is a bad idea, but it’s too early in the day, and we’re in the middle of the city. That’ll have to wait for another time. What’s something that doesn’t require nighttime?”

After thinking for another minute, she replied, “Riding in a convertible with the top down?”

Her uncertainty made me chuckle. “Is that a question?”

“No?” Obviously hearing another question in her tone, Evelyn shook her head. “No. Riding in a convertible with the top down is something I’ve always wanted to do . . . especially in California. Preferably along the coast.”

“That’s more like it, but we need a destination, so give me something else.”

“Okay, but you’re going to think it’s dumb.”

I kissed her nose yet again. See? I couldn’t help myself. “Do you want to get a tattoo?”

“What?” She flinched away from me. “Sugar, no. I hate needles.”

“Did you just call me *sugar*?”

Evelyn rolled her eyes. “*Sugar* is one of my expletive replacements.”

I blinked at her. “Expletive. Replacements.” She was so ridiculous, it was cute. Or was she just ridiculously cute? Either way, I loved it.

“Yeah. It’s childish, I know.” She shrugged.

“It’s adorable, but let’s get back to the topic at hand. You keep distracting me. What is the non-dumb thing you want to do?”

“Go hiking.”

“Hiking.” I was starting to sound like a damn parrot. But I never knew what was going to come out of Evelyn’s pretty mouth, so I needed time to digest her words. “You do realize you could have said, *go to the top of the Eiffel Tower*, and I’d make it happen, right? But no. You want to go hiking.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What happened to my ‘non-dumb’ idea?”

“I don’t think it’s dumb. I’m just surprised.”

What I didn’t say was that every other girl I’d dated in the last few years had been more than happy to take advantage of my money and position to plan the most lavish outings imaginable. I hadn’t minded, really. There was no point in having money if I wasn’t going to spend any of it. But it was still refreshing to be with someone who didn’t expect extravagance.

That didn’t mean I wouldn’t find a way to spoil her. Just not today. Today, we’d do exactly what she wanted.

“Okay, sweetie.” I took Evelyn by the shoulders, turning her before smacking her lightly on the ass. “Go change clothes, and I’ll take care of the rest, including putting up the cupcakes. You’ll want to dress in layers and wear comfortable shoes.”

Once she’d left the room, I called Marshall to make arrangements for an unobtrusive security escort, then shot off a text to Tyler. He, Landon, and Rook were spending the day with our stylist, who knew better than to ask me to show up. I’d pick and choose from whatever she sent over, but I wasn’t going to waste my day strutting around for a bunch of nosy onlookers with too-strong opinions about my clothes.

Me: Hey, man. Is it okay if Eve and I take out the 911?

While I was more of a Jeep man, Tyler was sports cars, all the way.

Ty: You know where the keys are. Just be careful with Evelyn, okay?

I smirked to myself. As much as he wanted to deny it, Tyler was just as smitten with Evelyn as the rest of us. He just hadn't admitted it to himself yet. It was obvious by the fact that he failed to remind me to be careful with his Porsche.

Me: Don't worry. I'll take REAL good care of her.

His response was so quick, I almost dropped my phone when it buzzed in my hand.

Ty: I'm serious, Levi. If I find even one hair on her head out of place when I get home, you're done for.

Oh, god. His reactions were making me giddy like a kid on Christmas morning. But I had better things to do than continue riling him up, so I left him with a final sendoff that would keep him guessing.

Me: I don't know. It might be worth it to see her draped over the front of that car.

Before I could see his response, I put my phone on silent and waltzed into my bedroom to change.

Yeah, I was aware that my comment was disrespectful to Evelyn, and I could only imagine the glower she would send my way if she read it. But provoking Tyler had just been too much fun.

What could I say?

I liked to have fun.

Twenty minutes later, backpack with extra supplies thrown over my shoulder, I led Evelyn down to the garage. Stopping next to the metallic blue Porsche 911 Cabriolet, I quirked a brow at her. "Will this do?"

"I don't know. Do you think this old rust bucket will even start?"

Chuckling at her sarcasm, I tossed the backpack into the small back seat and got to work opening the roof. Thankfully, I'd borrowed the car a couple of times, so I knew what to do.

When I gestured for Evelyn to get into the driver's side, she began shaking her head.

“No. No way. Nope. This car is worth more than my entire house back in Oklahoma.”

“So? It's insured.” I gestured to the fleet of other vehicles surrounding us. “And it's not like we're hurting for a replacement.”

“Levi,” she moaned. “I don't know.”

“Come on.” I practically pushed her toward the driver's door. “Riding in a convertible with the top down is a lot less interesting than driving one. Especially a car like this. That's a bucket list item in and of itself.”

Surprisingly, Evelyn dropped into the seat without additional argument and began adjusting her seat and mirrors to accommodate her smaller stature. When she felt comfortable, she turned to me and, with a serious expression, asked, “Promise not to hate me if I wreck your car?”

It occurred to me that I should probably let her know that it was actually Tyler's car but figured we'd never get out of here if I admitted that part. So, I merely nodded. “Cross my heart.”

After having her drive around the neighborhood to get the feel of the sports car, I directed her to head south on Pacific Coast Highway. Our eventual destination was a well-known trail along the beach in San Clemente. The almost five-mile hike would give her a taste of what she'd been missing without pushing either of us too hard. Though I was in good shape, I wasn't prepared to climb a damn mountain this afternoon.

While Evelyn concentrated on the windy road and other drivers, I concentrated on her. With large sunglasses perched on that nose I loved so much and her ponytail whipping around her face, she already appeared more carefree than ever before. And as she slowly relaxed into the drive, a small smile curved her luscious lips as she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and sang along with the X Ambassadors song blaring through the speakers.

She was loving this.

And I loved . . . her.

The realization struck me like someone had bashed the back of my head with my favorite guitar. It hurt so good, I wouldn't even cry about the loss of my guitar. Because this was the feeling I'd been waiting for my entire life.

Heart racing? Check.

Nausea? Check.

Fuzzy thoughts? Check.

A burning need to pull her into my arms just for the sake of holding her? All the checks.

Most guys I knew would be freaking out right now, but not me. I didn't care that it was too soon or that we hadn't even kissed, much less done anything else, yet. I never wanted this, her, to go away.

And when she turned her head to give me the widest, happiest smile imaginable, I knew I'd do whatever it took to make her mine.

## Chapter Thirty

*August, Cody, Oklahoma*

*The last time I wrote in my journal, I wrote about how I wanted things to be different.*

*I changed my mind. I'd give anything for it all to go back to the way it was before this summer.*

*Evelyn*



My phone buzzed, and I ignored it. Scarlett had gifted me an e-book she'd been raving about, and I didn't want to put it down. Suffice it to say, reverse harem was already my new favorite trope, especially when it involved rock stars.

It buzzed three more times, so I sighed and set my e-reader on the end table, exchanging it for my cell.

Presley: Tell me everything.

Presley: Hello?

Presley: Why aren't you answering me?

Presley: Do I need to call Levi and ask him what's going on?

I stared at the phone screen and shook my head at the barrage of messages. Before I could decide how to frame my responses, yet another text came through.

Presley: Unless nothing is going on? That would be disappointing.

Knowing she would keep this up until I replied, I jumped into what amounted to a conversation with herself.

Me: Why would you call Levi? And what are we even talking about?

To be fair, I had a pretty decent idea of what she was referring to. But I'd rather make her spell it out.

As I waited for a response, I peered out the glass living room doors. It was one of those rare days in Orange County when the sky was overcast, the wind gusted, and there was even a chance of rain. Or so I'd been told it was rare. I'd yet to cross the one-month line of my stay here, but it felt like longer. Probably because so much had changed so quickly.

Then again, the past week since I'd kissed Landon had moved at a snail's pace. Not in a bad way, exactly. In addition to my outing with Levi, I'd played video games with Tyler, gone swimming with Landon, worked out with Levi, and binge-watched the first season of *The O.C.* with Rook. But besides a short kiss here or there with Landon and Levi's incessant flirting—which had become decidedly more touchy-feely—nothing had really happened.

As in, no declarations from any of the guys. No “we all want to date you” or even just “let's go on a date.” Was I expecting too much? I'd assumed that, once I kissed Landon and then hugged his brother right in front of him, my intentions would be clear and everything would fall into place. But maybe they hadn't understood. Or maybe they only saw me as a friend with sixth-grade level benefits.

I grabbed the pillow next to me on the chair and buried my face in it. Why had I thought my oh-so-limited experience with guys would somehow magically translate into me dating more than one of them? *Silly girl.* And, yes, that was my



mother's voice in my head. But I wasn't going to listen to it. I'd come too far to give up. All I needed was a plan.

My phone buzzed twice before I dropped the pillow and reached for my phone again.

Presley: Levi, because I can count on him to gossip with me. And you told me you kissed Landon and went on a date with his delicious twin, but then complete radio silence. What the hell is going on in Newport Beach? Do I need to fly back there and tickle it out of you?

Me: I'm not ticklish.

Presley: Not the point. Dish, woman!

I laughed. If I didn't love her so much, she'd drive me batty. Of course, that had been true since we were kids.

Me: There's nothing to tell. We've been hanging out. End of story.

*There's nothing to tell.* Those would be fitting words for my gravestone if I didn't figure out how to start making things happen. A little extra incentive for me now.

Presley: Nothing? Please tell me one or more of them has at least taken you out?

I shook my head before reminding myself to put the sentiment into words.

Me: No such luck. They're basically holding me hostage, at this point.

It was an exaggeration, to be sure. But once Rook and Landon had found out about the hiking expedition, they'd been pissed at Levi and Tyler and even me. They'd yelled at us like we were disobedient teens, and they were a couple of overprotective fathers. It would have been sweet if they hadn't been so overbearing about it, practically forbidding me to leave the house, even with a security escort.

Me: But I'm working on several new songs for you and Scarlett.

One good thing about having so much downtime after my revelations about casting aside my parents' expectations was that I'd had lots of inspiration and plenty of time to turn it into something more. Tyler even loaned me one of his spare keyboards, so I could work in my room. Despite all the times Presley and I had worked together to perfect songs, I'd done most of the writing alone. It was simpler that way. Or maybe I'd just convinced myself of that.

All I knew was, sometimes, music was necessary for processing change.

Maybe that was my answer to my current boys problem. I just needed to work my way through Taylor Swift's entire library. There had to be good advice for my situation in there somewhere.

Presley: Send me the songs, but don't think I haven't noticed your distraction tactic. I can't believe that nothing else has happened.

Thankfully, Tyler chose that moment to drop into the chair across from mine, giving me the perfect out. His lack of a relaxed posture and heavy gaze told me that he hadn't sat down for an idle chat.

Me: Sorry, gotta go. Ty needs me.

Presley: He needs you? Tell me more.

After sending her an eye-roll emoji to end the conversation, I silenced my phone and returned my attention to the man who remained a mystery to me. Though he'd been around—I didn't think he'd left the house other than with the other guys for work-related stuff—we hadn't spent any time alone. Given the way he scrutinized me, I wasn't so sure he wanted to be alone with me even now.

I shifted in my chair. "What's up?"

"I need a favor."

My mind jumped around as I tried to determine what he might ask of me. Another public date? That seemed unlikely, considering the guys' overall stance on me going . . . well, anywhere. To make him a special dessert, maybe? Of all the

guys, he'd been the most enthusiastic about the baked goods I'd been consistently producing. He'd joked that he was replacing one drug with another, but really, I thought he just had a sweet tooth.

Seeming to misread my lack of a response as reticence, he added, "But don't feel like you have to. It's not a big deal." He rubbed the back of his neck before standing. "Actually, forget about it. I'll take care of it."

"Wait," I practically shouted. Waiting until he sat back down, I gave him a rueful smile. "Sorry. I wasn't going to say no. I was just lost in my thoughts."

"Oh? Anything interesting?"

"Only if your favor is a dessert request." I wouldn't bring up another fake date if he didn't.

He laughed, transforming his entire face and making my pulse race. I hadn't seen much of that since he'd quit the band. I wasn't sure if that was the reason or if it had more to do with the pressures of staying sober while making a huge life change.

Either way, he'd been noticeably more sedate than the first night I met him. It wasn't a criticism. Sedate was my middle name, after all. But I worried that he was losing a piece of himself without even realizing it.

"No dessert requests, but for future reference, chocolate chip cookies are my favorite."

"Really? I would have expected something more sophisticated."

"What can I say? I'm from Pennsylvania, home of The Hershey Company." He finally relaxed back into his chair, draping one arm over the back. "But it's really because my nanny and I used to make them every time my parents went out of town. Her intention was to cheer me up, but little did she know, my parents leaving already put me in the best mood."

As sad as it was, his statement brought back something from my own past, and I found myself sharing. "When I was

eleven or twelve, the church my dad pastored sent him and my mom on a week-long cruise to celebrate thirty years in service to the church. I begged for them to let me stay with Presley while they were gone, but they insisted that I stay with a woman who was recently widowed and her two children.

“Since I barely knew the woman, and the children were years younger than me, I had no idea what to expect.” The memory brought an automatic smile to my face. “Their house was a bit crazy. The kids had school, plus different sports or activities to go to, and the mom had to juggle it all. I ended up helping get the kids ready, pack lunches, clean the house. But it still was probably the most enjoyable week of my life, up until that point, because the chaos of it all felt somehow more real than anything I’d ever experienced. It was how I imagine family is supposed to feel—loving, supportive, and a bit crazy.”

Drawing myself back to the present, I looked at Tyler, who watched me with an enigmatic expression. “So, you get it.”

I shrugged. “Not the rich, important family part, but yeah, I do.”

Tyler nodded slowly. “Maybe my favor isn’t so out of left field, then.”

Oh, right. The favor. We’d gotten a bit off track.

“The thing is,” he said, “even though I’ve told the guys I’m quitting the band, it’s not official yet. None of us really feel like dealing with the inevitable media fallout right now. We need a little downtime before all that, you know?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Anyway, what that means is, even though I don’t plan to tour with the band again, I am going to record this next album with them. We already have songs for about half of it, so we have a ways to go. And we have that duet with Presley too.”

He shifted, tugging the nonexistent wrinkles out of his skinny jeans. Clearly, he was a bit nervous about something, but I couldn’t imagine what.

“What’s the favor?” I asked, prompting him to continue. My curiosity was getting the better of me.

“I thought, maybe, if you wanted to, you would, uh, want to write a song or two with me? No pressure, of course,” he hurried to add. “I know you’re used to only writing for Presley, and if you want to stick with that, I get it. But I think we might be able to come up with something great . . . together.”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from grinning. If Tyler’s sedate side had been surprising, this uncertain, faltering side of him was downright intriguing. Had he never asked for a favor before? Somehow, I had no trouble imagining that. He was the kind of guy people would do backflips for without even being asked.

The fact that he was asking me . . .

I was flattered. Even a bit honored.

“I haven’t really done the whole co-writing thing before. I mean, Presley and I would work together, but she tended to focus more on the production side of things. But I’m happy to give it a try. It, um, actually sounds fun.”

“Yeah?” His brown eyes seemed to lighten.

“Yeah. When do you want to start?”

“How about now?”

## *Chapter Thirty-One*

*Tyler*

Walking down the steps to the basement, Evelyn trailing behind me, I felt like we were entering the Phantom of the Opera's lair and there was no turning back. Dramatic? Yes. But that wouldn't surprise anyone. I'd always fallen more Lady Gaga than George Strait on the theatrical scale. It was part of my vibe.

But knowing I was being overdramatic didn't change the feeling that I was starting something I couldn't undo. Rook, who had been on me to try working with Evelyn, didn't understand my hesitance. Probably because writing had never affected him like it did me. For him, it was a necessary part of the job.

For me . . .

Well, for me, it was a necessary part of my being.

I'd never been great at expressing my feelings, which had led to fights, drinking, and a hell of a lot of meaningless sex. After months in recovery, I could attribute many of my behaviors to my family's lack of affection and attention. But I no longer lay the blame fully on my parents' shoulders. I'd been an ass, plain and simple.

The problem? That assholeish side of me had driven my songwriting. I was always blaming someone else for my problems. Was always looking for ways to stick it to anyone

who wasn't me. Though I hadn't been too obvious about it, if anyone went back and really studied the lyrics to every one of the songs I'd written all or mostly on my own, they'd see the connection.

Now that I was doing my best to eradicate my asshole behaviors, I was stumped. What the fuck did I have to say? It would figure that finally getting sober would drain all my creative juices. Karma, some might even say.

This was where Evelyn came in. She was a bestselling, award-winning songwriter in her own right. But where I was antagonism, retribution, and sex, she was peace, forgiveness, and love. Apart from the obvious differences in our outlooks, there was the matter of what sitting in the studio for hours, possibly days, to write a love song or five would do to my state of mind . . . and heart.

Ever since Wyatt and Beckett had suggested that Rook, Landon, Levi, and I needed to consider "sharing" Evelyn, I'd seen the writing on the wall. The others were already half in love with her, if not all the way there. I'd heard all about Landon and Evelyn kissing. From Levi, though. Landon was too tightlipped to share something like that. And I knew Rook was just biding his time before making his move.

The three of them hadn't ganged up on me to confess my feelings for Evelyn. Yet. They probably thought I was just being stubborn. They'd seen me kiss her at the club, and I was as concerned as them about her safety. According to my best friends, I was as good as done for.

But it wasn't that simple. I was a recovering addict, and I'd been taught to practice mindfulness regarding any major changes in my life. My sponsor from rehab—who I still communicated with daily—had warned me against quitting the band right away, but I'd done that, anyway. I could only imagine what he'd say if I dove into a relationship. And not just any relationship, at that. One that would only draw more attention and, undoubtedly, add more pressure.

Still, as I stopped at the bottom of the stairs and waved for Evelyn to walk in front of me, I wished she wasn't so damn

appealing. It was impossible to miss the light scent of her body wash or the gentle sway of her hips and perfectly round ass. Or the way her hair flowed down her back like a length of the finest silk.

I'd tried to forget how she'd felt in my arms and the softness of her sweet lips. Tried to forget the way she'd peered up at me in what appeared to be delighted surprise after I'd kissed her. Mostly, I'd tried to forget how she'd stopped drinking after that, concerned about my well-being, when I'd given her no reason to care.

Evelyn paused inside the door to the studio, looking around like she'd never seen it before. Since I knew that wasn't the case, I had to guess she was just as uncertain about this as I was.

"It's all yours," I said, gesturing to the piano. "If you want."

God, this was awkward. When had I ever been awkward around a woman? The only instance that came to mind was when I'd had a crush on my friend's stepmom and had gotten a boner at a very unfortunate moment. There was a bikini and swim trunks involved. I'd been twelve at the time.

She tugged at her hair, something I'd noticed that she seemed to do anytime she was lacking in confidence. "Sure. Unless you'd rather sit at the piano? It's your song."

The ridiculousness of our clumsy little dance struck me, and I started laughing. Evelyn stared at me like I'd lost it, and maybe I had.

"Sorry," I said, wiping at tears that had formed in the corners of my eyes. "It's just silly, you know? We're adults, who have kissed, by the way, and yet, the moment you put us in a room alone together, we seem to revert to middle schoolers."

Her mouth twitched, like she couldn't decide whether to smile or not before giving in and chuckling as well. "To be fair, I've only kissed a handful of guys, so I was probably going to be awkward around you, no matter how you acted."



“How many is a handful?”

Yeah, the question was rude as fuck, but now I was curious. I knew she'd been raised by religious parents, but that didn't mean much on its own. Besides, she'd been an adult for years now.

Evelyn ducked her head, and I almost took the question back. But she spoke before I could. “Three.”

I felt my jaw unhinge. As in, Landon, me, and only one other guy?

“Including me?” I couldn't resist asking.

Still not looking at me, she nodded.

Well, shit. “I'm sorry, Eve. If I'd known—”

She raised her head, the fierceness in her gaze stopping me from finishing that sentence. “If you'd known, you'd have what? Kept your sexy mouth to yourself?”

Oh, god. Those words. And did she have any idea how seductive she looked right now, with her eyes wild and mouth parted? As much as I found the innocent thing she usually had going on attractive as hell, this was something else. It—*she*—called to me on a primal level I couldn't have described, even if I'd wanted to.

“No.”

I took a step toward her. “I . . .”

And another. “Would . . .”

One more, and we were nose-to-nose. “Have . . .”

I gripped her waist. “Made . . .”

And pushed her backward a step. “Sure . . .”

And another. “It . . .”

One more, and her ass hit the edge of the piano. “Was . . .”

I lifted her onto the keys, causing discordant notes to fill the air. Held up only by the weight of my body caging her in, she gasped but didn't try to flee. Her breathing quickened,

causing her breasts to brush against my chest as she took in air and let it out.

Continuing to draw this out was no longer an option. “The best kiss of your life,” I said, finally finishing my sentence before crushing my mouth to hers.

If I’d thought our kiss in the nightclub was memorable, then I didn’t even know what to call this. I’d expected reticence or maybe shock from Evelyn. Instead, she immediately opened to me, inviting my tongue to tangle with hers. As I dug my fingers into her long hair, she wrapped her legs around my waist, drawing me even tighter against her.

It was a good thing she wasn’t wearing a skirt, because I didn’t know how I would have stopped myself from pulling it up and out of the way.

*Slow.*

Endorphins dumped into my system, making me giddy, and I took a breath. *Slow.*

Evelyn deserved all my focus, not a blind race toward an orgasm. I wasn’t about to exchange one addiction for another.

Two soft hands palmed my face, and I opened my eyes to find her staring at me. Studying me. “You with me now?” she asked. Somehow, she knew I’d gone deep into my head and was pulling me back.

Nodding, I dipped my head toward her. She tilted her chin up until our lips met.

Fireworks. Just like our first kiss, this one consumed me. But I didn’t get lost. I didn’t leave the moment. She kept me in it, anchored and on fire.

One of her hands trailed from my cheek down to the back of my neck while the other went to my back, holding me in place. I rocked against her, causing her to sink onto new keys and fill the air with sound.

Her knees tightened around my hips while that hand on my back slid lower and lower until her fingertips dipped past the waist of my pants to graze my skin. Immediately, goose bumps

broke out. She moved her hands over me, stroking my ribs, before holding me tight against her.

I wanted more. We were close, but I wanted her skin and her heat.

*Slow.*

No matter how badly I wanted her skin beneath my fingers, I would go at her pace. I dragged my tongue over her lower lip, nipped, then tugged it into my mouth with a gentle suck. She moaned, that husky voice vibrating from my mouth directly to my dick. There was the faint flavor of vanilla, probably from the cake she'd made earlier. I imagined her pink tongue darting out to lick the frosting, and I groaned.

I brushed my tongue over hers, needy for her taste, and her hands curled into my sides even tighter. Our kiss got hungrier, deeper, and just this side of bruising.

Evelyn let out a noise, not a moan of pleasure but of frustration. Pulling back, I met her gaze and took in the tiny lines between her eyebrows.

I stepped away from her. I'd pushed too hard, too fast. Despite all my best intentions, I'd fucked up. I must have.

"Am I doing something wrong?" she asked.

*Wrong?* She'd given me a kiss that would be forever burned into my brain. When I was an old man, I would tell the nurses at the retirement home about it. They would measure all kisses against this kiss. They'd go home and side-eye their husbands and tell them about the old man who still dreamed about kissing the first girl he loved.

*Holy shit.*

I thought the others were further down the road, but I was the one leading the charge. I hadn't even seen the cliff until I was falling off it.

"No," I answered quickly. "I don't want to push you. I don't want to move too fast."

At that, the crease disappeared, and she smiled. "You're not. Trust me to tell you if you're doing something I don't

like.”

I let out a breath—*whoosh*. She was asking me to give up control, but in the best possible way.

“Okay.”

It was my turn to lean in. Between one breath and another, I let go, and gave into feeling. I didn’t interpret her lips against mine or what she might want when she tugged my shirt from my pants. I felt it. I let my body answer any questions hers asked.

And it was perfect.

## *Chapter Thirty-Two*

*Rook*

Gentle chords echoed through the garage. The studio was soundproof, so Tyler and Evelyn must have left the door open. Leaning against the wall, out of sight, I tipped my head back and listened. Every so often, I caught the lilting twang of Evelyn's voice. She was country, through and through. Her voice wasn't perfect, like Presley's or Scarlett's—it was obvious she hadn't had any of the vocal training they had—but it was truer. Realer. If she ever made the leap from songwriting to singing, she'd put up golden records just like her friends.

The thought crossed my mind that I should go in there. Our own songwriting session had been one of the best experiences, ever. But I stayed put.

I would let Tyler have this.

I waited for the familiar sense of resentment to build in my chest, but it didn't come. Anger, frustration . . . it wasn't there.

The music stopped, and Evelyn's and Tyler's voices lifted, almost like they were arguing. I listened hard, wanting to make out the words, but there was only the rise and fall of volume and then a quick punch of laughter from Tyler.

It was real laughter. I'd known him long enough to see through his bullshit and the mask he wore. I'd heard his polite chortle and his drunken bray. This was real.

Evelyn didn't allow anything but realness, which was ironic, considering we'd roped her into being a fake girlfriend.

Pushing off the wall, I quietly made my way upstairs and into the living room. A blanket was balled up in the corner of the sofa that faced the ocean. I bet Evelyn had been here earlier. Sometimes, I caught her staring out at the water.

Her e-reader was sitting on the coffee table, next to a stack of books. I chuckled under my breath. It seemed like she couldn't make up her mind. She wanted her paperbacks and her e-books. Sitting down where she'd been, I picked up one of the paperbacks and skimmed the back. It was a fantasy with names I could only guess at. I opened the front cover and, sure enough, a map. The next one had cartoons on the front, but from the book summary, I couldn't tell if it was a romance or a potential thriller. A man leaves his fiancée at the altar and takes someone else on their honeymoon? It could go one of two ways.

The spine was bent, making me think she'd already started it, so I didn't feel guilty cracking it open. Leaning back, I began to read, but after the first chapter, I put it down. I was so angry at the cheating fiancé, I needed a break. What an asshole.

I picked up the e-reader, and at my touch, the screen lit to reveal the page Evelyn must have left off on. My mouth fell open as I read. Was this what Evelyn had been reading while curled up right here? Picking up where she left off, I wasn't able to discern the entire plot, but I was a fast reader.

I skimmed the scene, then went back, reading the details. Holy . . . seriously?

Huh.

I kept reading, barreling through the love scene that I decided was worth taking note of. I wasn't above stealing an idea or two. Sex on the piano. Check. In the shower. Check.

Sex with two members of a rock band?

Uh. Hold on. I made note of where I was stopping and found the book summary. It was a retelling of *Jane Eyre*,

which I'd been forced to read back in high school, but this wasn't the same book. For one thing, Rochester was four guys, and they happened to be in a rock band. And two, I definitely would have remembered a scene where Rochester goes down on Jane.

I reached down to adjust myself, glad no one was around to witness my untimely hard-on. It wasn't even from the scene I'd just read. Instead, it was imagining Evelyn getting turned on from reading it that had done the job. Had she pictured me touching her like one of the characters in the book? Gliding my hands over bare skin and swirling my tongue around her clit?

Ever since I'd overheard her telling Presley that she had needs like any other woman, I hadn't been able to stop envisioning myself fulfilling those needs. Sliding my fingers through her long, silky hair. Devouring her lush lips. Stripping her naked and worshipping every inch of her perfect body. Burying my cock deep inside her.

Just imagining the sounds she would make with her raspy voice was enough to get me going.

But I hadn't known how to approach her . . . until now. Women read romance for the fantasy of it, right? So, what if I made that fantasy a reality?

When I was done with her, Evelyn wouldn't need book boyfriends. She'd have the real thing.



“How'd the songwriting go this afternoon?”

The five of us had just sat down to dinner, and even though I'd promised myself to be cool, the words popped out before I could stop them. Tyler had been resistant to the idea of collaborating with Evelyn when I'd suggested it, so I hadn't expected him to take my advice. But after hearing them together earlier, I needed to know how it went. Was Evelyn the inspiration Tyler so desperately needed?

At my question, she immediately ducked her head, and I swore I saw pink staining her cheeks. Turning my attention to Tyler, I didn't miss the way he adjusted the collar of his shirt, a telltale sign he was hiding something.

Well, this was interesting. It seemed that they might have gotten up to more than writing in the studio. My initial inclination was to check the basement camera feed, but I would never invade Evelyn's privacy like that.

"Good," Tyler answered. "Amazing, actually. We finished one and started another."

I felt my eyes widen. Tyler was good, but he wasn't *that* good. I'd been hoping for a song after a week. Not one afternoon.

"I wouldn't say finished," Evelyn said, still looking down at her plate while she pushed around her pasta. "It could use some more work."

Tyler shook his head. "She's being modest. It's perfect for the new album. The five of us just need to hammer out the arrangement for the rest of the instruments. Otherwise, it's done."

"Impressive." I shot him a knowing grin. *Go ahead. Tell me I was right.*

He shook his head again, though the smirk he wore was as good as an admission.

"I can't wait to hear it," Levi said, tapping his fingers on the table in apparent anticipation of getting behind his drum kit. "Will you accompany us on the tracks, Eve?" His already-bright eyes practically started glowing. "Better yet, you should officially join the band. We need a new keyboardist, and you'd be perfect."

She finally lifted her head, her eyes widening to saucers. "What? No. I work behind the scenes only."

"Why is that?" I couldn't resist asking. "Don't you ever dream about standing on stage while a stadium full of people, your fans, scream your name?"



“No.”

Her answer was quick. Too quick, in my opinion. But I’d let it go for now. There would be plenty of time to coax her on stage.

“But just think how fun it would be for you to go on tour with us.” Levi, who wasn’t giving up so easily, leaned over the table until he was in Evelyn’s personal space. “Our bus is really nice, and we’d give you the bedroom in the back. We’d get to hang out all the time and visit cool places together. It would be awesome.”

She glanced from Levi to Tyler, Landon, and finally, me. Her deer-in-the-headlights expression told me that she had no idea how to respond. Was she horrified by the idea or merely surprised? I certainly hoped it was the latter.

Landon, who had been surprisingly quiet throughout this conversation, cleared his throat. “Seems like this is as good a time as any to address the elephant in the room.”

“You do realize we’re not actually in a room, right?” Levi glanced around the patio. “And if you’re seeing elephants—”

Landon ignored his twin, speaking over him. “I like you, Evelyn, a lot, and I want you to be my girlfriend.” He laughed under his breath. “God, that’s something I haven’t said since high school. But I know I’m not the only one of us who’s interested in you, and not to put you on the spot, but I have an inkling your feelings are a bit divided. So, we might as well clear the air and figure this out before things get even more complicated.”

Leave it to Landon to just put it all out there. It was one of the things I loved most, and occasionally hated, about the guy.

Right now, I had to love him for it. We couldn’t risk fucking things up with Evelyn, and the only way to make sure we didn’t was to be open. Although, I probably would have waited until we made sure Tyler was on board. When we’d discussed the possibility of all dating Evelyn, he’d been the only holdout. But I got the feeling today had changed something for him.

Not wanting Evelyn to feel overwhelmed, I reached for my glass of water and only glanced at her rather than staring, like I wanted to. She'd pulled her hair over her shoulder and cheek, something she'd been doing less and less lately. But I understood her impulse to do so now. This couldn't be a comfortable topic for her.

Levi was the next to speak, his gaze fully on Evelyn. "I'm sure you won't be surprised by this, but I still want to say it. Eve, you're the only girl for me. I would let you drive me around in Ty's Porsche every day, if that's what you wanted." Her lips twitched, so he kept going. "I'd even give up surfing for you. Just say the word."

A soft laugh spilled from her lips. "I don't think that will be necessary."

He wiped non-existent sweat from his forehead. "Thank god."

"The Porsche is yours," Tyler said suddenly, turning to Evelyn, who sat next to him. When he saw the shocked look on her face, he groaned. "That was bad, wasn't it? It sounds like I'm trying to buy your affection. Fuck. I suck at this. I just meant, you're welcome to the Porsche or any of my other cars. What's mine is yours, and that's something I've *never* said but have always wanted to. I was waiting to fall for a woman who wanted me for me instead of my family connections or money or fame. And you're that woman for me. If you want to be."

As he rubbed the back of his neck, I had to hide my grin. Damn, I'd never seen Tyler this worked up before, especially over a girl. It was entertaining and even a bit sweet.

Evelyn opened and then closed her mouth a few times. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything yet," I interrupted. "You haven't heard my pitch."

Shit. I should have gone before Tyler. There was no way I could beat his, "you're that woman for me."

I stood, needing to move as my mind whirled. If Evelyn was at all on the fence, I had to come up with something good.

“Like Landon, I would love for you to be my girlfriend. Ever since the first moment I spotted you at the Sunburst Records party, I wanted to know you. Maybe it sounds crazy, but even before I met you, I saw something in you that called to me. Your melancholy and hope. Your beauty and inner strength.”

Keeping my gaze on her while I paced behind the twins, I continued. “But it’s more than that. What we’re really saying is that we want you to be *ours*. It’s a lot and kind of fast, I know, but that doesn’t mean these feelings are any less real. Between the scandal surrounding the band and Tyler quitting it, this past month should have been one of the worst of our lives. But, somehow, it’s been one of the best. And you, Evelyn, are the reason why. The four of us have been pretty broken for a while now, but you’re slowly putting us back together. We’re stronger because you’re here with us.”

Finally stopping, I waited for some kind of reaction from her, not knowing what I was even hoping for. When she reached up to wipe tears from her eyes, my heart sank. She was going to reject us.

Or maybe only me. Could I live with that? The girl of my dreams choosing one or all of my three best friends and not me?

I couldn’t imagine, but I might have to. She had to be given a choice in the matter. Just because all four of us wanted her didn’t mean she felt the same.

I opened my mouth to say something to that effect, but Landon beat me to it. “We’re not pressuring you to accept all or even any of our advances. The ball is in your court, Evelyn. You now know how we feel, and whether you want to act on that knowledge is completely up to you. We’re here for you, no matter what.”

My breath held, I watched her, waiting.

Seconds and then possibly minutes passed before she finally spoke. “And if I want to be your girlfriend? What then?”

Levi pointed toward himself. “My girlfriend?”

“No,” she said with a laugh, her smile growing by the second. “Well, yes. Yours and Ty’s and Rook’s and Landon’s.”

My breath whooshed out of me, and I reached for the back of Levi’s chair to steady myself. She was saying yes. I didn’t think I’d ever experienced such a rush of relief and happiness at the same time.

What then?

“Then, we give you the world,” I murmured, more to myself than to her.

## *Chapter Thirty-Three*

*September, Cody, Oklahoma*

*I never realized how lonely I was until Jane left.*

*I'm happy for her. She's making her dreams come true and taking the world by storm. But that means I'm here on my own. Same classes. Same sports. Same schedule—church twice on Sunday, youth group on Wednesday, and choir practice on Friday.*

*But it's not the same.*

*She hasn't forgotten about me. Jane calls every Tuesday and Thursday, and I can't believe all the stuff she's doing. All the adventures she's having.*

*She's so brave.*

*Last night, it was late when I got home from helping serve food at the ladies' missionary aid meeting, so I didn't think she'd call, but she did. I was so tired, and she noticed. I wasn't feeling well, anyway. Josephine Franchette made some kind of bean dip, and good gravy! The smell seeped into my clothes and hair, and it was still making me gag. I had to get off the phone fast, before I barfed on FaceTime.*

*Jane texted me later, asking if I was sure I was okay, because I looked different.*

*I'm fine, I told her.*

*Everything is fine.*

## *Evelyn*



If I lived in a movie—a romance that made people swoon—telling Levi, Landon, Rook, and Tyler that I wanted to be their girlfriend would have ended with a swell of orchestral music and a sexy, yet heartwarming, epilogue.

In real life, what came after the declaration was even better.

It was . . . easy.

I helped clean up, and the five of us moved around the kitchen. We got in each other's way and made things take ten times longer than they should have.

But Levi kissed the back of my neck when I put the plates in the sink, and Tyler dragged his soapy hands over the backs of mine as I took a dish from him to dry. Landon stood with his hip against mine as he placed the cups in the cabinet, and Rook followed every move I made, heat from his gaze searing me.

Eventually, I stood at the island, watching as Landon and Levi brewed coffee. The aroma filled the kitchen, and I breathed in deep.

“Want a cup?” Tyler asked.

I shook my head. “I’m not a fan.” Besides, my stomach was still a bit jittery from when I launched myself off a cliff and told four rock stars I wanted them.

Landon poured himself a cup and then one for Levi. I watched him make it, noting that Landon added oat milk to his and cream for Levi. “I want to hear your songs,” he said after taking a sip. “How do you feel about playing them?”

Before I realized what I was doing, I held out my hands. They were trembling.

Levi put his cup on the counter, took them in his, and lifted them to his lips. Against my skin, just loud enough so I could hear, he whispered, “You’re braver than me.” He kissed them and let me go. “Chill out for a while. You’d slide all over the keys if you played right now.”

Landon handed him his coffee. “I guess it’s just the four of us, then?”

“Not me,” Rook replied. He’d been standing on the porch while the coffee brewed, talking on the phone. He slid his cell into his pocket. “I’m taking the night off.”

Tyler nodded, wearing a small smile. He held Rook’s gaze, then glanced at Levi and Landon. “*Three is a magic number,*” he sang, to which Levi laughed and added,

“*Yes, it is. It’s a magic number.*”

Walking backward toward the studio, Landon rolled his eyes. “Do you even know what the next line in that song is? It doesn’t fit at all. And there are five of us, so—”

I didn’t have a clue what they were singing, and when Levi helped me out by saying, “Don’t you know *Schoolhouse Rock?*” and I still stared at him in confusion, he sucked in a shocked breath. Following the others, I heard him say, “We’re going to have to put out a cover album, just to introduce Evelyn to the classics. I’m horrified. It’s like she didn’t watch *Sesame Street* . . .” They were too far gone; I missed the rest of what he said.

“I didn’t,” I said to Rook as he came to stand beside me. “Watch *Sesame Street*, I mean. I wasn’t allowed.”

Instead of responding, he gathered me into his arms and kissed me. This was no simple kiss. I could feel his intention in the way he pulled me tight against his body, his growing erection rubbing against my stomach. In the way he fisted my long hair and angled my head so he could deepen the kiss.

My body responded, my limbs weakening as heat flooded my center. Clutching his shirt, I rose on tiptoes, trying to reach his hardness with the part of me that needed the friction so badly. But it was no use. He was too tall. With a sigh, I

dropped back onto my heels, and Rook chuckled into my mouth.

“Something you’re wanting?”

“Mm-hmm.”

I wasn’t much of a risk taker, but I was ready to throw all caution into the ocean right outside the patio doors. Tyler had gotten me all kinds of worked up in the studio earlier, but we hadn’t gone any further than second base. That had been his choice more than mine. I had a feeling, if he’d tried, I would have let him take me right there, on the keys of the grand piano like I was Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.

Rook lowered his forehead to mine, his breathing just as ragged as mine. “I had a plan, you know.”

“Plan?”

“Yeah. I read some of your book with the rock stars earlier, and it gave me all kinds of dirty ideas.”

If my entire body wasn’t already burning from the inside out, I probably would have blushed. “You read some of *Just Jayne*?”

Good lord. What must he think of me? Did he assume I was reading it as a manual on how to charm all the guys in a rock band?

“I did. And I’d decided to pick a scene to act out for you, but now that I’ve been thinking about seducing you all day, I’m too turned on to think straight.”

A laugh burst out of me, mostly from the thought of him figuring out a way to re-create a scene from the book I was reading. It was cute, in a completely sexy way. “Is that so?”

“Yeah.” He drew back enough to peer down at me, the green in his hazel eyes more prominent than usual. Or maybe it was because there couldn’t be more than a couple of inches between us. “Tell me what you want, Evelyn Bishop. If you want rose petals and champagne, I can make that happen. Or if you want two of us at once, I’ll go get Levi. I have a feeling he’d be more than up for that.”



This time, heat did flood my cheeks as he smiled down at me. “If you want to wait, that’s okay too. You’re in control here.”

I didn’t even have to think about it, just took his hand and led him out of the kitchen and to my bedroom, closing and locking the door behind us.

Pressing against him, I said, “I don’t need anything but you.”

Rook bracketed my face between his fingers, using his thumbs to glide along my jawbone. “Somehow, this feels like the most important experience of my life,” he said. He studied my face, gaze lingering on my scar. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to the old injury.

That alone should have made me want to run, but strangely, the opposite happened. It made me pull him tighter.

“It feels important to me too,” I replied. “It *is* important. My eyes are open. I know what I want.”

His lips trailed from my scar down to my mouth. He moved slowly at first, keeping things soft, but behind those soft kisses was a building sense of urgency and need. He pushed his hands from my face to my neck, then down my back, pulling me closer. I could feel him, his rigid length teasing me as he rolled his hips against mine.

I wanted him—I wanted him so badly that I was the one who slid my tongue between his lips, deepening our kiss so I was breathing each of his breaths.

“Evelyn . . .” He groaned as I let my hands trail from his back down to his waist, then around to unfasten his belt.

He brushed my hands out of the way, lifting me into his arms, and walked us backward until he could place me on the bed. And he never stopped kissing me.

I could do this forever. It was a closeness I’d been yearning for—Rook’s weight pressed into me, his mouth on mine, the soft groans he made as he pressed his length against me.

And love.

I never thought I'd have this depth of feeling and the sense of utter rightness. How strange that what made me the happiest in my life could be in opposition to everything I'd ever believed was right.

"Evelyn. Honey." Rook pulled back to stare down at me. "I have to—I have condoms in my bathroom."

"I'm covered," I answered. One of the first things I did after leaving Oklahoma was get my first birth control shot. I didn't want anyone controlling my body except me.

"I'm clean." He kissed me, then drew back again. "I've never done this without a condom."

I studied him, worried that I might be pushing him into something he wasn't ready for. "If you want to get one . . ."

He shook his head and kissed me. "No. I just want you to be prepared, because I have a feeling that, the second I get inside you, I'm going to embarrass myself."

I laughed. "I don't want you to be perfect. *I'm* not perfect. I need the playing field to be even between us."

He went from smiling to serious in a second. "You are perfect. The perfect fit for me. The perfect woman for me." And he believed that. He really, truly did. I could tell by the way he held my stare and didn't look away once.

Lifting my head, I kissed him again.

The next moments were filled with sensations. His hands on my body. My hands pushing his pants over his hips and down his legs. My fingers threading through his hair, messing it up like I'd been wanting to since the day I met him.

He pulled the covers over us, making a dim cocoon that blocked out the world, and kissed me. I opened my legs to him, grazing the soles of my feet over the backs of his legs before arching into him. He didn't rush. His long shaft trailed between my legs, grazing my clit as he pushed back and forth.

"Rook." I grabbed his butt with both hands, but he laughed and took them, holding them over my head in just one of his

hands. “You’re going too slow,” I complained. My voice didn’t sound like mine. It was too needy and breathless.

There was an ache building deep inside me, and I needed him to soothe it.

Then . . . finally . . . I felt him at my core. He pressed inside me slowly, watching me, waiting to see if I showed any discomfort or hesitation.

There was none. I was ready—so, so ready—and when he finally slid all the way inside me, I thought I’d combust.

He smiled against my lips, then withdrew, dragging his mouth over my jaw, down my neck to my breasts. With gentle sucks, he pulled my nipple into his mouth. I arched my back, straining for him, and held him in place.

He let go of my hands, and I could finally touch him. I dragged my fingers all over him, wanting to feel the way his muscles moved as he pushed and then withdrew. He was shaking, and I loved that. It was a sign he was falling apart like I was.

He moved slower, and I got the sense he was trying to draw this out, but I didn’t want long and drawn out. I wanted us coming together like tectonic plates, or something equally momentous. There would be time for slow and unhurried. Right now, I wanted connection.

I rocked my hips, holding him deep inside me. I met every movement with one of my own, countered those retreats and then chased after him.

I was close. If he reached between us, stroked across me, that would be it. And like he could read my mind, he did just that.

My orgasm crashed into me, making me come so hard that I cried out. I immediately bit down on my lip, but Rook kissed me, sucking my lip, then trailing his tongue across it.

With a groan, he came. Heat filled me as he jerked, quivered inside me.

He pulled back, staring at me as the last aftershocks made me clench a little tighter around him. I let every raw emotion show on my face. I didn't hide a single thing.

I loved him so much, and it was the most natural thing to tell him. "I love you, Rook."

His eyes softened. I'd read about that look, in novels, the hero's eyes softening, but never thought it was real.

It was.

Love shone from his eyes, and his voice caught, just a little—like a tiny stutter—when he told me, "I love you, Evelyn."

*Love.* Real love.

I finally had it.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

*September, Cody, Oklahoma*

*My dad's doing better, and I'm grateful. I really am. But ever since he was released from the hospital, he's been hovering more than usual. Checking up on every minute of my day. Who did I sit with at lunch? Why did I arrive home from school ten minutes later than usual? What have I been working on so diligently in my room?*

*It's making me nervous. Like he knows something I don't.*

*Evelyn*



As I lay curled up against Rook's side while he trailed his fingers along my bare back, it occurred to me that this was the first time I'd had sex in a bed. Though I wouldn't mind trying out some more adventurous locations, there were obvious benefits to doing the deed on a luxurious mattress. Like blissed-out, naked cuddling, for instance.

Other than a quick trip to the bathroom to clean up, I hadn't moved since we'd finished, and I didn't plan to anytime soon. Until Rook was ready for round two, that was. Even though I was a little sore, since it had been so, so long for me,

I wouldn't turn him down. Lying here skin-to-skin was enough to make me ache for more of his touches.

I reached across his defined stomach to run my fingers along the black ink on his forearm. "Why a dragon?" I'd been wanting to know since I'd spotted it moments after we met.

He nuzzled his face into my hair. "I wish I had a good story for you, but I wanted a tattoo and fell in love with this design. It seemed badass."

Smiling, I lifted his arm to my mouth and kissed the dragon's head. "It's totally badass."

"You making fun of me, honey?"

"Nope. I like your tattoo. I kind of hoped you'd have more."

"Are you sure I don't?"

I twisted my head to look up at him. "Do you?"

Pulling the sheet back, he turned to reveal his side, where small but heavy script letters spelled out, *What I've found was never lost.*

They were Kings lyrics. "I love that song. You wrote it, right?"

"Yeah. One of the only songs I've written on my own."

Dropping my head, I slowly dragged my lips and tongue along each word, causing Rook to draw in a deep breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed him getting hard again and smiled to myself.

Would he want me to go down on him? I'd never done it, but I'd read enough novels describing the act that I could give it the old college try. From what I understood, guys generally weren't that picky, as long as no teeth were involved.

Hesitantly, I reached for him, and a low groan rumbled in his chest as he dropped onto his back. "Evelyn. Fuck."

"You should know that I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Doesn't matter, trust me."

After shifting onto my knees, I drew in a breath and lowered my mouth until my lips were pressed against his head. I was debating what to do next when a loud knock sounded on the door, and I jumped away so fast, I almost fell off the bed. Catching myself, I glanced at Rook in time to see him squeeze his eyes shut as he released a frustrated growl.

“Not now,” he yelled.

Landon’s voice came through the door. “I know, but Evelyn’s phone has been ringing for the last few minutes, and I’m worried it’s important.”

I almost called out that it couldn’t be *that* important, but I hesitated long enough that Rook had a chance to throw the sheet back over me before getting out of bed and stalking to the door. He opened it and snatched the phone from Landon’s hand before closing it in his face and returning to me.

I didn’t even try to hide my smile. A frustrated Rook was a sexy Rook.

Taking the cell from his hands, I glanced at the screen to see five missed calls in the last twenty minutes from my dad’s nursing home, and my stomach twisted. Calls from them weren’t unusual, but that many? In a row?

With trembling hands, I selected the number from my recent calls list, my voice coming out as little more than a murmur when I stated my name and waited for information.

The administrator cleared her throat before stating, “I’m sorry, Miss Bishop, but your father passed away about an hour ago.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Five*

### *Landon*

This place didn't feel like Evelyn. Not the small town, surrounded by wheat fields. Not the cramped house on a pothole-ridden street littered with rundown cars. Not even the ancient piano that had seen better days decades ago.

As we'd driven into Cody in a blacked-out SUV, she'd grown increasingly more uncomfortable, apologizing for the house ahead of time and insisting that we didn't need to stay with her. I understood her discomfort, even if I hated that she felt the need to apologize. Although Levi and I had grown up in a similar house on a similar street, Tyler and Rook had only ever known luxury. What I saw as typical, they probably considered a step above squalor.

Not that they would dare say as much. Even Tyler had been nothing but gracious during our tour of the modest home, proving that he truly had changed. Either that, or he'd fallen hard for Evelyn. Maybe a bit of both.

Still, I couldn't help but think Evelyn deserved more than she'd allowed herself for so many years. She deserved west coast sunsets and a kitchen large enough to bake a dozen pies and a grand piano that wouldn't dare go out of tune.

Funnily enough, our place in Newport fit that description to a T. Go figure.



“She still hasn’t spoken more than a couple of words to me,” Levi complained, pulling his hoodie tighter around him.

Apparently, he’d forgotten what the end of February was like outside of Southern California. I, on the other hand, was toasty in my down jacket while he, Rook, Tyler, and I talked quietly in the backyard.

“It hasn’t even been twenty-four hours since she found out,” Rook replied. “Though her father wasn’t in good health to begin with, the heart attack was sudden. She probably just needs time.”

“How much time?” Tyler blew on his hands before tucking them into the pockets of his peacoat. “I feel completely inept in this situation. Other than my grandfather passing when I was a kid, I haven’t lost anyone, and Eve’s now lost both of her parents.”

Rook shrugged. “Why don’t we just take our cues from her? When she’s ready to talk, she’ll talk.”

I was shaking my head before he even finished his sentence. “Bottling up her feelings will only make things worse.”

He quirked his left eyebrow. “And you would know how?”

Ignoring the question, I said, “Why don’t you guys go find something to pick up for dinner while I talk to her?”

When we arrived at the house, the refrigerator had already been filled with groceries and casseroles. Apparently, a member of the family’s church, who had also been looking after the house while it remained empty, had delivered the food that was donated by other churchgoers.

It was a kind gesture, but I also wondered if that same kindness would have been extended if the members knew about Evelyn’s boyfriends, plural. Somehow, I imagined they wouldn’t be quite so generous.

Regardless of where the food had come from, the last thing our girl needed tonight was to cook or heat up any of the dishes in the fridge. Nothing screamed “someone died” more than tuna casserole. Just the thought of it made me cringe.

Once the guys had disguised themselves as much as possible and left to check out restaurants in the town, I made my way into the kitchen. Not surprisingly, Evelyn was baking. It was probably just the diversion she'd needed. Not that I was going to let her get away with continuing to hide in here.

I sniffed the air. "What's baking? It smells delicious."

Without looking up from where she was preparing some kind of batter, she replied, "Apple dumplings."

"Oh, yeah? I don't think I've ever had one."

"They're kind of like individual apple pies, except you wrap the dough around an entire apple."

"Sounds great."

"I think so." She paused in her mixing to finally look at me, her expression sober. "But we're going to need vanilla ice cream. Can't have apple dumplings without it."

"Sure. I'll text the guys to pick up some. They went out to get dinner."

Evelyn nodded before going back to work, and I tried not to audibly sigh. Maybe this was going to be more difficult than I anticipated.

After texting the guys, I leaned against the counter across from her and said, "I know what it's like to lose a father." Yeah, it was a bit on the nose for a conversation starter, but sometimes, that was the only way to go.

My comment made her stop to look at me again. "I'm okay. You don't need to do this."

"What if I want to?"

The last time she'd asked me about my father, I'd promptly changed the subject. I'd been avoiding discussing the man for so long, I couldn't even remember the last time I'd done more than curse his name. This wasn't about me, but maybe it also was . . . just a little.

She bit down on her bottom lip for a few seconds before murmuring, "Then, I guess you should go ahead."

I didn't start talking right away. Wasn't sure where to start. "As you know, my father ran off when I was eight. Before that . . ." I blew out a harsh breath. "Before that, he was a good dad, you know? Took us to the park and played ball with us and started teaching us how to play guitar.

"That's the ironic part, I guess. Levi and I got our love of music from the man who deserted us, and we still ended up becoming musicians. For a while, I rebelled against the idea of having anything to do with the guitar or even listening to his favorite radio stations or artists. But the longer I denied myself, the more it seemed to ingrain itself into my very being. That's how I got into folk-rock, actually. I was searching for any artists that didn't remind me of my father, who had been into more traditional rock, and discovered Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Cat Stevens, Simon and Garfunkel, and so many others.

"In some ways, I can attribute my success to this man I despise, and that pisses me the hell off. He should have been there, you know? He didn't have to stay married to my mom. Divorce happens. I can accept that. But he needed to call. Visit. Pay his damn child support, so Mom didn't have to work herself to the bone to support us.

"And you know what pisses me off even more? To this day, I can't hear 'Hotel California' or 'Bohemian Rhapsody' without remembering sitting in his truck and belting out every lyric with him. I don't want to remember, but I can't help it. It's—he's—always there, in the back of my mind."

It wasn't until arms wrapped around my waist that I realized Evelyn had moved from her spot on the other side of the small kitchen to envelop me in her sweet embrace. I didn't waste any time pulling her tight against me and nuzzling my face into her hair. She smelled like apples and sugar and home.

We stayed like that for long enough that I lost track of time, but I didn't care. I would hold her like this forever, if I could. Whether we were standing in the tiny kitchen in the house she grew up in or by the beach, watching the waves crash against the shore, I wanted her with me.

And that's when I knew. Evelyn Bishop was it for me.

Eventually, she pulled back enough to look up at me. "I'm sorry he wasn't there. He missed out on the best sons, and maybe he doesn't realize it, but I hope he does. I hope, every time he hears one of your songs on the radio, his heart aches over everything he lost."

"You're not supposed to be comforting me right now, you know," I said with a slight shake of my head.

She smiled for the first time since hearing the news about her dad. "I know. But comforting you comforts me. And hearing about your father helps more than you can know. As complicated as my relationship was with my dad, he was there. He did what he believed was best for me, and that's what I want to remember most about him. Not all the misguided choices and unreasonable expectations. Because, at the end of the day, he chose me after my own birth parents abandoned me.

"I'll never truly forget the bad stuff, but I don't want to dwell on it anymore. Is that wrong?"

I kissed her forehead. "Not at all. You're entitled to remember him however you want to."

Evelyn nodded slowly, as though considering and accepting at the same time. "It's strange. I'm sad he's gone. I mean, of course, I am. But there's also this overwhelming sense of hope that I haven't felt in a long time. Maybe ever. And that's all because of you, Levi, Ty, and Rook. If I hadn't met you, I'm not sure how I'd be reacting to his death, but I know it wouldn't be like this. You guys have changed my life."

After that, I couldn't resist kissing her. Really kissing her.

Maybe it wasn't the time, or maybe it was the perfect time.

Either way, I pressed my lips to hers, and when she opened for me, I breathed her in as though she was all the air I'd ever need. She tasted of cinnamon and felt like bliss. She was my happy place and the only one I wanted to share my secrets with.

I longed to heal her wounds and shelter her from harm. I wanted to make music with her . . . forever.

“I love you, Evelyn.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six

October, Cody, Oklahoma

*I've been home "sick" for almost a week. Mom has stayed with me constantly, making me feel like a prisoner in my own house. Not that I blame her. I messed up, big, and I don't think my parents will ever forgive me. They say what's happened is punishment for my sin, and that just makes me cry. I've been doing that a lot this week.*

*I finally understand the meaning of heartbreak.*

*Mom left me alone today, so she could go to the grocery store, and I sat on the front porch to get some fresh air. I know better than to try to leave. The mailman showed up while I was out there and handed me a stack of mail. There was a letter from Isaac.*

*I thought about ripping it to shreds without even opening it. He's the last person I want to think about, much less hear from, right now. But I kept it. Maybe I'll open it someday.*

Evelyn



*I love you, Evelyn.*

Had Landon really said that, or was my imagination finally getting the best of me?

Drawing away from his kiss, reluctantly, I looked up into his baby blues, and they told me all I needed to know. No imagination needed. Landon Kerr, rock star and all-around amazing guy, loved me. I didn't know what I'd done to deserve his devotion, but I wasn't going to question it.

There were times in a woman's life when she had to follow her instincts, and for me, this was one of those times. My instincts told me to wrap myself up in this man and never let go.

The sound of the kitchen timer spurred me into action, and I planted a hard kiss on his lips before leaving the safety of his arms. In less than a minute, I'd taken the apple dumplings out of the oven and placed my bowl of half-finished cake batter in the refrigerator. Then, without a word, I took Landon's hand and led him out of the kitchen and down the hall.

"What—" he started to ask, but I shook my head. He'd see soon enough.

At the end of the hall, I pushed open the door to my childhood bedroom and tugged him inside, closing and locking it behind us. I'd only added the lock after moving my dad into the nursing home. Locked doors were one of a hundred things not allowed in the Bishop household when I was growing up.

Leaning against the door, I peered up at Landon, waiting. His breathing had accelerated, and his voice shook when he asked, "What do you want, Evelyn? You're going to have to spell it out for me."

"I want you to love me."

His responding smile made heat rush to my center. "Pretty sure I already told you I do."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it." I gripped his sweater, needing to touch him in some way. "Make love to me, Landon."

He inhaled a sharp breath. "Are you sure? I don't know if this is the best time. I mean—"

I pressed my palm over his mouth, stopping him from continuing. “This isn’t about anything or anyone other than you and me. I’m not in emotional distress or asking you to help me forget. I just want you.”

One moment, I was standing there, clutching at his shirt, and the next, he’d slid his arms under my butt and was lifting me. A girlish squeal spilled from my lips as I wrapped my arms around his back and clung to his shoulders while he carried me across the small room and laid me on the bed.

As he rolled toward me, the mattress springs squeaked, and I giggled. “Sorry.”

He pressed his lips against my throat, kissing down and down until he tugged on my shirt to reveal my collarbone. “Making out with my girlfriend on her twin bed has all the air of danger I could ever want.”

This lightness was unexpected, especially from Landon, but when he lifted his head to meet my gaze, his blue eyes were dancing. It struck me how my relationship with each of the guys drew out of me the pieces of my personality I’d kept hidden. And, I guessed, I did the same thing for Landon.

He smiled, lowering his head and letting his hand graze down my side to my waist. I closed my eyes, tilting my head back. I had no idea that my neck would be such a hotspot, but I was already arching toward him, seeking the pressure of his body against mine.

He rolled us, the springs groaning, until I was on top of him, kneeling over him. I sat up, surprised and a little unsure. The lights in my room were on, and while I was growing my comfortable with my body every day, there was something about having it all out there.

Landon stared at me, waiting, and I let out a breath.

This was perfect. In this room, I’d struggled against all the weight of my parents’ expectations and a deep, deep guilt that kept me from living my life.

Now, everything was in the open. The lights were on, and I was owning this.



Gripping the edges of my shirt while keeping my eyes on Landon, I pulled it over my head. His eyes widened, but I kept going. Off came my bra. I moved off of him long enough that I could strip out of my pants and underwear and then climbed back on.

Landon's mouth opened and closed, and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. He jackknifed, grabbing me behind my neck and pulling me down to him. His kisses were hard—urgent. Desperate. And so were mine.

I wanted him more than I wanted my next breath, so I was taking him. Somehow, he ended up naked beneath me, his hard length nestled between my legs.

“Evelyn—a condom.”

“I’m on birth control,” I barely got out before notching him right where I needed him. I lifted onto my knees.

“Evelyn. Shit.” The cords in his neck were so tight, and his eyes blazed. “You’re perfect. I fucking love you.”

Slowly, slowly, I let my weight push me into him. He was smooth, hard, and thick, and if I hadn’t been so completely turned on, it might have stretched me to the point of discomfort. Instead, there was only fullness. He eased the ache inside me.

Digging his heels into the mattress, he thrust into me, letting out a groan louder than the mattress. He kissed me hard, then dropped his lips to my shoulder. His rough fingers trailed across the skin of my back, then curled over my shoulders, holding me tight so he could drive himself inside me, over and over.

I couldn’t stay silent. Landon hit something inside me that had my entire body clenching. I wanted to slow it all down, but I wanted the release more.

This man read me like a book. He fell back onto the bed, staring up at me. With one hand on my breast, and the other between my legs, he made sure I got there.

He strummed my clit like I was the instrument he was always meant to play. That light touch did me in. Folding over

him, I kissed him and came undone.

With a deep-voiced groan, he followed me, coming hard inside me.

Landon held me to him, not caring that his release was leaking out of me, those strong hands trailing down my spine and over my shoulder blades.

“I love you,” I told him, propping myself just enough to meet his gaze.

He swallowed hard, and nodded, then swallowed again. His voice was ragged when he finally spoke. “I love you more than everything.”

## *Chapter Thirty-Seven*

*Levi*

Damn, she was beautiful.

The thought was followed by a twinge of guilt. Evelyn was dressed in a simple black dress for her father's funeral. I should have been considering how I might console or distract her. Instead, I couldn't help soaking in the way her hair glided over her shoulders like a dark, mysterious waterfall. Or how her subtle makeup and rose-colored lips only enhanced the gentle curves of her face.

She sat alone at the dining table, staring into a mug of coffee. With anyone else, I wouldn't have found the sight odd, but she didn't drink coffee. Had told me she considered it bitter sludge, no matter how much sugar or cream one added to it.

Slinging my suit jacket over my shoulder like a cocky businessman, I sauntered into the room, intent on drawing her attention. It worked, and when she spotted me, her eyes brightened and an almost-smile flitted over her lips, making my heart flip. I loved getting a reaction out of her, especially when it took as little as me entering a room. This thing between us felt so new and fragile but also easy, in the best way.

“Morning, sunshine.”

Her lips tilted up even more. “Sunshine?”

I nodded. “It fits you, don’t you think?”

“Not even a little bit.”

Sitting across from her, I gave her my most winning smile. “That’s because you don’t see yourself the way I do. To me, you shine brighter than the California sun.”

“In other words, it hurts to look directly at me,” she replied dryly, and I laughed.

“Sometimes, yeah, when I can’t handle how beautiful you are.”

Smile dropping, she lifted her left hand. Anticipating that she would use it to cover her cheek, I snatched it out of the air and tugged it toward me. “Don’t do that. You never have to hide from me.”

Evelyn stared at me for so long, I started to fidget in my chair. I’d never been one for uncomfortable silences, but she needed to be the one to speak next. So, I kept my mouth shut and waited.

“What about the scars on the inside?” she finally asked. “Should I hide those from you?”

I shook my head. “Show me everything, Eve. I want to see and know it all,” I said, squeezing her hand.

She dropped her gaze to the mug of coffee. “I made it for him. An old habit that I felt like I should repeat one last time.” Peering back up at me, she continued. “He was an early riser, but he always waited until I got up for school for his coffee. I would make it for him while he prepared breakfast. He wasn’t much of a cook, so it was usually a bowl of cereal or toast with peanut butter, but that hadn’t mattered to me. It was our tradition, and it made me feel special. At least, it had until I got older and started to question everything else about our relationship. Then . . . I don’t know. I kept making him coffee, but it didn’t mean anything to me anymore. I did it because it was expected, which was how I lived my life until very recently. Fulfilling expectations—at least, to the degree I was able.”

Evelyn dipped her head again, but I remained quiet, sensing she wasn't done. What I really wanted to do was pull her into my arms. But I didn't do that either. This was about her, not me.

“Did you know I haven't cried? What does that say about me, Levi? My father is dead, and I can't seem to shed a single tear for him.”

I reached for her other hand, so that I was holding them both, and waited for her to look at me. “It doesn't say anything about you. People grieve in different ways, and some don't grieve at all.” Drawing on my own past, I said, “I don't remember my mom crying at all when my dad left. Maybe she did and just hid it really well, but either way, she never showed an ounce of sadness to me or Lan. And that pissed me off. I wanted her to be as heartbroken as I was. But looking back, that wasn't fair to her. Her feelings were her own. Who was I to tell her how to feel?”

Evelyn smiled gently at me. “You were only eight. No one would expect you to be fair at that age.”

“Maybe not, but my point is, don't worry about what other people might think of your lack of tears. You said you've lived most your life following the expectations of others.” I threaded my fingers through hers, still wanting to comfort her in any way possible. “Don't backslide now, sunshine. Cry if you want to. Or don't. No one who truly cares about you will judge you for your honest emotions.”

“You're pretty deep, you know that?”

“Who, me?” I waggled my eyebrows. “Take me to your bedroom, and I'll show you deep.”

She gasped. “Levi. I can't believe you said that.”

I laughed. I couldn't help it. “Sorry. You know me. Can't be serious for too long.”

And I'd gotten her to smile—really smile—so I wasn't actually sorry.

“Can I ask you something about your dad?” Even though I was happy to keep up the lighthearted banter, she'd opened up

to me, and I didn't want to waste it.

"Of course."

"What's the one thing you most admired about him?"

"His dedication," she answered, without having to think about it. "He had a very strict set of values, and even though I don't agree with many of them, I can admire how dedicated he was to living by them. I would love to be that dedicated to something."

*Or someone?*

Maybe it was only wishful thinking on my part, but Evelyn struck me as the type of woman who valued people over things or even a specific system of beliefs. She probably didn't even realize it, since she'd adopted a loner lifestyle for so long, but I could see it in her. It was obvious in the way she'd so easily embraced me and the other guys. We were rock stars with dubious reputations, but she'd never seemed to care about that. She cared about who we were rather than things we'd done. And that said a lot about her character, especially given her strict upbringing.

"I think that's something we have in common. That's what I admire most about my mom too. She was so dedicated to making sure Lan and I were healthy and happy that she sacrificed all her time and energy to ensuring it. But while I love her for it and am glad we can now repay her for everything, that's not how I want to live my own life. I don't want to be so dedicated to the band that I ignore relationships." Laughing, I added, "I guess I just want it all."

In other words, I wanted her and marriage and kids, but there was no way I was saying that aloud right now. She'd probably run away, screaming.

"Knock, knock," someone said from the doorway, and Evelyn and I both turned to find Presley standing there. She wore a navy sweater dress and a pair of coordinating cowboy boots.

"Is it that time?" Evelyn asked.

Presley nodded. “Almost. I figured I’d check on you before leaving for the church, but it looks like Levi’s got it handled,” she said, shooting me a wink.

I smiled at her. She was clearly on board with Evelyn’s current dating situation, something I was grateful for. Without her encouragement, I had a feeling convincing Evelyn to date all four of us would have been quite the challenge.

Before standing, I squeezed my girl’s hands one more time. “I wish I could hold your hand all day.” Even I could hear the wistfulness in the statement.

As a group, we’d decided that Rook, Landon, and I would keep all public displays of affection in check today. It wasn’t the time to bring even more scandal on Evelyn, and since the media still believed she was only dating Tyler, he was the lucky bastard who got to stand by her side.

“Me too,” she admitted. “But just having you there will be wonderful.”

I nodded and stood. “Whatever you need, sunshine.”

She shook her head a little at the nickname, and I left the room with a smile. Not that my smile lasted long, once I found the other guys in the backyard, conversing with Marshall, the head of our security team.

For a few minutes, I’d almost been able to forget about the risk Evelyn was taking just by attending the funeral. I still didn’t understand how, even with all the resources at our disposal, we hadn’t identified her stalker. Even when the private investigator had focused his attention on current and previous church members, he’d found nothing.

The other guys and I had tried to convince her to hold a completely private funeral, but she’d insisted that, considering her father’s long tenure as the pastor of the church, all the members had to be invited. It wasn’t the most ideal situation, but we’d hired extra security for the event. What else could we do? There was no changing her mind about this one.

“What’s the status?” I asked as I joined the guys.

Landon crossed his arms over his chest. “Marshall was just assuring us that he has everything under control.”

Marshall gave a curt nod. “We’ll keep Miss Bishop safe.”

I wish that was enough to reassure me. Given the matching grim expressions on the other guys’ faces, they were feeling the same.

Maybe now was the time to start praying.



## Chapter Thirty-Eight

*May, Cody, Oklahoma*

*It's been ages, I know. I've been really busy writing songs for Jane—sorry, Presley—and haven't felt like divulging any of my secrets here. I've been putting all those thoughts into my songs instead. They needed to go somewhere, and it's not like I have anyone to tell. Even my best friend doesn't know what happened.*

*My parents set me up with this guy from youth group for the yearly church “formal”—where everyone dresses up in fancy clothes and watches boring skits with moral lessons—last weekend. His name is Jared, and our parents are friends. He's okay, I guess, but when he tried to look down the top of my dress, my skin crawled.*

*I'm not interested in him.*

*I'm not interested in any boys. Not anymore.*

*Evelyn*



The service passed in a blur. In between comments by the new pastor, the choir sang “How Great Thou Art” and “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” Several long-time members of the church

spoke about what a “great”—it was the word of the day, apparently—man my father had been. They were probably the closest thing he’d had to friends. Since all his relationships had revolved around the church, he’d never had what I considered typical friendships. Instead, he’d been at the disposal of the members, all hours of day or night. He’d visited hospital beds and counseled grieving spouses. He’d performed weddings and held newborn babies. He’d been there for his flock, and they’d loved him for it.

There was that dedication again.

I could already see the epitaph on his headstone.

Joseph Alan Bishop: Dedicated pastor, devoted husband, and disappointed father.

Okay, maybe not that last part. But it wasn’t like I would have a say, regardless. My dad had left detailed instructions for every aspect of his passing, from the exact coffin to the program for the funeral and the photograph that was to be displayed during the service.

Not that I was complaining. I’d had to make very few decisions over the last few days, something I was grateful for. I had no family left to lean on. Only the family I’d made with Presley and Scarlett. And the one I was starting to make with Levi, Rook, Tyler, and Landon.

The guys had been incredible. I hadn’t expected them to travel to Oklahoma, much less stay in my small childhood house with me. They hadn’t listened when I’d tried to convince them they could go home or, at the very least, move to a five-star hotel in Oklahoma City. I knew they were worried about my stalker, but that’s what the security team was for.

I hated being a burden. Except, the guys never made me feel like one. They insisted they stayed because they wanted to be here for me. And, crazy as it was, I believed them.

It was one thing to jump into a relationship with four guys. It was another to immediately be thrust into a high-pressure

situation with them. I wouldn't have blamed them if they'd run. But the fact that they hadn't . . . it meant everything.

Presley pressed her hand gently into my thigh, and I looked up from where I'd been unconsciously staring at the pulpit to realize it was my turn. Not to speak. Dad hadn't added that to the program, thankfully. No, he'd wanted me to play "Amazing Grace" at the close of the service. It was fitting. He'd loved the song and had asked me to play it for him often.

Slowly, I stood and walked to the piano, sitting on the bench that was as familiar as my favorite chair at home. I didn't have sheet music. Didn't need it. I could play this song in my sleep.

Forcing myself to loosen my death grip on the handkerchief the pastor's wife had handed me when I walked through the door, I dropped it in my lap before inhaling a deep breath and stretching my hands.

As I placed my fingers on the correct keys, I paused. I knew exactly how I was expected to play the piece. Straight from the hymn book, like always. But as I hit one key and then another, that's not what I found myself doing.

The beauty of "Amazing Grace" was the way it made people feel, and the simple chords I'd played in church for most of my life weren't cutting it today. So, with Levi's advice about not letting myself backslide by giving in to others' expectations in mind, I played the song the way I wanted to.

I poured my emotions into the melody. All the sorrow, relief, anger, and grief I'd been pushing so deep, I hadn't even realized it until this moment. Sorrow, because here I was, an orphan for the second time in my life. Relief, because not only was my father free from his pain, I was free from the pain he'd caused me without realizing it. Anger at myself and my father and even my mother, who had already been gone for years. And grief, because there was no denying the good memories remained, and part of me wanted to cling to them with every ounce of my strength.

As I played, drawing out the song longer than necessary, the tears that had refused to come rolled down my cheeks, and I smiled through them. This was what I'd needed.

I should have known. When in doubt, music was my answer. It had been my refuge in every storm. My confidante when I'd had none. And, like now, my release for all the emotions I kept bottled up.

After playing the last note, I stayed behind the piano and allowed myself to remember . . . and forget. For the first time, it was truly sinking in that this was *my* life. How I lived it was up to me and no one else.

I could take the beliefs that had been drilled into me from childhood and adapt them into my own set of values that focused on kindness and loving others rather than judging them. I refused to be defined by the way I was raised, but I could learn from it. Be better for it.

A hand rested on my shoulder, and I looked up to find Tyler standing behind me, his brows drawn together as he scanned my face. "You okay?"

"Yes." The truth, I realized. I was okay now and would be in the future.

How . . . freeing.

Grabbing the handkerchief from my lap, I dabbed at my eyes before looking up at Tyler. "On the scale of raccoon to rodeo clown, how bad is it?"

He chuckled and reached out to gently swipe at my cheek. The scarred one. And his soft smile never left his lips. "I was thinking more hooker mug shot, but if you want to go with rodeo clown . . ."

I had to bite back my laugh. Now probably wasn't the time. Even though most people were slowly making their way out of the sanctuary to the gym, where they'd be served food by ladies of the church, I felt too many eyes on me. The burial wouldn't take place until later today, and at least that would be private.

“That was beautiful, by the way,” Tyler said. “Your rendition of ‘Amazing Grace’. I’ve never heard anything quite like it.”

“I’m guessing not everyone was a fan. If you couldn’t tell, this church is a bit on the conservative side.” Understatement of the year.

“Who cares what they think?”

“Not me.” Not anymore.

I sighed and looked at the doors leading to the gym. “I guess I should get in there.”

“Why?” Tyler asked, and I just looked at him. “I’m serious, Evelyn. Why go at all? You don’t owe those people anything, and like you just said, you don’t care what they think. So, skip it.”

The part of me that had, almost, always followed the rules rebelled at the thought of leaving now. People would see it as disrespectful. But it wasn’t. Not really. What was going on back there—the eating and, likely, gossiping—wasn’t about my father. It was about them and how they needed to make themselves feel better after the death of one of their own. It would be different if my mother were still alive and needed me to support her. But that wasn’t the case. No one here needed me. And the last thing I needed was their looks and words of sympathy.

I nodded, and when Tyler held his hand out for me, I took it, more than ready to get out of here. We’d only made it a few steps when Presley and Scarlett surrounded me, taking turns pulling me into tight hugs.

“What do you need?” Scarlett asked, her eyes bouncing between mine.

“Just to go home.”

Presley squeezed my arm. “And by home, do you mean the house here or the one in California?”

I inhaled a sharp breath as thoughts of the house in Newport Beach filled my mind. It was supposed to be a

temporary place to land. A favor for my best friend. But it had already become so much more . . . and not because of the beachfront views, square footage, or state-of the-art music studio. As I looked past my girls to where Tyler now stood with Landon, Levi, and Rook, I knew it had everything to do with them.

Yeah, I'd always dreamed of visiting Orange County. But more than that, I'd dreamed of being surrounded by people who truly saw me and liked, and even loved, me for me. Not for who they thought I should be.

They could move to Alaska, and I'd happily follow them. The place didn't matter. The people did.

Life was short—funerals were good for that reminder—and I refused to waste any more of mine.

Loud enough for the guys to hear, I said, “By home, I mean California.”

Though their responding smiles were different, they all conveyed one thing—happiness. They wanted me with them, and with them was the only place I wanted to be.

Presley tugged on my hair. “Good decision.” Then, with a wink, she took Scarlett's hand and led her out of the church, leaving me with the guys.

Levi took a quick glance around to make sure we were alone before pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “You cried because you wanted to.”

I laughed softly. “Yeah, I did.”

“Good.” His smile was so gentle, fresh tears burned behind my eyes. “Now, ready to blow this popsicle stand?”

“So ready.”

As I walked past Landon and Rook, they each squeezed my hand quickly and gave me a look that communicated *later*. I nodded at them before taking Tyler's arm. I'd be happier if I could hold on to all four of them right now, but the goal was getting out of here quickly and quietly without making a scene. There would be plenty of time to scandalize the good

people of Cody, Oklahoma, later, when our relationship went public. Because I had to assume it would, someday. At least, I hoped it would. The alternative meant I was no longer with the Kings, something I didn't want to think about.

We were only a few steps away from the side exit when someone called my name, and I turned. As a man around my age approached, I recognized him as Jared, a guy I'd attended youth group with back in the day.

"You're not leaving, are you?" he asked, his gaze frosty as it surveyed my escorts, focusing on where my hand was wrapped around Tyler's elbow.

Not wanting to draw out this interaction longer than necessary, I forced a smile and simply said, "Actually, I am. Thank you for coming, though."

"Evelyn," he said, his voice almost whiny as he stopped a few feet away from us. "Everyone really wants to see you and pay their respects. You should stay."

"Hey, man," Rook said, blocking me from Jared's view. "Why don't you back off?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Malcolm and one of the other guys from the security team closing in on us. I dropped Tyler's arm so I could turn and shake my head and mouth "it's okay" at them. Other than attending one church event together, a setup by our parents, we hadn't known each other that well. But Jared hadn't done anything remotely threatening, and I couldn't picture him as a stalker.

Still, my pulse accelerated as I watched him step to the side, trying to peer around Rook's tall frame. The wild look in his eyes took me back to playing dodgeball with him during youth group. We hadn't been allowed to listen to music with drums, but we'd been encouraged to throw balls at each other as hard as possible. Go figure.

More memories of his aggressive behavior in the past sprang to mind, and I backed up into Landon, who wrapped his arms around my waist.

So, Jared might not be quite as harmless as I thought. But that didn't mean I needed to run from him.

"I'm okay," I whispered to Landon, and he reluctantly let me go so I could move to Rook's side. "Jared, I don't want any trouble. Please just go."

"Seriously?" he said angrily. "You'd rather leave with these filthy, sexed-up rock stars than stay here with people who actually care about you?"

Rook took a step toward him, but I grabbed his hand in an attempt to hold him back.

"See, that's where you're wrong. These sexed-up rock stars care more about me than you or anyone else in this building ever has." Tugging on Rook's hand, I said, "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Though his entire body practically trembled with repressed rage, he allowed me to lead him toward the doors. We'd almost made it when I heard a crunch, followed by a cry and the sound of someone crumpling to the floor.

Spinning, I found Levi shaking out his hand and grinning. "I've always wanted to do that, and damn, did it feel good."

That was when I spotted Jared on the ground, blood dripping from between his fingers where he held his hand to his nose. Two more of the private security guys had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and moved in front of him in a way that suggested they intended to detain him.

Malcolm nodded to me and Rook. "Head on back to the house. I'm going to stay here and see if I can get anything out of this guy."

"He's gotta be the stalker," Tyler practically spat. "Those were the craziest fucking crazy eyes I've ever seen, and I've partied with Charlie Sheen."

Ignoring his comments, Malcolm said to me, "Don't worry, Miss Bishop. We'll get to the bottom of this. I promise."

"Thank you."



“The car’s right outside, waiting for you guys. Go straight to the house and don’t leave until I get in touch. The paps have found you, so you can expect photographers here and there.”

“Understood,” Landon said, moving to my side. “Let’s get you out of here.”

I just nodded, unsure how to feel. Was Jared really my stalker? Strangely, that outcome felt more random than if it had been some guy from the internet who had fixated on me.

His expression still grim, Rook planted a kiss on my forehead before dropping my hand. “Let me and Tyler go first with the twins behind you. Keep your head down and avoid eye contact with any of the paps, no matter what they say.”

“Okay.” At this point, I would agree to anything to get the heck out of here.

As soon as the security guy in front opened the door, the sounds of reporters shouting assaulted me. I kept my head down as instructed, not wanting to face any of them, especially today. Didn’t they understand the concept of respecting the dead?

I scoffed under my breath. Of course, they didn’t. The paparazzi had no boundaries. Vultures, the lot of them.

The guys did their best to shield me, but I could tell that several of the paps had found higher ground and were probably getting the perfect shot of me with all four of the Kings. The media was going to love this.

Just as I made it to the SUV, I looked up out of habit, and my gaze clashed with a tall man in the crowd. There was something familiar about him, but before I could take a closer look, he disappeared.

Was that . . .

I shook my head.

Couldn’t be.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

*Rook*

On the short drive back to Evelyn's house, I booked a private plane for this afternoon and canceled the one for tomorrow. As soon as she'd made it clear that she wanted to go home—to *our* home—I'd been ready to throw her over my shoulder and carry her off into the sunset.

I wasn't sure where these caveman tendencies were coming from. All I knew was Evelyn seemed to bring them out in me. I wanted to hunt and gather for her, as well as protect her from every threat to her person and her heart. Right now, it seemed like the only way to do that was to get her the fuck out of here.

My fists clenched as my mind wandered back to that asshole back at the church. It had taken everything in me not to pummel his face into the tile floor. If Evelyn hadn't held me back, I'd be the one with his blood on my knuckles. A grin tugged at my lips. I was proud of Levi for taking that shithead down. It was so unlike him, but I got the feeling that our girl brought out the caveman in all four of us. She'd been through a lot, and it had to stop.

As we pulled up in front of the house, we had to drive through a police barricade to get to the driveway. At least they were here, keeping an eye on the paps surrounding the property. I just wished the garage hadn't been converted into a family room, so we could get into the house unseen.

Looking into the back seat at Evelyn, who was snuggled into Tyler's side, I asked, "Are you sure you don't just want to stay here? I can run in and pack up your stuff for you."

She shook her head. "It's fine. I'm sure pictures from the church are already circulating the internet. There's really no point in hiding out."

"Okay, but let's make it quick. The plane will be ready for us within the hour."

"Thanks for taking care of everything, Rook. I owe you."

I glared at her, though there was no heat behind it. "You don't owe me or any of us anything. We got you."

Not giving her a chance to respond, I climbed out of the front passenger seat and opened the back door before offering my hand to help her out. She took it and exited, followed by Tyler. I didn't wait for Landon and Levi to crawl out of the third-row seat. Instead, I stayed a close distance behind Evelyn as she unlocked the front door and stepped inside.

"I'll go pack my things," she said, heading down the hall. "There's plenty of food in the fridge if any of you are hungry."

I waited until she was out of earshot before turning to the other guys. "Why don't you find something for her to eat while I go help her?"

Landon opened his mouth, looking like he was going to object, but after a few seconds, he closed it and nodded. "Take care of her."

I shot him a devilish grin. "Oh, I will."

My intentions were completely pure, at this particular moment. But what was the fun in sharing a girlfriend with your three best friends if you couldn't needle them a bit?

Evelyn's bedroom door was slightly ajar, so I knocked as I nudged it the rest of the way open. "Hey, I thought I'd—"

Spotting her standing in front of her bed, holding her stomach while she stared at something covering the comforter, my words halted, and I strode to her in two steps and pulled her into my arms. "What's wrong?"

My gaze cut to a mess of torn-up paper littering every inch of her bed, answering my question. Other than handwriting on the shreds of paper, I had no idea what it was from. But that didn't matter right now. All that mattered was—

“When did this happen?” I asked, too sharply.

A shudder racked her body, and I pulled her even tighter against me. “Sometime after we left for the funeral.”

My eyes scanned the room as the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Someone had been in here. No, not someone. Evelyn's stalker.

Fuck.

“Landon,” I yelled before turning Evelyn to look at me. “What is this? What did he do?”

She shook her head, still watching the bed as though the debris on it might start flying around the room and attacking us like the enchanted keys in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Yeah, I was a Potter fan. Deal with it.

“Evelyn.” I shook her gently to get her to look at me. It worked, but I almost wished it hadn't. Her dark eyes were too wide, her skin was pale, and her lower lip trembled. “Honey, it's okay. But you need to tell me what's going on.”

“It w-was my journal. From w-when I was a teenager.”

The fucker had ripped up her fucking diary? This guy was sick. There was no doubt about it.

For the first time in a while, I started counting backward from ten to keep my rage in control. *Nine*. I clenched my fist, wanting to put a hole through the wall. *Eight*. Pounding feet like a horde of elephants sounded from outside the door until Landon, Tyler, and Levi all crowded into the doorway. *Seven*.

“What happened?” Landon asked, his gaze frantic as it slid over every inch of our girl.

“He—” I didn't want to use the word *stalker* in front of Evelyn right now “—was in here while we were gone.”

Landon's jaw visibly ticked with anger, but he didn't let that distract him. "Okay. Tyler, go tell the security guy outside what happened and ask him to speak to the officers stationed out front. Levi, I need you to inspect every inch of this house. Figure out how he got in and make sure he's not still here."

Tyler and Levi obeyed without question for once and left the room. Landon stayed and, softening his tone, said, "I'm going to update Malcolm, but first, I need to know what to tell him."

My arms still tight around Evelyn, I maneuvered the two of us to the corner of the room, so Landon could see what we already had.

"It's her journal," I supplied as he glared at the scattered shreds of paper. "From when she was a teenager."

"Son of a bitch," he bit out. "Is anything else damaged or missing?"

Evelyn glanced around. "Not that I can tell, but I doubt I'd notice if something small was missing."

"Okay. Is there anything in here that you really need to take back to California with you today?"

"No. I mostly just brought clothes, and they can stay."

"Good. I think you should leave everything just as it is for the cops." Landon bent down to kiss her softly. "I'm going out back to call Malcolm. After Levi is done inspecting the house, you just sit down and relax. We're going to take care of everything."

Once he'd left the room, I pulled Evelyn against my chest, so she couldn't see anything but me. I didn't want her even thinking about what had happened here, much less seeing it.

"It's all going to be okay, honey. You've got us now."



Goddammit.

I stared down at the message from Malcolm, my hand gripping the phone so tight, my knuckles were turning white. Jared wasn't the culprit. A half a dozen witnesses had placed him at the church before and during the funeral service, which meant there was no way he could have broken into Evelyn's house and destroyed her journal.

We were back at square one.

The little we did know was getting us exactly nowhere. The stalker had come in through the backyard and broken the handle on the ancient back door. Otherwise, there had been no obvious signs of a break-in. He'd carefully searched Evelyn's room, leaving—almost—everything in its place and no fingerprints behind.

We should have done a better job of securing the house. Stationed men around the perimeter. Put up security cameras. The works. But we'd been so focused on keeping her safe *at* the funeral, we'd neglected the house.

The police were going to question neighbors and see if any of them had cameras that might have caught something, but I seriously doubted it. It was an old neighborhood in a small, typically quiet, town. People wouldn't have a reason to feel unsafe in their own homes.

Peering down at Evelyn, her head resting in my lap, I lightly ran my fingers through her hair. God, I loved private planes. Even first class on a commercial flight wouldn't allow me to sit on a couch with my girl stretched out beside and on top of me. Flying private was a luxury, for sure, but now was one of those times it was one-hundred-percent worth it.

As she shifted to lie on her back and look up at me, I wished I didn't have to tell her what I'd just found out. Before we'd left for Oklahoma, that melancholy she'd worn like a crown when I saw her for the first time had faded until it was barely visible. I hated that it appeared to be back, even temporarily.

But this was her life. She deserved to know.

“Can you think of anyone who would have been particularly interested in your journal?” I asked.

It was the only clue we had, and I had to think there was meaning behind it. The stalker hadn’t disturbed anything else in her room. Hell, in the whole house. So, why had he chosen to rip her diary into shreds? There had to be a reason.

“Jared?” she asked, her voice little more than a croak.

I shook my head. “It couldn’t have been him. Malcolm’s certain.”

She sighed but didn’t otherwise react. “Okay.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

Evelyn glanced away from me. “I’m not. Yeah, he acted like a jerk, but I just couldn’t see him being obsessed with me like that. And I really don’t think he’s smart enough to pull off the untraceable emails.”

I chuckled at that. “Good point.”

Returning to stroking her hair, I gave her a minute to continue, but she remained quiet. “You didn’t answer my question about the journal.”

She nodded, finally returning her gaze to mine. “I know.”

“So, you do have an idea?”

My pulse accelerated. A lead. *Please let her have a lead for us.*

Evelyn blinked up at me, her dark eyes shining with unshed tears. “Maybe, but it feels really far-fetched.”

“That’s okay. Any lead is better than none.”

She swallowed, still hesitating. “It’s kind of a long story.”

I checked my watch. We only had about thirty minutes before landing, and I sensed she wasn’t quite ready to tell whatever story she was holding in.

“Why don’t you tell us when we get home? And in the meantime . . .” I lowered my head to brush my mouth over hers. “I have a few ideas of how I can distract you.”

For the first time since I'd found her standing still in her bedroom, her lips formed a smile. "Oh, yeah?"

My own grin became wicked. "Yeah."



## Chapter Forty

*May, Cody, Oklahoma*

*School is almost out for the year, and I keep thinking about last summer and that sense of freedom I experienced. It didn't last long, but it was glorious while it lasted.*

*These days, I'm not sure I'll ever experience that feeling again. While everyone around me is already thinking about applying to colleges or making other plans for after graduation in a year, I just feel stuck.*

*Is this all my life will ever be?*

*At least I still have my songs. They're the only thing getting me through.*

*Evelyn*



I sat cross-legged on the couch, a pillow pressed into my stomach, as though it might keep me from vomiting. This moment had been inevitable. Deep down, I'd known that. But I'd thought I would have more time. My relationships with Rook, Tyler, Levi, and Landon were still so fresh. I wasn't ready to shave the bloom off the rose so soon.

The only thing keeping me seated was the concern and understanding wafting off all four of them while they waited for me to speak. We'd arrived at home less than an hour ago, but I couldn't put this off any longer. Because of the stalker investigation, yes, but also for my own peace of mind. I would drive myself crazy until I spilled my guts once and for all.

"Rook said you have an idea of who the stalker might be?" Landon prodded gently.

I swallowed deeply before saying, "Yes. But I need to start at the beginning . . ."

Levi reached over from where he sat two cushions away on the couch and squeezed my knee. "Take your time. We're not in a hurry."

With a nod, I mentally forced myself back to that time. "When I was sixteen, I spent my summer as a junior counselor at Camp Shining Light, a very strict, very conservative church camp that I'd attended as a camper for years. Although there were more rules than you could believe, it was also my first taste of freedom. An entire summer away from my parents . . ." I laughed lightly. "It sounded like heaven.

"By that time, Presley had already been in Nashville for about a year, and I was feeling beyond lonely. So, when I met Isaac, I was primed to become attached. I'd never had a boyfriend or anyone who even came close, and he was cute and sweet and paid attention to me. He made me feel special and interesting instead of like the shy, awkward girl I knew myself to be."

Pausing, I clutched the pillow tighter to me as my mind wandered back to one of the first times we'd spoken to each other. He'd flipped his rowboat, and I'd had to "rescue" him. The moment had been so innocent, and I just wished it had stayed like that. Then, maybe we wouldn't be having this conversation at all. Isaac would be nothing more than the distant memory of a cute boy I'd had a crush on once upon a time.

"In the beginning, we just hung out and talked and listened to music. I started learning how to play guitar, and we would

play together. But eventually, the people in charge of the camp caught on to our ‘inappropriate friendship’ and we had to start sneaking around. The summer went on, and one thing led to another . . .”

I shook my head self-deprecatingly. “I’m sure you can guess what we got up to. At the time, I wasn’t even sure how I felt about it. Guilty but happy. Anxious but excited. Most of all, I worried about what would happen when the summer was over. My parents would never approve of me dating, and we lived a state away from each other. There was no happily ever after in sight.

“In the end, we didn’t have to figure it out, because my father had his first stroke, and I left camp weeks early without getting a chance to even tell Isaac goodbye. Since I wasn’t allowed a cell phone or social media accounts, and we hadn’t exchanged any other information, I never heard from him again.”

“So, what?” Tyler asked, frowning. “You made the tabloids last year, this Isaac guy recognized you, and he suddenly turned into a crazy stalker?”

I wished it was that simple, but sadly, there was still more to the story.

“Sort of. The creepy emails didn’t start until after I made the news because of being outed as Presley’s songwriter. But that wasn’t the first time he’d tried to reach out to me.”

Acid churning in my stomach, I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t seem to force the words out. I’d never spoken them aloud before, and I didn’t know how to now.

Landon stood from his chair and squeezed into the empty spot between me and the arm of the couch. He wrapped an arm around my back and tugged me into his hard, warm body. Against my hair, he said, “It’s okay, Eve. Whatever it is, we’re here for you.”

“You called me Eve,” I said, before realizing how silly the comment probably sounded. “I mean, you usually call me Evelyn, so . . .”

“If you don’t like it—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I do. My parents refused to call me anything other than Evelyn, since they didn’t want the reminder of sin that Eve brings to mind. But I like it.”

I was good with a name that meant “life.” It seemed fitting for this new view of my life I was embracing. And I wouldn’t want to give up on my name altogether. It was the one thing my biological mother had left with me.

“Good.” He brushed my hair off my shoulder and kissed my jaw, making me shiver. But I couldn’t get distracted. Not right now.

Leaning into Landon’s body, I looked at the other three guys and just spit it out. “A couple of months after I returned home from camp, I found out I was pregnant.” I felt Landon’s muscles stiffen slightly but kept going. “I found out when I had a miscarriage.”

Tears leaked out of my eyes as memories flooded my vision. The pain and terror and so much blood, followed by shame, regret, and an emptiness like I’d never known. I’d been carrying this tiny creation that was half me and hadn’t even realized it until it was too late.

My devastation was like a living thing, slithering through my being every day for the past decade. I hadn’t been ready to be a mother at sixteen, but given the chance, I would have found a way. Because there was no choice. I’d been abandoned by my parents, and I could never do that to my child. My flesh and blood.

Warmth seeped into me, and I looked up to find that Levi had slid across the couch until his side pressed into mine. He patted his legs, and realizing what he wanted, I uncrossed my own so he could pull them across his lap.

Surrounded by the twins and sensing the support Tyler and Rook were sending me through their sad smiles, I mustered the strength to finish my story. Wiping at my damp cheeks, I said, “My parents told me that losing the baby was my punishment for having pre-marital—”

“Fuck,” Tyler said at the same time that Rook stood and began pacing. Landon kissed my temple, and Levi ran his hands up and down my denim-covered legs.

I laughed, though it came out more like a whimper. “Right? The sad thing is, for a long time, I believed them. Not that God was punishing me for the sex part, exactly, but that if I’d been a better, kinder, more selfless person, I wouldn’t have lost my baby.”

I swiped at my cheeks again, but the tears were flowing too quickly now to stop them. “So, I put my head down and did my best to make amends. I taught Sunday school to teenagers and played piano for the weekly church service at the nursing home. I donated baked goods for an ongoing fundraiser to benefit the local women’s shelter and did chores for elderly women in the church. And I donated the majority of my royalties from Presley’s songs to various orphanages and related charities.” Smiling through the tears, I added, “If you assumed I’m rich, that isn’t the case. I’ve saved enough to help support myself, but that’s it.”

The truth was, after my miscarriage, I hadn’t been able to bear working with small children, so I’d done the next best thing—I’d donated as much money as possible so that others could do the work I couldn’t.

“And now you know my biggest secret. I’ve never told anyone. Even Presley.”

Which I now felt horrible about. I should have told her everything years ago. But I’d been too scared. And ashamed. My best friend had always been stronger than me. She wouldn’t have let what anyone said to her, even her dad or gran, change who she was or wanted to be. Not like I had.

Rook finally stopped pacing and sat on the coffee table, facing me, and reached for my hands. “I’m so sorry you went through that, honey. You were so young, and I can’t even imagine how difficult it was. Your parents were wrong. You know that, right?”

I nodded, fresh tears forming. “I do now. I’m not exactly sure when or how it happened, but I’m finally able to see past

the lies of my past, especially the ones I told myself. And you four are a big reason for that. You've helped me realize that I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not anymore."

"Don't give us too much credit," Landon said. "You're an amazing woman, Eve, and so strong."

Tyler knelt on the floor in front of the couch and stole one of my hands from Rook, making it so that all four of them were touching me. "I second that. You never needed us, but I'm damn glad you want us."

"Hear! Hear!" Levi said with a grin.

"I hate to bring this up again," Rook said. "But what about Isaac? You said the emails weren't the first time he'd reached out to you."

Oh, right. I'd almost forgotten why we'd started this conversation in the first place.

"Shortly after I lost the baby, I found a letter from him in the mail. It obviously wasn't the first one he'd sent, and when I asked my mom about it, she took it from me and threw it out. She and my dad had been destroying his letters from the beginning but never told me about them. I guess they eventually got in contact with his parents and told them that he was harassing me, and the letters finally stopped."

At the time, I'd been upset by their interference but also strangely relieved. If I'd known about and responded to all his letters, I would have had to decide whether to tell him about the pregnancy and subsequent miscarriage. And I'd been so torn up about everything, the continuing correspondence with Isaac likely would have just made it worse.

"That's it?" Landon asked. "You've had no other contact with him?"

"No, but when we were leaving the church today, I spotted someone who seemed very familiar to me. It crossed my mind that it could have been him, but I immediately dismissed the idea, since I haven't seen him since we were teenagers."

I drew in a rough breath. "But after finding the journal, I'm not so sure. It was the one I started writing in at the beginning

of camp that year and continued through the next school year. I detailed my feelings about Isaac and, later, the miscarriage.” A shudder racked my body. “If he was the one in my bedroom, he now knows he got me pregnant when I was sixteen.”

## *Chapter Forty-One*

*Tyler*

I stepped out onto the patio, a glass of lemonade in my hand. I'd never cared much for the stuff, but I'd needed to find something other than water to drink, and Evelyn made a damn fine lemonade. It wasn't surprising. I doubted there was anything she couldn't do well if she put her mind to it.

Right now, she was gliding through the pool like she'd been born there, her movements swift and smooth. All day, she'd been even quieter than usual, so I hoped the laps were doing her good. After spilling her biggest secrets to the four of us last night, she'd gone to bed early and hadn't emerged until almost lunchtime, looking exhausted. Between the funeral, the break-in, and having to face her past, I couldn't blame her. She'd been through too much.

Wanting to watch her more than interrupt her, I sat on the edge of the pool without putting my legs in the heated water. Though the bite to the night air reminded me it was still technically winter, we weren't far from spring. The days were growing longer again, and the already-temperate weather was warming.

Did Evelyn like spring as much as I did? Or was she more into fall?

There was still so much I didn't know about her, but now that she'd agreed to be ours—mine—there was plenty of time to learn it all.



After another ten minutes, she finally emerged in the shallow end and slicked back her hair with her hands, water sluicing down every inch of her bikini-clad body. Fuck. With the pool lights highlighting every curve, she looked like a goddess rising from the sea. That redheaded mermaid had nothing on Evelyn.

She pulled her hair over her shoulder to wring it out and froze when she spotted me gawking at her like a horny teenage boy. “Oh, hey, Ty. I didn’t know you were out here.”

I had to swallow deeply before being able to speak. “Yeah. It’s nice out tonight.”

“It’s nicer in here,” she said, walking toward me in the water.

I met her smile with a smirk of my own. “Is that so?”

She nodded. “You want to join me?”

My cock stirring at the thought of getting my hands on every inch of her slick body, I didn’t need any additional encouragement. After setting my glass of lemonade aside, I reached behind my neck to remove my tee then stood to drop my shorts, leaving me in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs.

With Evelyn’s gaze on me, I slid into the pool and took one of her hands to lead her into deeper water. As much as I enjoyed seeing her out of it, her exposed skin was covered in goose bumps, and I’d seen her shiver.

“Don’t want you to get cold,” I said, leaning against the wall of the pool and pulling her against me.

“Wouldn’t want that,” she agreed, laughter in her voice as she wrapped her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist.

Oh, god. This girl was going to kill me.

“How are you doing?” I asked to distract myself from the idea of pushing her bikini bottoms to the side and fucking her right here and now.

“I wish people would stop asking that.”

“I get it, but we just want you to be okay.”

She nodded but didn't otherwise contribute to the conversation, so I took it upon myself to keep it going.

“If you ever want to talk more about what happened, I know a little something about dealing with the past.”

“Have you? Dealt with it, I mean?”

I pressed a quick kiss to her plush lips. I couldn't wait any longer. Kissing her had become a necessity.

“I'm not sure that I'll ever be able to use the past tense. Dealing—present tense—is something that will probably continue for the rest of my life. Does anyone really ever get over being simultaneously ignored and disliked by their family? That kind of shit stays with you, as you well know. Growing up like that, along with having too much money and freedom, led me down a self-destructive path. And now I'll be an alcoholic for the rest of my life. That'll never go away.”

Recovery wasn't a one-and-done scenario. It was a daily battle, one I was supposedly making harder on myself right now. My sponsor knew about Evelyn and had warned me about jumping into a relationship with her. But the ball was rolling, and there was no stopping it now.

The thing was, I didn't care what he or even the experts said. I refused to believe that caring about a woman like Evelyn would, could, be bad for me. She didn't bring me down. She inspired me. Inspired me to think about the future and strive to be better. To be the man I wanted to be.

Evelyn tightened her arms around my neck. “After everything that happened with Isaac and then losing the baby, I shut down. No one got close. I even pushed Presley away, little by little, until we were practically strangers. I didn't think I would ever be able to open my heart again, and then Presley shoved her way back in . . . and I met Scarlett.” Her smile was wide. Beautiful. “They're the best.”

“And what about now? Is your heart open?”

She bit down on her bottom lip, and my dick immediately jumped. As much as I was trying to take things slow, my less

evolved, er, member wasn't getting the message.

"I don't know. Is it possible for my heart to be open and full at the same time?"

I nodded.

It had to be, because that's how I was feeling right now. For the first time, my heart was beating for someone else, and I wasn't even tempted to run away from these feelings. The mere thought of going out and picking up some other girl made me sick. I wanted Evelyn . . . only her.

And I couldn't wait any longer.

Sliding my hands up her back, I untied her bikini top with one tug. I looked at her for permission to keep going, and when she nodded, I slipped the top over her shoulders and dropped it onto the concrete outside the pool.

Pulling back, I studied her. God. She was fucking beautiful, and my sponsor had been right to warn me about exchanging one addiction for another, but this was different. Evelyn was an addiction like air. I needed her to survive, not to get high.

With her upper body fully exposed to me, I went from hard to pound nails with my dick. This beautiful, complicated woman was my match. Her broken edges fit mine, and when we placed them next to each other, they turned into something that had never existed before. She turned me into the man I thought I could never be. Someone aspirational, not real.

I aspired for her.

Her gaze dropped to my mouth, and I realized I'd been so lost in my thoughts about her, I hadn't kissed her. Which was just fucking ridiculous.

I skimmed my tongue over her lips, and she opened her mouth, teasing the tip of her tongue to mine. She tasted like fresh fruit, and for a second, I remembered how she'd spoken about her parents refusing to call her Eve. She wasn't forbidden fruit. She wasn't sin. She was the first.

My first. The first woman I'd ever made love to and actually loved, though I hadn't told her yet. I would. Not right now. But soon. I wanted her to remember the words with her mind clear, not flooded with endorphins.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, pressing her core against mine. Her feet slipped past the waist of my boxers, and she lifted herself while pushing them down over my hips so I could step out of them.

"Neat trick," I said, pulling my mouth away from hers so I could lick a bead of water that trailed down her neck.

Tilting her head to one side, she giggled. "I'm full of them."

"You're going to be full of me in a second." It was a raunchy, dirty thing to say, but from the way her pupils dilated and her body strained toward mine, it didn't bother her.

"Promise?"

Oh, this girl.

Reaching between us, I pulled her bikini bottoms to one side, then thrust toward her. My length slid between her legs, forward and back, forward and back.

"I'm clean," she said. "And on birth control."

What an asshole I was—the thought hadn't even crossed my mind, when it abso-fucking-should-have. "I'm clean," I replied. "I got tested at rehab, but Eve, I can use a condom. Or we can wait."

After everything she'd told me, I never wanted her to feel pressured or worry about anything. "You know I'll always take care of you, right?"

She nodded. The lights around the pool were behind her, illuminating her like the angel I truly believed she was. "I do."

One day, I wanted her to say those words to me in a different place, at a different time, but they'd mean the same thing. Trust. Promise.

Forever.

I pushed into her. Her body gripped mine tighter than a fist, and I nearly came right then and there.

She let out a tiny moan, lifted herself up, then let herself fall back down. I thanked the science gods for buoyancy and kissed her.

And kissed her.

There, in the night air and water, utterly wrapped up in the woman, I let myself go. She nibbled on my lips, pressed soft kisses against my cheeks, and pushed my hair back from my face so she could look into my eyes as she rode me.

It wasn't going to take long, but I wasn't going over the edge without her.

Unused to such intimacy, I had to remind myself to keep my gaze locked with hers. I never let myself be as exposed as I did in those moments. *This is me*, I wanted to say. *I'm a fucking mess, but I'm yours.*

Her body tensed, and her inner walls quivered. *Thank god.* She held her breath and held me even closer.

Her release was mine, and I came so hard, spots danced in front of my eyes. It took me an embarrassing amount of time to catch my breath, but breath bellowed out of her too.

"I thought it was supposed to be easier in a pool," she whispered against my ear. "But my thighs are burning."

I held her until her feet touched the pool floor. "We'll just have to keep working out, then."

She grinned at me. "Anytime."

I couldn't help the dopey grin that popped onto my face. What a great thing time suddenly became.

## Chapter Forty-Two

*June, Cody, Oklahoma*

*I had a miscarriage. It's been eight months, and I finally said—well, wrote—it. I don't talk about it with anyone. Not even my parents, and they were at the hospital with me.*

*They want to pretend it didn't happen, but the way they treat me proves they haven't forgotten. I'm not sure if they ever really trusted me, but any trust I'd earned from a lifetime of following the rules is now gone.*

*And that hurts.*

*I made a mistake, but I can't help but feeling like, now, that's all I am. A mistake. My biological parents didn't want me, and I'm not sure my adoptive parents want me, either.*

*Will I ever find someone who does?*

*Evelyn*



Tyler reached across the island to snatch chocolate chip cookie dough from the bowl, and I smacked his hand with my spatula.

“Do you want to eat the dough or the cookies?” Funnily enough, I wasn't turning into my mother. I was turning into

Presley's gran. She'd been the master of shooing away greedy fingers.

"Why not both?"

I shook my head at him, but I hadn't been able to stop smiling all morning. After our tryst in the pool last night, we'd slept in my—technically, his—bed together. And by slept, I really meant caught an hour or two of sleep between much more interesting activities between the sheets.

People said sex made things complicated. But it could also make things so simple too. Without the tension of the unknown between us, I felt like I could fully relax around him for the first time. We weren't fake dating or holding back secrets anymore. We'd exposed our jagged edges and grown all the closer for them.

Turning toward the cabinet behind me, I took out an espresso cup and spooned two cookies' worth of dough into it before handing it to Tyler. "Don't blame me if you get salmonella poisoning."

"It would be worth it," he replied seriously before taking a bite.

Agreeing, I waited until he wasn't looking to pop a chunk of the dough into my mouth. Like every self-respecting woman, I had a weakness for raw cookie dough. There wasn't anything else quite like it.

"Why is the chocolate so good?" he asked, and I smirked.

"Because it's Ghirardelli instead of Hershey's, Mr. Pennsylvania."

He groaned. "Damn it. I just walked right into that one, didn't I?"

I laughed as I dropped a spoonful of dough onto the parchment-paper-lined baking sheet. "You did."

"Have you ever considered turning baking into a profession? You could open your own bakery."

I shook my head. "Making it a job takes all the joy out of it for me." Since I'd worked at a bakery in Cody for years, I

knew from experience. “I much prefer baking for the people I love.”

Without a conscious choice to do so, my mind began playing an old-school video montage of what my future could look like, surrounded by my guys. Baking cakes for the guys’ birthdays and pies for Thanksgiving. Sugar cookies for Christmas and cupcakes for Valentine’s Day. Then, a little girl with dark curls joined the fray, followed by towheaded twins and a wily boy with endless brown eyes. There would be trips to the beach and family jam sessions. And laughter. So much laughter.

“Love?” Tyler asked, his tone knowing.

I froze as my brain shoved me back into the present. I’d used the “L” word, hadn’t I? As I mentally searched for a response, his grin grew. We hadn’t exchanged “I love yous” last night, but our bodies had practically screamed the words while we’d made love. Even though I knew he was more than just attracted to me and vice versa, I hadn’t worked up the courage to tell him. It hadn’t seemed like the right moment.

But as I looked at him sitting across from where I made his favorite dessert, this felt like the perfect moment. Not that I would make it easy on him.

“Yeah. That’s why I enjoy baking for Landon, Levi, and Rook so much.”

His eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. “That’s it?”

I struggled to keep my expression unaffected but managed as I added, “Well, and Presley and her husbands and stepdaughter and Scarlett and her guys. Oh, and Micah, Scarlett’s brother.”

Tyler narrowed his eyes before slowly pushing back his barstool and standing. My heart pounded as he stalked toward me, stopping inches away. “You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what—” without my permission, a grin split my face “—you mean.”



He shook his head and attacked my sides in an attempt to tickle me. When I didn't immediately react, he glared down at me.

I shrugged. "I'm not ticklish."

"Oh? We'll see about that."

He double downed in his efforts, and though I wiggled the tiniest bit, his touches barely affected me . . . until he went for the backs of my thighs, almost to my butt. Shock rolled through me at the same time I clutched at his shirt to hang on as I squirmed and squealed. Tyler had found a ticklish spot I hadn't even known existed.

"Stop," I breathed out around giggles.

"Not until you say it."

I tried to get away from him, but he trapped me between the counter and his strong body while continuing his assault. "Say what?"

"You know what, Eve. Say it."

I shook my head, being stubborn for no reason at all.

Suddenly, he released my thighs and cupped my face in his hands right before crashing his mouth against mine. His lips were warm and urgent, and I moaned into his mouth as he trailed one hand to my neck and tugged on my hair just hard enough for a slice of pain and pleasure to rush through me.

"Say it," he demanded against my mouth.

I blinked up at him, my heart swelling for this perfectly imperfect man. "I love you."

"Again."

"I love you, Tyler fudging Hammond."

He nipped at my lips. "And I love you, Evelyn Hammond." At my gasp, he chuckled. "Thought I'd try it out. I rather like the sound of it. How about you?"

"Personally, I prefer Evelyn Kerr," a voice said from behind us.

Tyler sighed and pressed one last, lingering kiss to my lips before releasing me. I turned to find Landon, Levi, and Rook standing on the other side of the island, watching us with varying expressions of amusement.

“Me too,” Levi said. “My twin tingles are telling me it’s already a done deal.”

“Not the twin tingles again,” Landon muttered.

Levi ignored his brother. “Besides, since there are two Kerrs, pretty sure we win by default.”

Rook arched his eyebrow. “Clearly, Evelyn Alexander sounds the best. And it keeps her name at the beginning of the alphabet.”

“What is this, elementary school?” Tyler asked.

“It will be when the kids start school.”

My jaw dropped. The kids? Was Rook being serious right now? Yes, I’d been daydreaming about children only minutes ago, but I was . . . well, me. I’d always wanted to be a mother. It was supposed to be different for guys. Especially the rock star types.

“And,” he added, “they’ll automatically get cool points for sharing a name with Alexander Hamilton. Isn’t he the hippest guy in history these days?”

Levi snorted. “You’re one of the most recognizable front men on the planet, and you’re going with the *Hamilton* connection? Lamé, dude.”

Rook pointed at him. “Take that back. There’s nothing lamé about *Hamilton*.”

What the gingersnaps was happening right now? Had I entered some kind of fantasy dimension, where my dream guys were discussing our future children as casually as they made dinner plans? I pinched myself. Nope. This was real life.

Landon cleared his throat. “As much as I’d love to hear you two debate the ‘hipness’ of Alexander Hamilton, particularly if you rapped it, we do have something else we need to discuss.”

Rook and Levi immediately sobered. So, it was going to be one of *those* discussions. I wasn't surprised. The guys had been working on this whole stalker problem for the past thirty-six hours. I'd asked them to leave me out of it until they'd learned something concrete. I had no desire to dwell on any of it; I just wanted it to be over.

Moving to the other side of the island, I dropped onto a barstool. "What did you learn?"

"Quite a bit," Landon answered. "Malcolm spent yesterday in Kansas, in Isaac's hometown. His family and friends haven't seen or heard from him in over a week, and they're worried about him. Apparently, he has a history of obsessive behavior and has had several restraining orders filed against him by past girlfriends or women he's fixated on. His roommate admitted that Isaac hasn't been able to stop talking about you since you first made the news all those months ago. He said that, at first, Isaac kept bragging about your summer together, but over time, his comments became more and more possessive."

"The asshole should have reported Isaac," Rook muttered.

I tended to agree, but I was only hearing a small part of the story. Who knew how much the roommate had known about Isaac and his history with obsessive behavior. Isaac was at fault for stalking me—no one else.

The look Landon gave me was half-worried and half-pitying. "Unfortunately, we still don't know where Isaac is. Based on the timeline Malcolm was able to put together, there's no way he was the one who left the, uh, thing outside our gate. He must have hired someone to do it for him. But that doesn't mean he won't come to California. Actually, we're counting on him doing just that."

"Wait, what?" Surely, I hadn't heard him correctly. "You want to him to show up here?" That didn't sound like Landon, at all.

"Yeah, we have a plan. But to pull it off, we need Presley's help. Do you think she would be willing to make another trip out here?"

“I’m sure she would, but what’s the plan?”

Rook smiled. “We’re going to set a trap for a rat.”

## Chapter Forty-Three

*Landon*

“You know, when I made the deal, this wasn’t what I had in mind,” Calvin said dryly.

“Are you really complaining right now?” I asked from backstage of the same club we’d *almost* performed at on Valentine’s Day.

When we’d left early that night, Calvin had agreed that the Kings would come back weeks later for an intimate performance and Q&A session . . . that would become considerably less intimate when it was live streamed for the world to view. As of a few days ago, we’d arranged for Presley Cole—joined by her brilliant songwriter, Evelyn Bishop—to replace us. As predicted, the news had spread like wildfire, the story topping practically every celebrity news site.

Typically, such a small event would only attract local attention. But Presley hadn’t performed in front of a camera since she’d walked away from Nashville, and her fans and haters alike were salivating at the opportunity to watch her perform, if only online. Not to mention the people who wanted to see more of Evelyn. She’d become a celebrity in her own right, especially since news of her relationship with Tyler broke.

“It would have been good publicity for the Kings, something you guys still need.”

I shrugged. The band's public image was the least of my current worries. "You'll come up with something else."

Calvin scoffed. "Sure, just as soon as I pull a rabbit out of my ass."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Always knew you were talented."

He rolled his eyes, but I could see the smile playing at his lips. Calvin had been managing the band long enough to know we needed all his extra patience. We just didn't normally require it because we were trying to take down our girlfriend's stalker.

As I watched my girl in deep conversation with Presley, my stomach churned. Even though this setup had been my idea, I still didn't like how it had turned out. *My* plan had been to draw Isaac here with the promise of Evelyn's attendance, but she would actually remain in a location far away. She had outright rejected that idea, insisting that she needed to be here to face her tormentor.

I understood, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

From everything Malcolm had discovered by speaking to the people closest to Isaac, the man needed professional help. His mental health was a huge question mark, and no amount of security or plainclothes police officers on the premises would ease my mind. Even the metal detectors stationed at the door only provided a modicum of reassurance.

"When were you going to tell me you guys decided to pull a reverse sister wives?"

Calvin's question drew my attention back to him. "Reverse sister wives? Really?"

"What? Would you prefer brother husbands?"

"Uh, no." That just sounded wrong. Probably the way "sister wives" had before everyone got accustomed to hearing it. "And, if you haven't noticed, we've been kind of busy. Filling you in wasn't at the top of our to-do list."

Calvin scowled. “Filling me in should always be at the top of your to-do list. You know that, Landon. I can’t protect you if I don’t know what’s going on.”

I sighed. He was right. He could only do his job if we let him. “I’m sorry. We should have let you know first thing.”

“Damn straight. You do realize this is just going to add to the gossip shit pile, right?”

I allowed my gaze to stray to Evelyn once again. She was wearing a knee-length dress in a sparkly, light pink fabric. Though the neckline was high, accentuating her ruby heart necklace, and her arms were covered, when she turned around, the back dipped down to her waist. The effect was sweet and sexy, just like her. I hated that she’d carefully styled her hair to fall over her left cheek, but I got it. Whatever she needed to feel comfortable tonight.

“I know, but I don’t care. None of us do.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

It took me a few seconds for his words to sink in, and when they did, I looked back to him, my confusion likely evident on my face. “You are?”

His often-teasing expression had sobered. “Evelyn is a special woman, and she deserves a man—or, in this case, men—who are completely devoted to her. If the four of you are going to subject her and yourselves to additional scandal, it better be for something real, not just some kinky fling.”

“Never knew you were such a romantic, Cal,” I said, only half sarcastically. I liked that he was looking out for Evelyn just as much as he was the Kings. Most managers wouldn’t bother.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

With that, and a wink, he walked off, leaving me to return to fretting about how tonight would go. On the one hand, I wanted Isaac to show up here more than anything. I wouldn’t be able to relax until he was in police custody. On the other hand, I wanted him far away from Evelyn. A country—hell, a world—away from her.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I withdrew it to check the screen.

Malcolm: He's here.

Malcolm: Don't worry. We've got this.

That wasn't the first time he'd said something similar. I hoped, this time, he was right.

Me: Guess it's showtime.

In more ways than one.

I made my way over to Evelyn, and the smile she gave me nearly cracked my heart wide open. She was mine. I was still getting used to the idea. It didn't seem real.

As inconvenient as four men sharing one woman might seem to others, for us, it just worked. Evelyn settled us in a way individual girlfriends never could. She allowed us to be more than a band. I'd always considered us a family, but we weren't. Not really.

Not until her.

Careful to not muss her makeup, I kissed her on the temple. "You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." She peered up at me, her eyes wider than usual. "Is he here?"

"He is. You sure you want to go through with this?"

"I'm positive." She pressed a soft kiss to my cheek, then swiped away the lipstick she'd left behind. "I'll be okay, Lan. Promise."

"I know. I believe in you, Eve."

She beamed up at me before turning to Presley. Hand in hand, they walked out onto the stage, and a minute later, the lights rose to whistles and shouts. The crowd might be small, but they were enthusiastic.

Presley stood in the center of the stage, under the spotlight, but I couldn't keep my eyes off Evelyn, sitting behind the keyboard. I knew she'd rather hide behind a grand piano. Or,



more accurately, backstage. The fact that she was here, facing her fears, made my chest tighten with pride.

As soon as Presley began speaking to the audience, I forced my gaze away from my girl and made my way toward Tyler, who would spend the entire show backstage. We didn't want to take a chance that Isaac would spot him and react irrationally.

"He's here?" Tyler asked immediately.

"Yes. You got things covered back here?"

"You know it."

I nodded, knowing there wasn't anything else that needed to be said. Tyler was taking the threat against Evelyn as seriously as the rest of us. If it came to it, I had no doubt he would do whatever was necessary to protect her.

After shooting off a text to Rook and Levi, letting them know about Isaac's appearance, I made my way out into the club. Everything in me longed to hunt down the sicko right now and drag him to the parking lot. I wanted to see him in jail, but first, I wanted to go biblical on his ass. To see his face swollen and limbs bloodied.

*Vengeance is mine.*

Except, I couldn't do any of that. Evelyn had made her own plans for tonight, and she deserved the chance to see them through. I just needed to be patient, something that wasn't usually a problem for me.

Usually.

## Chapter Forty-Four

*July, Cody, Oklahoma*

*It's been a year today since my first time with Isaac. Looking back, I wonder what I was thinking. That girl seems so young and naïve to me now.*

*I want to believe Isaac truly loved me, and I him, but I'm not sure anymore. Love shouldn't be so fleeting . . . right? If it was true love, a year later, I should still be pining for him. Instead, I just want to forget about everything that happened between us.*

*And that's what I've decided to do—forget. As much as possible, anyway.*

*This will be my last entry. I'm ready to move on and focus on atoning for my mistakes.*

*It's the only thing I know to do.*

*Evelyn*



The lights on the stage were bright, too bright for me to see much beyond them. It was probably for the best. I didn't think I would get through this if I saw him out there. Just knowing

he was among the small crowd gathered for the show made my skin crawl.

After seeing the way my journal had been destroyed, I'd suspected Isaac was behind the other messages. But I hadn't wanted to believe it. Any feelings I'd developed for him that summer had been ravaged by the miscarriage and my subsequent depression. Still, we'd created a child together, and that was something that had always tied us together, even when he hadn't known.

Now, all I wanted was to move past him.

My hands shook slightly as I accompanied Presley on "This Side of Home," one of her most popular songs. Though people generally loved it for its description of the experience of leaving home for the first time, I'd written it as more of a daydream. What I'd imagined spreading my wings would be like. At the time, I hadn't realized I wouldn't take that leap until my mid-twenties. But now that I finally had, the song meant more to me than ever.

Presley performed another song before pausing for the question-and-answer portion of the evening. All the questions had been approved ahead of time, and the event organizer intentionally made sure to start with the easiest ones. What artists had influenced Presley's sound, and how did she like working behind the scenes with Sunburst Records? Slowly, they grew more personal, asking about her three husbands and how she'd dealt with becoming a pariah overnight.

"How has your friendship with Evelyn Bishop changed since she publicly took credit for writing your songs?" a woman asked. Although I could see the shapes of people in attendance, I still couldn't make out features.

Knowing this was my cue, I reached for the heart-shaped ruby hanging around my neck, rubbing my thumb along the cool stone for luck. Even though the guys had given it to me for my fake date with Tyler on Valentine's Day, I couldn't help thinking that it had meant more to them, even then.

"To answer that question," Presley said, "I'd like to ask Evie to join me. What do you all think about that?"

To the sound of cheering, I stood from the behind the piano, where I'd been bathed in darkness, and joined Presley in the spotlight—literally and figuratively. Other than the time the two of us had done a live video to share the story of why she'd lied about writing her own songs for all those years, I'd never spoken up publicly.

Sitting on a stool next to Presley's, I said a simple, "Hello," to the crowd.

"Back to your question. My friendship with Evie is stronger than ever." She moved her microphone to her left hand so she could reach for my free hand. After squeezing it, she added, "Holding on to that secret for so long was hard on both of us, and we've grown a lot, together, since letting go of it."

"While I was disguising who I really was, it was easier to hide in my small town and shut everyone, including Presley, out," I said, my voice shakier than I would have liked. "Now, I finally feel the freedom to be myself, and I wouldn't be me without Presley's friendship."

Though our responses might have sounded rehearsed, they were true. After telling the guys about Isaac and the miscarriage, I'd finally told both her and Scarlett the entire story, providing every detail of the summer romance and aftermath. And I truly felt like I was closer to both of them than ever. There were no more secrets between us.

Presley grinned at me. "Love you too, Evie." Then she let go of my hand and nodded for the next question.

"Do you two plan on collaborating more in the future?"

This time, I could see the woman who asked the question clearly. I allowed my gaze to stray to where Levi had promised me he would be standing and immediately spotted his halo of blond hair. I released a relieved sigh. He was just the angel I needed right now.

"I would love to collaborate with Evie for as long as she'll put up with me," Presley answered.

I smiled. “I’ve put up with you for this long, so I guess you’re in luck.”

The crowd laughed, putting me at ease . . . but only slightly.

“Evie has already written a number of incredible songs that will appear on Scarlett Butler’s debut album later this year. Scarlett is Sunburst Record’s first artist, and you all are going to fall in love with her and her music. I can guarantee it.”

“My question is for Evelyn,” a man around my age said next. “Are you still dating Tyler Hammond? And, if not, will you go out with me?”

The audience erupted into laughter once again, and heat flooded my cheeks. “Thank you for your kind offer, but Tyler and I are still together and very happy.”

I wanted to add that I was also dating the other guys in the band, but tonight wasn’t about that. I needed to stay focused.

“Evelyn, I was wondering where you got the inspiration for ‘It’s Simple’?” a young woman asked. “It’s my favorite song of all time.”

I smiled, thinking about when Landon had told me that it was one of his favorites. Knowing I’d written music that resonated with people was one thing. Being told it in person was another. I didn’t know this woman, but my song had become an important part of her life. My heart did a funny little twist at hearing it.

“Thank you for saying that. It’s a personal favorite as well.” I drew in a deep breath. Even though I’d been prepared for the question, the answer still stuck in my throat. “Of all the songs I’ve written, that one was the most difficult, and I worked on it on and off for about three years. Originally, it was inspired by something that happened when I was a teenager, but I could never seem to express the depth of my emotions over it. One day, I realized what I’d made so complicated was actually simple. Sometimes, there is no putting an experience into words. No one else needed to

understand what I'd been through. And that's when the song finally came together."

The woman who had posed the question nodded, and I could have sworn I saw tears in her eyes. It made me wonder what heartache she'd experienced. Was she unable to find the words as well, and that's what drew her to the song? I wanted to hop off the stage and give her a hug. But instead, I prepared myself for the next question.

"Hi, Evelyn," a woman around my age said. "When I was a teenager, I was obsessed with Presley's second album. It was pretty much all I listened to. Since most of the songs revolve around first love and losing it, I was wondering if they were based on your own experiences at the time?"

While she spoke, I allowed my gaze to return to Levi, who solemnly directed it toward a tall, thin man with brown hair and glasses. Now that I was getting a closer look than I had when leaving the funeral, I could see that Isaac's hair, though the same color, wasn't as shaggy as it had been when we were teenagers. In his deep blue button-down shirt, he could easily pass as a businessman or a store manager, at the very least.

His gaze was riveted on me, and I couldn't help the shudder that passed through my body. He couldn't hurt me here. I knew that. But the fact that he'd created such sick drawings and dedicated them to me made my stomach twist with unease.

Still, I was the one who'd insisted on facing Isaac tonight. Running wasn't an option.

Lifting the microphone back to my mouth, I didn't move my eyes from him as I said, "When I wrote those songs, I believed I'd experienced love. But I've since realized that the guy in my life had merely filled a longing I hadn't understood back then—to be noticed. To be appreciated. To be seen.

"I'm grateful to him for noticing me, but I've grown up since then and have experienced the kind of love that makes my knees weak and my heart full." I couldn't resist returning my gaze to Levi, for just a second, before zeroing in on Isaac once more. His previously unreadable expression had turned

hard, and his shoulders were noticeably tense. “What I had at sixteen was special to me, but it wasn’t love, and it’s very much in the past.”

I’d only made it halfway through my last sentence when Isaac began walking forward, his stiff movements quickly growing agitated as he pushed through the crowd.

On cue, Presley hopped off her stool and said, “This seems like the perfect time for another song. What do you think?”

Over the cheers of the audience, I heard the band playing the introduction to the next song. I was supposed to be returning to the keyboard right now. That had been the plan. For me to stay at least a stage away from my stalker. I’d promised the guys.

But as Malcolm and his team closed in on Isaac, I found myself moving forward instead of backward. Before I could reconsider, I headed straight for the stairs on the side of the stage and skirted around the security barrier. No one stopped me. Their job was to keep the audience out—not keep me in.

Presley began singing, but still, I didn’t stop. An unseen force pressed against my spine, propelling me forward. Over the crowd, I spotted Malcolm’s tall form heading toward the side exit, and I followed.

I’d almost made it when a hand clamped around my elbow, pulling me to a stop. Looking up, I found Rook glaring at me. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

The room was loud, but he was louder.

“I’m seeing this through to the end,” I said, yanking my arm out of his grasp.

I expected him to fight me, but instead, he took my hand before leaning in close and growling, “Stay behind me.”

I nodded. That, I could do.

We made it outside just in time to witness Landon shove Isaac up against the side of the brick building. As he encircled the smaller man’s neck with his hand, Landon got right up in

his face. “You ever threaten, look at, or even think about Evelyn again, and I’ll end you. You got that?”

My hand not clutching Rook’s flew to my mouth, and I didn’t know whether it was to cover a gasp or a laugh. Landon was famous for his cool head, and yet, he was scaring the giblets out of my ex. I wouldn’t have believed it if I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes.

Bug-eyed, Isaac choked, “Y-yes.”

“Good.”

“Hey, boss,” Malcolm said, alerting me to his presence. I’d been too distracted to notice that he and Levi were standing back, watching the show with matching grins. “We’re going to have cops on our asses any second.”

Landon nodded but kept hold of Isaac for a few more seconds, his face a mask of rage. Slowly, he released the other man’s neck and stepped back, allowing Malcolm to take over. Things happened quickly after that, several plainclothes officers joining us in the alley, followed by two in uniforms with their cruisers.

Rook held me the entire time, but we didn’t speak. We just observed. Tyler showed up a few minutes later, his face red from either anger or exertion—I couldn’t be sure which. But all he did was kiss me on the forehead and stand beside me, stroking my bare back.

When Levi and Landon joined us, I threw myself into Landon’s arms, burying my face into his warm chest. “That was so dumb. You could be charged with assault.”

He chuckled into my hair. “It was worth it.”

I shook my head, but I was smiling. “I love you, you . . .”

*Wonderful, sexy, stubborn man.*

Landon lightly gripped the back of my neck and tilted my head up. His mask had fallen away, leaving only something awfully close to adoration behind. “I love you.” My heart melted . . . until he added, “Even though you shouldn’t even be out here.”



I shrugged, not concerned in the least.

Against my ear, he murmured, “Better watch it, or I’m going to have to spank that pretty ass of yours when we get home.”

I clenched my legs together. Dang. Was that supposed to turn me on? Because it was totally working.

With another chuckle, Landon released me, and Levi took his place, squeezing me so tight, I wheezed, “Need . . . to . . . breathe.”

He loosened his grip but didn’t let me go. “I’m so glad that’s over,” he said, before kissing me softly on the mouth. “You okay?”

I nodded. I was okay. More than okay, actually.

“Evelyn.”

My name had come out as a desperate plea, and on instinct, I turned around. Isaac stood there, his hands behind his back while he was being handcuffed. With wild, green eyes, he yelled, “You’re mine! I noticed you when no one else did. I even saw past your hideous scar. I was your first, and we made a baby together. You were supposed to love me, Evelyn. Me! You were supposed to be mine, not become some groupie whore.”

I almost laughed at that. If he only knew . . .

Standing tall, I peered right back at him. “That’s the thing, Isaac. If you’d really loved me, you wouldn’t have found anything hideous about me. Even my scar.” Then, I turned back to my guys. “What now?”

“We’re already here.” Rook grinned. “Might as well go back inside and play something for the fans.”

“As long as you remember I’m your number-one fan.”

Tyler slung his arm around my shoulder. “No, you’re our *one*, Eve. Our only one.”

## *Chapter Forty-Five*

*March, Newport Beach, California*

*It's been a long time.*

*I spent too many years hiding. From who I was. From who I am. From who I want to be.*

*But I'm not hiding anymore.*

*If I could go back, I would tell past Evelyn that everything would be all right. She just needed to hang on. I would be tempted to convince her to change sooner, but she probably wouldn't listen. She needed to find her way in her own time.*

*Most of all, she—I—needed to accept a dance from none other than Tyler fudging Hammond. My life changed that night in ways I never could have anticipated. After denying myself the chance to find happiness for so many years, I'm finally embracing it and everything that comes with it. The love, the sex, the companionship, the family.*

*For the first time, I can imagine a full life.*

*I want it.*

*I deserve it.*

*And I'm going to take it.*

*Always,*

*Evelyn*

Laying down my pen on my desk, I folded the piece of paper and tucked it into the drawer. I'd thought turning my back on Isaac tonight had been the final step toward moving on. But as my racing thoughts had kept me awake for the past hour, it finally dawned on me that I'd only faced two-thirds of my demons.

I'd lain my parents' expectations to rest.

I'd shared my biggest secret and faced off with the man who'd been wrapped up in it for all these years.

But I had yet to confront my most daunting adversary—myself.

I'd spent my life avoiding mirrors. I hadn't wanted to see the girl with the unknown heredity. I'd averted my gaze so I didn't have to study my scar. But what I'd been avoiding most of all was everything lurking beneath the surface. Because if I allowed myself to look at myself—to really look—then I wouldn't be able to hide anymore.

That hadn't been an option. Hiding had been my security blanket, and just like a toddler, I'd refused to let go of it.

It was easy to look back and focus on all the ways I'd messed up. But I wasn't going to place the blame on past Evelyn. She'd been doing her best to survive, and if she hadn't remained closed off for so long, I never would have ended up here.

And I couldn't imagine any other place I'd rather be.

Soft footfalls sounded behind me, followed by hands rubbing my shoulders. "Hey, sweetie," Levi said. "Why are you up?"

"I had to take care of something."

"And did you?"

I groaned at the feel of his fingers working my sore muscles. "Mm-hmm."

"Good, because I want to take you somewhere."

“Now?” I glanced at the digital clock on the desk. “It’s after three.”

“So? Do you have somewhere to be in the morning?”

“No . . .” Turning, I looked up at him, only able to make out the strong lines of his jaw in the soft moonlight streaming in through the open blinds. I reached out and took his hips in my hands. “But we could stay here and take advantage of that big ole bed over there.”

For whatever reason, Levi hadn’t taken things past kissing with us, even when I’d tried to nudge him in that direction. He would playfully distract me, and I hadn’t pushed him. But I wasn’t sure how much longer I could wait, especially if we kept sleeping in the same bed, like we were tonight.

He laughed. “Tempting, but I have a better idea.” Lifting my hands from his hips, he tugged on them. “Come on, Eve. You know you want to.”

A smile tilted my lips. What had I just written about a full life?

“Okay, Levi. Take me.”

“Oh, I will.” He winked. “Trust me.”

Ten minutes later, dressed in a sweatshirt and shorts over a bikini, as instructed, I met Levi in the kitchen. He took my hand and, instead of walking toward the stairs to the basement garage, he led me to the back patio doors. I hesitated. As much as I enjoyed nighttime swimming, especially after my tryst in the pool with Tyler, I wasn’t really in the mood.

Levi tugged on my hand to get me moving again. “Trust me,” he repeated, and I relented. Whatever he wanted to do, wherever he wanted to go, I would be by his side.

He took me past the pool, around the side of the house, and down the steps that led to the dock. A night swim in the ocean instead? That could be fun.

But once we were walking across the wooden slats, water lapping beneath us, I realized something was different. The usually empty boat slip wasn’t, well, empty.

“When? How?” I asked as I took in the sleek lines of the white and blue cruiser visible in the low dock lights. I didn’t know much about boats, but I did know this was the kind that had a small cabin below. It wasn’t big enough to be considered a yacht, I didn’t think, but it sure was pretty.

Levi grinned at me. “I had it delivered this evening while we were at the club. I’ve been looking for a while, and I’m test driving this one for the week before I decide.” He pulled me into his chest. “Gotta make sure my lady approves first.”

I shook my head at him. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy for you.” Pulling away, he said, “You want to go for a ride?”

“Now?”

“Yes, sunshine. Now.”

Looking from him to the boat and then back to him, I asked, “Do you know how to drive that thing?”

He laughed. “Yes. I’ve owned a couple of boats in the past, but nothing quite this luxurious.”

“Okay,” I sighed, feigning annoyance. Really, I was excited. Kids at school had bragged about going to the lake during the summers, but I’d never had the chance. This would be a first. Another one.

Levi helped me on board, and I immediately realized he wasn’t kidding about the luxury. The main deck of the boat was partially covered and surrounded by windows on two sides. The white, leather-looking seats with gray stitching were pristine, and there was a built-in fridge under a bar with a small sink. In front of the cockpit was additional seating, which was currently made out into a bed that would be perfect for sunbathing . . . or other things.

I slid my hand lightly over what was basically the front passenger seat. “Wow, Levi. This is incredible.”

“You like?”

“Very much.”

“Good.” He pressed his lips to my forehead and gestured for me to sit. “Let’s get going, then.” Lifting a hidden compartment under the seat, he handed me an all-weather, puffy-style blanket. “In case you get cold.”

Assuming I’d want the extra protection once we got going, I went ahead and wrapped myself in the blanket before sitting in the chair next to where Levi stood behind the wheel. He appeared at ease and unquestionably happy, the creases along his cheeks and mouth creating those pseudo-dimples I hadn’t spotted in weeks.

When he started the motor, it was quieter than I expected, and he skillfully backed us out of the boat slip and slowly headed out of the harbor. Once we hit open water, he shot me a look that said, “get ready,” before punching it.

I laughed as my hair whipped around my face, and Levi’s did the same. The air was chilly but not too cold, since the windows surrounding us were blocking much of the wind. As we got farther away from home, I marveled at the darkness. I could almost believe we were in our own little world.

After about twenty minutes on the water, Levi headed toward what appeared to be a cove and slowed. “What do you think about here?” he asked.

“For what?” Even I could hear the suggestion in my voice, but I wasn’t sorry about it.

“To drop anchor. It’s a nice, *private* spot. No one around for miles.”

A smile lit up my face. “I think it’s perfect.”

Following him to the front of the boat, I watched as he opened a hidden compartment to lower the anchor. I glanced around us, absorbing the peacefulness of our surroundings and the blanket of stars above us. That’s when it hit me. “You brought me stargazing,” I said, my voice filled with awe. The day we went out in Tyler’s convertible, I’d listed it as something I’d wanted to try. He’d remembered.

Standing, Levi smiled down at me. “I listen to you.”

“And I love you.”

As soon as the words were out, an unknown weight lifted from my chest. How had I not said that to him before? It felt like he'd been residing in my heart for as long as I'd known him.

His smile seemed to widen until it took over his entire body as he grabbed me around the waist and spun me around. I giggled, not caring that he was making me dizzy.

When he set me down, his arms still tight around my waist, he gazed down at me, adoration clear in his eyes, even with only the soft boat lights illuminating them. "I love you, Eve. I've been dying to say that, but I wanted to wait for the perfect time."

"Guess I stole your thunder," I replied sheepishly.

"Never." He peppered my cheeks, chin, forehead, jaw, lips with kisses. "Feel free to tell me anytime you want. On a boat. Or a float. While playing with a goat."

I laughed against his lips. Only Levi.

"Want to check out the cabin?" he asked, between kisses.

I pointedly looked toward the makeshift bed. "I'd rather stay out here."

Releasing me, he immediately opened yet another compartment and withdrew two pillows and a blanket that he spread over the bed. This one was the size of a queen comforter and looked soft.

Planting my hands on my hips, I purred, "Why, Mr. Kerr, it's almost like you planned this."

This time, his grin was wicked. "More like hoped for it."

That was the thing about Levi. For all his lightheartedness and confidence, he was so considerate of my boundaries and hang-ups. It didn't mean he didn't push me—he did—but never so I was uncomfortable. I had the feeling he would have been totally content holding me all night.

But I wanted more than holding tonight.

“I hoped for things too.” I pulled him toward me and whirled us around.

Facing me, he lifted his eyebrows. “Tell me everything. I want to make all your fantasies come true.”

I let my fingers dip past the waistband of his board shorts and pushed them down. Staring up at him, I went to my knees. I took in the way he swallowed hard and felt a surge of excitement zing up my spine. “What if I want to be the one who does that?”

His voice cracked as he got out, “That would work too.”

I tugged him next to me, pushing him back until he was on the makeshift bed. Slowly, gaze on his, I lowered my head until I could take him in my mouth.

Dropping his head to the pillow, he lifted his chin and groaned. I knelt next to him, propping myself with one hand while I gripped him with the other. Despite my lack of experience, I was enthusiastic, and the sound Levi made spurred me on.

I pushed my mouth down on him, then pursed my lips and rose up.

“Evie . . .” His hand pushed through the strands of my hair, cupping my skull, while another hand dove between my legs. I spread my knees, making room for him, and gasped as his long fingers found that sensitive spot.

He rubbed me, fingers circling gently, then harder, making me lose my rhythm. “That’s enough.” Moving fast, he jackknifed, kicked off his shoes and shorts, and ripped his shirt over his head.

I was under him and naked in seconds. Laughing, I stared at him. His face was bathed in blue shadows, and this far from shore, all I could see were a thousand galaxies framing his body.

“You’re beautiful,” I whispered and cupped his face in my hands.



Turning his face, he kissed my palm. Then, slowly, he slid lower and lower until he could nuzzle my breast. I whimpered, arching my back as he ran his lips over my curves. He teased the tip with his tongue, swirling it over and over, and then glided to the other breast.

I rocked against him, holding him tight, parting my knees to hold his body closer to mine. Running my hands over his back, I traced his muscles with my fingertips. He was smooth and warm, but goose bumps erupted every place my hands went.

Levi lifted his head, his lips swollen, and kissed me. His tongue parted my lips, and we tasted each other. I wanted him so badly, and his thick erection was teasing me.

Reckless and desperate, I arched my back until I had him right where I wanted him. He took my unspoken invitation, lowering himself, rolling his hips, and pushing inside me inch by inch.

I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't do anything but reach for what I needed. "Deeper."

We watched each other. Levi's blue eyes were totally swallowed up by the pupils, but still—I could read his face. He eased back slowly, then flexed his hips. Eased back, flexed. It started gentle, but it couldn't stay that way. We wanted each other too badly.

Burying his face against my neck, he bucked into me, harder and faster. His abs flexed against my stomach with every thrust, and the pressure in my middle was growing too fast, too bright. Brighter than the stars above my head.

I tangled my hands in his hair and cried out with every stroke, glad we were far from shore and that Levi somehow knew having this distance would only encourage me to let go.

His hands gripped desperately hard—the curve of my hip, my butt, my neck. "Please," I got out.

He slammed into me harder, and I was right with him, lifting my hips to meet his thrusts and then—

Release.

It was like the stars collided and created a new universe. Something that had never been seen before.

I chanted his name, “Levi. Levi.” The pleasure went on and on as he throbbed inside me.

He cupped my cheek, staring at me, holding my gaze as he came and came. “I feel like I’ve waited forever.”

“I know.” I did. I’d been waiting for them my entire life, and for the joy that Levi gave me.

He smiled then, so bright and so genuine, and in such a completely Levi way that I had to laugh.

He rolled, taking me with him, and hugged me so tight I could barely breathe. “You’re mine now, right?”

Like he needed to ask. Still, I answered, “I think I always was.”

## *Chapter Forty-Six*

*Tyler*

Levi and Evelyn strode in through the patio doors, their hands linked and their expressions joyful. They were both dressed casually, their hair obviously windblown. It seemed Levi had finally managed to pull off his grand romantic gesture. He'd been trying for a while, but things kept getting in the way. First, the news of Mr. Bishop's passing and the trip to Oklahoma. Then, Evelyn's revelations about that bastard Isaac.

I was glad Levi had gotten his chance last night—this morning?

For all his playful, fun-loving traits, the guy was a true romantic at heart. I had no doubt he would continue sweeping Evelyn off her feet for as long as she let him. Which I was really starting to hope would be forever.

If only I wasn't about to ruin their good moods.

They'd only made it a few steps inside the house before they both froze at the sight that met them. Landon and Rook leaned against the island, their arms crossed over their chests and identical scowls on their faces. Sometimes, I would swear they were the twins. Meanwhile, I stood halfway between the kitchen and the entryway, unsure what to do with my hands. Next to me, a primly dressed blonde woman clutched her handbag tightly while a man who looked suspiciously like an older version of me held onto her elbow.

After swiping at a strand of hair that had fallen across my forehead, I made my way into the living room and toward my girlfriend and another one of her boyfriends. I wished I'd had more notice, so I could have warned them to stay far away. But our uninvited guests had only arrived about two minutes before them, so there'd been no time.

"Evelyn." I settled my hand over her lower back and urged her forward. "I'd like to introduce you to my parents, Cecile and Robert Hammond."

My mother's icy blue eyes scanned Evelyn from head to toe before turning to me, effectively dismissing her. I knew what she and my father saw. Evelyn's inexpensive shorts and sweatshirt and wild hair. Her hand holding Levi's and her unfettered laughter as she'd entered the house. Unfortunately, there was nothing I could do to convince them to approve of her. They found every woman who wasn't a part of their social circle unacceptable. It's who they were, and I'd given up on trying to change their minds about anything.

"Robert, could you ask your . . . friends to give us some privacy," my mother said, her voice commanding rather than inquisitive.

Yes, my given name was Robert. There was a reason I went by my middle name, and it wasn't only the unfortunate "Bob" nickname. Sharing a first name with my father wasn't something I'd ever be okay with.

"Actually, no. Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of them."

Her eyebrows lifted—well, as much as possible, given her propensity for Botox injections. I understood her surprise. For as long as I could remember, I'd gone along with those types of simple demands from my parents. It was just easier.

But I was done letting them push me around.

Watching Evelyn on stage last night, facing some of her biggest fears, I'd longed to be as brave as she was. I hadn't expected to have to face my own fears so quickly, but it was probably for the best. No time like the present.

“Why don’t you have a seat,” I suggested, gesturing to one of the couches. With my hand still on Evelyn’s back, I led her to the one across from it, and Levi joined the other guys, sitting on one of the barstools.

I knew they had my back when it came to my parents. They’d been urging me to stand up to them for years now, but I’d always put it off, maintaining that it wasn’t the right time.

Neither of my parents sat, though my father did step forward, his movements stiff. Like me, he wasn’t a particularly tall man, but he had presence. It’s why he’d been so successful in politics. That, and his willingness to devote his life to his public image to the detriment of real connections.

“Tyler, your mother and I would like to speak to you in private. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

At least he didn’t insist on calling me “Robert,” like my mother did.

“Actually, it is too much to ask. Unlike my biological family, my friends give a shit about my well-being.”

My father stared hard at me, and I stared right back. He must have recognized the “not going to back down” in my gaze, because he eventually said, “Cecile, sit,” and took one of the chairs, instead of lowering himself onto the couch.

With a huff, my mother did the same, crossing her ankles and smoothing out her skirt. I wanted to roll my eyes. Did she have to be so proper all the damn time? This wasn’t an audience with the queen.

“What did you want to speak to me about?” I asked, hoping to move this along.

“News of your recent . . . exploits have reached us,” my mother said. “Another fight in a nightclub weeks ago and a man who is tied to your newest conquest getting arrested at your show last night.” She spit out “conquest” like she was referring to a poisonous snake. Ironic, since she spewed more venom than any snake on earth. “You promised us you were done with all of that.”

Had I? I’d probably been wasted at the time.

“Is that all?” I asked calmly, taking Evelyn’s hand in mind. It was shaking slightly, so I gave her an encouraging smile.

“Excuse me?” my father asked. He usually let my mother do most of the talking and then jumped in when he felt the need to share his disgust.

“Is. That. All?”

The great Robert Hammond, United States senator and heir to a fortune, leaned forward in his chair, his eyes blazing. “Don’t you dare speak to me like that.”

I laughed. It was probably a bad idea, but I couldn’t help myself. “Do you hear yourself? I’m twenty-eight, not eight. I can speak to you however I damn well please. And while we’re at it, I have a few things I’d like to say to you. Until recently, I’ve been a mess of a human being. I drank too much, did recreational drugs, hooked up with random women. I was selfish and self-destructive. But after spending nine weeks in rehab for my alcohol addiction and meeting this woman right here—” I lifted Evelyn’s hand to my mouth and kissed it, “—I’m finally getting my act together. And it’s absolutely no thanks to you.”

My mother rolled her eyes. “Please. You aren’t an alcoholic.”

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself . . .” More likely, it was what she needed to tell her friends. She could never admit to something as gauche as having a son who was an alcoholic. It didn’t matter that most of her social circle had serious drinking problems they refused to own up to.

“It’s good that you got the help you needed,” my father said diplomatically. “But make sure your battle with addiction stays quiet. That news getting out is the last thing your brother’s campaign needs.”

Ahhh, yes. My brother’s congressional campaign.

That was why they were really here. I’d made the headlines one too many times lately, so they were here to remind me of my familial duties.

Well, fuck my familial duties.

I'd been hearing this speech for my entire life. It was always about some campaign or upcoming charity event or magazine feature. They only cared about their image and how I affected it. They didn't care about me.

*My parents don't care about me.*

Deep down, I'd always known, but I hadn't really gotten it. Not until right now.

All that self-destructive behavior for attention—according to my therapist—had been a complete waste of time. They hadn't cared if I was being self-destructive, as long as my actions didn't make the headlines.

“You know what?” I said, feeling lighter than I had in ages. “No.”

My father narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean, no?”

“I mean, I don't have any plans to announce my battle with alcoholism to the world, but if gets out, then so be it. I am who I am. I have nothing to hide.” With Evelyn's hand still in mine, I stood, bringing her with me. “Now, I'd appreciate it if you left, so me and the love of my life here can get on with our day.”

Levi, Landon, and Rook began clapping, and it took everything in me not to crack up. Man, I loved those guys.

Cecile—because that's how I'd be referring to her from now on—clutched her damn pearls. “You can't be serious. She was just consorting with the long-haired one.”

I snorted. *The long-haired one.* Like she hadn't known Levi for almost a decade.

“Who Evelyn does or doesn't consort with isn't any of your business. Like I said, please leave. I have nothing else to say to you.”

Robert stood. “Don't do this, Tyler. If you do, I'll officially cut you off from the family and the family's finances. That means no inheritance.”

Like I cared. I already had full control of my trust fund, which could easily provide for me, Evelyn, and the guys for

the rest of our lives, even without any of the band's earnings. Money wasn't an issue for me. I didn't care about the kind of obscene wealth my family had amassed over generations. It hadn't brought them any happiness, that was for damn sure.

I nodded at him. "Understood."

He stared at me for several long seconds before saying, "Come, Cecile. We're leaving."

The woman who had given birth to me merely stood, her gaze hard, and walked out of the room. Out of the house. Out of my life.

Once the door shut behind them, Evelyn threw her arms around my waist and burrowed against my chest. "I'm so sorry, Ty."

I hugged her tight against me. "Don't be. I'm not."

"Does this mean we're going to have to downsize?" Levi asked. "Because after Eve and I christened the boat—multiple times—there's no way I'm giving it up. I've already named her The Wet Dream."

Evelyn drew back enough to glare at him and said, over the sound of the rest of us laughing, "Really?"

He shrugged. "It's not like they didn't already know what we were up to."

She shook her head before snuggling back into me.

"Don't worry, Levi. They can't touch my trust fund. We should be good."

He swiped at his brow. "Phew. I was panicking for a minute there."

"I'd rather know if this means you're not quitting the Kings," Rook said, stepping forward. "All the pressure from your family created the problem, and now that they're no longer in the picture . . ."

I shook my head. "Nothing has changed on that front. I want to keep writing and playing with you guys and Eve. But no more performing or touring."



He still didn't get it, and that was okay. Maybe in time, he would understand. Lately, I'd been picturing myself as a stay-at-home dad, something that had never even been on my radar. But the mere thought brought peace like I'd never known.

I wasn't going to let my experiences with Robert deter me from tackling fatherhood myself, especially with Evelyn, Rook, and the twins by my side. We were going to create the family none of us had growing up.

As the other guys started moving around the kitchen, getting out food to make for lunch, Evelyn peeked up at me. "Love of your life?"

I smiled down at her. "I was wondering if you caught on to that."

"If you just said it to piss off your mom, it's okay. I won't hold you—"

I cut her off with a kiss. Maybe it was too soon for that kind of declaration, but I didn't care. Evelyn was mine.

My present. My future. My everything.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

*Evelyn, three months later*

Rook slipped his arm around my waist. “Are you ready for this, gorgeous?”

“No,” I answered honestly. This wasn’t something I could ever be truly ready for.

He chuckled. “It’s normal to be nervous. Just remember . . . you won’t be alone.”

I drew in a deep breath, willing my heart rate to slow from its erratic pounding. Nerves might be normal, but if I didn’t get mine under control, I was going to pass out in front of almost eighteen thousand people.

As the lights lowered on stage, the sound of stomping feet and the coordinated shouting of “Kings! Kings! Kings!” reverberated around the Hollywood Bowl amphitheater.

Landon moved to stand in front of me and slipped my hair off my shoulder so that it fell down my back. “I thought we talked about this.” He slid his thumb along my scar. “Every inch of you is beautiful. You don’t need to hide any of it.”

I nodded, unable to choke out any words. I hadn’t intentionally pulled my hair over my shoulder and face, but some habits were hard to break. And, at this point, that one was more instinctual than anything.

Levi practically shoved his twin aside before swirling his finger in the universal sign of, *turn around*. Reluctantly

slipping out of Rook's arm, I spun, showing off my sapphire-blue satin mermaid gown. The front and back crisscrossed, displaying a hint of cleavage and most of my back. The fabric clung to my hips and butt, accentuating every curve God had given me. It was the sexiest thing I'd ever worn, and I'd never felt more beautiful.

Levi whistled. "Damn, sunshine. You could stop air traffic in that dress."

"Let's hope that won't be necessary," Landon said dryly.

Tyler was the last to approach, his air quietly confident. Taking my hand, he led me several feet away from the other guys. "This is your first time on stage with the Kings and my last. That's some circle of life shit right there."

I laughed. "It's probably going to be my last too." Why did the guys enjoy performing in front of thousands? And this was even a small audience for them. It was official—my boyfriends were crazy.

He pressed a soft kiss to my temple. "If all else fails, pretend you're in our studio at home, jamming with me and the guys. Up there, the five of us are all that really matter. Okay?"

"Okay." It wasn't bad advice. And—bonus—he hadn't suggested that I imagine the first row in their underwear.

"It's time," Rook said, his smile more childlike than I'd ever seen it.

Landon nodded at me. "You got this, Eve."

"I got this," I repeated.

"You're going to kill it," Levi said, with a smack on my butt.

I scowled at him, but he just laughed. Good thing I'd worn wedges, because if I'd been wearing stilettos, I probably would have teetered over from the force of his strike.

With the lights still lowered, Kings Gambit—plus me—walked onto the stage. Rook strode to the microphone in the center and picked up an electric guitar, slinging it over his

chest. Levi headed for the drum kit, and Landon for the microphone to Rook's right, selecting an acoustic guitar. Tyler stood behind the keyboard on Rook's other side.

And I settled onto the stool behind a grand piano. It was off to the side and behind the guys, just where I'd wanted it. I'd tried to argue that the band didn't need two pianists, but they'd insisted. This was their first big performance since losing their previous record contract, as well as Tyler's final one, and they wanted me up here with them.

So, I was doing this for them, proving there wasn't much I wouldn't do for my guys.

As the first few notes of one of the band's most popular songs rang out from Landon's guitar, followed by Rook's sultry voice, the screaming from the audience enveloped me, seeping into every pore like a parasite, until my body was no longer my own. And when blinding lights suddenly illuminated the stage, my limbs froze, causing me to miss my entrance.

I'd expected to be anxious and maybe a bit overwhelmed. But this experience was something else. My senses were overloaded, paralyzing me.

Tyler turned around and mouthed, *It's just us.*

The reminder snapped me out of my stupor, and I lifted shaking hands to the keys and began playing along. At first, I missed a note here or there, but by the end of the first song, I'd gotten into a rhythm. I could almost—*almost*—pretend, like Tyler had told me to.

After another song, Tyler and Landon kept playing in the background while Rook addressed the audience. "This is an extra special night for Kings Gambit. Though he's promised to continue collaborating with us, this is Tyler Hammond's final performance with the band."

A collective groan, mixed with some boos and other unintelligible reactions, rang out from the crowd, and Rook signaled for them to settle down.

“I know, I know. I’m sad about it too. But can I ask you a favor?” He tipped his microphone at them, as though requesting an answer. After receiving a roar of encouragement, he said, “Help me make tonight the best damn concert of our lives—for Tyler.”

The cheers grew louder, and a chorus of “Ty-ler! Ty-ler! Ty-ler!” filled the space, making me smile. After saluting the crowd, Tyler turned and shot me a wink while wearing the biggest grin I’d ever seen from him. He was eating up the attention, and I didn’t blame it. He deserved it all and so much more.

When Rook turned to glance at me, I stiffened. I’d known this was coming, but I still wished I could melt into a puddle of blue satin.

“The other reason this is such a big night for us is that my girlfriend—”

“That would be our girlfriend,” Landon interjected.

Rook chuckled. “Right. *Our* girlfriend, Evelyn Bishop, is joining us on stage for the first—and if she has her way, the last—time ever.” Laughter and catcalls rang out. “So, please show her some appreciation.”

As planned, I forced myself to stand on shaky legs and offered a wave to the crowd before quickly sitting again.

We’d intentionally leaked photos of the five of us together a few weeks ago and then released a statement about our relationship. The paparazzi had been relentless ever since, but that had been expected. I didn’t know what was being said about us in the media, and frankly, I didn’t want to know. People were going to judge us, but, amazingly, I didn’t care. Those people didn’t know what was in our hearts and didn’t need to.

Because I knew.

Over the last few months, the bond between me and the guys—individually and as a group—had only grown stronger. We’d written together, eaten together, played together, and even done a little traveling together. It wasn’t all fun and

games. Sometimes, real life intervened, and I'd gone weeks without seeing much of them while they recorded their next album. But we didn't waste the time we did have.

There'd been some hiccups along the way—there was only one of me and four of them, after all—but we'd settled into a new kind of normal. I never slept alone, and more often than not, I ended up as an Evelyn sandwich between two of the guys. We hadn't gotten too adventurous during sexy times yet, but I had a feeling it was only a matter of time. Landon had already proved that he liked to watch, and Tyler liked to show off. Levi was up for almost anything, and Rook . . . well, I wasn't sure of his feelings on the matter yet, but it would be fun to find out.

The next stretch of songs flew by as I finally relaxed into my role, mostly by convincing myself that no one was here to see me. They only cared about the guys, who they knew and loved through their music.

When it quieted for Rook to speak again, I glanced at my set list. There wasn't a planned break here, but the other guys didn't seem put out. Maybe this was just something Rook did?

"We have a little surprise for you tonight," he said. "Please welcome Presley Cole and Scarlett Butler!"

I watched, shocked, as my two best friends appeared, each dressed to kill. Presley wore a skin-tight gold mini dress that set off the gold in her blonde curls, and Scarlett wore a fitted sequin dress in her signature red. It was more demure than Presley's, reaching past her knees, but was no less stunning.

Both women smiled my way as they walked past me to join Rook in the center of the stage. When I caught Levi's eye, I mouthed, *How?* With a grin, he responded, *Landon.*

That man. He was always surprising me, in the best possible ways.

"Be nice to these ladies," Rook said. "Not only because they're great friends of ours, but because Presley is kind of our boss."

Presley nodded adamantly. “That’s right. Getting to boss these guys around is my favorite part of owning my own record label. Well, that, and getting to collaborate with incredible artists like this woman standing next to me.”

“Why, thank you very much,” Scarlett said, sounding way more relaxed than I felt. “Working with you is a pleasure.”

Presley touched her arm. “Oh, I know it is.” After waiting for the resulting laughter to die down, she announced, “Scarlett’s debut album is releasing next week, and I want you all to be the first to hear a sample of it. What do you think about that?”

While Scarlett told the audience a bit about herself and how she’d ended up here, Presley turned off her mic and joined me on my piano bench.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I told her.

“You didn’t think I’d miss your first performance at the Hollywood Bowl, did you?”

“Only,” I insisted.

“We’ll see.” She nodded toward Scarlett. “She’s fantastic, isn’t she?”

She was. Unlike me, she’d been performing regularly for many years. But it was for audiences of around one hundred instead of eighteen thousand. Yet, she sounded and looked as poised as ever.

Although Scarlett maintained she didn’t want to go on tour, she would kill it. That was obvious already, and she hadn’t even started singing.

“You good to accompany her?” Presley asked, after giving me a rundown of the three songs she was going to perform.

“Yeah, I got her.”

“I had no doubt. You look like a million bucks, by the way.”

“Only one million?”

She laughed. “Wow. A few months of living the high life, and you’re already too rich for my blood.”

I just grinned. We both knew that would never be true. I would always prefer a soft pair of yoga pants to a dress, designer or not. All the years of being forced to wear ugly, hand-me-down dresses to church had ruined them for me.

When Scarlett turned and nodded to me, I played the introduction to the first song . . . one I’d written for her. Although I’d listened to the recording numerous times, hearing it live was an entirely new experience. Goose bumps lifted the hair on my skin as her clear-as-crystal, sultry voice surrounded us.

When all the guys, plus Presley, joined in with their own instruments, tears pricked my eyes. This, right here, was what it was all about. Coming together to create something beautiful. Something that would last. That meant something. That made people feel.

The next hour passed in a blur. Scarlett finished out her small set, Presley joining her on “Regrets,” the song she’d written. Then, the guys took over once again, giving the audience, and myself, one heck of a show. Their energy was palpable. They were giving it their all.

We only had one song left when things slowed down again unexpectedly. This time, Tyler addressed the audience.

“Thank you, Los Angeles! Since the beginning of our careers, you have embraced us and allowed us to call your home ours. We’ve had a rough year, which is mostly thanks to me being a dumbass.” He paused for laughter. “But you haven’t given up on us, and that means everything. Even though I won’t be touring with the band anymore, these guys are my brothers, and that’s never going to change.”

My eyes welled with tears once more as he looked from Levi to Landon, and finally, to Rook—his lifelong friend and partner in crime. Rook nodded, going from somber to smiling in a matter of seconds. He’d come to terms with Tyler’s decision over the last few months, but it was still hard for him and the twins. For them, Tyler was synonymous with the



Kings. It was almost impossible to imagine one without the other.

As much as I respected Tyler for making such a difficult choice, the moment was bittersweet. It would change everything, for all four of them.

“In the spirit of brotherhood, we have one last surprise for you,” he continued. “We’re going to perform a brand-new song that I just finished writing with the help of my boys.”

Wait, what? How did I not know about this? I’d been sitting in on most of their practice and writing sessions for months.

Tyler turned to me. “But we’re going to need Eve to join us for this one.”

My body froze and then immediately liquified, the spotlight on me like my own personal sun. Me moving out from behind this giant piano wasn’t part of the plan.

As though reading my thoughts, Levi stood from his drum kit and walked toward me, holding out his hand. When he got close enough for me to hear, he said, “Trust me.”

What had started out as a question from him had become a mandate over the months we’d been dating. Levi had a tendency to push me to the limits of my comfort zone but never past it. He knew me. He loved me. He wouldn’t ask anything of me that would hurt me.

Trust Levi? Always.

I placed my hand in his and stood, keeping my gaze on him rather than the audience. We joined the other guys at the front of the stage, and with a sultry, satisfied smile directed at me and only me, Tyler began speaking again. “The first time we met, I threatened to serenade you. Do you remember?”

I nodded. How could I forget?

“Well, since you didn’t let me get away with it that night, I’m creating a do-over. This one’s for you, sweet Evelyn.”

Then he started singing, the other guys joining in shortly after. No instruments. Just me and my guys underneath the

California sky. In this moment, the other eighteen thousand sets of eyes didn't matter. Because my amazing, talented, hot-as-heck, sweet boyfriends were singing about an epic love story, and they were singing to me.

As Landon, then Levi, Rook, and Tyler dropped to their knees while harmonizing about their beloved, I finally allowed the tears I'd been holding back to stream down my face. This wasn't a proposal—I knew that. But it was something even better.

A promise.

A promise of always.

# *Epilogue*

## *Evelyn, Two Years Later*

Three quick raps sounded on the bathroom door, and Rook groaned against my shoulder as I tightened my legs around his waist. We both knew that was Landon's signal warning us to hurry things up.

"I'm close," I panted.

As Rook increased the pace of his thrusts, I reached one hand between our slick bodies to help things along. This wasn't a first—or even a twentieth—for us. Though he'd continued reading many of my romance novels, and making scenes from them come to life, he'd become most enthralled with shower sex. Now, anytime we traveled somewhere new, he insisted on christening the shower.

Which was why we were currently going at it in the bathroom connected to our suite in the Hastings Hotel. Not that the hotel was actually new for us. We'd just never stayed in this particular suite before.

Rook took my mouth in a punishing kiss, reminding me he was in charge. After months of him letting me have all the control in bed, I'd sensed he was holding back and had insisted he take over. He'd enthusiastically given in and had been sweetly dominant ever since.

While our tongues tangled, my entire body tensed in anticipation of my release. Rook tightened his hold on my

thighs and pressed my back into the wall of the shower, slamming into me over and over. Tearing his mouth from mine, he demanded, "Come for me," before biting down on my shoulder.

The stinging sensation, mixed with the command and the tingling building in my core, pushed me over the edge, and I shuddered around him as I cried out. He continued thrusting for a few more seconds before following me into oblivion.

After a minute of stillness, other than our ragged breaths, I tapped his shoulder, and he carefully set me on my feet. Leaning against the wall for support, I peered up into his eyes, which were somehow intense and smiling at the same time.

I trailed my fingers over my shoulder, feeling the slight indentation he'd left behind from his teeth. "You're lucky I wasn't planning on wearing a strapless dress tonight."

He grinned back at me, unapologetic. "I wouldn't have minded everyone seeing my mark."

"You're such an alpha." I turned him around and shoved at his back. "Now, get out of here so I can wash my hair."

He relented but took his time toweling off every inch of his muscled body, seeming to spend way too long bent over, giving me an eyeful of the globes of his perfect butt, while he dried his calves and feet. When he turned around, my gaze automatically strayed to the "always" tattoo along his Adonis belt in honor of the song the five of us had written together on our honeymoon.

I longed to reach out and run my fingers along it, but I'd only be starting something with him again, and we didn't have time for that. Once Rook left me alone in the bathroom, I made quick work of shampooing and conditioning and then drying my hair. I was standing in front of the mirror in nothing but a white hotel robe, applying makeup, when Levi shoved the door open without knocking.

"If you don't hurry up, we're going to be late," he said, coming to stand behind me and placing his hands lightly on my hips.

In the mirror, I saw that he was wearing a light blue button-down that made his eyes pop, tucked into a pair of fitted charcoal dress pants. The only thing saving him from looking too respectable was his chin-length blond hair. He'd tried a few different styles in the last couple of years, but he'd ultimately returned to this one. Probably because it was my favorite. It was just so Levi.

"Isn't that my line?" I asked.

Out of all my guys, he was the only one who was perpetually running late. He was constantly moving, staying busy, but that also meant he tended to lose track of time. Once I'd learned to expect it, it had become endearing rather than frustrating.

But he was right. This time, I was the one who was going to make us late to the party. Scarlett and her guys had reserved the entire hotel for friends and family to celebrate the two-year anniversary of her album release.

Really, I thought it was just an excuse to get us all together, but I wasn't complaining. Though Scarlett, Presley, and I made frequent trips to visit each other, we were rarely able to get all our families together. Presley had even convinced Sawyer to turn over the reins of the ranch to employees for the weekend.

I was debating between two lipstick colors when Levi started trailing kisses along my neck. Closing my eyes, I leaned back against him. "Weren't you just complaining about being late?"

He groaned. "Yes, but I didn't get enough of you earlier."

"That's what happens when you share," Rook said, and I opened my eyes to find him leaning against the doorframe, fully dressed, a smirk on his face.

"Sharing is caring," Levi shot back. Finding my gaze in the mirror, he added, "Not to mention, it's fucking hot."

That was all it took for memories of this morning to inundate my brain. Not in black and white, but in Technicolor. Levi's face between my legs while I took Tyler in my mouth

and Landon watched on as he stroked himself. Then Landon taking me from behind while I went down on Levi and Tyler talked dirty to me.

Though I was usually just with one or two of them at a time, all of us staying in the same hotel suite meant one thing had led to another . . .

Rook was the only one who liked to keep me all to himself and had gone to work out in the gym while the four of us had gotten our workout the old-fashioned way.

As heat began to pool in my center at the memories, I pushed off Levi and returned to my lipstick. *Can. Not. Get. Distracted.* Then I kicked both men out of the bathroom so I could finish getting dressed.

Fifteen minutes later, I emerged, wearing the definition of a “little black dress.” Except, I hadn’t picked this one up at the mall, like I normally would have. Presley had dragged me to Rodeo Drive last month and talked me into buying the designer garment, claiming it would be perfect for any occasion. She did have a point. It had wide straps going down to a V in the front and back that ended at the empire waist. With black lace cutouts along the sides and a skirt that ended a few inches above my knees and swayed when I walked, it was the perfect amount of flirty. Simple but with a little extra flair.

Out of habit, I locked eyes with Levi first then turned in a slow circle. As usual, he whistled. “Not bad.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Not the best compliment you’ve ever given me.”

He walked around me a couple of times before stopping at my back. “Just let me fix this one thing.”

Impatient, I tapped my platform-heeled foot. I had no idea what he could fix. If Dolce & Gabbana wasn’t good enough for him, I didn’t know what would be.

Levi brushed my hair over one shoulder and then slipped something around my neck. With a sense of dread, I forced myself to look down. A single pearl threaded through an open-shaped heart on a silver chain lay above my cleavage, and my

worry dissolved instantly. I should have given the guys the benefit of the doubt. As much as they liked to spoil me, they also knew I wasn't big on flashy . . . well, anything. This necklace wasn't cheap, but at least I wasn't wearing ten-thousand dollars' worth of diamonds around my neck.

I twisted my head to look up at Levi. "Thank you."

"Really, you should be thanking Ty. He's the one who snuck into your closet, took a picture of your dress, and then went shopping for the perfect accessory."

I walked straight to Tyler and stepped into his arms. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." With one hand, he skimmed the exposed skin of my upper back, and with the other, he brushed a thumb over the heart. "You look stunning, as always."

I tugged on his cherry-red blazer. "As do you."

It didn't matter that he wasn't a rock star anymore. He still wore his brown hair in a perfect swoop and dressed like he was ready for a men's magazine shoot.

Landon opened the hotel room door. "Ready?"

Tearing myself away from Tyler, I grabbed my phone, tossed it in my clutch, and made my way to the door. Landon snagged my hand as I walked past and let go of the door, letting it slam in his twin's face.

"Lan," I said, though I couldn't help laughing.

"What?" He blinked at me innocently. "It's the only way I get a moment alone with you." Then, he kissed me softly just as the door reopened.

Ignoring Levi's mutters of complaint, Landon led me down the hall and to the elevator. Less than five minutes later, we'd finally made it to The Scarlett Room, the hotel's speakeasy-style club.

Presley was waiting just inside the doors and waggled her eyebrows when she spotted me. "Well, well. You finally made it. Want to tell me why you're late?"

“Nope.”

“I’m just glad you’re here. I was about to send out a search party.”

I glanced around the room, where most people were already seated at tables and being served drinks by the waitstaff. “Did we miss something?”

“No, but Jill was asking about you, and she seemed oddly frantic.”

“O . . . kay.” I couldn’t imagine why Scarlett’s best friend would be upset about me being a few minutes late. Unless she needed help with a hotel emergency? She was the manager and had been my boss when I’d worked here.

“Oh, thank god,” Jill said, appearing at my side. “You all need to take your seats. It’s almost time!”

She squealed rather than said that last part, causing me to look from her to Presley—who shrugged—and then back to her. “Is something going on, Jill?”

Instead of answering, she scurried away, calling over her shoulder, “Sit, now!”

Landon tugged on my hand. “Guess we should listen to the woman.”

We found our designated table right in the front of the stage, next to one where Sawyer, Beckett, and Clayton were sitting with Clayton’s daughter, Montana, and the guys’ Aunt Milly.

Glancing around, I caught sight of Gavin, Presley’s manager, at a nearby table with his boyfriend and Caroline, Jill’s wife, with their toddler at another. But I didn’t see any of Scarlett’s guys or Scarlett herself.

Curious. Very curious.

Within the next few minutes, the waitstaff disappeared and the lights lowered, suggesting it was showtime. Was Scarlett putting on a surprise concert?



As soft piano notes filled the air, a hush fell over the crowd. It seemed that all the guests, like myself, were holding their breaths, waiting to see what would happen next.

When Brady, Carter, and Wyatt filed onto the stage from the right, all wearing tuxes, and stood in a line facing the room, my breath whooshed out of me. Was this what I thought it was?

A spotlight suddenly illuminated the back of the room, and everyone turned to find Jill walking in on Micah's arm, a simple bouquet of red roses in her hand. Holy peanut butter cheesecake. This wasn't a surprise concert—it was a surprise wedding.

Presley caught my attention, and we grinned at each other. We'd been bugging Scarlett about tying the knot with her guys for ages. She'd been engaged to them the entire time we'd known her, but every time we'd asked about a wedding date, she'd shrugged it off. There was always something else going on, she'd insisted. They'd get around to it, eventually.

How long had she been planning this?

Once Jill and Micah made it to the stage, the music changed, and the first few notes of "At Last" by Etta James played through the speakers. Everyone rose just in time to see Scarlett standing at the entrance, resplendent in an off-the-shoulder lace mermaid gown that flared out into thick layers of white tulle at her knees. But this wasn't just any wedding dress. The lace was a deep red that perfectly matched her signature lipstick.

As she started toward us, my smile was so wide, I could feel it throughout my body. But Scarlett's still outshone mine, even if I'd combined it with every other guest's. Joy radiated through her, and when I looked back up at her guys, their elation clearly matched hers.

Scarlett joined them on the stage, and they talked quietly among themselves until the song was finished. As the officiant began speaking, my thoughts trailed back to my own commitment ceremony almost a year ago.

It had been a small affair on the beach at sunset. I'd worn a simple but beautiful dress with floral applique and beading on the bodice and a flowy chiffon skirt. Presley had walked me down the short aisle and stood up as my maiden of honor, while Calvin had been the guys' shared groomsman.

I hadn't wanted to turn it into a production, and Levi, Landon, Rook, and Tyler had been happy to give me what I wanted. Although our union wasn't recognized by the church or government, it had still been the happiest day of my life. Pledging myself to the men I loved and listening to them as they made promises of their own had cemented our bond in a way nothing else could.

Feeling movement on my left hand, I looked down to where Landon played with my ring. It had been a habit of his ever since the guys had proposed with the diamond solitaire set in a delicate band accented with four tear-shaped sapphires—one for each of them. They'd told me ever since that night when I'd performed with them at the Hollywood Bowl in my sapphire dress, they'd known I was theirs, forever.

Glancing up at Landon, I found him staring at me, his ice-blue eyes alight with devotion. I knew him well enough to guess he was thinking about our day on the beach too. As though they were having similar thoughts, Rook, Tyler, and Levi glanced away from the stage as well, the same love I'd seen on the day of our commitment ceremony shining in their eyes while they gazed at me.

We watched while Scarlett legally married Carter before sharing promises with Wyatt and Brady as well. When Scarlett sang "What a Wonderful World," accompanied by Wyatt on the guitar, tears sprang to my eyes. I was so happy for them. Though today wouldn't change how devoted they were to each other, their joy proved that it was something they'd all wanted.

When the ceremony was over and the waitstaff began offering appetizers, my best friend practically dragged me to Scarlett's side. "I can't believe you kept this a secret," Presley exclaimed with a pout.

She grinned widely at us. “But it was so much more fun to surprise you.”

“It was the best surprise,” I said, pulling her into a tight hug. “And you’ve never looked more radiant.”

“Why, thank you.” She scanned my face with an assessing eye. “You’re looking pretty radiant yourself. Married life certainly agrees with you.”

“You’ll find out just how well it agrees with her if you ask her why she was late to your wedding,” Presley teased.

“Oh?” Scarlett smirked. “Do tell.”

“In my defense, I didn’t know it was a wedding,” I insisted, ignoring the rest.

Thankfully, Brady appeared at that moment, his grin wide. “Sorry, ladies, but I need to steal my wife for our first dance.”

We watched all three guys take turns with her before the song changed and everyone was invited to dance. Tyler was at my side almost immediately, offering me a hand. “Dance with me.”

Like the first time he’d said those words to me, they weren’t a question. But, this time, I didn’t hesitate. I placed my hand in his and happily allowed him to lead me to the dance floor. It was a slow song, so I wrapped my arms around his neck and rested my head on his shoulder as we swayed.

“Happy?” he asked.

“Do you even have to ask?”

“Maybe I’m just needy and want to know that you’re happy with me.”

I lifted my head to look at him. “You make me happy every day, husband.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my mouth. “Same for you, my sweet wife.”

“Are you saying you don’t miss your days of hooking up with a different woman every night of the week?”

Tyler laughed. “It wasn’t *every* night of the week.” I smacked him lightly on the shoulder, and he just kissed me again. “I barely remember any of those women. They don’t compare to you and never could.”

I tightened my hold around his neck. “That’s more like it.”

We continued swaying together through another song, and then Wyatt tapped on Tyler’s shoulder. “May I cut in?”

“Of course.”

Wyatt kept a considerate distance between us and placed one hand on my waist while taking my hand. I had to hide my smile. It was such a Wyatt thing to do.

Reaching up, I ruffled his short, dark hair. “I almost didn’t recognize you without your ball cap and work boots.”

“I tried to convince Scarlett to allow me to wear them, but it was a no-go.”

“Shocking.”

“How are you?” he asked, changing the subject.

“I’m wonderful. And I’m so happy for you, Wyatt. Scarlett’s a lucky woman.”

A rare smile crested his mouth. “I’m the lucky one.” Just as quickly, it fell away. “But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you. Landon told me Isaac is getting released from prison soon?”

I sighed. Isaac had been convicted of felony stalking and sentenced to three years in prison but was getting out early. The guys were pissed about it, but I wasn’t as bothered. He’d sent me several letters, apologizing and explaining the treatment he was getting to deal with his psychological issues. I seriously doubted he would consider reaching out after he was released, especially since it would mean violating his parole.

In my mind, he was a part of my past, not my present.

“It’s your wedding day. You’re not supposed to be worrying about that.”

He grunted. "I'll worry about you when I want to."

"I have four husbands to do that for you, you know."

"They're good guys, but I'm always going to look out for you."

I smiled at him. "I know, and I love you for it. But don't waste time worrying about Isaac. I don't expect him to show up again, and if he does, we have plenty of security measures in place."

Wyatt nodded. "Good."

The reception continued into the evening. After dinner, the newlyweds cut the cake and made speeches, and there was more dancing. I assumed things were wrapping up when Scarlett took the stage. "I've been warned this is a terrible idea, but with so many musical artists in the room, I happen to think it's an amazing one. So, time for karaoke!"

Presley began cheering loudly. Not surprising. She was the karaoke queen.

She and Scarlett kicked things off with a rousing rendition of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," followed by "It's Raining Men," which made most everyone in the room crack up.

After several employees of the hotel took their turn, Presley dragged Sawyer, Beckett, and Montana up on stage with her. Noticing Clayton standing by himself while his family sang "Let It Go," I joined him.

"Not a performer?" I asked.

"Clearly, you've never heard me sing, or you wouldn't have to ask."

"Doesn't seem to bother Beckett." Though Sawyer was good, his brother was downright terrible. Completely off-key and kind of shrill. But that didn't stop him from belting the lyrics.

"Yeah, but Beck has no shame, and I do."

I laughed. "Good point."

"How about you? Are you going to get up there?"

“Oh, no. I’m not a singer. I don’t even like playing the piano in front of people.”

Rook, Levi, and Landon occasionally dragged me on stage with them for a special performance, but I’d never really taken to it. I’d barely gotten to where I didn’t feel like I was going to pass out every second.

I was happy behind the scenes, and thankfully, they understood. Tyler and I wrote most of the band’s songs these days, which had resulted in a bit of a different sound. But no one seemed to mind. The Kings were selling as many records as ever, though they’d cut back some on touring. They didn’t want to be away from home longer than they had to. Even though Tyler and I traveled with them some, I was a homebody at heart and didn’t enjoy being on the road for more than a few weeks at a time.

When Tyler, Rook, Levi, and Landon took the stage, Clayton said, “I wonder what they’ll perform.”

“There’s no telling.”

As the first notes of one of Presley’s songs started playing, he laughed. “Life is funny sometimes.”

“How’s that?”

He shook his head, the silver in his hair glinting in the stage lights. “Not only am I married to one of the most famous women in the world, I’m also standing here, watching one of my favorite bands of all time sing one of her songs while I’m talking to the songwriter. It’s a bit surreal, you have to admit.”

“Surreal is one word for it.”

Truthfully, I never could have imagined my life would turn out this way. It had all started with a younger me playing around on the piano when my parents weren’t home. Less than twenty years later, I’d written dozens of songs, won industry awards, and married the four loves of my life, who just happened to be rock stars.

Yeah, surreal could never do it justice.

After the guys sang a couple more songs, including one of their own, by request, they surrounded me. “Sure you don’t want to give it a go?” Levi asked, in that coaxing tone that often led to me doing things I normally wouldn’t. But that wasn’t going to work on me tonight.

“Actually, I’m a bit tired. I think I’ll head back to the room.”

“You feeling okay?” Rook asked, immediately concerned. “You’re not getting sick, are you?”

I hid my grin. “Yes and no.”

“I’ll go back with you in case you need something.”

“Is it your stomach?” Landon asked, just as worried, despite my protests. “Or your head? I can run to the convenience store and pick up some stuff.”

“Good idea.” Rook steered me toward the back of the room, and the others followed.

“Geez, guys,” Tyler said. “Give her some space. She said she was fine.”

“I don’t know, sunshine.” Levi cut in. “You do look a bit flushed.”

“Sugar,” I muttered before turning to look at them. As much as I loved them, my husbands could be over the top when it came to my safety and well-being. “I was going to wait, but . . . I, uh, have an early anniversary gift for all of you.”

“Does it involve black lace?” Levi asked hopefully.

“Or handcuffs,” Rook suggested, quickly getting on board with Levi’s line of thinking.

“Sorry, no.” I drew in a deep breath and just spit it out. “I’m pregnant.”

At first, no one reacted, and I wondered if I’d only said that in my head. But then, Tyler grabbed me around the waist and lifted me off my feet. “Holy fuck. We’re going to be fathers.”

“Put her down, dumbass,” Rook said, sounding harried. “You could hurt her or the baby.”

“She’s pregnant, not an invalid,” Tyler muttered, but he still set me gently back on my feet just in time for Levi to take me in his arms.

“A mini sunshine. I can’t wait.”

I hugged him back, smiling. I’d taken the test before we left home but had promised myself I would wait until the right time. This wasn’t what I’d had in mind, which made it that much more perfect.

Once Levi released me, Landon stepped forward and placed a hand over my stomach. “When?” he asked, wonder filling his voice.

“In about seven-and-a-half months. I’ll need to go to the doctor to make sure.”

He nodded, his gaze still on my stomach. “We’ll come with you.”

The thought made me laugh. I could just imagine me and all four guys in the small examination room with the gynecologist. It would be chaotic and perfect.

Rook was last, and he cupped my face in his hands and kissed me. “Thank you.”

And that’s when tears filled my eyes. I’d been pregnant before and hadn’t even known it until it was over. That had felt like the end of my life. Now, with the kings of my heart surrounding me, I knew this was just the beginning.



## *A Note from Autumn*

Thank you so much for reading *Always, Evelyn*. I struggled with frequent, and often crippling, anxiety while writing this book and consider completing it a triumph. My acknowledgments for this one are brief: Thank you, Ripley—you know what you did. And thank you, my readers, for hanging in there and waiting for this one.

Whether you can identify with Evelyn's background and experiences, I hope her story—as well as Scarlett's and Presley's—resonated with you. They might be fictional, but getting to delve into their mistakes and triumphs, their friendships and love stories, has been an honor.

If you enjoyed *Always, Evelyn*, I would truly appreciate it if you would share your thoughts by posting a review.

And to learn more about me and my future projects, please visit my [website](#) or contact me at [autumnreedauthor@gmail.com](mailto:autumnreedauthor@gmail.com).

Also, don't forget to sign up for my [newsletter](#) for sneak peeks, behind-the-scenes details, and information about upcoming releases!

In case you've missed any releases, here's a list of all my contemporary reverse harem books and series...

[Love Notes](#) (connected standalones)

[Lonely Souls](#) (contemporary Wizard of Oz retelling)

[Extra Credit](#) (contemporary Rapunzel retelling)

[Risking It](#) (new adult, billionaire series)

The Stardust Series (new adult, slow burn, mystery)

Autumn

# *Evelyn's Playlist*

Listen to the *Always, Evelyn* playlist on [Spotify](#).

- 1: From Eden - Hozier
- 2: Perfect - Ed Sheeran
- 3: surrender - Christina Perri
- 4: California Dreamin' - Freischwimmer
- 5: Saturday Sun - Vance Joy
- 6: Broken Shadow - Karen Elson
- 7: All We Ever Knew - The Head And The Heart
- 8: California 2005 - Phantom Planet
- 9: Malibu - Miley Cyrus
- 10: Believe - Mumford & Sons
- 11: Maybe - Drew Holcomb & The Neighbors (feat. Natalie Hemby)
- 12: As It Was - Harry Styles
- 13: I Hear the Bells - Mike Doughty
- 14: Romeo And Juliet - Indigo Girls
- 15: Meet Me in the Woods - Lord Huron
- 16: I Ain't Worried - OneRepublic
- 17: Now I'm In It - HAIM
- 18: I Don't Want to Be - Gavin DeGraw

- 19: Come Around - Rosi Golan
- 20: Butterflies - Kacey Musgraves
- 21: High and Dry - Radiohead
- 22: Thank You - Dido
- 23: Brave - Sara Bareilles
- 24: Bad Liar - Selena Gomez
- 25: The Wolf - Mumford & Sons
- 26: Saint Honesty - Girl Named Tom
- 27: Any Day Now - Trousdale
- 28: Follow Your Arrow - Kacey Musgraves
- 29: Renegades - X Ambassadors
- 30: Snow On The Beach - Taylor Swift (feat. Lana Del Rey)
- 31: It Goes Like This - Thomas Rhett
- 32: Geronimo - Sheppard
- 33: Can't Help Falling in Love - Kacey Musgraves
- 34: Crystals - Of Monsters and Men
- 35: The Sound of Silence - Simon & Garfunkel
- 36: Run (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift (feat. Ed Sheeran)
- 37: Palms - Allman Brown (feat. Liz Lawrence)
- 38: Home - Edward Sharpe & The Magnetic Zeros
- 39: Tattoos (Acoustic) - Jack Botts
- 40: Searching for the Truth - Katie Pruitt
- 41: More than Words - Music Travel Love
- 42: Sweet Nothing - Taylor Swift
- 43: Sigh No More - Mumford & Sons
- 44: Rising - Julia Lester
- 45: This Is Me - Keala Settle & The Greatest Showman Ensemble

46: Downtown - Majical Cloudz

47: Honeybee - The Head And The Heart

Epilogue: At Last - Etta James

## *About the Author*

Autumn is a lifelong bookworm with a penchant for sarcasm. She loves cloudy days, fluffy dogs, and murdering succulents. When she isn't bringing daydreams to life on the page, she can be found behind the lens of a digital camera or binge-watching Veronica Mars.

To read more about Autumn Reed, visit [www.autumnreed.com](http://www.autumnreed.com).

