

ONLY GIRL TRILOGY #2

# Broken Boy



MARION DE RÉ

# Broken Boy

ONLY GIRL TRILOGY #2

MARION DE RÉ



# COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2022 Marion Thomas

Cover design by House of Orian

All rights reserved.

No part of this ebook may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. Any unauthorized distribution or use maybe be a direct infringement of the author's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly. For permission contact:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

# CONTENTS

## READER EXPECTATIONS

Dedication

Prologue - Jack

1. Who's Counting?

2. Late Night Confidence

3. Everyone Has a Crush on Logan Reyes

4. Back in The Saddle

5. The Music Gazette Party.

6. To Move or Not To Move

7. The Forgotten Issue

8. The Non-Date

9. L.A. Is a Tough Market

10. The Santa Barbara Transformation

11. The Sole Ambassador

12. The Cat's Out of The Bag

13. Exciting News

[14. Party Crasher](#)

[15. Steamy Dreams](#)

[16. An Unusual Proposal](#)

[17. An Active Day Out](#)

[18. The Premiere](#)

[19. New Beginnings](#)

[20. Kendra](#)

[21. Coachella Surprises](#)

[22. House Warming](#)

[23. They're All The Same](#)

[24. Welcome Back](#)

[25. Fired Up](#)

[26. The Designer Charity Ball](#)

[27. The Imposter Syndrome](#)

[28. Thicker Skin](#)

[29. Walk Down Memory Lane](#)

[30. The Marketing Strategy](#)

[31. Whispers](#)

[32. Unexpected](#)

[Also By Marion De Ré](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

## READER EXPECTATIONS

**Heat level:** Fade-to-black, sensual descriptions, mentions of sex

**Cursing:** Not a lot, but a few F-bombs (especially in the prologue)

**Notable tropes:** Rockstar romance, fish out of water, different worlds, love triangle

**Triggers:** Mention of drug addiction, drug abuse in the prologue only

**Style:** First person present, single POV. Prologue in MMC's POV

**Ending:** Cliffhanger (HEA in Book 3)



To my wonderful readers:

Yeah, there's another cliffhanger. Muhahaha. You love me.



## PROLOGUE - JACK

AS I PARK IN front of my old friend's house, memories come back to me in a flash. Fuck. I've got to get this over with. Fast.\*\*\*

"Hey, mate." Liam opens the door. "Wasn't sure you'd show up!"

He looks like shit. Even worse than yesterday. His clothes are ragged and his hair dirty.

"Hey, man," I reply.

I enter his house, and it brings me back five years when I used to spend so much time here. The place hasn't changed one bit. The same couches with the same holes and the same smell. The same coffee table, still barely standing on three legs, with lighters, booze, rolling paper, and straws.

Freddie, Max, and Harry are already here playing *W.A.R.* We join them and I actually have some fun. A lot of more than I thought I'd have, anyway. I only agreed to come here to please Louise. I noticed the look on her face when she saw I'd have a chance to see my childhood friends. Little did she

know, these are also my drug addict friends. *Were*. They were my drug addict friends. I didn't want to disappoint her. I didn't want her to think I'm broken or that I can't handle hanging out with old friends or something. Anyway, it's not that bad. Or at least it wasn't until Freddie lit a joint and started passing it around. The smell is appealing. I've always loved the smell. Weed has been the hardest of my addictions to let go of.

"Bathroom," I groan, getting up. I need to get out of there. Opening the bathroom window, I take a deep breath of the crisp December air. It'll be fine. It's just a fucking joint. I just need to keep it together for an hour or so, and then I'll go home to Louise. The simple act of thinking of her makes my mind clearer, focused. I can picture her flawless features, her beautiful hazel eyes, the way her sandy blond hair flows around her face, her body, so exquisite. She's shy about it, but damn, I don't know why—her curves are in just the right places. I can see the way men look at her when she enters a room, but she's so oblivious to it. She's everything to me. She doesn't even know how much she makes my life better just by being here and loving me. I got this. I go back into the living room, and it feels like we're in a fucking steam room.

"Want a drag?" Max asks.

"I'm good, man." I try to remain cool as he waves the joint under my nose.

"Come on, mate." He insists. "You're such a pussy."

"Leave the bloke alone." Liam cuts. "He's not good enough for a joint with his mates anymore." He snorts.

My hands are shaking, and I hate myself for it. “It’s not that. Come on, man, I’m clean.”

“Me too, Bro. Me too. But it’s just a joint.” Max shrugs.

“You always look so tense, like you need to take a shit or something.” Harry laughs, kicking his feet up on the coffee table.

“Shut up,” I reply.

“Don’t be so uptight. Just because you’re like famous or something, doesn’t mean you can’t have a smoke with your friends,” Liam says, rolling his eyes at me.

“Fine!” I yell. “Give me the joint.” I take two deep drags. “Happy?”

“See, wasn’t that hard.” Harry yawns.

I try to stay cool. Like it didn’t do anything to me, but I can feel it already. The sensation is exhilarating. Like a weight has been lifted off of me. I’m always in control. For once, it’s good to let go. And it’s harmless really. Like he said, it’s just a joint. I take a few more drags, and I’m much more relaxed than I’ve been in a long time. And when Max offers a drink for the third time, I reply positively.



TWO O’CLOCK. I HAVEN’T slept this long or this well for a long time. I pat Louise’s spot on the bed, but she isn’t there. I miss her so much. I stumble down to the living room, but she’s not here either. My stomach growls with hunger. I wish we

could have gone out for lunch together. I'm eating cereal when I hear the elevator chime. Here she is. So pretty. Her smile widens as she sees me. I tell her I had fun last night and that I'm going back tonight. She's right. It did me good to see some old friends and relax for once. When she kisses me, I feel a surge of emotion. I want her—I need her. I need her hands on my body. I need to bury myself in her. And I'm so lucky because she lets me. Numerous times.

The next day, I'm back at Liam's, and he doesn't even have to ask. After some junk food, joints, and booze, I feel so good. At ease. We laugh hard. How long has it been since I laughed that much in one night? My job is so demanding. I have to be so proper all the time, be careful of what I'm doing, what I'm saying, keep up with crazy deadlines, please the fans, please Adrian, please Kim, please my mum. Louise helps a lot with that, though. She helps me focus and gives me a purpose. But it also adds someone to the mix. Someone else that I have to take into consideration. Someone else I can't disappoint. Someone else who could leave me. I need a break.

After my third glass, I indulge in a line. They've been doing them all night. I can't resist it anymore. When the powder hits my nostril, I feel the familiar burn and numbness in my nose and throat. It feels so good. My blood is pumping hard through my veins. I feel so alive.

I wake up and glance at the clock. Three pm. Stumbling downstairs, I find Louise curled up with a book on the couch. My head is killing me, my mouth is dry, and I'm starving. I'm

looking for something to eat and drink when Louise badgers me about fucking Christmas shopping.

“Shit, L. Can you go alone? I’m tired. I don’t want to go walking around in London,”

“Fine.” She throws her book on the couch and storms upstairs.

When she comes down, I take her into my arms and apologize. I’m such a dick. Being the wonderful girl that she is, she forgives me and leaves me in the apartment. I’m restless. I need coke. Why did I take a fucking line yesterday? I was fine with the joint. Why did I have to throw it all away? My palms are sweaty. I feel hot. I open a bottle of whisky from the liquor cabinet, and I relax a bit after a few sips. Scribbling a note to Louise, I hurry to Liam’s.

“So, you’re really gonna marry that girl?” Liam asks as we’re enjoying our high.

“Yeah. I love her.”

“That’s deep, mate. That’s some deep shit.”

I laugh. “It is.”

“But why, though? Can’t you love her and like, just date?” he asks.

“I guess. I don’t know. It’s what girls want, isn’t it? Marriage and all that?” I reply.

Why am I marrying her? I love her, I do. But it’s true that I don’t know why we couldn’t leave it as it was. That never

occurred to me.

“I guess, but dude, you’re twenty-four years old. I don’t know, I’m not against it or anything, but I thought I’d get married when I’m like forty, you know?” He laughs before taking a long drag.

“Yeah,” I reply.

“Plus, it means you can’t bang other chicks. That’s some commitment.” He jokes. “Especially for you. I would have never thought that you, of all people, would be a one-woman man.”

I know what he means. It used to be a different girl every night, sometimes several per night. I didn’t really care for any of them. I don’t even remember their faces or bodies. But I was horny, and they were here. I could, and so I did.

“Good to know that fuck-ups like us have a shot at a girl like her. We had some good times, though,” he says, taking a long drag on his joint. “By the way, we’re going to Prague tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Yeah, with the guys. Czech girls, you know.” He winks. “You should come. One last hurrah before you take a vow or whatever.”

“Yeah?” I ask.

“Of course, mate! You’re always welcome. Plus, don’t tell me you’re not having fun since we bumped into each other the other day.”

The most fun I've had in ages. I mean, sure, I enjoy my life a lot more with L in it, but she can be uptight sometimes. She doesn't let loose, like really let loose. I'm a twenty-four-year-old millionaire. I'm entitled to some fun, am I not?

The next day, I'm still high, but I know I can't just leave her like that. I need to explain to Louise where I've gone. The manly thing to do would be to go back to the apartment and tell her face-to-face. But I'm a coward. I know if I look into her eyes, I will cave, and I won't go through with this. I also know that I'm in deep already. I'm hooked, and it's too late to go back now. I don't want to. I haven't felt this good in years, and if she loves me, she'll understand it's what I need right now.

Anyway, she might be good for me, but I sure as hell am not good for her. I almost killed her, and I wasn't even using at the time. She's better off without me. She deserves better. I know Adrian and Kim are going to look for me and try to kill my buzz. They'll probably send someone over here to get me, so I'm sure they'll find my phone, and the note I write to Louise. I find a piece of paper and scribble:

*"I'm sorry. I can't do this. This is too fast, too soon. I thought it would work. I thought I changed, but I didn't. We're better apart. I'm not good for you. I'm not good for anyone. I don't want to break you. I'm too young to be tied down. Please don't try to find me."*

That's not very structured or clear, but I don't have time. Liam is yelling that we have to go. It's a little harsh, so I add

for good measure and as a form of punishment for myself:

*I will always love you. Don't hate me.*

*Jack.*

And it's true—I do, and I always will. I've never loved anyone more than that girl. And I know I'm doing the right thing by letting her go.





## WHO'S COUNTING?

DAY 1: A TEAR falls on the note, and my body crumples to the floor. My legs can't hold my pain. This doesn't make any sense. I can't breathe, I can't think. This can't be real. This is a nightmare.

DAY 3: I still can't eat anything. I'm still in Jack's bed. I still haven't showered. I'm still holding the piece of paper, rereading it, looking for missed clues, but there are none. Adrian tells me that Jack went on a similar bender in the past. I know the song *Demons* he wrote is about all that. But I didn't think this was still such a big part of him. All I do is stare at the Polaroid pictures of us I have in my wallet. We looked so happy then. What happened?

DAY 6: I manage to eat a little and even get myself in the shower. I feel a little better. He just overreacted, and he will come back soon. Yeah, that must be it. *Tied down?* He's the one who proposed! He's just having cold feet. He'll be back after a few days. I call my parents to let them know Jack had a work emergency, that we're on our way to L.A. and won't be able to spend Christmas together. I hate lying, but they weren't

Jack's biggest fans at first, and I can't let this affect their relationship with my future husband.

DAY 12: It's Christmas day. I call Kim and demand she hire someone to find Jack. She tells me that she can't. Jack is an adult, and he made it clear he broke up with me. As much as she feels sorry for me, she can't do anything. She has to protect her client. I can sense she's worried, though. She's trying to stay professional, but I know she doesn't like this anymore than I do. I call Jack's mom, and she's worried, too. When we hang up, however, there's some resentment in her voice.

DAY 16: This is all my fault. I should have paid more attention to him and to his needs. We spent too much time together. His friends were my friends, too. He didn't have much alone time. I smothered him. I should have asked more about his past, too. Help him fight his demons. I didn't know he was still struggling with this. I thought it was over.

DAY 19: I'm in bed already, about to sleep, but my phone keeps buzzing over and over again. Who the hell is that? I have two missed calls from Mel and a text from Candice. It says: "Are *you okay?*" I put it down. I don't want to answer. Wait a minute. How does she know? Why now? Something must have happened if they're both trying to reach me. I open my browser and type "*Jack Rose*". There we go. "*Jack Rose partying in Prague for New Year's Eve.*" There are a dozen similar articles on all the usual tabloids websites. I click to enlarge the pictures. Here he is, my fiancé, with a tall, black-haired girl, entering, then exiting the club, getting into a car,

entering his hotel holding hands. Is he kidding me right now? He's cheating on me? And I'm here waiting for him to come back.

DAY 21: I can't avoid my phone any longer. In addition to Candice and Mel, my parents, my sister, Sabrina, and even my childhood friends, Karine and Léa, are calling me. I have to face reality. All the conversations are more of the same. Me reassuring them that really, I'm okay. Them telling me he's making a big mistake and will eventually come to his senses. The only one that differs is the one with my parents. The superior tone of my mother saying "I told you so" is unbearable.

DAY 27: He's not coming back. There are more pictures online of him with different girls, including one where he's literally eating her mouth. I hate his guts. He's the one who coerced me into moving in with him, writing me stupid songs, saying that I was the only girl for him. What an idiot I am. I changed my entire life for him. I fought with my parents over him. I almost died because of him! I'm done with this. Hastily grabbing my things scattered around the apartment, I get out as fast as I can.

DAY 35: I receive an email from Griffin. One of the publishers he sent my book to is interested and wants to meet me at the end of next month. My first instinct is to throw the phone away and tell him that it's not a good time for me. But that would damage my life further because of him. He already almost broke me. I can't let him take this away from me, too. I've worked too hard for this. I try to call Susan, but she

avoids my call. I'm now positive she resents me for her son's disappearance, and well, I can't blame her.

DAY 42: I go out for a walk along the Thames. I've been cooped up in that hotel room for two weeks, surviving only on room service. I need to breathe some fresh air. The sun is blinding, and the cold bites my skin. It's like a slap across the face. There is life to live out there. *You can't throw it away for a stupid boy.*

DAY 48: I'm on a plane back to L.A., and then I'm going to stay with Mel in Vegas until I figure out what to do next. I just have to go back to his house and get the rest of my stuff. I hope he won't be there. I don't think he will. He was spotted a few days ago on a beach in Mexico with a harem of girls.

DAY 49: Being in the house is harder than I thought it would be. It reminds me that it wasn't just a dream. It still smells like him—everything does—and I hate it. I get trash bags and shove my things in it. I don't take any of the stuff he bought me. Not the clothes, not the jewels, nothing. I just take what's mine. I stumble upon my I LOVE NY cap from our first date, and I almost barf at the sight of it. I throw it on the bed along with my locket, key chain, and engagement ring.

I'm about to leave the room, but I'm drawn to the frame above the bed. The picture I got him for his birthday with the two of us on the set of the music video. I jump on the bed, unhook it, and throw it with all my strength onto the tiled floor.

DAY 51: The tabloids are full of pictures of Jack celebrating his birthday on some Mexican island. I recognize Liam, his childhood friend, in one of them. Why did I suggest he spend time with him? This is all my fault. There's a video, too. I hesitate for a second. Mel would tell me not to open it, but she's at work. Jack is walking with a group of people, holding hands with a girl.

*"Where is Louise?" the paparazzi ask. Jack turns his head to the camera. His green eyes are bloodshot, with dark circles underneath them.*

*"Is this your new girlfriend?" They continue.*

*"She's a fucking model man. What do you think?" He winks before wrapping his arms around the girl's waist, making her giggle.*

Does he really have to humiliate me like that?

DAY 65: I feel a bit better now. I'm starting to get back to my old self, and I have Mel to thank for that. She's been an amazing friend as usual, and she's helping me day after day. I don't feel as tired. My eyes aren't swollen, and my cheeks aren't sunken anymore. I even gained back some of the weight I lost with her bringing home takeout every night. Candice has been badgering me for days to come back to L.A. and spend some time with her. As much as I want to see her, I'm not sure it's the right move for me. It was hard enough being at Jack's house two weeks ago.

I'm in a good place right now. I want to keep getting better. I think I just need a little more time. Kim calls me, too. She

suggests that I do an Instagram post about the breakup because Jack's pictures and videos are going viral, and it won't help with either of our public images. She offers to prepare it for me, saying that we grew apart, it wasn't meant to be, and that we're still friends. This is bullshit, but I get that being our publicist, she's worried about the optics, so I let her do it.

Today is day sixty-nine, but who's counting? More importantly, we're celebrating Mel's birthday. I really don't want to go out tonight, but since I ditched her last two birthdays for Jack, I kind of owe her. We go to a popular Las Vegas club with some of her co-workers and friends, and since one of them is dating the club owner, we are treated to bottle service.

After a few drinks, I'm letting it loose on the dance floor when I feel eyes on me. I look around but don't see anyone. Then I look up, and there he is: Jack, leaning over a banister, a drink in his hand, staring at me. My chest constricts, and I can't move. I can't take my eyes off of him. I feel like everyone else in the club disappeared. I can't hear the music anymore, the only sound being the one of my heart pumping in my chest. He's so different. This person is the polar opposite of the guy I knew. He's thinner, or maybe he just lost his muscles, his hair is longer, and his eyes are darker. We keep staring at each other for what seems hours, when a girl appears behind him, wrapping her arms around his chest and kissing him on the neck. He turns to her and kisses her languorously.

I turn around and see Mel at the edge of her seat. She's drunk, but I know she witnessed the entire scene. I rush over

to her, and minutes later, I'm crying my heart out in my best friend's arms.

"Let's go," Mel says, breaking the embrace.

"No, Mel. It's fine. I don't want to spoil your birthday," I say, drying my tears.

"Are you sure, Babe? Because I'm fine if we leave now."

"Positive." I force myself to smile. "Let me just go to the bathroom."

I jump up hastily and hurry to the bathroom. My face is red, and my eyes are puffy. I throw cold water on it and slap my cheeks a little. *Damn it.* I was just getting better. Why did he have to be here tonight? He looked so different, too. The worst thing is that I can't help but wonder if he's okay. I shouldn't. He clearly doesn't care about me anymore. So, why should I?

After a few more drinks, I feel better, or at least I don't feel anything. I don't think he's even here anymore. Not that I'm looking, but I don't see him or his posse anywhere in the club. We enjoy the rest of our night a little too much, and Mel is completely wasted when we stagger to the cloakroom.

I'm patiently waiting for our coats when Mel yells, "Look Lou! It's your Jack."

Panic and anger twist knots in my stomach, and for a second, I can't seem to move or talk.

"Your Jack, he's here!" Mel shouts.

"Shut up, Mel," I hiss, putting my hand over her mouth.



But it's too late. Jack notices and comes toward us, his posse behind him. I can see him better than in the club now. His cheeks are sunken, his eyes are even darker and more bloodshot than I expected, poisoned by the amount of drugs and alcohol in his system. I can't quite read his expression. Is it anger? Embarrassment? Sadness? A sharp pain radiates throughout my body, and I force myself to look away.

"Baaabe," he drawls. "What are you doooooing heeere?"

I gulp, aware that all eyes have turned to us, as curious club goers watch the scene. "Mel's birthday," I say, breathing heavily.

"Wanna come up to my room?" He winks, coming closer to me, but I don't let him. It takes everything I have to push him back gently. As much as I want to hear those words, I know it doesn't mean anything. Still, the sharp heartache isn't going away.

"I'm good, thanks," I reply.

"Ooooooh snap!" "Burn!" "Damn!" His friends yell behind him, including Liam, who is almost unrecognizable with fancy clothes on.

"Shut up." Jack turns to his friends, his cheeks burning red.

"Come on," he whispers, leaning on me. "You used to love to sleep in my bed." He tries to kiss me, and for a second, I almost let him. I hate how weak I am. *He's drunk, and he abandoned you!* My hands are shaking, but I manage to push him away again.

“Oh, come on now!” he yells. “You used to love it when I went down on you. Do you remember how good I made you feel, baby?”

“Yeah right, tell that bitch what she’s missing!” Liam calls behind him.

And then everything shifts. Jack’s fist connects with Liam’s jaw. People are yelling, getting their cameras out while Jack and Liam are tangled on the floor.

Panic takes over me. Should I try to stop them? I look around for support, but everyone seems to be enjoying the fight. Mel’s weight is crushing me and the mass of bodies around us making me dizzy.

When our coats are finally here, I grab them and take advantage of the craziness going on to exit the club, managing Mel the best I can.

2

## LATE NIGHT CONFIDENCE

“I NEED YOUR HELP,” Kim says when I pick up the phone.  
“Are you still in Vegas?”

I sit down on the brown couch in Mel’s living room. “Yes, why?”

“Do you know which hotel Jack is staying in?”

Of course, she’s calling about this.

Looking around the colorful room, I sigh. “No Kim, I don’t know.”

“Are you sure?” She insists.

“Yes.” I’m pissed off. She’s been telling me to stay out of Jack’s life for the past two months, saying that she couldn’t help me find him or do anything for me on that matter, and now she’s calling me about this. *Seriously?*

“Okay. Do you think you could maybe find out?” she asks.

“How am I going to find out?” I ask, exasperated, rubbing my feet on the carpet. “Can’t you do it?”

“I already tried.” She sighs. “I called every hotel on the strip, but they all refuse to disclose information about their clients.”

I stand up and pace around the room. “If you didn’t figure it out, I don’t know how I could!”

“He’s in big trouble, you know. His album is supposed to be released in a month, and the label is freaking out. And now he’s brawling in public? We were finally on the right track with his image. I can’t believe he did this!” She whines.

“Well, I’m sorry, Kim, but it’s not really my problem anymore. I wish I could help you, I do. But I just can’t. I need to focus on me—my future, my life, my mental health—and chasing after someone who broke my heart without thinking twice about it doesn’t seem like the sane thing to do!” I blurt, before hanging up and throwing the phone on the couch.

My stomach pinches with guilt, but honestly, I can’t deal with this. Last night’s encounter was bad enough and almost broke me again. I get that she’s out of options, and she’s doing her best to fix this, but I am not the solution.

My phone rings again. This better not be Kim. It’s with great relief that I see Candice’s name on the screen.

“Hey, girl!” she peeps. “How are you doing?”

“I’m good, Candice, really. Don’t worry about it,” I reply.

“Okay. I won’t then. But I miss you. Why don’t you come to L.A. for a weekend or something?” she asks. “Wat\$on is on

tour. We could do a slumber party on Friday, just Brina, you, me, and Mel.”

“Sure, why not?” I reply. Candice’s one of my best friends, and I miss her like crazy. I’ve been avoiding going back to L.A. because of Jack, but I can’t keep doing that forever.

“Really?”

“Yeah! Mel is working all weekend, but I was going to call you because I have a meeting with a publisher on Friday, so I was thinking we could catch up.”

“Perfect! You’ll stay all weekend then?”

Her cheer is contagious, and I’m thrilled about seeing her too, so I agree as long as there’s no party.



ON FRIDAY, I MAKE my way to the City of Angels in a rental car and meet Griffin in front of The Beverly Hills hotel. We’re meeting the publishers in the lobby here. Apparently, this is common practice, since their offices are in New York.

“Louise, I’m happy to see you. How are you?” Griffin asks, giving me a swift hug.

I force a smile. “Me too, and nervous.”

“Don’t be. It’s a very good sign that they came all the way out here to meet you. We’re probably going to get a proposal. And if we don’t, there will be others,” he says, squeezing my shoulders.

I wipe my hands against my black pants as we enter the lobby, our shoes echoing on the shiny marble floor. There aren't a lot of people here, aside from a family at the check-in counter and a couple near the elevator. Griffin points to a man and woman seated on a couch across from a small glass coffee table.

“Louise, Griffin. So nice to finally meet you.” A tall, close-shaved forty-something man rises to his feet before thrusting his hand in my direction. “I’m Lawrence, and this is my colleague, Jennifer,” he adds, turning to a blonde, middle-aged woman.

“Very nice to meet you,” she says, shaking both of our hands.

Griffin and I sit down on plush zebra print armchairs across from them. I immediately grip the armrests to stop myself from shaking. Is this really happening? After all the time spent working on this book, writing and rewriting. This doesn't even feel real.

“So, Louise. Let me start by telling you that we *loved* your book. It's exactly what we're looking for.”

I sit still for a second. Did she really say she loved it? I have to pinch myself. “Oh wow. Thank you so much,” I reply, finding my voice again.

“Indeed,” Lawrence says. “We are very excited about this project, and we have an offer to present to you. But, um, there's just one tiny detail that we have to clear before we do,” he adds, rubbing his hands together.

“Yes?” Griffin asks, an eyebrow raised.

“Well, how do I put it...” he continues, clearing his throat before glancing at Jennifer.

“Are you and Jack Rose still engaged?” Jennifer’s words hit me like a slap in the face. Is that what interests them?

“What does that have to do with her work?” Griffin asks, sitting straighter.

“Well, nothing with the work per se, but it has a huge impact marketing-wise. You are an unpublished author, Louise,” he continues, looking me in the eye. “This is always a risk for a publishing house. Your, um, personal life could provide us with a type of insurance regarding sales numbers.”

My intestines twist in knots. Yep, that’s what it’s about.

“We saw the news, naturally, but we thought that there might be more to the story or that it wasn’t true at all?” Jennifer says, her eyes gleaming in anticipation.

“It’s true. Jack and I are broken up.” My voice breaks as I say those words. I blink rapidly to prevent the tears from leaking out and force myself to smile. First, I have to run into Jack at the club, and now they’re throwing him in my face. This is a great week.

“Oh,” Jennifer says, scratching her head with her sharp nail.

“That’s unfortunate. I’m afraid we’re going to withdraw our offer. It’s nothing against your work, but the risk is just too big for us to take,” Lawrence says, not looking me in the eye.



I could have lied. Then I would have had a publishing deal. They're still talking, but I can't hear anything they say. My head pounds with rage. I hate that they were only interested in my book because I was with Jack, and I hate him for putting me in that position. Will I ever be able to sell my book? Is it even good enough without the weight of the Rose name behind it? Was I kidding myself when I thought I could pursue writing as a career?

They're all standing up, dragging me back to reality. I clutch the chair for support, so I don't tip over. The news sits on my chest like a brick. I'm numb as we shake hands again, and Griffin and I exit the room.

"I'm sorry, Louise. I knew we'd have that problem, but I didn't think it would happen with them. This is such a reputable publishing house," Griffin says, once we're outside. "I will be more careful next time. Be upfront about it when we speak, to prevent this from happening again."

"If there even is a next time..." I say, fidgeting with my bracelet, the sun causing tinty droplets of sweat to form on my forehead.

"Of course, there will be, Louise. You wrote a great novel. Don't let this tarnish your confidence, okay? They weren't right for you, but we will find one that is, I promise you," he says, squeezing my arm.

"Yeah, I hope you're right. Thanks." I give him a feeble smile before handing my ticket to the valet. If he's wrong, my life's basically over. It took me years to finally have the

courage to say I wanted to be an author. Maybe my mom was right. Maybe it isn't a serious career path for me. But what do I do if it's the only one that makes sense?

It's with low spirits that I make my way to Candice's house, and it doesn't get better as I enter the familiar road. If only she lived somewhere else, on any other street but this one. The only good thing is that her house is before Jack's on their block, so I don't have to drive past it. Candice is so excited to see me, and I immediately feel at ease when I enter her house. It's so glamorous, so girly, so Candice. Everything is in shades of white, light gray, and pink. It's not too much, though. It's all done very tastefully and makes her house feel like home.

"You know," she says, gathering her long light-brown hair into a high ponytail. "You're my friend no matter what, okay?"

I smile. I'm so glad to count this sweet girl as one of my friends.

"I know. Thank you. I wouldn't blame you if you'd stick with Jack, though. You know that, right? You were his friend first," I say, and I mean it.

"And I'll always love him, but I don't agree with what he did. I know he's probably in a very bad place right now, and I wish I could be there for him, but I can't. You're my friend, too. I can be there for you, and I want to." She smiles.

"Thank you, Candice. It means a lot." She takes me into her arms and gives me a warm, comforting hug.

After telling me about her upcoming album and Wat\$on being on tour, and me explaining that my meeting was a total bust, we get ready for tonight's slumber party. When I leave my room in my Ivory beige PJs, I see that Candice is in full glam, wearing a pink satin baby doll dress with matching feather high heels.

"Wow!" I exclaim.

"Babe," she says looking at me, "you didn't think we'd do just any slumber party, did you?" She winks. "It's L.A. style baby." She laughs, and I join in. She drags me into her closet, and even though she's much thinner than I am, we find a satin and lace green set that fits me. It's a camisole with matching shorts and kimono. She gives me matching slippers, applies some make-up on my face, and styles my hair in a ponytail.

"Much better." She smiles, clearly proud of her work. It feels good to be pampered, and I'm so ready for tonight. What I wasn't ready for, however, is the full catering service and the beauty bar that has been installed downstairs. A waiter and three beauty attendants in uniforms are waiting for us by little stations: a nail bar, some massage tables, a mani-pedi station. Hundreds of candles are lit everywhere. This is Candice. Always so over the top, but I wouldn't change her one bit.

Sabrina arrives in a sexy, long satin nightgown and a Jeroboam of Dom Perignon. The food is great; the champagne is bottomless; the conversation is light, and the masseuse's hands on my body feel amazing. I'm so comfortable, much more than I've been in a while. I'm really grateful for both of

them and the fact that they are taking time off their busy schedules to make me feel better. Once our mani-pedis done, the attendants and the waiter leave us, well-fed, relaxed, and a little drunk. Okay, maybe really drunk. Next thing I know, we're dancing on Candice's couches, empty bottles and remotes serving as microphones.

"Wait! I just had the best idea!" Candice calls. "Let's do a video for 'Bad Bitches!'" It's one of her new songs and talks about girls and friendships. We film ourselves one by one, and then together, doing silly and sexy dances, flirting with the camera, twerking, and we even create a small choreography for the chorus. I can't wait to see the result because, damn, I'm making a funny music video with Sabrina Evans and Candice Anderson, two of the most famous singers in the world.

We're sweaty, and a bit sore from all the crazy moves we busted, so we sink into the fluffy couches.

"Shit," Candice says, as one of Jack's songs plays on the speaker. She runs to turn it off.

"It's fine." I smile. "You don't have to change tracks." I need to be okay with this. Avoiding his songs won't do me any good.

"Are you okay, though?" Brina asks, twisting her black hair in her hand. I can't blame her for asking. She didn't yet.

"Yeah, I am. I'm better now. I wasn't at first, but now I'm okay. And I'm even better tonight, thanks to you guys."

"Of course. We're here for you," she replies.

“Always,” Candice says.

“I hope he’ll be fine, though,” Sabrina says. “It’s hard to see him like that and not be able to do anything. I remember the last time it happened. It was brutal.”

“Yeah, it was.” Candice adds, picking up a cushion and settling it on her lap.

“What happened?” I whisper, not entirely sure I’m ready to hear this.

“He overdosed,” Candice says, her blue eyes watering.

“And almost died,” Brina adds, staring into space. “It was awful. Rehab was tough on him, too. It was really hard to watch his withdrawal.”

“You were there?” I ask, not hiding my surprise.

“I was, yeah. Didn’t you know that’s where I met Jack?”

I shake my head in denial. I had no idea Sabrina even went to rehab.

“Um,” I start, not sure if I can even ask. “Why—”

“Why was I in rehab?” she answers for me. “Don’t worry, it’s alright. You can ask.” She smiles, and I nod. “Same as Jack, I guess. I got overwhelmed by the sudden fame, the attention, and the money. I made the wrong decisions to help me perform. It was a way for me to deal with the pressure, to meet the expectations. Jack and I are very alike in that way. That’s why we clicked in rehab and supported each other through it, and even afterward.”

This revelation hits me like a ton of bricks. I lived for a year and a half with Jack, and we saw Sabrina countless times, but never once did he tell me about this.

“I never knew you struggled with addiction, too,” I blurt, still processing this new information. “I mean, your life looks so normal, you even still drink,” I tentatively say, not sure I can talk about this further, but she’s still smiling, so I keep going. “I’m sorry if I’m prying. All of this is just so new to me. I saw how Jack lived his life, organized like clockwork, with the precise routine, the exercise, the sobriety...”

“Don’t worry, you can ask me anything. I’m good now. I’ve been sober for seven years. I was addicted to stimulants. They gave me more energy, stay focused longer, and be better on stage. It was doctor prescribed and worked well at first, but then I needed more and more. When I wasn’t taking it, I wasn’t at my best. I couldn’t perform on stage. I was tired, so I took more. I struggled a lot with my weight, and it helped with that, too. Being in the public eye was so hard for me. I was a teenager with a few pounds to spare. So, I took a little more to help with the energy, the focus, and to lose just a little more weight. It was a vicious cycle. It broke when I had a seizure in the middle of my tour rehearsal.”

“Oh wow...” is all I can muster.

“But to answer your question, I can drink now, but at first, I couldn’t. The doctors advised me not to because alcohol can lead to poor judgment. After a while, though, I started drinking again, little by little. I can casually drink like we did tonight. I

can even get completely wasted, as long as it's not on a regular basis. I never mixed the pills with alcohol though, which is rare, but for me, it never was a trigger," she explains.

"Thank you for explaining all of that to me. You're such a brave and strong woman. You look amazing, too. I would have never guessed." I'm so clueless about all of this. I wish I'd known more when I was with Jack. Maybe I could have helped.

"Thank you." She smiles. "I learned to take care of my body, pacing myself. I eat healthier most of the time and follow a strict diet while on tour. Yoga also helps with the focus. It's not always easy, but it's getting better each day."

I feel so much love and compassion for her. She always appeared to be such a strong, confident woman, well-balanced, and very mature for her age. Now I get why. She had to deal with a lot of stuff, and at a young age, too.

As I drift off to sleep, I'm thinking about fame and how it almost wrecked this person that I love, wondering if it will manage to destroy another one of them.





## EVERYONE HAS A CRUSH ON LOGAN REYES

THE NEXT MORNING, WE all feel a little sore and thirsty. We had a blast last night though, and Sabrina's revelations strengthened our bond. Candice shows us last night's footage, and I must say, it's pretty cool. Do we look goofy? Sure. Do we look like we're having fun? Yes. Do we look drunk? Hell yes! But it's one of those memories that you keep with you forever. And since Candice always goes all out, she even makes a montage with an app on her computer and sends it to us as a keepsake.

"We should go shopping for tonight," Brina suggests when we're done eating lunch.

"Tonight?" I ask, picking up my glass from Candice's kitchen table.

"Yeah, for my TV show launch party. Candice didn't tell you?" Sabrina asks, glancing at her.

"Um, what?" she replies, pretending to read something on her phone.

“Candice! You didn’t say anything about going out! You said slumber party. I told you I didn’t want to go out.” This is the last thing I need, especially after what happened last time, and especially in L.A.

“I know.” She lets out a heavy sigh. “But I really wanted you to come. Plus, it’ll be fun. Please come.” She bats her lashes, making both Sabrina and me roar with laughter.

“None of Jack’s friends, or the usual crowd, will be there,” Sabrina adds, sensing that this is my primary concern. “I’m guest starring in the new season of *Moonstorm*. It’s a party to celebrate the first episode which aired on Thursday. It’ll be very Hollywood.”

I accept because, well, they leave me no choice, and I’m proud of Sabrina, especially after everything she shared last night. I want to celebrate her success. We go shopping on Rodeo and enjoy some frozen yogurt afterwards. Needless to say, the girls buy a lot of things. I find a little dark red dress and black stilettos. I figured I’d keep it classy and simple.



WE ARRIVE AT AN enormous house perched on the top of a hill, and park in a driveway full of luxury cars. The place is bustling with people as music rattles the floor-to-ceiling windows. It’s extremely modern, too. It’s as if everything is controlled by robots or something. The door opens by itself, and a high-tech cloakroom mechanism takes our coats and gives us a ticket. This is cool, but a bit intimidating, and not

really my vibe. David, the TV show producer, greets us and shows us around. Sabrina introduces us to some people working on the show, and I really feel out of my league here. I'm always out of my league in L.A., but this is different. It's so grand, so Hollywood, more adult somehow, and definitely more unnerving.

Scenes from the show are playing on numerous TVs, and I'm intrigued. It seems like something I would like, so I make a mental note to watch it. We are mingling and drinking champagne when I feel someone staring. *Please let it not be Jack. Please let it not be Jack.* I scan the living room, and my eyes lock with a handsome guy. He's lean with piercing dark brown eyes and short brown wavy hair. He's talking with someone else but definitely looking at me.

"Oh yeah," Candice says, sipping her drink. "Very cute."

"What?" My voice comes out a lot louder and squeakier than intended.

"Don't deny it!" She laughs. "The cute Latino guy, it's Logan Reyes."

"I feel like I know him from somewhere."

"Well, duh! He's so popular, very in demand. He had like three movies come out last year."

Now I remember where I saw him. He was in a movie I watched on the plane with Jack. Why do I always have to circle back to him? Why is it so hard to get him out of my head? He made it clear he doesn't want anything to do with

me. I'm at this great party. There's a crazy cute guy, and I can't even linger on him for one second before thinking about Jack. How pathetic! I want to slap myself.

"What's up, girls?" Brina asks, joining us.

"I think someone has a crush on Logan Reyes." Candice teases.

"No, I don't," I reply, heat scorching my cheeks.

"Everyone has a crush on Logan Reyes. That's not news." Sabrina laughs.

"I don't have a crush on anyone. I just saw him, and I agree that he's very, um, handsome."

They laugh.

"Right." Sabrina smiles. "You're *so* blushing right now! I can introduce you. He's my co-star."

"I'm good," I say. My life is complicated enough. I don't need to throw in yet *another* famous guy in it.

"You're aware he's still staring at you, right?" Candice says.

I turn my head a little. Yep, still staring. I don't know why I feel so awkward. Probably because I'm still not over Jack. I'm not ready for this. Ready for what? What am I doing? Just because a cute guy looks at me doesn't mean I have to marry him or even date him. Jeez! What's wrong with me? Anyway, he's probably looking at me because he doesn't know me, or worse, because he does and feels sorry for me, like everyone else. When I snap back to reality, I'm happy to see that the

conversation quickly shifted because Sadie, who is apparently the biggest skank in Hollywood, is dancing on a kitchen counter and is making a fool of herself. I learn that she's the reason Sabrina broke up with her ex and that, even though she doesn't care for him anymore, it still hurts.

David asks for attention and makes a speech about the new season, thanking everyone for their involvement with the show. Sabrina even gets a special mention as a guest star, and she says a few words, too. It's really cool to see this other part of her, so different, so "actressy."

After they're done with the speeches, the music resumes, and we dance for most of the night. My feet are killing me, though. What a genius idea to buy new shoes and break them in at a party. I need to pee too, so I tell the girls I'll be right back. I exit the living room, take my shoes off, and appreciate for a second the feeling of the cold tile floor against my sore feet. I try to find the restrooms, but every room I open is more extra than the last. Movie theater, gym, game room, living room, another living room, and none of them is a bathroom. I see stairs, and since it's a safe bet to find restrooms upstairs, I venture up. Thankfully, the first room I find is a bathroom. Of course, the toilet is so fancy and modern that it takes me a while to figure out how to flush it, and I end up spraying myself with a jet. I grab a towel and dry myself as much as I can, but it still shows on my red dress.

Putting my shoes back on, I exit the room, but find myself in an enormous closet. It was the wrong door. I came from the other side of the room. I turn around to go back, but curiosity

gets the best of me. I mean, it must be as futuristic as the rest of the house. I just want a quick peek. This must be the biggest closet I've ever seen, except Candice's probably. I only see men's clothes, though, so there must be an equally, if not bigger one, for the owner's wife. How crazy is this? I turn around to go back downstairs when I hear someone speak.

"Find something you like?" says a deep masculine voice.

I jump and turn around. The voice coming from the other side of the closet belongs to Logan Reyes, who is leaning against the door frame.

My heart jumps to my throat as a gasp escapes my lips. "Oh! You scared me. No, I was looking for a bathroom. Found it, but then I exited in the wrong direction, and here I am."

He comes toward me and arches an eyebrow. "Are you wet?"

Heat rushes to my cheeks. Oh, he's good. "Um, yeah. The stupid toilet sprayed me. I couldn't operate it. This house is so futuristic, it's insane."

"*Operate it?*" He laughs, and I join in.

"I'm Logan," he says.

"I know. I mean, I'm Louise Mercier," I say, feeling the red coming to my cheeks.

He chuckles. "Nice to meet you, Louise Mercier." The way he says my name makes my insides burn.

"You, too," I reply.

“So, can I offer you a ride downstairs?” He jokes.

“Yes please! This place is huge. I would need a map if I were living here!” I chuckle.

“I did when I first bought it, but after a few weeks, I was able to find my way around.” He winks.

“Oh! This is your house?”

“Yep. You don’t like it, do you?” He raises an eyebrow and points to the door he came from. “This way.”

“No, it’s not that,” I reply, following him out of the room. “I mean, it’s amazing. Just a tiny bit over the top. It’s a very cool house, just not really my style.” Did I just tell Logan Reyes I didn’t like his house? The glint in his eye tells me he isn’t offended. I drop my gaze to the dark steps below our feet as we make our way downstairs.

“Thanks?” he says, and we both laugh.

“Anyway,” I say, at the same time he says, “So where—”

We laugh. “Ladies first.”

“I was going to say thank you for helping me find my way back. What were you going to say?”

“I was just wondering where you’re from. Louise Mercier, that’s not American.”

“Oh yeah. No, it’s not, it’s French. *I’m* French,” I reply, as we reach the ground floor.

“Oooh! France! *J’adore la France*,” he says with a bad accent, making me laugh. “What brings you to L.A. then,

Mercier?” he asks, slamming his hands in his jeans’ pockets.

“It’s a very long story.” I smile. “Maybe someday I’ll tell you all about it,” I blurt, visibly feeling more confident. Why the hell would I say that? I have no plans to see Logan Reyes again. *Right?*

“It’s a date.” He winks.

“I’m not dating at the moment, sorry.”

He laughs. “It’s just a figure of speech, you know?”

“Right,” What is wrong with me? “Yeah, okay. Then I agree with that.”

*Get a grip, Louise!* Why am I so frazzled by him? Maybe it’s his unruly curly hair? Or his annoyingly magnetic eyes?

“You agree to what?” He arches an eyebrow, his dark eyes burning me. Yep, it’s the stupid eyes.

“This non-date thing with you.”

“Well, that was easy.”

“Don’t call me easy.” I frown.

“I’m not! I’m just saying *this* was easy.” He drums his finger on the banister, distracting me for a second.

I snort. “Right. Like you don’t have all the girls at your feet, anyway.”

“I don’t, actually.”

“Okay. Well, it was nice to talk to you,” I say, walking away because I can’t take any more of this awkwardness. I need to



get away from him, fast.

“Wait, what?” he calls. “I thought we just agreed to go on this non-date rendezvous kind of thing?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“How do you expect me to set this up if I don’t even have your number?”

“Oh, right,” I say, taking the phone he’s handing me and typing my number in.

“Thanks, Mercier. I’ll text you.”

The way he only says my last name both bothers me and turns me on somehow. I walk as fast as my heels allow me to put as much space as possible between us. *What was that?* I get back to the girls who are sitting on a couch drinking.

“What’s wrong, girl? You look weird,” Brina asks.

“Nothing, I’m fine.” I sway on my feet, trying to shake the heat off my body.

Candice leans over Brina to look behind me.

Her mouth falls open. “Wait! Were you with Logan?”

“No, what?” But I can hear it’s not convincing at all. My cheeks are burning, and my heart wants to burst from my chest.

“Spill,” Sabrina says.

“Fine.” I sigh. “I was looking for a bathroom. I got lost, and he helped me find my way back here. Did you know it’s his house?” I ask.

“Yeah,” they both reply.

“Don’t change the subject,” Candice says. “Tell us everything! What did you talk about?”

“You guys are so annoying.” I smile. “I don’t know. We introduced ourselves, and we scheduled a meeting,” I add, hastily.

“A meeting?” Candice asks, raising her perfectly shaped eyebrow.

“Are you going to do a movie with him or something?” Sabrina asks.

“Um. No, it’s just to get to know each other,” I say quickly, before adding to the waiter passing by, “Can I have more champagne, please?”

“So, it’s a date,” Candice says, one hand on her hip.

“No!” I shake my head. “It’s not a date. We specifically established that.”

They laugh.

“This is bullshit, and you know it. It’s *totally* a date,” Candice replies.

I keep shaking my head in denial, but they don’t let it go.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Brina laughs. “No guy is going to go on a ‘meeting’” she says, air quoting it, “with no intention.”

“Maybe, but I’m not ready for this. I don’t want to date. I just want—I don’t want anything, actually. He’s the one who

coerced me into this, anyway.”

“Coerced you?” They both exclaim.

“You could have said no if you weren’t interested,” Candice says.

“Like hell she’s not.”

“I couldn’t... I don’t know what happened. I was frozen. I couldn’t say no to him. Those eyes...”

We all laugh.

“Those eyes,” Candice repeats, winking.

“You know, I’ve known Logan for a while now, and he’s a very nice guy. He’s not dating anyone and by the way, he’s not a player, so if you’re interested, you should really go for it,” Sabrina casually says, sipping her champagne.

“I’m not going for anything.” This doesn’t change anything. I’m still not dating, especially *not* another famous guy.

“Well, you totally should.”



## BACK IN THE SADDLE

WHEN I STUMBLE DOWNSTAIRS the next day, Candice is already up, eating granola at the kitchen counter.

“Hey, girl! Sleep well?”

“I did, actually.” I smile. “Thank you and Brina for inviting me this weekend and making me go out. It was a good idea. I’m starting to feel like myself again. Being out with friends was good for me.”

“No worries,” she says, getting me a cup of coffee. “Speaking of my fabulous ideas—”

“No, no, no, Candice!” I shake my head, knowing where this is going. “I’m heading back to Vegas today.”

“Wait,” she pleads, holding her hand out. “Please hear me out.”

She’s very frustrating, but given the fact that she’s one of my only friends, I sigh and nod.

“So, tonight is the biggest party of the year. The *Music Gazette* party, duh!” she adds, seeing my confusion. “It’s *Grammys* day!”

Really? Already? I can't believe how fast the year went. I felt like the last party was only yesterday. It was a great night. We had so much fun. Jack was so cute with his—

“Uh oh... Earth to Louise!” Candice waves a hand in front of my face.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about last year's party.”

“Right!” she exclaims. “It's a great event, one of the best. Since I don't have a plus one—”

“No, Candice. I'm not going.”

“Yes! You have to. It'll be so much fun! And for once, Brina is here, too. We never get to go together, and now you're both here. It would be so perfect!”

“Candice, I'm sorry, but I don't want to be on a red carpet again. It's just too much right now. I'm not ready for this.” I never was at ease at those events, and seeing all the people I met when I was with Jack is the last thing I need.

“Please, just think about it. Look at all the fun we've had these last few days. We're young, we need to create memories! Please don't leave yet. I just got you back.”

Damn, she's good.

I sigh. “I couldn't come even if I wanted to. I don't even have a dress! This is one of the biggest fashion events of the year, and I don't have a freaking dress, so that settles it,” I say, proud of myself for coming up with this argument.

“If I find you a stupid, crazy, beautiful dress, will you come?” she asks, a big smile on her face.

I stay silent.

“Think about it?” she asks.

“Argh! Okay. I’ll think about it. Now let me take a shower.”

I’m halfway up the stairs when she adds, “Don’t take too long thinking about it, though! Clock’s ticking.”

I get into the hot shower and wash the night away. The warm water feels amazing on my skin, and I close my eyes. All I see is a brown, wavy-haired boy with deep brown eyes. Damn, I can’t get him out of my head. I feel terribly guilty. Just a few months ago, I was engaged to another man. I can’t be thinking about someone else. *What’s wrong with you, Louise?* It does feel good, though. I’m not even sure what this means, but at least it’s an improvement from the sharp pain I feel when I think about Jack.

When I get out of the shower, my phone chimes. I have a text from an unknown number.

“Hey Mercier, it’s Logan. I hope you slept well. It just occurred to me that you might be attending the MG party tonight. If you are, save me a dance this time?”

The fact that this text gives me goosebumps and a weird sensation in my stomach is a sign of hope. I thought I’d never feel this kind of excitement and anticipation over a guy again. It definitely makes me see things in a different light. And this party is truly unique. Candice is right. I do need this. We’re

young, we need to create memories. And let's be honest, I'm dying to see Logan in a suit. Damn Candice, and Damn Logan for getting under my skin.

Candice is on her computer, on the couch, looking at me with an expecting look. I give her a big smile. She tosses her laptop aside and comes to me with open arms.

“Yes! I knew you'd see reason!”

I laugh and hug her back.

“Okay, now can we panic about the dress?”

“Don't worry, we figured it out. I talked to Jenna, my stylist, and she says you have a great relationship with Valentin Guérin, the creative director of Maison Gaumé. He's asked you to model for the Designer Charity Gala, right?”

“I do, and yes, he did. If that's still happening, I'm not even sure.”

“I'm sure it is—it'll be fun by the way. Who did he draw? I'm doing Cinderella.”

“Sleeping Beauty,” I say. “Even so, there's no way he'll be able to make me a dress in a few hours.”

“Of course not. But Jenna said that she could reach out to his team to see if they'd have a dress to send over for you, and then she can fit it on you if needed,” she says, clapping her hands.

“Do you think that would work?” I'm perplexed.



“Yeah! And Jenna’s good. She’s a miracle worker. We can totally pull this off! She’s just waiting for your okay to call them.”

“Right. Okay, yeah. If she thinks it could work.”

“It’s the best option, definitely.” She nods.

She texts Jenna, and we wait anxiously.

“Don’t worry,” she says, “if it doesn’t work, I have dozens of red carpet dresses that you can wear.”

“Candice!” I scold. “I won’t wear any of your dresses! These were sent for you. They expect you to wear them. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“Oh, please.” She throws her hands out. “I’ll just tell them it was a fashion emergency, and that if they want me to wear their designs, they can just send me new ones.” She winks.

“You’re insane.” I chuckle.

“Well, you have to be in this business,” she replies, too seriously.

After a light lunch, we hear back from Jenna saying that they put a dress aside for me, and she’s on her way to pick it up. An hour later, I’m trying on the gown in Candice’s dressing room.

The dress is absolutely magnificent. It’s all black with long sleeves. The upper part is in glittering rhinestones and a plunging V-neck. The bottom is like a ball gown, except there is a large slit cut over the left leg. It would be embarrassing if

it wasn't for the tight black skirt underneath that ends at the middle of the thigh.

“OMG! I'm so jealous right now. I want a last-minute emergency dress, too,” Candice says, falling dramatically on the couch.

“Stop.” I blush. “I do like it a lot, but it's a bit extra, don't you think?” Candice shakes her head vigorously. Of course, nothing is ever too extra for her. I turn to Jenna.

“Well, I agree that the plunging V-neck is a bit deep, and it's a little long,” she says, turning around me to adjust the fabric. “But nothing unfixable.”

“Great. Thanks, Jenna. I'll go look for accessories,” Candice says, dashing to her accessories closet. Yes, she has an accessories closet.

I undress and give the gown to Jenna, who promises to have it done in a few hours.

I give a call to Valentin to thank him. He says it's always a pleasure to dress me and tells me to make him proud on the red carpet. I promise him I will. I also take this opportunity to ask about the Designer Charity Gala, and he tells me that, of course, I'm still his model. They're working on the dress, and it should be ready for a first fitting next month.

We then sort through Candice's finds and settle on a pair of earrings and a small, glittery black purse. Once we put everything away, I write, and rewrite a few times, a reply to Logan before settling with a simple:

You assumed right, see you on the dance floor with a winking emoji.

*Huh! Who's that girl sending winking emojis to a guy she barely knows?*

I lie back against my bed and close my eyes. Life is so freaking complicated. Why can't it be simpler?



STELLA AND CARLA, CANDICE'S hair and make-up artists, do a fantastic job. Stella gives me a simple hairstyle, a messy bun with some hair falling out on the side of my face, and Candice is wearing a high, sleek ponytail. Her light-brown hair looks so perfect, so sleek and so shining, as always. I'm a bit anxious when I see Carla using really dark colors for my make-up, but the final result is stunning. She did a smokey eye with gray, black, and glitter, and put a simple red lipstick on my lips to go with my nails. Naturally, Jenna did a marvelous job. The dress fits to perfection.

As always, the overwhelming feeling that I don't belong here takes over me as soon as I step out on the red carpet. I cross my arms and freeze for a second.

"Relax, Louise. You'll be alright," Aaron, Candice's publicist, whispers in my ear.

Candice walks first on the red carpet, full of confidence in her beautiful mermaid gown. Then it's my turn. I pose for a few pictures, trying to look relaxed. But I'm not. I've never felt more exposed. It's the first time I'm doing a red carpet

event without Jack. He was always next to me, making me feel more confident, telling me I looked gorgeous, or how much he loved me. Flashes of these moments appear before my eyes, and it takes everything I've got not to burst into tears. I miss him so much. Why would he do this to me? Thankfully, Aaron interrupts my thoughts to ask me to take some pictures with Candice, and moments later, we are joined by Sabrina, stunning in a long, red satin dress, her hair braided to one side.

When we get inside, I don't recognize the venue at first, even though it's the same as last year. This year's theme is Winter Wonderland and, of course, they went all in. Everything is white, silver, or light blue, shining and glittering under the lights. There is still the same lounge area, and even small igloos fitting two people for private conversations. Between the lounge and the buffet is a huge white chocolate fountain, surrounded by mini fruit and biscuit skewers. The buffet looks exquisite with white chocolate cupcakes and lollipops, marshmallows, and funnel cakes, but also the traditionally famous fast-food area. There are also four different kinds of popcorn and powdered donuts.

Waiters pass by with champagne and wine, and even though the dance floor is already crowded with people, the floor sparkles like diamonds. They outdid themselves. Once we take it all in, we make our way around the room with a glass of champagne and are stopped numerous times by Candice's and Sabrina's friends. I don't know most of them, but I'm happy to see some familiar faces like TV hosts, Hollie Barker or John Greenway, who both greet me warmly, and thankfully, don't

say anything about Jack. We also bump into Clarissa Goodman and Sophie Mills, whom I met a couple of times before, and we talk for a few minutes. It's still overwhelming for me to be face-to-face with some of the biggest actresses in Hollywood, but I manage to hold a normal conversation with them.

We eventually end up near the chocolate fountain, which we had our eye on since we entered. I'm on my third skewer when I see him. No, actually I feel him somehow, before I see him. I can feel his presence in the room. Logan. Dressed in all black: black slacks, black buttoned up shirt, black jacket, and black bowtie matching his dark hair. I can't take my eyes off of him. He's like fire around ice, and I'm definitely melting inside. I'm going to get burned, but I can't help it. I'm hypnotized. I can't look away, fueled by the exciting feeling of the butterflies in my stomach. He notices me staring, and my lips part as our eyes meet.



## THE MUSIC GAZETTE PARTY

“CAREFUL, GIRL!” CANDICE WARNS. “You’re drooling. You’re going to ruin your dress.”

She’s always so dramatic! I’m not droo—oh crap, yes, I am! I literally am. I drag my eyes away from him and wipe the chocolate from the side of my mouth before I ruin the dress. When I look up, my heart drops as I see he’s gone. I focus again on the conversation with the girls.

“Hello, ladies,” a masculine voice says behind me. A thrill runs down my spine because I know exactly who it belongs to.

“Hi,” we say all together, giggling.

“That’s quite the welcoming committee.” He smiles. “You all look stunning.”

“Thank you,” we all reply at once.

I’m definitely blushing now, and I pray it won’t show underneath the thick make up Jenna applied.

He turns to me and says, “How about that dance, Mercier?”

I try to think of a witty reply, something funny and sexy, but all that comes to mind is “Sure.”

Who is this shy, gawking girl? I’ve never been intimidated by a man like that before, not even Jack. Or maybe I just forgot how it felt at the beginning? My heart tightens again at the thought of Jack, and my body stiffens. Logan must have noticed my change of behavior. He comes to a halt and turns to me.

“Are you okay? I don’t want to pressure you. We don’t have to dance if you don’t want to.”

I smile. “No, I want to dance with you. Just do your best not to trip on me, okay?” I tease.

His mouth twitches upward. “Right. I’ll do my best.”

We make it to the dance floor. The song playing is a mix between a pop song and a Latino song, I believe sung by J Lo. Of course, he’s an amazing dancer. He moves in sync with the music and wiggles his hips to the beat, and I’m trying my best not to look too stupid in front of him.

“Well, you’re definitely not going to trip on me,” I say in his ear.

“One of the perks of being an actor, I guess. Hours of training to master roles.” He smiles.

“I could use some training.” I joke.

“Here, take my hand.”



When I take it, it's like a bomb exploded in my stomach. I can't see anything else but him and his deep, beautiful eyes.

"Do as I say, okay? Right, center, left," he says, moving his foot to the right, and I do the same.

"Okay. Now add a little hip. Like that," he says, wiggling his hip.

"Good. Now faster to match the rhythm." He instructs, but I stumble and almost fall. He catches me.

"Don't look at your feet. Look at me."

I take a deep breath and get lost in his eyes again, doing my best to remember the steps and feel the music.

"That's it," he whispers in my ear. "Now the same, but back and front." I collide with him the first time, but I quickly find the pace. I'm having fun as he's making goofy faces and horribly sings the words out loud. Before the music comes to an end, he surprises me by making me twirl and dipping me in his other arm, a few feet from the floor. That draws the attention of the people around us, and some even applaud. He brings me up in a swift movement. We stay like that for a second, but it feels like an eternity. I draw back from him.

"That was fun, Mercier."

"Yeah," I reply, blushing, unable to hide my grin.

"I need a drink. It's been a while since I danced that hard!" he says, taking me to the nearby bar. He grabs two bottles of water and passes me one.

“So, you played a dancer in a movie?” I ask, taking a sip of water.

“Yep. Main role. It’s a dance movie coming out in April, I think. It’s your typical rom-com but with a lot of dancing.” He leans his elbow on the counter, dangerously close to mine. The hair on my arm stands, as if to get closer.

“What’s it about?”

“I play a Mexican guy living in Miami. My father lost his job, and I have to provide for my family. I hear of this dance competition with a big money prize. Unfortunately, my best friend and usual dance partner broke her leg at the first rehearsal, so I have to find someone else. Then I see this girl dancing in the street. You can guess the rest. I don’t want to spoil it for you.”

I clutch my hands together. “Please don’t. It seems like something I’d want to watch. I’m a sucker for rom-coms.”

“Cool! You’ll let me know what you think. If you want, I can even take you to the premiere.”

“Um, I don’t know. I’ve never been to a premiere.” *Not to mention I barely know you!*

“All the more reason to do it. It’s fun!” he says, raising his bottle.

“Sorry to interrupt,” a bald man in a suit says. “Can I talk to you, Logan?”

Logan looks at me, but I speak first. “Go, we’ll talk later.” I smile.

I leave them and go around the room to find the girls. I find Sabrina first, but she's sitting on one of the sofas with a super-hot guy I don't know. They seem pretty cozy, so I don't dare to interrupt. Candice isn't hard to find with her bright gold dress, but she's already in a conversation with two other girls. I don't see their faces because they have their backs to me. I'm debating whether to interrupt, but Candice makes the choice for me when she sees me.

"Louise!" she exclaims, gesturing for me to come over as the two girls turn around. I'm speechless. She's with Sarah Kimmons, whom I've met before, and Jayde Barnes. *Keep cool, Louise.*

"Louise, nice to see you again!" Sarah says. "You look great."

"Thank you!" I reply, hugging her. "You, too!"

"Jayde," she says, holding her hand out to me.

"I know," I reply, before adding, "big fan." We all laugh. "I'm Louise. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," she says with a warm smile.

"Oh, I have an idea, guys!" Candice gasps. "Let's take a pic in the photo booth."

The photo booth is obviously too small for four women in gowns, so we only have our heads inside. We take four different pictures, and each time, we make a different funny face. The results are pretty good, and I can't get a grip on how

crazy it is that I'm in a picture with Sarah Kimmons, Jayde Barnes, and Candice Anderson. It's out of this world.

“What about one with me?” An electrifying voice says behind me, sending goosebumps up and down my arm. Logan. He has to stop sneaking up on me like that.

I nod, and we get into the small booth. Awkwardness takes over because I have to sit on his lap for us to fit inside with my big gown. The first two pictures are really serious, and we smile nicely at the camera, but before the third one is taken, he takes me by surprise by tickling me.

“Pick one,” he says when we retrieve the photos. I choose the third one because of my surprised face.

“I pick this one then,” he says, taking the fourth one. “The other two are terrible. We look like children having their pictures taken for IDs.” He chuckles. I go to put them in the trash, but at the last moment, I decide to put all three of them in my purse.

“Logan,” I hear someone say behind me. “We gotta go.”

“Oh shoot, yeah.” He turns to me. “Sorry, I have to go. I have a shoot tomorrow at six am so I have to get some sleep.”

“Sure, yeah. No problem. Good night.” I smile.

“Good night, Mercier,” he says before leaving. I turn to find the girls, but a few seconds later, someone taps on my shoulder. I turn back around.

“Oh, and Mercier. Just because we drank, danced, and took pictures, doesn't mean that this counts as our non-date thing.”

He winks. "I'll call you."

6

## TO MOVE OR NOT TO MOVE

I WAKE UP A little stiff from last night's event. It's twelve pm already. I'm making myself some coffee when Candice joins me in the kitchen.

"Hey! Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't," she says, sitting on the bar stool. "I was awake already. I was on the phone with Wats. So, you had fun last night, right?" She smiles widely.

"I did. Thank you for another good idea." I chuckle.

"You're welcome! I'll drink to that, but coffee please," she says.

I give her a mug, and she cups her hands around it. "So, Logan?" she asks, innocently.

"Yes," I reply in the same tone.

"He's totally into you! And you are totally into him!" she adds quickly. "Don't deny it. I'm happy for you. You need this."

“I don’t know if I need this, but it’s true that it feels good to be wanted, to be appreciated, after being thrown away like yesterday’s news.”

She lowers her eyes on the mug. “Right.”

“So, yeah,” I add with enthusiasm. “It’s a really good feeling, but for now, that’s it, you know?”

“Right. No pressure. It doesn’t have to be anything more if you don’t want to. It’s just nice for me, as your friend, to see you out and about.” She smiles. “You can date him or not, or even find someone hotter if that’s possible. You’re free. Did he text you yet?”

“No, but he doesn’t have to.”

“Um. Yeah, he does. If he’s a gentleman. That’s what you do after a date.”

“But it wasn’t a date.”

She arches an eyebrow. “You guys spend time together, you danced, you took pictures—”

“Still not a date.” I giggle, thinking about Logan’s words from last night.

“To-mae-toe, to-mah-toe,” she says, and we argue a bit more about whether this was actually a date when my phone chimes. It’s a text from Logan.

“Hey beautiful, had fun last night. Hope to see you again soon for the highly anticipated non-date. Let me know what works for you.”



My heart flutters as I read his words, and I find myself missing him, wanting to see him again.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Candice asks, studying me as I read the text.

“No, it’s not,” I quickly reply. “It’s my mom.”

“Your mom doesn’t make you blush like that. Cut the crap.” She laughs and takes my phone from my hands.

“I knew it! He’s totally into you! So, when are you going to see him again?”

“I don’t know... I have to go back to Vegas now and—”

“You don’t have to, though. You can always stay longer.” She offers.

“No, I need to go back.” I smile. If I stay here, she’ll drag me to more parties and events. I need to take a beat and figure out my life. “I’ll come back soon, though.”

“Fine. Speaking of that, I was thinking. Why don’t you move back here? It would be so much fun. You could stay with me until you figure out your living situation.”

“I don’t know where I want to live. I have to think about it, but I do love L.A., and it really feels like home now. But in Vegas, I have Mel, and I missed her so much, and she took me in and—”

“Yeah, I get it. And she’s such a sweetheart... It sucks she doesn’t live here, too.”

I scratch my head. “Yeah. I really have to think about all of this.”

“Anyway, know that my house is always open. I’m not going on tour for a while. I’m recording at the moment, and Wats is on tour, so I’d love the company.”

“Thanks, you’re so sweet. But if I do come back here for real, I’ll buy a house. I’ll stay in a hotel in the meantime. I would never impose like that. I have enough savings.”

“Ew. No, don’t stay in a hotel. That is so sad! I know Jack did that a few times, but it is not healthy. And anyway, you wouldn’t be imposing. I offered. Look how big this house is! It was designed for having guests over.”

I go take a shower and pack my bags. When I come back downstairs, Candice has made us some sandwiches. We eat, discussing the possible plans of me moving here and the kind of house I would get. Candice is so thrilled by the prospect, and I must admit I’m getting a little excited myself. I’ve never owned any property in my life, and I never imagined I’d be able to at twenty-six years old, but thanks to the money I made last year with the huge Ivory deal and my Instagram contracts, I do have a seven-figure bank account. And really, what am I going to do with all of it? Buying a house kind of makes sense right now. Even if it’s a big step, I think I’m ready for this. I need to get going, however, if I don’t want to get to Vegas too late. Plus, if I stay longer with her discussing houses, I’m going to buy one within the hour. She’s so persuasive. I have

to take a beat and get away from her so I can think this through.

On the way to Vegas, all I can think of is my potential move to L.A. I'm only interrupted by Griffin calling me to say he got a positive answer from Delacroix publishing. He reads me the email he received from Alexandra, the editor. She says that she is so excited about the book, that it's a really good novel with well-written characters, and that she devoured it in no time. She will do her best to make it pass acquisitions at the next meeting and will come back to us when she has news. I'm so excited that someone else besides Griffin actually read the book, and thinks it's good. Specifically good enough to be published by Delacroix! I have to calm down, though. Just because she liked it doesn't mean her team will actually buy it.

When I get to Vegas, Mel is waiting for me in the living room. She's sprawled on the couch watching TV, her messy, red curls loosely tied on top of her head. I tell her everything about the fun weekend I had, and she's so happy for me. It's good to be able to talk to Mel about this. I mean, I can talk to Candice and Brina too, but Candice gets so excited, and Brina is Logan's co-star and friend, so I really need someone outside of their world to give me advice.

She tells me that it's great for me, exactly what I needed, and that I shouldn't think too much about it, just like I knew she would. Mel has always been so *carpe diem*. But the last time she gave me that advice, I ended up fiancée to a pop star, dumped on the side of the road, only emerging two months later, so I'm not sure this is the right advice for me.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she says. “But you can’t let one relationship define your actions in life. You took a leap, and it was amazing. I’m sure you wouldn’t change it even if you could, right?”

I think about it for a second, but no, she’s right, I wouldn’t. As much pain as it brought me, it was an incredible journey, and the feelings we had for each other, the love, the passion, were real. It’s something you don’t get to feel very often. I know I’m lucky to have had that kind of love. Even if it ended disastrously. Plus, it brought me amazing friends, too.

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“Right, because you only keep the good. That’s how you go further in life. So, if you’re attracted to this guy and he’s attracted to you, you should see where this goes. Maybe it’ll only be a coffee, and maybe it will end up being a grand love story.”

I shift in my seat. “I don’t know.”

“Look, I get it. You’re still upset and in love with Jack, but it will go away. You can’t mope around forever.”

I groan and slouch my shoulders. Noticing my mood switch, she puts her arm around me.

“Babe, you have to move on if you want to be happy. You deserve so much happiness, Lou. Don’t waste your time over a boy when there are millions more, and including an especially hot one, crushing on you.” She smiles, patting my arm.

“It’s just hard, you know? He threw everything away, just like that. I don’t get it. I hate him so much it hurts. I wish he’d explained it to me. I wish I had closure.”

“Yeah. I get it. It was harsh. You have every right to be angry or sad, but please don’t waste your life, babe. These are our best years. We have to make the most of it. Trust me. Plus, look at you two,” she says, reaching for the picture of Logan tickling me in the photo booth. “You look so cute, so happy. I love seeing you like that. And God, he’s hot!” She chuckles.

“Yeah, he is.” I laugh. Since I met him on Saturday, I have been thinking about him a lot. There’s no denying it. I’ll text him back. We’ll take things slow and see where it goes. Mel’s right, I have to get over Jack. He doesn’t want me anymore. I can’t waste my life on him. Taking a deep breath, I reply to Logan. I tell him I had fun last night too, and that I’m currently in Vegas, but will let him know when I’m back in town.

My phone beeps a few seconds later, and I’m excited to see his answer, but turns out it’s Valentin, telling me how proud he was to see me wear his dress on the red carpet last night.

“So, when are you going back to L.A.?” Mel asks.

“I don’t know. I was talking with Candice, and she suggested that I move there.”

Mel pauses for a second, and I’m scared that she’ll be mad, or sad, or worse, disappointed, but she smiles and gives me an endearing look.

“It’s a great idea!”

“I’m not sure yet. Only thinking about it. I just moved here with you—”

“Babe,” she cuts in, “you really should go. Look how happy you are today compared to when you left on Friday. It’s like there are two different Louises! It would be good for you. You have so many more friends there, too. Here you’ve got only me. Sure, I’m awesome, and it’s fun living together again, but I work a lot and I’m going on tour in April for the rest of the year, so you’ll be all alone here. In L.A., you’ve already made a home for yourself. You lived there for a year and a half.”

I open my mouth to reply, but she continues.

“And don’t worry about Jack. He’s been MIA for like a month, and even though he was back, L.A. is a huge city, one of the biggest in this country, in fact, so you could easily avoid him. And you’ll have Candice and Sabrina. They’re amazing friends.”

“Yeah, they are. It’s just that I still feel like such an outsider, you know? Their world is so intense. I don’t think I’ll ever fit in.”

She laughs. “You’re not sure if you’ll fit in? You already do. Look at you! Look at the pictures from yesterday. I mean, come on.” She shows me the red carpet photos. “You belong there. You belong on red carpets, mingling with celebrities. You belong in a crazy-ass rich mansion in L.A. You’re pals with Sarah Kimmons. You’re hanging out with Jayde Barnes at parties. You’re BFFs with Sabrina Evans and Candice

Anderson, for God's sake! You already are part of their world."

"You'll always be my best friend," I say, frowning.

"Of course, and you'll always be mine. But it doesn't mean you can't have other best friends, too. You and I, we're like sisters. We have an unbreakable bond. Don't think for a second that you moving there is going to change anything. We made it work when we lived at opposite ends of the country. It'll work with only a four-hour commute!"

"I guess."

"Don't overthink it, babe. You have to start living your life. Not tagging along with me or Jack, yours. What YOU want to do, and what makes *you* happy. You're a freaking millionaire! Enjoy! Have fun! Just don't forget to invite your bestest friend to some amazing parties." She winks.

"Okay," I say, grinning. "You made your point. Jeez, you're fired up today!"

"Well, it's been a while, so you know."

We laugh. "So, it's settled then?"

"I guess I'm moving to L.A.!"

7



## THE FORGOTTEN ISSUE

“HEY KIM,” I SAY, answering the phone.

“Hey, Louise. Is this a bad time?”

I sit down on the couch with a cup of green tea and kick my slippers off onto the carpet. “Um, no. What’s up?” She better not be calling about Jack again.

“First of all, you looked stunning on the red carpet Sunday night. I’m glad you went to that. You seemed very happy. I’m sorry I couldn’t be there.”

I relax my shoulders. “Thanks, Kim. No worries. I didn’t even think of calling you. I decided to go at the last minute,”

“Well, I’m glad you did. I’m calling about the Ivory deal. They just called me, and they want to remove Jack from the ambassador campaign.”

“What?” I exclaim, almost spilling tea all over my pajamas.

“They don’t want to be associated with him at the moment. Since he’s been seen partying, etc.”

“Okay. So, what does that mean?”

“Well, they want to keep you as their brand ambassador, alone. If you can agree to that? It means that only the pictures and videos of you alone will be used for the campaign.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t expecting that. I would be the sole ambassador for one of USA’s most famous casual wear brand. This is insane. They must have no other choices. “Why?”

“Well, they like your pictures. This is a casual brand, so choosing a regular girl instead of an established model is not that farfetched. Plus, you do have a large Instagram following, and the campaign is already shot.” She explains.

“Okay then,” I reply because I don’t feel like I could refuse. First of all, I need the money. If I say no, I will probably have to give it back. And also because I don’t back away from commitments. Jack has already defaulted on them. They put their trust in us. The least I can do is keep my end of the bargain.

“Great.” She sighs. “I’m happy to hear that! They will increase your revenue, naturally. They’ll give you what Jack was supposed to have. You’ll receive the extra payment by the end of the week. The launch is scheduled in ten days, and the party will be in L.A. I’ll send you the details ASAP.”

“Okay,” I reply, leaning back on the couch.

“There’s something else. Your *Fashion Warehouse* issue is coming out today. I don’t know if you remember. They probably sent one over to—”

“Wait, that’s still happening?”

“It is. I’m guessing either they couldn’t find a replacement in time, or they think it’s going to sell well, with everything going on—”

“You mean with him breaking my heart and publicly humiliating me? Yep, that’s great entertainment.” I snort, standing up.

“I’m sorry, Louise. There’s nothing we can do.”

“I get it, Kim. I have to go.” I’m pacing around the room, trying to get rid of that surge of emotion.

Good thinking on her part to let me know, though. At least I was prepared. As much as possible, anyway. I would have probably lost it at the grocery store later in the day if I didn’t know about it. Instead, I’m keeping it together. I lay my groceries on the conveyor belt and add the twenty-two issues they have on display. The fewer people who see it, the better. I hurry back to the apartment, put my purchases away, and pick up the magazine.

My heart’s racing fast as I brush my fingers on the glossy cover. Here we are. So happy, so passionate, so in love with each other. We’re holding hands and looking into each other’s eyes. For a second, I’m transported back to this moment. Everything always felt so light, so bright, like it was a dream. Like those scenes in movies when the characters are in heaven. And I was. I looked into his eyes, and I was at peace. I looked into his eyes, and everything was right. It feels so far away now. A lifetime ago.

I turn the pages and find the interview. I remember it well. We were sitting on a couch, across from the reporter, and Jack didn't let go of my hand the entire time. It was so hot and sweaty by the end of it. He kept whispering things in my ear too, making me laugh, making me blush. The reporter calls it "incredible connection and obvious passion" in the article. She says she found us "endearing and the perfect definition of pure love." How wrong she was.

But it's the quotes that hurt the most. One in particular feels like someone planted a dagger in my heart. "She's my everything. I can't go on without her. I don't want to go on without her. She's my fuel. I finally found my soulmate. I'm finally at peace, and I will never leave her side."

*But you did, Jack. And the pain is unbearable. I will never forgive you for that.*

When Mel comes home, she finds tiny pieces of glossy pages scattered around the room.

It takes a few hours to clean the apartment, and a few days to dry my tears. Of course, Mel has a lot to do with it. She keeps me distracted from all this and focused on finding my perfect house, which seems even harder than I thought.

I start by looking at properties in Candice's neighborhood first. Of course, being a gated community fifteen minutes away from the center of Beverly Hills, there's nothing underneath twenty-eight million dollars, which is way more than I have in my bank account. I expand to nearby

neighborhoods. I definitely would like to live in that area since I know it well now, but not necessarily in a gated community.

There is nothing under eleven million in the Holmby Hills neighborhood. What the hell?

Well, that's a great start.

I search for properties in Bel Air next, which is the area Sabrina lives in. Of course, her gated community has nothing under twenty million, but outside of it, I do find a few houses. It's a shame because the two in my price range don't have a pool. For three million dollars, I expect to have one. This is L.A., after all. The sun shines all year long.

Next, I search for Hollywood Hills properties, which is the area where Logan lives. My heart flips a little when I think about him. There are two houses under four million matching my criteria. This is above Hollywood, so a bit more than twenty minutes away from Beverly Hills center, but it would still work. When I look more at the pictures, I see that the first one is on a slope and the second is encased, almost attached to the next-door neighbors, and very narrow.

I'm really concerned about the price. Four million is way too much. My maximum acceptable amount is three. Anything over that feels too outrageous, especially since I'm alone with an uncertain future.

I expand my search on the map, and I find three houses in downtown L.A., and one in Pasadena that meet my criteria and are priced between two and three million. True, they're not as modern and nice as the ones I found in other areas, but I think

it's worth checking them out first. I contact the realtors, and I'm pleasantly surprised to find out that one of them has the three downtown L.A. houses in her listing. We set up the showing at two pm on Friday, and I schedule a visit in Pasadena with the other realtor on Saturday afternoon. I call Candice to let her know and ask if it's okay that I stay with her for the weekend. She's thrilled and says it's no problem. She won't be there much tomorrow because she has a photoshoot in the afternoon, followed by a label dinner meeting afterwards, but she'll be free this weekend. Carmen, her housekeeper, will be waiting for me tomorrow to give me the keys. I hesitate for a second, but I decide to text Logan. Mel's right. I have to take control of my life and move on.

Hey! Looks like I'll be in L.A. this weekend!

Hey! Awesome! I'm free tomorrow or Sunday evening.

Tomorrow would be great! I hit send, butterflies twirling in my belly.

Okay, it's a non-date! Where should I pick you up?

I'll be staying at Candice Anderson's. Do you know where she lives?

No, send me the address and I'll pick you up at 7?

See you then

I'm going to keep this private for now. I don't want any pressure from Candice, Mel, or Sabrina, even if she would probably be the least pressuring of them all.

So, the next day, it's with a fully loaded rental car that I park in Candice's driveway. She texted me this morning to tell me to bring as much stuff as I want from Vegas and choose a bedroom in her house. So, I did just that. I brought quite a few of my things already. One more trip, and I should be done. I meet Carmen at the house, and she shows me how to arm/disarm the alarm system and gives me a set of keys. I choose the same bedroom I was in last time and unpack my stuff in the closet before heading out to meet Janelle, the realtor at the first property.

It's located in the Central L.A. area, and it's kind of difficult to find. When I finally get there, I'm twenty minutes late. Janelle is a tall woman with pretty hazel eyes. She introduces herself and explains how she works. She asks me in detail what I'm looking for and why, and then she shows me around. I'm not really impressed. It's on a very busy road, which of course wasn't mentioned in the ad, and mostly has carpeted floors, which I couldn't see when I looked at the pictures. I politely smile and follow her around, but I already know this won't do it.

The next house is five minutes away. It's in a better location, but the first thing I notice when I get in is the floors. They're beautiful hardwood, but they are really damaged. A lot of renovations have to be done to be up to basic living standards. About two weeks and twenty thousand dollars of work, according to Janelle. What? And an additional fifteen thousand dollars will be necessary to redo the patio area where

a lot of tiles are missing or chipped. Christ! What did they do here?

We move on to the third house, which is on the same street as the second one. It's really nice. I love the fusion of modern and mid-century style. There's a big kitchen and a nice backyard. But she eventually tells me that there is a leak in the roof and some humidity problem to be fixed. She doesn't have a quote about that but will get back to me if I'm interested. I tell her that it's unnecessary as I really don't want to be bothered with any renovations. I thank her for her time, and she promises to call if more listings appear in my price range and criteria.

Feeling defeated, I lie back against my car seat. What the hell am I doing? Buying a multi-million dollar house in L.A.? This is nuts. Maybe this isn't for me, maybe this isn't meant to be.

I drive back to Candice's without getting lost this time, but it still takes me around thirty minutes. Too long to get to the home of one of my only friends. It's already six, and I have to get a move on for tonight. I decide to wear high rise blue skinny jeans with a satin top that I got last week when I was shopping with the girls. It's really cute, a bit sexy because of my cleavage, but not too much. I pair that with black strappy wedges and a crossbody bag. I apply a bit of make-up and battle with my messy wavy hair just in time to hear the gate bell ring. When I see Logan, small butterflies flutter in my stomach. He's wearing light blue torn jeans, a simple black T-



shirt and a light blue denim jacket over it. He's really handsome.

"Looking great," he says, ruffling his hands in his wavy hair. Not unlike Jack used to.

*Get it together, Louise! Stop thinking about Jack. It's over, and this cute guy just said you looked great!*

"Thanks," I finally say, blushing a little. "So do you."

"Shall we go then?" he asks, gesturing to the car. An Aston Martin, similar to mine, or rather, my former one.

"Nice ride," I say. He grins and opens the door for me.

"Where are we going?" I ask when he gets behind the wheel.

"You'll see."



## THE NON-DATE

WE SPEND THE CAR ride getting to know each other. I tell him about France and how I came to the U.S. to study and then work in marketing, leaving the Jack part out of it purposely. He tells me that he's from Texas. His parents are originally from Puerto Rico and moved here just before he was born. His mother left when he was three months old, so it's just him, his older sister, and his dad. He tells me he loves being an actor, that it always was the dream, the goal. He started with theater when he was six and ultimately moved here at sixteen, found an agent and was cast in a few roles before "the one". The one role that launched his career. A huge high-school romantic comedy series. Now, he's pumped about the new TV show that he's working on. It's his first time doing TV.

"I watched the first two episodes, you know."

"You did?" he says, parking the car. We are almost at the beach. Sure enough, there's a Santa Monica Pier sign. The parking lot is crowded with cars.

"Yeah! It was great. I can't wait to see where it's going, but no spoilers." I joke.

He pretends to zip his lips, making me giggle.

“So, Santa Monica, huh? I’m excited!” I exclaim.

“Yep. One of my favorite places in L.A.”

“Really? I’ve never been.” I say as we get out of the car, welcoming the light wind on my face.

He moves to his trunk and puts a black cap on his curly hair. “Just in case,” he says, before her comment sinks in. “But wait. What? How is that possible? It’s such a great place!”

We walk to the north entrance of the pier. This is a very busy night, and a lot of tourists and locals are strolling on the wooden boardwalk, the Ferris wheel shining brightly contrasting nicely with the sunset.

“You have to explain why you’ve never been here before. It’s totally unacceptable, Mercier.”

“I don’t have an explanation.” I giggle. “But I agree, it seems fun. I haven’t actually done a lot of visiting since I got here.”

“How so?”

Here we go. Now is the moment where I have to fill in the blanks.

I chew my bottom lip. Will it change anything for him that I dated a famous singer? Does he know about Jack’s reputation? “Well, it’s a little complicated.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he quickly says with a warm smile.

“No, no, I don’t mind, but I don’t know where to start.” I smile, looking down at my feet.

“Let’s start with some food, and then you can tell me all about it.”

We stop at a place called *Pier Burger* where a lot of people are already lined up, waiting to order. The smoky smell mixed with the salt water of the ocean makes my mouth water.

“Here,” he says, “sit on the bench before it’s taken. I’ll get the food.”

A few minutes later, he comes back with two kraft bags.

“There you are.” He smiles, handing me one. “Taste this, and tell me how good it is.”

I take a bite of the juicy burger. “It’s so good!” I exclaim, wiping my mouth.

“Right?” he says, taking a bite.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, savoring the delicious burgers, before he says, “so... complicated, huh?”

The ocean breeze caresses my face, calming my nerves. “Right. I told you I was living in New York two years ago. Well, that’s when I met Jack Rose.”

“The singer?” he asks.

“Yes. We started dating, and he eventually asked me to move in with him, here in L.A. We lived together for about a year and a half. Most of our time was spent on tour, and the few moments we had here, we didn’t do any sightseeing. The

paparazzi made our life so difficult we couldn't go anywhere. We even ended up in an accident last summer because of it."

"Oh yeah. I remember hearing about that. They said he almost died."

"Yeah, it was pretty bad. We both almost died... I was in a coma for days," A shiver runs through my spine thinking of that time.

"I'm sorry... It sucks. I know how it is. I've always been private about my personal life, and since I've never really given them anything juicy, I'm not as persecuted, I guess, but they're still annoying."

"So anyway, that's why I didn't have much time to do any exploring."

"Well." He claps his hands. "I'm happy to be part of your first Santa Monica experience, Mercier," he says with a big smile.

We finish our burgers and take a walk along the promenade.

"If you don't mind me asking, what happened between you guys?"

"We broke up last December. He wasn't ready for commitment. I guess it all went a little fast."

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Yeah, it's fine. It was a hard pill to swallow at first, but I bounced back. I'll be okay." And for the first time, I actually mean it.

“I’m sure you will.” He smiles. “So why Vegas now?”

“Right.” I chuckle. “I forgot that part. My best friend, Mel, whom I lived with in New York, is now a dancer in Vegas. I moved in with her until I figured out where I was going to go next.”

“And where is that?”

“Here. L.A. That’s actually why I’m here this weekend. I’m looking at houses. I saw three today, and I have another showing tomorrow.”

His eyes light up. “Oh cool! How did it go?”

“Bad,” I answer, and we both laugh. “Really bad. Let’s just say that not everything was mentioned in the ads.”

“Ouch. L.A. is a tough market.”

“It is, yeah....”

“But you know, my sister Isabella, is a realtor. If you want, I can arrange a meeting for you guys. I mean, she’s a pain in the ass, but she’s really good at her job.” He chuckles.

“Yeah? That’d be great! I’m kind of lost here, to be honest.”

“No problem. Let me text her right now.”

We enter the Pacific Park section of the pier, and he points to the Ferris wheel with a quizzical look.

I can’t remember the last time I had been on a Ferris wheel. The water stretching for miles into the horizon takes my full gaze. The cool ocean breeze is nice on my skin, but he notices my arms crossed over my chest and offers me his jacket.

“Thanks,” I say, holding it tighter. It smells like musk and wood. So foreign at first, but then, I take comfort in it.

As we step off the Ferris wheel, his phone chimes. “Oh, it’s from Bella. She says she’d love to help you find a place, and she can meet you whenever you want.”

“Awesome, thanks! Well, I have to see that house tomorrow at three, but maybe I can meet her after?”

“I’ll ask,” he says, and she responds immediately. “She says yes, she can come to you. Do I give her Candice’s address?”

“Yes, perfect. That’s where I’m staying until I find my own place.”

“Okay, she’ll meet you there.”

“Thanks a lot, Logan. I appreciate it.” I smile. And I really do. I feel like I won’t be able to navigate the real estate here without a professional.

“Don’t mention it. Now, let’s go play some games, Mercier. I’m gonna kick your butt.”

“You wish!” I retort, sticking my tongue out.

He buys tickets, and we try a bunch of different games: Ring Toss, Planko, Basketball, Penalty Kick, Whack-A-Mole, and Balloon Bust. I’m not bad, but he’s definitely brilliant. I’m guessing he comes here a lot. He manages to win a dolphin stuffed animal, a teddy bear key chain, which he gifts me, and a huge cotton candy, which we share. We keep walking to the end of the pier and lean against the banister to watch the waves crash in the dark.



After a few moments in comfortable silence, I say, “Thank you for bringing me here. It’s a really cool place. I get why you like it so much.”

“Anytime, Mercier. You made it even better than usual.”

We plunge back into the peaceful silence, looking at the waves, and I see him shiver.

“We should go,” I say. “You’re freezing. I feel bad for kidnapping your jacket.” I joke.

“Don’t. It was my pleasure. But yeah, I guess we better go. I don’t want you to get sick.”

In the car, we talk more about his new show and real estate and I’m a little disappointed the drive doesn’t take longer. We’re already in Candice’s driveway. I turn to him to say goodbye, but he gets out of the car and opens the door for me.

“Thanks for tonight, Mercier. I had a really good time,” he says as we’re walking to the front door.

“Me, too. It was fun,” I reply, wringing my hands. Is he going to kiss me now? Do I want him to? I like him, but I don’t think I’m ready for this.

He must sense my internal fight because he gives me a warm smile. “Maybe next time you’ll let me take you out on a proper date.”

“I would like that very much.”

The words escaped my mouth before I could even think about it. I feel the warmth going to my cheeks.

His smile grows wider. He steps toward me and gives me a warm hug.

“Oh, your jacket!” I say, taking it off.

“I almost forgot. It looks so good on you.”

I’m fully blushing now. Thank God it’s dark. “Thank you, again,” I say, before opening the door with my key.

“Bye, Mercier.”



## L.A. IS A TOUGH MARKET

WHEN I ENTER THE kitchen the next morning, Candice is already up, dressed in a yellow tracksuit, mixing a smoothie.

“Hey, girl!” she says, “How are you?”

“I’m good. How are you?” I give her a hug. “How was your photoshoot and dinner?” I ask, taking a mug from the cabinet to make myself a coffee.

“Fun and boring.” She smiles. “How was your date with Logan?”

I spin around. “You saw us?”

“No, I didn’t see you. However, the front gate called me yesterday afternoon to ask me if I allowed a certain Logan Reyes in the community for a seven pm pick up.” She jokes.

Shit, I forgot about that. I was going to tell her. After.

“Sorry,” I say. “But you would have given me so much crap about it. I didn’t want any pressure.”

“You’re probably right.” She laughs. “So, how was it? Where did you go?”

I tell her everything, and she's hanging on my every word.

"That's sounds great! He seems like a nice guy."

"Yeah, I think he really is... It's just a bit weird, you know?" Weird is an understatement. A few months ago, I thought I was going to be marrying the guy I love. Now I'm going on dates with another one...

"Of course... but you have to move on with your life. Take things one day at a time, see where this goes."

"Yeah. I think I will." I smile.

"I'm super happy for you! So, what are we doing today? I was going to go do some yoga if you want to join me?" She offers.

"I have another house showing at three, and then I'm meeting Logan's sister here, if that's okay? And sure, I can try yoga with you."

"How were the houses? And you're meeting Logan's sister?"

"Terrible, nothing like the pictures. His sister is a real estate agent who, I hope, has better listings than the ones I saw yesterday."

"Damn. Yeah, L.A. is a tough market. Cool about his sister, though. I hope she's good. If she's not, I can call my realtor."

"I hope she is, too! So, yoga?" I ask before she can give me more crap about the fact that she's Logan's sister.

“Sure, go get changed. I’ll fix you a bottle. I made orange mango smoothie.”

Yoga with Candice is so much fun. I’ve never actually done yoga in my life. I’m not keen on sports, but it’s really different. Slow paced and amusing somehow, especially me, because I can’t execute half of the poses correctly.

After we’re finished, we both go take a shower and meet in the kitchen for lunch.

“So, what are we doing tonight?” Candice asks.

“I don’t know. We can just stay in.” I shrug.

“Absolutely not!” she exclaims. “Wats comes back in two weekends, and he always wants to stay in. Let’s do something. Let’s call Brina and see what she’s up to.”

Sabrina is down too, but none of us really has any idea where to go, so we end up deciding on dinner at Nobu and taking it from there. However, Sabrina suggests that we should do a spa day tomorrow, just us girls.

“That’s a great idea! But you know what would be even better? If we went tonight to Santa Barbara,” Candice suggests, whispering to me, “there’s a spa retreat,” when she sees my questioning look. “I could see if Tania’s there, and maybe Ava, too? I don’t think they’re shooting at the moment.”

“Yeah,” Brina says in the speaker. “That’s perfect. I’ll call now to see if they have availabilities.”

“Okay. Text me back. I’m going to ask the other girls,” she says before hanging up. “It’ll be fun. It’s a gorgeous place, you’ll see.”

“Yeah, I’m excited! It’s been a while since I went to a spa. But crap, I have to go to this showing. It’s one fifteen. I’ll be back before four.”

I rush to get my bag and get out the door. It takes forever to reach Pasadena with the Saturday traffic, and it’s two fifteen when I get there. Damn, this place is far. I already know I won’t be interested in this one either. The drive alone was enough to discourage me. I meet Robert, the realtor, and I follow him around the house politely, but I let him know that it’s not really what I’m looking for. The drive back to Candice’s is as daunting as it was on the way over, and it’s five past four when I pull up in the driveway. Two cars are already here. Damn. I hate being late. I get in, take my shoes off, and rush to the living area where I hear voices. Sitting at the dinner table are Candice, Aaron, and Adrian.

“Oh, hi! I’m so sorry to interrupt. I thought it was Isabella,” I splutter.

They all greet me, Adrian with a wide smile. It’s good to see him, it’s been a while.

“She isn’t here yet,” Candice replies. “But you guys don’t mind using the formal dining room, do you?”

“No, no, of course not,” I reply as the gate door buzzes.

I let her in and get to the front door before she can ring the bell.

“Isabella,” I say, opening the door. “Nice to meet you.”

“Please call me Bella,” she replies, handing me her hand. “Nice to meet you, too.”

When she comes in, I notice her eyes travel everywhere around her. The walls, ceilings, furniture... probably an occupational habit. She looks very professional in her light gray pantsuit. Her hair is the same deep brown as her brother, but straight and long, tied into a low ponytail.

I lead her to the dining room where we sit on couches opposite each other.

“So, Logan tells me you are looking for a house?” she asks, opening her laptop.

“Yes, that’s right. I’ve seen a few houses already, but nothing that I really like. It’s proven harder than expected.”

“Yeah, L.A. is a tough market.”

Don’t I know it.

“So, let me explain how I work. First, we’ll establish what you want and don’t want. The more precise you are, the fewer houses we’ll find, but the ones we do see will be exactly what you’re looking for. Then, I’ll check my database. If I find something matching your criteria, I’ll send you the link to look at it, and if you’re interested, I’ll schedule a tour. If we don’t find anything, or if you end up not liking the ones we have, I’ll expand my search to other agencies.”



“Okay. That sounds good.”

“Great. Let’s start with a little Q&A then.”

I answer all of her questions, and we finally end up with a more or less three thousand square feet house, with a modern look, a minimum of three beds and three baths so I can have my family and friends over, an office and/or a library, a large living and kitchen area, a garage, a patio, and a good-sized pool. It might sound bratty, but honestly, if I spend millions on a house, especially in L.A., I need a pool. I also tell her I don’t want to have to do any work in the house except redecorate. It’s a good thing I have already seen three houses. It helps me narrow down my criteria.

“That’s good. You have a pretty clear idea of what you’re looking for, so that’ll make it easier. Now, which areas are you looking at?”

“I don’t have any specific neighborhoods in mind, but I would like to be fifteen to twenty minutes away from Beverly Hills, preferably close to here also, but I understand that it might be complicated.”

“It depends on your budget. Did you consult your financial advisor yet?”

“Um, no. Not really. I mean, I know how much I have in my bank account.”

“Of course, but the price of the house is one thing. Then, there are property taxes, federal taxes, utilities, like your typical electricity, water, internet, but also landscaping and

housekeeping fees. And you still need to have plenty to pay your taxes and go about your everyday life.” She explains.

I scratch my head. “Right, yes.” It sounds so logical that I feel dumb now. I don’t even know if I’ll be able to afford anything. Five million is way more than I was prepared to spend. “I will call them ASAP to figure it out.”

“Okay. FYI, given your criteria and the location, I think we’re looking at a 4.5-to-5-million-dollar house. So, if they can get behind that amount, we should be good.”

“Okay.” I gulp. I really hope it’ll work out. I don’t want to look stupid, especially in front of Logan’s sister.

“Perfect. Let me know then, and in the meantime, I will send our property links via email.”

“Sounds good. Thank you so much, Bella, for coming all the way here,” I say, showing her to the door.

“No problem. Don’t hesitate to call me if you have any questions.”

“See you soon.” I wave and close the door behind her.

“Louise,” someone calls behind me. It’s Adrian. I’m happy to see him, but I was hoping I wouldn’t have to talk to him because I know what’s coming.

“Hi, Adrian.” I smile.

“Um,” he says, putting his hands in his pocket, clearly embarrassed, which is a first. He always looked so confident.

“I’m sorry to ask you this, but do you have any news from Jack?”

“I’m sorry, Adrian, I don’t. I haven’t heard from him since last month in Vegas.”

“Yeah, I figured. Sorry, I had to ask. The situation is pretty bad. I’m really concerned about him and his career.” Worry fills his bright, warm eyes.

“Oh,” I reply, not sure what to say more.

“Yeah. We have no means to reach him since he ditched his phone. He pops up sometimes in tabloids in St. Barts, Mexico, Vegas, but every time, when we get there, he’s long gone.” He lowers his eyes. “The label is now calling me every day. They’re considering dropping him.”

“They can drop him?” I ask, puzzled.

“Yeah. After last time, they put a morality clause in his contract.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, and I mean it. I feel terrible. He went AWOL partly because of me, I know that. He said in his note he felt tied down with me. We were going too fast.

“Did you try his family, or his friends from London? I tried to call his mom the other day, but she didn’t pick up,” I add.

“Yeah, I called Susan. She hasn’t heard from him. No one has.”

“Sorry,” I repeat. “I wish I could help. But even if I could talk to him, I wouldn’t be much use. After I saw him in Vegas,

I realized he's nothing like the guy I used to know. I don't think he has any feelings for me anymore, so I'm not the right person to help you, anyway."

"Right," he nods. "Sorry to bother you. I know it's been hard on you, and you're trying to move on."

"No problem. I get it. It's your job to ask. Don't worry, if I see or hear from him, you'll be my first call."

"Thanks, Louise, I really appreciate that," he says, walking to the door.

"Wait, I wanted to ask you something. I need to get in touch with my banker, and I don't know who to call."

"Oh, sure. I think Kim sent you an email about that when she set up the account. I don't know his name, but you definitely should have gotten an email. If you didn't, just call her. She'll give you the contact info."

"Okay. Thank you, Adrian."

"Sure. Bye, Louise," he says, closing the door behind him. I lean against the door for a second, once again trying to make sense of Jack leaving. This is really bad for him. My eyes start to fill with tears. I can't go back to that. He's not my problem anymore. Shaking my head, I put a smile on my face and go to the living room.

Candice isn't downstairs, so I go up to my room to look through my emails. Adrian is right, there is indeed contact information in the emails Kim sent me about my bank account. His name is Ken Lawson. I decide to call him first, but there's

no answer. I look at the clock on the nightstand. It's almost five. He probably already left for the weekend. So instead, I write him an email explaining what I need when Candice appears in the doorframe.

"Hey. How did it go?"

"Good," I say, and I explain how the meeting went and the encounter with Adrian.

"Yeah." She sighs. "I know. It's a crazy situation, and I must say I'm starting to worry about him, too. I mean, what if he loses his record deal? That would be really bad."

"Yeah," I say, plucking at my pants.

"But let's not talk about that now," she cheers. "Let's pack! Because we are going to Santa Barbara tonight, baby!"

"Really?"

"Yep! And everyone is joining us. Even Mel."

"What?"

"Yeah! I called her when you left. She's off tonight, so she'll meet us there. She left like two hours ago."

"Oh Candice! Thanks a lot. That's amazing," I say, hugging her.

"You're welcome! It's going to be great! So, let's pack. Sabrina got a car service. The driver is picking us up at six."



## THE SANTA BARBARA TRANSFORMATION

THE DRIVE TO SANTA Barbara is pleasant. We talk, sing a few songs, and reach the hotel in less than two hours. The hotel is beautiful in a Spanish colonial style, situated right in front of the ocean.

We meet Ava and Tania in the lobby. I don't have to ask them what they do because they look so perfect, they can only be models. They're both tall and slim, with perfect facial features like high cheekbones and small pointy noses, but that's where the similarities end. Tania has long sleek black hair and deep brown eyes, while Ava's shoulder length platinum blond hair makes her green eyes sparkle. I remember seeing Tania at my "welcome to L.A." party last year. She seemed nice but didn't stay long enough for me to get to know her. Mel arrives, stunning as ever, in a long yellow sundress as we go to the check-in counter.

Candice, Mel, and I will share one bungalow, while the other girls will be in another one. The bungalows are close to each other and are located in a lush tropical garden. It's a very serene atmosphere.

The bungalow is bigger than I imagined. We enter a large living room, dining room, and kitchen. There is a nice patio with a pool, three bedrooms, and two bathrooms. I think that, really, we could have rented only one bungalow, but I guess they all want their personal space. Candice chooses the first bedroom next to the living area, and Mel and I choose between the two others further in the back. I unpack quickly, motivated by my stomach growling with hunger, change into a long sleeve mid-length, tight black dress, and put on some black stilettos. I touch up my make-up and go to Mel's room.

“Hey, gorgeous,” she says.

“You don't look too bad yourself,” I reply. She's wearing a white minidress, paired with silver stilettos, her long, curly red hair contrasting fiercely with the sheer outfit.

“How big is this place?” she asks.

“I know! We could have totally shared this one bungalow.”

“Exactly what I thought.” She laughs.

“Giiiiirls! Let's go. I'm starving,” Candice calls from the living room.

“Let's go. She gets crazy when she's hungry.”

“Oh, by the way,” Mel says, closing her door behind her. “I brought the rest of your stuff.”

I stop dead in my tracks. “What? Why?”

“I figured it'd save you a trip since I was coming here, anyway. There wasn't much left.”



“I know, but you didn’t have to. I was happy to come back with you for a bit.”

“I know, but with the tour coming up, I have less and less time off. Me not working tonight was exceptional, and I managed to get out of tomorrow’s rehearsal, but it was a one-time thing. They already told me not to expect a lot of free time this month.”

Part of me is disappointed. Even if I’m thrilled for her work opportunities, it sucks that I won’t get to live with Mel again. It’s been great to be back with her.

We meet the girls in front of our bungalow and go to the seafood restaurant. We enjoy our girls’ night, talking about casual things and funny anecdotes, and I appreciate every moment. It’s during these moments that I feel like I really fit in. Like I’m not an outsider anymore. There are no pop stars or models, just me and my friends, and that feels so good. I still think about Logan all night. And when I’m finally in bed, I can’t resist the urge to text him.

Hey, just wanted to thank you again for setting the meeting up with your sister

A few seconds later, my phone screen lights up, and I see Logan’s name on it. He’s calling me. Shit. I sit up and arrange my hair a little. What am I doing? He can’t see me. I slide my finger on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mercier. Is it okay that I called you?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying to sound casual. “No problem.”

“What’s up?”

“I’m in Santa Barbara, actually.” I explain to him what I’m doing here, he tells me about his shoot today, and we keep going, talking about everything and anything, books, TV shows, movies. When we say goodbye, it’s almost one am.

The alarm on my phone wakes me up. I sit for a moment, reminiscing about the wild, vivid dreams I had about a brown, wavy-haired boy. Then Candice, Mel, and I eat breakfast in our living room and change into bathing suits and bathrobes to meet the girls at the spa.

The spa is beautiful. It feels like we enter a cocoon, far away from the USA. The Spanish colonial vibe transports us out of California. We are greeted by the Spa manager, Maria, who offers us cucumber water and explains what’s available for us today: hammam, sauna, ice cave, relaxation area, pool, hot tub, massages, body and facial treatments, and salon services, provided by a beloved Hollywood hair stylist. She also tells us that refreshments and food are served all day long in the pool area, and hands each of us a spa menu so we can choose what we want to do today. There are a lot of options.

I finally decide to go with the organic seaweed body scrub, followed by a detox seaweed leaf bath. Mel chooses the same, so we are put in a couple’s suite. We don’t talk much during the treatment though because we want to enjoy it as much as possible. After the bath, we meet the girls in the pool area to grab something to eat. There are a lot of small sandwiches,

fruits, yogurts, and bread. It's nice that the spa is almost empty. Aside from a group of four 50-something women, it's only us. After lunch, I decide to go get a haircut, inspired by the new do Sabrina got this morning. It's very bold and short, and it suits her well, but I would definitely not do the same.

I take a shower, change, and arrive in the luminous salon. It's very chic, with modern chandeliers and white counters. I am welcomed with a glass of champagne and asked to stand on a pedestal for a moment. The hair stylist, a tall, squared jaw guy with long shiny hair, studies me for a few minutes, and then says, "Okay, I know. Yes! Stella, get me dyes number 67, 68, 69 and 70." And a girl, Stella, I assume, disappears behind a door.

"Dye? What?" I mumble, not sure how to start.

"Don't worry, honey, it's going to be fabulous. You can sit here," he says, showing me a chair in front of a mirror. He taps the mirror, and it doubles as a screen. Very high-tech. Too high-tech for me, but I smile because it makes me think about Logan.

"This is what I'm thinking," he says, showing me pictures of hair styles on the screen.

"It's an *ombré* with different shades of brown. It will give a natural, yet very sophisticated, look to your hair. What do you think?"

"I like it! But I don't want my hair too short," I add, seeing one of the pictures.

“Oh, no, no, honey. We’re not cutting your hair short, just a trim. I love the length and the natural wave. In fact, it’d be better if it was even longer. You should definitely let it grow more.” He smiles. “I’ll give you some wonderful products to help with that, and to give it even more volume.”

I would love to have longer hair, but each time I try, it ends up bothering me, or there are too many split ends, so I have to cut it.

When he finally tells me he’s finished, I’m on my fourth glass of champagne, and I don’t even know what time it is. I’ve been there forever, but I’m very excited to see the result. I’m a bit scared when we’re back in front of the mirror after he rinses my hair because it looks really dark. But he turns the chair toward him, and I can’t see myself anymore. He blow-dries and styles it with coconut scented products and turns the chair back to the mirror.

“Ta-da!” he exclaims.

“Wow!” I gasp at my reflection. I have no words. This is really beautiful. I don’t even recognize myself. I still have my dirty blond color, but with a lot of different shades of brown on the ends. It’s luminous, and the blend between the brown and the blond is very subtle and nicely executed. Smiling, I think to myself: *“You’ve got this.”*



THE NEXT DAY, IT’S a bit hungover from last night events (we hit the casino until two am), but still fully relaxed that we

go back to Beverly Hills. Saying goodbye to Mel was hard, though. I don't know when I'll see her next, and I already miss her.

We're halfway home when I receive a phone call from the Vegas rental agency. Crap. I totally forgot to extend the rental. They are not very kind, but at least they were understanding. When I explain that I won't be returning to Vegas, they tell me to return the car at the Beverly Hills location by seven tonight, or I will be charged for an additional day. So, this is the first thing we do when we get back. Candice is sweet as ever and tells me that I can use whichever one of her cars I want until I find one.

Jeez. House, Car. The list of things to buy seems to grow by the minute.



## THE SOLE AMBASSADOR

THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN I check my emails, I see I have one from Bella, and one from Ken, my financial advisor. I open it first, and I'm excited to see he gave me the green light for a 5million-dollar house. He also offered to meet to talk about investment opportunities. I thank him and tell him to send me his availabilities. I do have to take control of all this and be more proactive, especially since I don't have any regular earnings at the moment, except for the occasional Instagram post.

Bella sent me links for several properties. She found some promising houses and respected my wishes and price range. I attentively look at all the listings and reply to Bella, telling her that I got the green light from my financial advisor and which properties I would like to visit.

I'm both relieved and excited that everything is moving forward. Sitting at the dining room table, I show the pictures to Candice on my laptop.

"I like this one, and this one," she says, pointing at the ones I like.

“Me too. I’ll visit them both and we’ll see. Now, I need to look at cars.” I sigh.

“Why are you so down, girl. Buying stuff, *especially cars*, is the fun part,” she jokes.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I smile. “It’s just that it’s all at the same time, and it’s big decisions.”

“Let me show you some options,” she says, pulling my laptop to her. She starts typing, open a few tabs and turns the screen fully back to me. “These are amazing.”

Candice is a huge car enthusiast and has an enormous fleet. She’s a lot like Jack in that way, except she has a lot of convertibles. I watch the models she suggests with bulging eyes. Ferrari, Lamborghini, Bugatti...

I give her a side eye. “Candice, these are all supercars.”

“Well, duh. If you buy yourself a five million dollars mansion, you might as well get the car that matches it.”

“That’s way too excessive and definitely not me.” I’ll admit I liked my Aston Martin, but it would remind me too much of Jack, and it’s just too extravagant for me.”

“Fine. Then, there’s nothing I can do for you. I know nothing about regular cars,” she says and we both laugh. But it’s true, though, she never owned a “regular car.” She got famous before she could drive.

So, after doing some online research, I take Candice’s Range Rover, the least extravagant car in her garage, to test drive a Porsche. At the Porsche dealership, I’m greeted by a



nice representative who lets me try the Macan, and I really like it. It's easy to drive, not too fancy, but still very luxurious. When we go to the seller's office, though, he informs me that it would take approximately twelve weeks to have the one I want delivered. It's too long of a wait for me. However, he tells me that they have new or like-new cars that are available right away if I don't mind overlooking certain aspects like color, or options. He shows me the cars, and we find a new black model which has almost all options. We do the paperwork and agree on a home-delivery the next day. I'm relieved that it's all done. Between that and the house, it's really all coming together.

Candice has already left for her charity function tonight, so I'm alone. I received two packages while I was gone. They're both from Kim, and there are two notes. The first one says,

*Sorry for the delay. They sent it to your former address. Don't forget to wear them! Can't wait for the launch on Friday! – Love, Kim.*

I open the package, and it's full of clothes. I rummage a little through the box, but there are so many things, it's overwhelming. The second package is smaller. I open it and find a one-shoulder gold metallic gown with a matching clutch and shoes. I check the labels, all Ivory. The note says,

*This is the look they would like you to wear for the launch party on Friday. Call me when you get this. I'll fill you in with the details. – Love, Kim.*

I call her, and she tells me more about the launch party. Several influencers, celebrities, designers, and A-listers are

invited. There will be a red carpet, and I will have to answer some questions for reporters, talk about the campaign and how I relate to the brand. There will be no mention of Jack. They were very clear about that. I can also invite whomever I want to come with me, and Kim says she'll pick us up in a limo. Taking a few deep breaths, I try to calm myself down, but it doesn't work. I'll be the center of attention all night. Who am I to be the brand ambassador for a brand like Ivory? Damn Jack! I really hate you for putting me in this position.

After I hang up with Kim, I text Logan a simple "*How are you doing?*" because I miss him a little. He replies by calling me. We end up spending a few hours on the phone. It's so easy to talk to him, like I've known him forever. Before hanging up, we decide on lunch tomorrow, and I cannot wait to see him again.

The next morning, I receive my new car, and I spend about an hour with the technician to review all the features and choose my preferences. I also call Sabrina and talk to Candice about the launch party. I'm relieved that they both agree to come with me. Mel, however, as expected, won't be able to have the time off.

For my date with Logan, I decide to wear some of my new Ivory clothes and go with light blue jeans, a white crop top, and white wedge sandals. I also put on a white Ivory cap before leaving.

I give my car to the valet outside the hotel restaurant where we're meeting and go inside. Logan is already here. He stands

when he sees me, a big smile on his face. He's so handsome, and his smile is contagious. He gives me a big hug, and for a second, I'm lost in his scent.

"Sorry I'm late," I say, regaining my composure.

"No, you're not. I was early. How's the new ride?" he says as we sit at the table.

"Awesome! I love it. I'll show you if you want."

"Sure do. You look great, by the way, Mercier. I love the new hairdo."

"Thanks." I blush.

"Hello, I'm Polly. I'll be your waitress today," she says as she hands us our menus. "Can I get you anything to drink?" she asks, her eyes lingering on Logan. Clearly, she recognizes him.

"I'll get a Coke," he says.

"Same for me, diet though," I add.

"*Diet*," he says, teasing me when she leaves.

"Shut up!" I laugh. "I need to be careful." My love handles are already too much for this town.

"You don't need diet soda, Mercier, come on."

"Do I have to remind you that my best friends are Candice Anderson and Sabrina Evans?"

He arches his eyebrow. "And?"

“Anyway, I don’t like the taste of regular coke. There’s too much sugar, and it makes me thirsty,” I reply, which is absolutely true, for the record.

“Alright.” He smiles, rubbing his hands together. “What are we eating? I’m starving,”

“Me, too.”

“You’d better not choose a salad then.”



## THE CAT'S OUT OF THE BAG

I CHOOSE THE GRILLED chicken with vegetables and roasted potatoes. He takes the biggest, fattest burger on the menu and adds extra cheese. I don't know how he can eat that way and have a six-pack. Well, maybe that was fake for the TV show, but he still looks very fit. We enjoy a nice moment, talking about food, sports, and how he's shooting on location at the Staples Center tomorrow, which, of course, reminds me of Jack. The *Grammys* are held there, and we went to a couple of NBA games there as well. *Stop thinking about him! Think about Logan. He's here, in front of you, and he's perfect.* He waves his hand in front of my face to bring me back to reality, and we resume our conversation like nothing happened. I think he sensed why I zoned out, but he doesn't mention it.

When we're finally ready to go, and the waitress brings the check, he takes care of it. I don't argue because inside, I know this definitely counts as a date. Before we leave, Polly, our waitress, musters up the courage to ask for a selfie with Logan, which he accepts, not bothered one bit.

We leave the restaurant and wait for our cars at the valet. His car, a red Lamborghini, arrives first, but he waits for mine to arrive. He gets in, looks at it from every angle, makes a few bad jokes, and decides he likes it. Everything is always so much fun with him. Even the simple task of showing him my car. He gives me a long hug before closing the door on me. I drive away nervously, knowing that he's probably still looking, and avoid looking in the rear-view mirror so I don't get distracted.

When I make it to Beverly Crest, I'm five minutes late, and Bella is already there.

"Sorry I'm late. I was with your brother, actually, and he wanted to look at my new car."

"Oh, that's cool! No worries. You guys are good friends, huh?"

"We just met recently, but we always have a good time together. He's a good guy."

"That he is," she quietly answers. "Okay, let's look at this house!"

The house is splendid and it catches my eye immediately. It sits in a cul-de-sac, and even though it's not gated, it has a big driveway which I like a lot. I remember liking the façade with the mix of wood and stone in the photos, and it's even better in real life. I'm particularly fond of the modern living area, and the dozens of mini LED lights throughout making the house so luminous. The enormous living room looks like it came straight out of Architectural Digest, and it turns out there is a

second one, which is just as beautiful but cozier. There's also a fireplace embedded in a marble wall separating the living room from the dining room, so the fire can be seen from both sides. It's really cool. I love the temperature controlled all glass wine cellar, the size of the kitchen, and the office overlooking the pool, too. The backyard is rather intimate, secluded with the mountains around.

The staircase is modern, lit with many LED lights in the stone wall, and upstairs, we find four bedrooms, three bathrooms, and an empty space which was used for a gym. Well done, Bella. This is definitely a great one.

Then, we go back into the car, and I follow her for five minutes through a very green area. It looks more like Pennsylvania than California. This house is in a gated community, so Bella has to show credentials to enter, and it's almost as if we're in the middle of a forest. From the street, we can't see the house, but when she opens the white gate, it's a beautiful sight. I remember they called it a Cape Cod style house in the ad, and I definitely get why it looks like a house you'd find on a coast. I love how calm the entrance is. It's like once you're past the gate, you're in your own little bubble.

We enter into a corridor, and I really like the contrast of the dark wood floors and the white walls, just like I did in the pictures. The living room and dining room are both very cozy, but it doesn't have the same open feeling I saw in the previous house. I don't like the stairs either. Small and curvy, with carpeted floors. Bella notices me flinching and tells me that the carpeted floor could be removed easily.



The drive to the next house takes approximately five minutes. We're a lot higher than we were at the other houses, and I remember the great view from the photos. The inside is exactly like the pictures. Modern and airy, with vast bay windows that she opens to reveal the breathtaking view of the canyon.

The vibe of this house is great, and I know it's going to be between this one and the first one we saw this afternoon. It's a shame that neither of them is gated, though. I would have liked the added security. I tell Bella my thoughts, and she promises to look again, but informs me that if I'm interested, I shouldn't wait too long because even though these houses have only been on the market for a couple of days, they will sell fast.

When I get back to Candice's, she's on her laptop at the kitchen counter, and the first thing she says is, "So, enjoy your lunch at The Beverly Hills Hotel?"

"I did! We had a great time. It's always so much fun, so easy with him." A nice change in my overly complicated life.

"I'm so glad!" She sighs, wistfully. "I really miss Watson, though."

Then it dawns on me what she said. "Wait, how did you know?" I ask sitting next to her.

She doesn't answer right away, typing on her computer.

"Here," she says, turning it to me.

It's a tabloid website with an article titled "*Logan Reyes seen out for lunch in Beverly Hills with Louise Mercier, Jack*

*Rose's former fiancée.*” With pictures of Logan and me. We’re waiting for the valet, talking. He’s shoving my arm playfully with a big smile on his face. He’s looking inside my car, and we’re hugging each other goodbye. Under the photos is a brief article:

*Sorry, Ladies! It looks like Hollywood's most eligible bachelor, Logan Reyes, may have a new girl in his life! He was seen in front of The Beverly Hills Hotel today with Louise Mercier, Jack Rose's ex-fiancée. There were no obvious signs of PDA, and they each left in their own vehicles, but that hug seemed very cozy! To be continued.*

*Tell us what you think in the comment section!*

“Oh my God! We didn’t even see them!” I gasp. Just what I was trying to avoid. I don’t need the media up in my business again.

“I know, they’re everywhere.” She sighs. “Don’t sweat it, though. It’s nothing, and you are both hot and single, after all.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I say, looking away. “But that’s not so much what’s bothering me. This is not even a thing yet. We went out twice, and they’re already talking relationship. That’s pissing me off and puts a lot more pressure on it, too. I just—” I’m interrupted by my phone buzzing. It’s Logan.

“Hi, Mercier. I don’t know if you saw... I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, I did. It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not!”

“No, it’s not, but it’s not your fault.”

“I know, but still, you wanted to take things slow and be friends, and now they put a label on it.” Butterflies quiver in my stomach. He seems genuinely concerned. The fact that he’s really respecting my wish to take it slow means the world to me.

“Don’t worry about it. Really. I’m—I was gonna say I’m used to it, but it’d be wrong. I get it. You’re famous, and they want to know what’s up with you.”

“It’s the kind of thing that really pisses me off, though. Don’t worry, I told my reps to deny everything. Anyway, how were the showings this afternoon?” he asks.

“Great, actually. Really great! I’m still debating between two of them so I have to think this through and go back to see them, but it’s going well.”

“Cool. If you want me to come with you, I’ll be more than happy to.” He offers.

“Right.” I laugh. “Imagine what the tabloids would say about that...”



## EXCITING NEWS

THE NEXT DAY, A big surprise awaits in my emails. Griffin forwarded me the email Alexandra, the Delcroix publisher, sent him. She managed to get my book through acquisitions and they would like to make an offer. She'll be in L.A. next Thursday and would love to meet with us to discuss it further. I jump up and down at the news. I can't believe it.

"Hi, Louise," Griffin says, answering after the first tone.

"Hey! This is so exciting!"

"Yes, this is wonderful news," he says. "Let's hope the offer meets the quality of the book now. Are you available to meet her?"

"Yes! Of course! Just let me know what time works for both of you."

"Will do. Bye, Louise," he says, before hanging up.

*They want to make an offer for your book.* I marvel at the thought for a minute. This is so unreal. A few years ago, I didn't even expect to finish this book, let alone having it read by someone else or published by Delacroix Publishing. I owe

it mostly to Jack. I can't deny it. He's the one who pushed me to write it and encouraged me to show it to someone. I remember when I first showed it to him. I was so nervous.

*"Please, don't think less of me if you don't like it. If you don't like it, it's okay, really. Just tell me honestly if you don't."*  
*I was a mess.*

*"Babe, relax! I know the feeling. I've been writing songs since I was nine. At first, I was so scared to show them or sing them to anyone. But then I did, and it changed my life."*

*Four hours later, he came back to the living room. He was wearing a Lakers jersey. I remember it like it was yesterday.*

*"It's really good, babe. I mean it. I'm not saying it just because I love you. It's funny, witty, and captivating. I don't know why you're afraid. It would be a shame not to share it with the world."*

So, I took his advice. He asked Kim to find me a book agent, and now I'm going to be published. The first person I want to tell is him. The first person I want to celebrate with is him. *Why?* Why do I always circle back to him? Why does he have to take this away from me, too? But he won't. I won't let him ruin one of the best moments of my life. He doesn't deserve it.

Candice isn't here, and I need to share this unbelievable news with someone, so I call my parents. They are, of course, thrilled for me, and even impressed—well my dad is. He's always supported me and believed in me. My mom just smiles and says that she "hopes I can make a career out of it." But it

feels amazing, almost as much as the news itself, to have my mom's (semi) approval. She's always so judgmental and so hard on me. I also send them the links to the two houses I'm considering. We talk it over, and they both prefer the second one.

They're right. This house will be a better fit for me. It has most of the things I wanted. It's the cheapest of the two, and the only downside is the lack of a gate, but both houses have that same problem. I do want to see it again, though. I call Bella, and we schedule another visit for later today. She said that the process, once I sign, will take about a month, so I'd rather get it going as soon as possible. Watson is coming back on Wednesday, and I don't want to intrude on their life like that, especially since he and Candice haven't seen each other for two months.

The rest of the morning is more phone calls. The first one to Ken, telling him that I can indeed meet him at the bank tomorrow. And the second one from Kim. She wants to know who my plus ones to the launch tomorrow will be, and reminding me to create as much buzz as possible around the campaign.

I take a picture wearing the Ivory cap and caption it: *D-I* with the hashtag #ivory and #ivoryspringcampaign, which is the hashtag used by the Ivory Instagram account to promote the launch. I know it's probably not enough, but honestly, what more can I do? I was photographed in all Ivory gear just yesterday with Logan, after all.

When I see the house again, I decide to make an offer. After discussing it with Bella, we agree on four million dollars. It's a little below asking, but she thinks it'll go through because we're making an all-cash offer, which is really appealing to sellers. Now we just have to wait and see.

I leave the house early on Friday morning, and after my meeting with Ken at the bank, I decide to go do some shopping. Sabrina has invited me to her album launch party tomorrow night, and I'd love to buy a new outfit for the occasion, even though I'm sure I already have something in my closet. Plus, I haven't heard from Bella yet, and I really need a distraction. I'm so stressed about whether or not I'll get the house. The meeting at the bank was painful, too. Even though it's somewhat interesting, and also very important to learn about investments, after two hours my brain is fried. We still made progress and decided on a few safe and reliable investment options that will help me earn interest. I go to a few stores—Versace, Chanel, Maison Gaumé, and Prada—and I find a few items, particularly a sleeveless, very simple, yet gorgeous, long black dress with a slit on one side and a gold choker. Since the theme of the party is “black”, the album's title being “Black Roses,” it will fit right in.

As I'm returning to my car, I almost lose my grip on the latte I'm sipping. Right before my eyes is a poster of me, taking the entire half wall of the Ivory storefront. This is so weird. I glance around, feeling like everyone is staring, but really, no one is paying attention to me.



My eyes are glued to the picture. I look so fierce, like an actual model. Memories of the shoot come flooding back. How hard it was for me, and how Jack helped me feel better, helped me be confident. How much fun we had. How in love we were. And now it's just me, alone. Just like in the picture. I can't repress the tear coming out of my eye, and that infuriates me. It should be an amazing moment. I'm the model of the Ivory spring campaign! Never in my wildest dream would I have imagined such a thing. Yet it doesn't feel good. Worse, it really hurts. The sales rep sees me through the window, and unfortunately, I don't have time to leave before she gets through the door.

"Louise!" she exclaims. "What a nice surprise! Welcome to Ivory! We're thrilled to have you here. Please come on in."

"Um." I glance left and right, trying to find an escape route, but nothing magically appears.

I follow her inside, and several sales assistants are trailing me with interest. When we're in the middle of the store, they all applaud me. Crap. What do I do? I try to smile. Thank God I'm wearing all Ivory again. They take a few pictures of me, some with me, and tell me to look around and take whatever I want, which makes me feel really uneasy. They've already sent me so much. But they keep coming at me, offering me pieces, so I have no choice. I don't want to seem ungrateful. I have a look and pick a few items. They put everything in a bag, with my face on it naturally, and thank me again for coming today.

Of course, when I get out of the store, I see a few paparazzi waiting for me. Bastards! They called them. I get it, it's good press, but it's not fair. I smile at the paparazzi, who thankfully are not too pushy. They really just want a picture of the Ivory model dressed in Ivory, holding an Ivory shopping bag with her face on it, in front of the poster with her face on it. I mean, I don't blame them. It must be a sight to see. A few of them call my name, some ask about Jack, one asks about Logan, but I don't reply to any of them. Instead, I make my way quickly to the car and drive away.

"You went shopping without me!" Candice says, both hands on her hips, when I enter the living room.

"I'm sorry. I needed it after that bank meeting," I reply, leaning on the kitchen bar.

"Fine. I can't argue with that. Shopping therapy is usually needed after those." She smiles. "By the way, two flower arrangements came for you," she says, showing me the bouquet on the dining room table.

I look at the cards. The first one is from Megan Roberts, the creative director of Ivory.

*"Welcome to the Ivory family, Louise. We are so glad to collaborate with you on this campaign. Thank you so much for your incredible work and dedication. See you tonight! Megan."*

The second one is from Kim.

*“Congratulations, Louise! I’m so proud of you for the Ivory campaign. Watching you grow into an established model and a confident woman is one of the best parts of my job. See you tonight. Kim.”*

I bring the note to my chest, batting away the sneaky tears that have formed in my eyes. Our relationship has always been a bit rocky, especially at the beginning, and I know she’s tough to impress. I don’t exactly consider myself a model or particularly self-assured, but this definitely boosts my confidence for tonight.

Just as I’m putting the second bouquet in water, Kim calls me to congratulate me again. She thanks me for stopping by the store today, and for the Instagram picture. She also lets me know she’ll be picking us up at seven tonight.

At five pm, Stella and Carla arrive, bags full of tools to make Candice and me red carpet ready, and once again, they do a fantastic job. It’s amazing what a good hairdo, make-up and outfit can do to a girl. It’s with a huge boost of confidence, and feeling more like the guest of honor that I am, that we join Kim and Sabrina in the limousine.



## PARTY CRASHER

WE ARRIVE ON THE red carpet, and this time the photographers are cheering for me. I pose for a few pictures on my own, and then with Candice and Brina. We follow Kim to the reporters' section, and they all ask me the same questions about my connection to the brand, what I like most about the collection, and how it inspires my style. As promised, Jack wasn't mentioned once.

Nothing could have prepared me for the sight unfolding in front of me as we enter the room. Me. Everywhere. Videos of the shoot are projected on walls, and there are larger-than-life pictures all around the room. This is intense. Taking a deep breath, I try to calm my throbbing heart. Many people come to greet me, some that I know, but a lot that I don't. Megan Roberts, the creative director of Ivory whom I met once before, tells me the collection has made a fantastic debut with a great deal of praise for the campaign, especially from critics underlining their bold move to choose a "regular" girl instead of a model. I'm glad it worked out. I wasn't sure about all of this, but after seeing all the pictures and videos on the walls, I must say I'm really proud of how it turned out. She proudly

introduces me to a lot of people, and I get a lot of compliments on my work.

“What’s up?” I ask Candice and Brina, joining them near the bar, adding, “What’s wrong?” when I see their concerned expressions.

“Um,” Sabrina starts.

“I’m so sorry,” Candice says.

My heart plunges to my stomach. What the hell happened? Candice hands me her phone. It’s a video. Jack is sitting on a couch, a bottle of brown liquor in one hand, a rolled joint in the other. He looks even worse than last month in Vegas. His hair is longer and dirtier, his eyes seem empty, expressionless, emotionless, as if there is no soul behind them. “Fuck this, man. This is bullshit. Do you know they took me out of the pictures?” he laughs. “Me? Fucking Jack Rose! Who do they think they are? And they kept her?” He laughs more. “She only got that gig cause of me, anyway.” The video stops, frozen on his face, laughing at my expense.

Chills run down my spine. My heart beats faster, and I can’t control my breaths. I hate him. It wasn’t enough to ruin this for me. Now he has to turn the entire campaign into ridicule, insulting me in the process. I want to scream. I want to throw stuff. I want to cry. But I can feel the atmosphere in the room has shifted. The news made its way around the room, and dozens of eyes are settled on me. I can’t spoil this any further. I try to stay calm and hand Candice back her phone. She and

Brina look at me with apprehension, like I'm going to break any minute.

“Guys, I'm fine. I promise.” Even I don't believe my lie. I'm not fine, and they know it.

Kim hurries to us, phone in hand. She tells me how sorry she is, and that they're doing everything they can to take it offline. But it doesn't matter. The damage is done. He embarrassed and insulted both Ivory and me, and it can't be taken back. I keep my cool until we get home, but once I'm in bed, I burst into tears, crying myself to sleep.



ON SATURDAY MORNING, IT takes me a minute to remember why I feel this miserable. Unfortunately, the memory of last night's humiliation catches up to me. I finally make my way downstairs, my eyes red and puffy. Thank God Candice is already in the gym doing yoga. I take my coffee to the bathroom and linger in a hot bath until the water becomes cold and I'm feeling a little better. I return Kim's hundred calls. She tells me that the video has successfully been taken down, and that the press about last night is really good. Thankfully, they don't mention the video, and the articles are all very flattering, saying that I was a brilliant choice, and that hopefully, it will pave the way for other clothing companies to have more regular girls modelling for their collections. They also say this decision brings the brand closer to its customers since it's first and foremost, a casual wear brand. I'm relieved.

And after talking to Mel, and texting with Logan, who doesn't even mention Ivory at all, I feel a lot better.

I spend the rest of the day with Candice, and she does an amazing job at making me forget the whole thing. She asks my opinion on her new songs, and we look at pictures for her album cover. I know they are releasing her album earlier than expected because of Jack, but she doesn't mention it.

At five pm, Carla and Stella are back once again to help us get ready for Sabrina's album launch, and by six thirty, we're in a limo on our way to West Hollywood.

Aaron is escorting us, and we start by posing for a few pictures at the small red carpet event before getting inside. The room is unbelievable, and I need to pause a moment to take it all in. Everything is black, yet not dark. Black drapes hanging from the ceilings, black curtains on all windows, black tablecloths, black chairs, and a black mirrored dance floor.

On each table are bouquets made of red and black roses, and on the ceilings, dozens of gold chandeliers appear to be floating, lighting the room with a muted glow. All around us are frames with built-in TVs, showing artwork and videos from her album, promotional material, and also recording sessions. Everyone is wearing black, of course. Dress codes are taken very seriously in Los Angeles.

It doesn't take us long to find the guest of honor. She looks amazing in an all-sequins black dress fitting her body tightly, her shiny black hair and make-up finishing the look.



“Wow! This is amazing. Congratulations!” I say, giving her a hug.

“Congrats, girl! This looks so gorgeous,” Candice says, hugging her next.

“Thank you, guys!” She claps her hands. “I’m so excited, but also a little tense.”

“Don’t worry! You know the drill. You’ll be fine. Plus, it sounds like you’ve got a fun crowd tonight!” Candice says, giving her shoulder a reassuring squeeze as people mingle and chatter all around us.

“Yeah, I know, but it’s always nerve-wracking. Oh, excuse me,” she says, as someone is waving at her.

Candice and I make our way to the bar and grab two glasses of champagne, Candice stopping a few times to talk with guests, introducing me only to the ones she likes, meaning two people, a producer and a pianist. We’re halfway through our first glasses when I hear, “Ladies, you look dashing tonight.”

Logan. I must be getting used to him now. I didn’t feel him before I saw him. That’s an improvement.

“Thank you,” we both reply.

“You look very handsome yourself,” I add with a smile. And that he does. Dressed in all black, naturally, but I know he likes the look, as it’s not the first time I’ve seen him dressed this way. It’s not a suit this time, but jeans, and a black shirt.

“I see someone I know and don’t like, but I have to go talk to them,” Candice says at once, winking at me, making Logan

and me burst into laughter.

“Subtle.”

Warmth fills my cheeks. “Yep, that’s Candice for you.”

“How are you, Mercier? I’ve missed you,” he says, wrapping his arms around my middle. His woodsy scent takes over, making me heady.

“We saw each other like two days ago,” I say, but my insides melt into a puddle.

“Ouch!” he says, clutching his chest as if my words hit him there.

“That’s not what I meant.” I chuckle, swatting at him playfully. “I’m flattered, actually, and I did miss you too, if I’m being honest.”

“Much better.” He teases. “So, what’s new? Since I haven’t seen you for so long.”

“Well, I made an offer on a house, and I am now the official face of the Ivory spring collection, but other than that, nothing new.”

“Really? That’s great. Which one then?”

“It’s the one below Beverly Glen Park, with the wine cellar. The offer we made is a little below asking because Bella was confident that it would be accepted, but now I’m a bit stressed about it. I’m not gonna lie. I hope it works out.”

“Ah, don’t worry. If she says it’ll be accepted, it will. She’s good at her job. Of course, you’d take the one with the wine

cellar.” He laughs. “And I saw the pics for the Ivory ad. Congrats!.”

He tries to be excited, but I know he feels a little awkward about it.

“Yeah. Thanks,” I say, suddenly very interested in my feet.

“So, are these events always so over the top or what?” he asks. “I’ve never been to an album launch before.”

Never? Does that mean he came just to see me? “Um, yeah, pretty much. I’ve only been to Jack’s but—”

Shit. I try to avoid his eyes. *Does it have to be that awkward?*

“So,” he says, scratching his head. “We’re pretty bad at this, aren’t we, Mercier?” He chuckles.

“Yeah, sorry, everything with Jack is a little awkward. He’s part of my past, but somehow, he always makes his way to my present.” The video of Jack is still fresh in my mind, twisting my stomach into knots.

“Don’t worry about it. I get it. I wanted to punch him in the face when I saw that video yesterday, but at the end of the day, there’s nothing you can do about it. You just have to let it go.”

“Exactly.” He’s right. I do have to let it go. But it’s not that easy. How do you let go of someone whose face is plastered everywhere? Whose memory is still etched in your mind?

“Don’t let him ruin this for you, okay? The pictures are great. You look amazing. You should be proud of yourself.”

He gives my wrist a gentle squeeze.

“Thanks!” My skin warms under his touch.

“So, are we going to get this party started or what? Shall we dance?” he asks, offering his hand.

“I thought you’d never ask.” When I place my palm in his, thoughts of Jack float further from my mind.

We dance for a while, to a lot of different music from Sabrina’s new and old albums. And then she comes on stage. She makes a quick speech, thanking everyone for coming and explaining the making of the album. And then she sings the eponym song titled “Black Roses”. It’s a slow song, so Logan puts his hands on my waist, bringing me closer to him. I can smell his woody cologne, and I want to bury my face in his shoulders and get lost in it. Instead, I put my hands around his neck, and we start to sway. We don’t say anything the entire time, and at the end, I feel myself wanting him to kiss me, but I know he won’t. He respects my decision to take this slow and hang out. But damn! I want to kiss him, hard. I know he feels it too because he blushes a little and scratches the back of his head.

“Should we grab something to eat?” he asks, biting his lip.

“Sure.” I smile, *even though the only thing I’d like to eat right now is you*, I silently add. *What is wrong with you, Louise Mercier?* I push the thoughts to the back of my mind and follow him to the buffet. When more upbeat songs play again, Candice drags us to the dance floor, and we have a great time. After a while, I really need to sit down, even if I am

wearing comfortable shoes., Logan and I go to the lounge area, and we talk for a while, his arm resting against the back the sofa behind me.

“Hey, guys,” Candice whispers, sitting down on the coffee table in front of us. “Sorry to disturb, but I just want to tell you that this place is swarming with journalists, so be careful.”

“What?” I gasp. “I didn’t see any.”

“Not photographers, but reporters. They’re always invited to launch parties so they can write about the album, you know,” she explains.

“Oh, right.” It makes sense. Why didn’t I think of that?

“Anyway.” She smiles. “Be careful, because you guys look really close, and even though they can’t take pictures, they can still write about it.”

We’re not doing anything really, but I can imagine that the fact we’ve spent most so much time together tonight, and are now sitting on a couch, his arm behind my shoulders, could stir the pot. He takes his arm back, and I sit a little further away for the rest of the night.

When it’s time to say goodbye, I hug him swiftly before heading out first. We agreed that he should wait a few minutes before exiting, because the paparazzi are still out front. It feels childish and stupid, but I enjoy getting to know him, and I’d like to see where this is going. The problem Jack and I had, eventually leading to our downfall, was that we moved way

too fast. We need to keep moving slowly if we want to have any hope of it becoming an actual thing.



## STEAMY DREAMS

ON SATURDAY, I WAKE up late, as usual after these functions, but I'm awoken with fantastic news: the seller accepted the offer on the house! I literally jump out of my bed when I read Bella's text and run downstairs to tell Candice.

"That's amazing, girl! I'm so happy for you. can't wait to see it," she exclaims. "We have to celebrate this. Let's do something tonight!"

"Okay!" I do feel like celebrating.

"Yay! I'll call the girls and ask what they want to do. It's my last weekend without Wat\$on, so a girl's night out would be fun."

I call Bella to thank her for her work and ask for the next steps. She tells me that I have to sign a few documents she'll send over to me, as well as a contract with a fourteen day home inspection contingency which will allow her to go back with a specialist to verify the state of the house, making sure that nothing needs to be repaired or replaced, for example. After that is cleared, the settlement agent will do the necessary



verifications, like title research, before it's officially transferred to me.

She also asks me about the staging furniture. We already discussed it briefly when we visited for the second time, and she told me that everything was available to purchase. I tell her I really loved the downstairs area, so I'd love to buy all of that. And then for the upstairs, the only furniture I don't like is the bed in the master because it has no headboard. It really helps that I can buy most of the staging furniture, though. It's just one less thing I have to do. I still might want to furnish a bit more, like shelves in the office, but I'll just figure that out later. I text Logan and Mel and email my parents to give them the great news.

Five minutes later, Logan's name appears on my screen.

"Congrats, Mercier!" he says when I pick up.

I sit down on the side of my bed. "Thanks, I'm really excited."

"Let's celebrate tonight! My treat."

My stomach sinks. I'd love to celebrate with him.

"Oh. Sorry, I already made plans with the girls. I wish I could celebrate with you, too."

"No, it's okay, Mercier. How about you come over to my house on Sunday instead? I'll cook you lunch."

Lunch at his house, alone. It will be the first time we'll be alone together. Isn't that a little weird? But on the other hand, I do want to spend time with him. And if I want to get to know

him without being scrutinized, seeing each other at home is the only way.

“Sure. I’d love that.”

“Great. See you then, Mercier.” He hangs up, and I can’t hide the smile on my face when Candice enters the room, so I tell her everything.



BY EIGHT PM, WE’RE out the door and on our way to the restaurant/club. The front of the building is swarming with paparazzi. This is apparently a regular celebrity hangout. We get in, quickly escorted by Ryland, Candice’s bodyguard, and join Brina and Ava, who are already here. The atmosphere inside is really cool. There’s music, almost too loud for a restaurant, and the décor is a mix of wood and velvet furniture. It gives a really cozy feeling, almost like a ski resort restaurant. The waiter brings us a tray of finger food and a bottle of champagne. The food is delicious. The food and drinks seem to empty really fast because soon enough, we’re on our third trays and second bottle.

Around ten thirty, the mood changes drastically, and we’re definitely in a club now. There is no dance floor per se, but people dance next to their tables. We dance the night away and have a lot of fun, especially Ava, who does one shot after another. That girl is wild. So wild that we are now helping her out of the bathroom where she just threw her guts up.

“Damn models! They’re paper thin, and they drink like truckers,” Brina growls, making Candice and me burst into laughter. She is so right, though.

“We have to get her into the car without the paps taking too many pictures, or she’ll hate herself tomorrow,” Candice says.

So, we do our best. We clean her up a little and stand around her to help her out of the club. There still are a few paparazzi, but Ryland and Jacob, Brina’s bodyguard, are keeping them at arm’s length. We pretend to hug her goodbye while we shove her the best we can into Sabrina’s car.



IT’S CHRISTMAS. WE’RE IN Jack’s apartment in London. Our families are here, and we’re eating around the big table. Everything is decorated beautifully, and I’m on Jack’s lap.

“You know I love you, right?”

“I know. I love you, too,” I reply, burying my face in his neck.

Ho-Ho-Ho! Santa Claus just walked into the apartment, and he’s bearing gifts. He smiles at me and motions for me to sit on his lap. Wait a minute, I know that smile. I’m sitting on his lap. That smell? What’s that smell? I know it, I’m sure of it.

“So, have you been a good girl this year?” he asks, adding with a taunting smile, “Mercier.”

My insides are burning. We stand up.

“Because I heard you’ve been naughty,” he says, taking off his wig and beard. “Very naughty,” Logan says. The room shifts, and we’re now in front of a bed. He throws me on it, takes off his coat in one swing, and jumps over me.

I wake up panting and sweating. I sit down and reach for my bottle of water, which I gulp down in three sips. Damn it! I lie back down. I’ve had this dream where Jack and I are together, celebrating Christmas many times since we broke up, but the Santa addition is definitely new. My head spins. I really wished the dream would have continued, though. *No!* A little voice in my head says. *Shut up. Pull yourself together. If you want any shot at this one, you have to take it down a beat.*

I get directly into the shower. I need to cool down. Well, I take a semi-warm shower—I’m not of those crazy people who actually take cold showers. I get dressed quickly, in black skinny jeans and dark purple top, showing just enough of my cleavage to keep it PG. Even though it is already twelve pm, there is no sign of life downstairs. I make myself a cup of coffee and some toast. While I’m eating my breakfast, I go online to see if there’s anything about Ava’s hardcore partying, but there’s nothing. Disaster averted. There are only a few mentions of us being out.

The drive through the canyon to get to Logan’s is nice and doesn’t take more than twenty minutes. I give my name to the guard who lets me through, and when I arrive, his gate is already open. I park in front of the gigantic house and take it all in again. Last time I was here, it was dark, and I didn’t

realize how extravagant it was. I ring the doorbell, and he opens immediately.

“Mercier,” he says with a big smile. He pulls me into a tight hug, and his woodsy smell makes my insides burn. Damn dream.

“Hi,” I say when we break apart. I get in the house and, once again, the size of the place hits me. It looks twice as big in daylight, and the opened patio doors are giving us an unspoilt view of the below canyon.

“I hope you’re hungry. I’m making my famous enchiladas.” He grins.

“Famous, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m an excellent cook. You’ll see.”

“Okay.” I laugh. “Can I help?”

“Not at all. Just go sit down outside. I set the table there, if that’s okay?”

“Perfect.” I go through the patio doors and sit on the chair facing the canyon. The view is truly spectacular, and it must be even better from the infinity pool on the edge of the cliff.

“Lunch is served, milady,” Logan announces, bringing out two plates.

“It smells so good!”

He rubs his hands. “Dig in.”

It’s delicious. There is just the right amount of cheese and meat, and the vegetables are fresh. He didn’t lie, he is an

excellent cook.

“Mmm. These are amazing,” I say around a bite of food.

“Thanks!” He beams.

When we finish eating, we stay outside a little longer. It’s really nice out today, so we appreciate the breeze and talk about different things: college and the fact that he didn’t get to go, and the current discussions about a possible upcoming movie.

“So, what are we doing today, Mercier?”

“Well, I don’t know. It’s your house.” I chuckle, glancing around. “What is there to do? I’m guessing a lot.”

“Yeah.” He runs his hand through his hair. “I have a movie theater, a gym, a geek room, a game room,” he enumerates.

“What’s a geek room?” I raise my eyebrows in question.

“I have a bunch of gamer computers in there, multiplayer games, also music or dance games.” He explains.

“What’s in the game room, then?”

“The game room is a pool table and arcade games, mostly.”

“Cool. Let’s play some arcade games then. This time I’ll kick your ass.” I wink.

We make it to the game room, which is the room I found when I was looking for a bathroom last time I was here. I don’t tell him, though since I already invaded too much of his privacy that night. And clearly, I saw nothing that night

because I'm amazed at what I see. He has half a dozen arcade machines and a basketball hoops game.

"Now I understand why you love Santa Monica so much, and how you win at every game," I laugh.

"Yeah, I admit I have a bit of practice, but to be fair, I don't really have a lot of time to play here."

The room also boasts a snack area with a fridge filled with all sorts of drinks, a shelf with dozens of different snacks, and even a popcorn machine.

We start by playing *Need for Speed*: he wins. Then, *NBA Jam*: he wins. Then *Street Fighter*: I win but only because he let me, I'm sure of it. We make some popcorn, eat some candy, and play the basketball hoops game. Of course, he's amazing at this, too. Halfway through, he already has double the points I have, so I stand behind him and put my hands over his eyes so he can't see. The annoying thing is he still manages to make two more shots. Then he takes me by surprise by spinning around and taking my wrists in his hands.

"Cheaters be losers, Mercier." He warns.

"Game over." I giggle.

He's so close I can feel the heat from his body. He pulls me closer and kisses me hungrily. His tongue is cold and sweet from the candies he's been eating, and the tension grows in my lower belly. He frees my wrists and lifts me up against him, my pulse leaping with excitement. I throw my arms around his neck and run my fingers through his hair. He carries me to the

pool table and sits me on the edge, kissing me harder, making my heart pound faster. I'm burning. I want him now. His mouth finds my neck, then he lifts his arms up so I can take his T-shirt off. The touch of his icy hands sends a shiver through my back as he removes mine. He pushes me back further on the table, his body heavy and warm on top of mine.

“Are you sure?” he whispers into my hair.

“Yes.” My voice is barely audible over my hammering heart. I've never been so sure about anything before in my life.





## AN UNUSUAL PROPOSAL

“DO YOU WANT SOMETHING to drink?” Logan asks when we exit the room.

“Sure.”

“What would you like?”

“Mmm, water?”

“Water? That’s it? It’s not some nonsense about watching your weight again, I hope?”

“No. I happen to love water. It’s my favorite drink. Or maybe champagne. I’m still debating.”

He laughs. “Water it is then. Put a movie on. I’ll be right back.”

I move to the living room, grab the remote, and sit down on the couch. I’m scrolling through the Netflix library when he shouts from the kitchen, “Nothing with me in it, please!”

“Oh? Why not?” I reply playfully.

“No, no,” he says. “I don’t watch my own movies, it’s weird.”

“Okay fine.” I agree. I wasn’t going to choose anything with him in it, anyway. It is strange, I’m guessing, for actors to watch themselves on screen. He comes back with the drinks, puts a blanket over our legs, and his arm over my shoulders. We only see the first half of the movie, though. Soon enough, we are tangled in each other again.



“WHAT TIME IS IT?” I gasp. It’s dark out already.

He looks at his watch. “It’s seven thirty.”

“I should go,” I say, standing up.

“Or you could stay...?”

I look at him for an instant, trying to find a reason not to stay, but I don’t find any. I feel so good here, in his arms, and I really don’t want to go home.

On Tuesday evening, however, it really is time for me to go. We’ve been extending my stay for two days, but this time we can’t push it off. I have a meeting with the publishing company tomorrow, and Logan has to be at the studio early. I wish we could stay in our little bubble forever. It was perfect even if we didn’t do much. We went for a walk in his community park, we played games, watched TV, and spent a lot of time in bed. Bursting the bubble literally hurts.

When I finally get back to Candice’s, she teases me mercilessly, and rightfully so. I let her have her fun and even give her the details. Well, not all the details, but I do tell her

we made it to third base. Anyway, it's no secret, I stayed there for three days so there's no way we could have kept it PG.

“Good for you, girl! The best way to get over someone is to get under somebody else.” She winks. “And not everyone gets hot actor Logan Reyes as a rebound!”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “I guess you're right. I'm pretty lucky.”

She keeps teasing me, but I can tell she's very happy for me. She scolds me, however, for leaving her all alone, and I do feel bad because Wat\$on comes back tomorrow. I make it up to her by agreeing to waxing and mani-pedis tomorrow afternoon. She has to get ready for Wat\$on after all, and it wouldn't hurt to be perfectly pampered for Logan either.

Wednesday, Griffin and I go to our meeting with Alexandra, the Delacroix editor, at the Four Seasons hotel in Beverly Hills. I'm extremely nervous because Delacroix is one of the top five publishing houses in the world. My first meeting with a publisher didn't exactly go as planned, so I'm really hoping it won't be the same this time. But Griffin said that he already talked to them about that on the phone, and they still want to meet me.

Griffin and I leave the car with the valet and walk inside the lobby. We notice her immediately, which isn't hard since she's the only one sitting alone in the lobby with her laptop out, and a manuscript lying on the coffee table in front of her. My manuscript. I gulp and follow Griffin as he introduces himself to her.

“Hi.” She shakes Griffin’s hand. “I’m Alexandra Pierlot, but you can call me Alex.”

“Griffin Graham.”

“And you must be Louise Mercier,” she says, shaking my hand vigorously.

“Hello, nice to meet you.”

“Trust me,” she continues, “the pleasure is all mine.” We all sit down around the table.

“Louise, let me just start by telling you—I love your book. It’s funny. It’s dramatic. It’s upsetting. There’s love. There’s hate. There’s confusion, disappointment. It’s a true rollercoaster of emotions, and it keeps us on the edge the entire ride. I love the characters and how real they feel. They have so much depth and so many layers. I’ve been an editor for Delacroix for three years now, and I’ve only been swayed by a book that much once. You know what it was? *Over You*.”

“No way!” I gasp. “That’s a best seller. I loved that book so much I read it three times!”

“Exactly.” She smiles. “Now you understand why we are very excited about your book.”

“Wow, thanks!” I reply, unable to sit still. *They’re very excited about my book!*

“So, as I told you, I passed it through acquisitions, and I do have an offer to present you,” she says, showing us a folder. “We just have one specific proposition.”

Oh, here we go.

“We would like you to write the book in French as well.”

“What?” Griffin and I gasp.

“This is highly unusual,” Griffin says.

“I know. But Louise, you are a French girl, living in the USA, and you would be published by a French company. This is something we can definitely exploit, marketing wise. I know this is a tremendous amount of work, but we believe that your book would sell even better if you, the author, would write it in French and not a translator. Of course, we could use a translator, and we still can if that’s what you want, but we would give you a much better offer if you are the one who does it.” She explains.

When I don’t reply, she continues, “Of course, you should take all the time you need to think about it. Here are the offers. Review them and let me know.”

“Okay,” Griffin replies. “If she rewrites it in French, what would the deadline be?”

That’s an excellent question. It took me years to write this one. This is insane.

“Well, summer is a big market for romance novels, so we were hoping to have it out by Independence Day,” she replies.

“What?” Griffin and I both say again.

“I know it’s short notice, but since you are perfectly fluent in both languages, and it’s your book, your story, your

characters, it should be easier for the French rewrite,” she says.

“When would you need the final manuscript to launch it on the Fourth of July?” I ask.

“Well, we’ll need to have it reviewed by the copy editor and the French legal team, and then printing should take about a month. So, we would need it by mid-May, at the latest. Of course, this is only for the French version. We would begin the process for the English book right away. We would also start with the book cover now for both languages, and the title you chose *What If?* fits perfectly, so that’s a time saver.”

“Okay, so two months to rewrite the whole thing in French,” Griffin states.

“Basically, yes,” she answers. “And if you choose that option, in addition to the higher financial deal, we’ll also send you on a small book tour, stopping in Los Angeles, New York, and Paris to promote it.”

Wow, this is crazy. A book tour? *Holy crap!*

“Okay, we’ll discuss it and get back to you very soon,” Griffin says, standing up.

“Thank you so much for your time. I hope we’ll talk soon,” she says, shaking both our hands before walking away.

I don’t know what to say. Standing here, mouth agape, is about the only thing I can do right now.

“Are you okay?” Griffin asks.

I massage my temples. “Yeah, I’m good. It’s just a lot.”

“Yes, let’s look at the offers, and then we’ll figure out the rest.”

We look at the contracts. They are very generous. Griffin says that they are willing to pay that much money because I have an already huge fanbase so they’re guaranteed to sell a lot of books. The proposition with the French rewrite is really attractive. They offer a lot more than the English only version. Plus, the idea of a book tour is very appealing.

“I did start to write it in French at first, so I have maybe half of it already. But that was before all the changes we made. So, I’d still have to review it entirely and write the rest. I’m not sure I can meet the deadline.”

“Okay, but that’s a good start, though. And they’re right. If you write the French translation, it would create a lot of buzz. It’s probably unheard of, especially in fiction, so that would boost the sales for sure. On the other hand, it’s a tremendous amount of work, and you can’t do a botched job.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of. The offer is great, but to rewrite it in French with the same depth and layers in the characters? I’m not sure I can do it.”

“I get it. And I won’t be any use, so it’s up to you.”

“I mean, it would be amazing to write it in French, and the exercise alone would be so much fun, too.” I wonder. “But I don’t know if I’ll have the time.”



“Think about it. Look at what you already have, and take it from there, okay?”

He’s right. It’s the only way to make a decision. So, I say goodbye to Griffin and rush back to Candice’s.

“Hey, girl!” she says when I enter the kitchen. “What’s wrong?”

I throw myself on the couch, face first. “They want to publish my book,” I mumble through the pillows.

“What? That’s amazing! Why the long face then?”

“They would like me to rewrite it in French,” I reply, sitting up.

“What? The entire thing?”

“Yep. They would give me a better deal if I did, plus a book tour. They think it would be cool since I’m French, you know? It’s really rare, too, so it would create buzz around the book.” I explain.

“Wow! That sounds really cool, but that’s a lot of work, right? And with the new house and everything, it does seem a little—”

“Unrealistic?” I suggest. “Yes, it does.”

“Well, I was going to say challenging.”

“Yeah. I don’t know if I can do it. I need to have a look at what I already wrote in French first and make the necessary amendments. And then it’ll be full on translation, so it’s going to take a lot of time. I mean, I think I could pull it off. I don’t

have that much going on, except the new house and the Designer Charity Gala, so maybe it could work.”

“Well, we do have Coachella, and my birthday, too.”

“Oh, yeah. Crap. I forgot.”

She gives me an accusatory look.

“Not your birthday.” I chuckle. “Coachella.”

“Yeah. We said we were going. Brina is performing.”

“Yes, right. Well, I better get going then. At least try to figure out if it’s even possible.” I sigh. “Will you hate me if I bail on mani-pedi this afternoon?”

“Of course not.” She smiles. “I get it. No problem. I’ll see you tonight.”

All afternoon, I work on my book, revising the part already written in French, which is about forty thousand words. By six pm, when Candice comes back, I have modified about ten percent. If I keep working at this pace, meaning no distraction whatsoever, I should be done with the modifications in nine days. And then it will be a complete rewriting, so I’m guessing it’ll take me at least twice the time, so twenty days minimum. But I do have a life, and I know I can’t realistically believe that I will write non-stop like that for a month, so I will have to double that, at least. Technically, two months could work. But honestly, I’m not sure it’s going to be that good and ready to print. It would need to be re-read and adjusted more to fit the French language, because even though it’s my native

language, I'm sure there'll still be mistakes. Argh, this is impossible. What am I going to do?

I give Griffin a call to explain to him the calculations I made. He tells me that he will sleep on it and call Alex tomorrow morning to talk about it.

This is my last night alone with Candice, so I want to spend it with her and not working. We order some Chinese food and binge watch a new show called *Friday*. Before I go to bed, I text Logan to tell him about my book deal, but he doesn't answer. I haven't talked to him since yesterday, and I have to admit, I miss him a lot. A lot more than I thought I would. Even with everything going on, he's still at the top of my mind. This is clearly more than the hot rebound Candice was talking about.



## AN ACTIVE DAY OUT

IT'S THE FIFTEENTH, AND Watson is back today. I'm so happy for Candice because I know she missed him a lot. I want to give them some privacy so I tell her that I'm sleeping at Logan's for a few days, even though I'm not. I booked a room at the Maybourne Hotel. I don't mind, and this way, I'll have more time to concentrate on my book. I'm almost done unpacking when I receive a call from Griffin.

“Louise, I have good news. We've found a solution.”

“Really?” I gasp.

“Yes, if you think you can work at the pace you told me, it should be fine. They agreed to have a translator from Delacroix review your writing to make sure that the sentencing works in French since you were worried—and rightfully so,” he adds. “It's important to do it right.”

“Okay, that's great! I'll feel a lot better if an actual translator can review it, too.”

“So, in order for the timing to work, you should send him the chapters in French as soon as they are done. They will send

you his contact info today. He's already reading your book in English now. He lives in France, so the time difference will work to our advantage. You can send him each chapter as it's done, and he can review it while you write the next."

"Yeah! That's genius. It could really work."

"I believe so, too. So, do we have a deal?"

I hesitate for a second, but I know I have to say yes. I have to at least try. All of my dreams are so close to coming true. I can't refuse.

"Yes! We have a deal." I exclaim.

"Okay great! I'll have them change the conditions on the contract, and I'll call you when it's done."

"Perfect, thanks Griffin," I reply before hanging up.

Thursday and Friday, I work on the "French first draft" as I call it. I only stop to eat, sign the contract Griffin brought me, and jump on the bed for a second. *I'm a freaking published author! I'm a freaking published author! I'm a freaking published author!* I wish I could dwell more on that wonderful feeling, but if I want to hold up my end of the bargain, I have to go back to work.

It's seven pm on Friday, and I'm happy to see that I'm about halfway through the French first draft. One day ahead of schedule. Being locked up in a hotel room works really well. I'm sending today's work to Paul, the French translator, when my phone rings. It's Logan. My heart leaps. I'm so happy to

hear his voice. He, too, has been busy since Tuesday, and we've only exchanged a few text messages.

“So, Mercier, what are you guys up to tonight?” he asks, adding quickly, “And can I come?”

I laugh. “Nothing, but yes. Please come. I need the distraction.”

“Nothing?”

“No, I'm at the Maybourne, actually.”

“What? Why?” Confusion rings in his voice.

“Watson came back from his tour Wednesday, and I didn't want to bother them, so I checked in here. Anyway, it's been really good because there are no distractions, so I can focus on my book.”

“Yeah, that makes sense, but it's a little depressing though. Especially now that it's the weekend.”

“I know. Why don't you come over? To put me out of my misery.” I tease.

“On my way!” he jokes. “No, seriously, I can be there in like half an hour.”

“Okay, sounds good! I can't wait to see you.”

“Me too, Mercier. Me too,” he says, before hanging up.

Half an hour on the dot, a knock at the door tells me that Logan has arrived. As soon as he comes in, he takes me into his arms and kisses me deeply. How I missed him. We have a

great night together. We catch up, order some room service for dinner, and watch TV before falling asleep in the comfy bed.

The next day, we wake up tangled in each other, and I'm so happy he's here. I had fun. A lot more than the two previous ones spent writing, waking up on my computer. I get up slowly, careful not to wake him, and jump into the shower. I stand longer than usual under the warm water to wash out my steamy night with Logan, when I feel a cold breeze. I open my eyes, and there he is. Naked. In my shower.

His body is so muscular and sexy under the dripping water. He comes forward and starts to kiss me, hard. His slow, drugging kisses trail down my neck and on both of my swollen breasts. I tuck my hands in his hair and moan as he makes his way down to my belly.



“THAT WAS.” HE PAUSES to plant a wet kiss on my mouth.  
“So freaking good, babe.”

“Babe?” I raise an eyebrow. “I’m not ‘Mercier,’ anymore, am I?” I tease.

His smile is wide, and his pupils dilated. “Wash yourself up, Mercier. You’re so dirty.” He winks at me, giving me a little slap on the butt before exiting the shower.

I put my head through the door and say, “for the record, I like ‘babe’ better than Mercier.”



He laughs. “Duly noted, Mercier,” he yells from the bedroom, and I can’t help but grin like a teenage girl.

Once we’re finally clean and dressed, we decide to go hiking in Runyon canyon. Yeah, you got that right. Me, hiking. Clearly it wasn’t my idea, but he insisted, and I do need some fresh air. I haven’t been out of this hotel room, let alone outside, for almost three days now. I don’t really have any hiking clothes, but Logan tells me the hike is very easy, and I can “just wear whatever.” I put on black leggings, a simple white Ivory T-shirt, and gather my hair in a ponytail through the Ivory cap I’ve grown to love.

The drive takes only about fifteen minutes, but unfortunately it takes about as much to find parking on the street. Logan grabs two bottles of water from his trunk, and we begin the walk on the trail. There are a lot more people here than I’d expected. Sure, it’s Saturday, and the weather is perfect, but still, it’s hiking! The more we walk, the more I get it, though. It’s cool here. It doesn’t really feel like exercise, more like walking, except that I do need to make frequent stops to drink water.

We’re almost at the top when I ask to take another water break. I’m getting tired, and now I realize that I’m in a very poor physical condition. No one else seems to be stopping as much as I do.

“Again, Mercier? You’re killing me,” Logan whines.

“Sorry, just one sec—argh! Logan put me down!” He grabs me by the legs and throws me over his shoulder.

I try to fight him at first, but I know he won't let me go. So, I patiently wait to be put down.

"Sorry, Mercier, but it had to be done," he says, and I shove his arm playfully.

"I just needed one minute, you impatient man. Plus, it only took us one hour to get up here, so shut up!"

Logan starts laughing.

"What?"

"The hike is one-hour, round trip, Mercier." He claims.

"No way!" I gasp, choking on my water.

"Yes, way! At least that's my usual time."

"I really suck." I sigh.

"Argh! No, you don't. Come here," he says, taking me into his arms and kissing me on the cheek. "I mean, you *are* slow, but you don't suck." He teases. "Plus, it's way more fun to do it with you. When I come alone, I put my earphones on and I don't stop the entire way."

"Do you come here often?" I ask.

"I try to, but not as much as I'd like with work piling up. It's a good thing, of course. I've been so blessed, and it's helped my family a lot," he says, gazing off. "But I like it here!" He smiles. "It's a good way to exercise outside and still be close to the city, if needed."

I can tell his mind wandered somewhere for a second, but I don't want to press him to talk to me. He will if and when he's

ready. “Yeah, it’s breathtaking up here,” I say.

From here we can see a huge part of the city and even the Hollywood sign in the distance. It feels as if we’re outside of the city overlooking it, even though we’re really close to it.

“Thanks for bringing me,” I add.

“My pleasure, Mercier. Race you to the car?” He winks.

“What?” I yell, while he’s running down. “It’s a joke, right?”

He turns around, looks at me, dropping his arms to his side.

“Of course, it’s a joke! Get your butt down here. We’ll walk down.” He smiles.

“Okay.” I sigh. “Cause I think I could roll down, but that’s about it.” I chuckle.

The walk down is quicker. We make it in about thirty-five minutes with the help of my friend, gravity.

“What are we doing now, Mercier?” he asks, once we’re back in the car. “Wanna eat?”

“Always.” I grin.

He takes me to a café on Sunset where I have a delicious grilled salmon with roasted potatoes, and he chooses a huge ribeye steak with fries.

“So, what should we do this afternoon?” he asks.

I take a sip of my water. “I have to work.”

“Oh, no, you don’t! You said you were one day ahead of schedule, so we can totally have fun today.”

I can’t resist him. I know I can’t. And as much as I do have to work, I really want to spend more time with him.

I sigh. “Okay. What do you have in mind?”

“Anything. Everything. We can go shopping. We can go to the zoo or Disneyland. There’s Venice, that’s always fun. Santa Monica, of course. We could go to Universal or Six Flags. It’s L.A. There’s always something to do here.”

“Mmm, Six Flags, then? I’m a sucker for rollercoasters.”

We finish eating and make our way to Six Flags. It’s a little farther away than I thought, and it takes us about forty-five minutes to get there. After purchasing tickets and express passes at the entrance, the fun day begins. The rides here are insane. We start with “X2,” a huge rollercoaster with 360 degrees rotating seats. Then we go on “Tastu,” a face-down roller coaster. We get wet with the roaring rapids and dry out with the “Riddler’s revenge,” a stand-up roller coaster. There are a lot of people here, but the fast passes help us get to the rides in a few minutes, which is great. We stop for ice cream. Logan laughs at my choice of flavor, but he takes a disgusting combo of pistachio and mocha.

“I like vanilla. It’s not plain, like you say, but full of subtle flavors. Creamy and not too sweet.”

“Exactly! It needs to be more sweet.”

“No, it doesn’t. I hate really sweet food. Like those pretty cakes parents order for their kids’ birthdays, made entirely of sugar. It’s beautiful, but it’s absolutely disgusting.”

“You’re crazy!” He laughs.

“No, really though. I prefer simpler things, with a good balance of sugar.”

“You’re the sweet one, Mercier,” he says, kissing me with his sticky, sugary mouth.

“Your lips are too sweet, Reyes. Wipe that disgusting sugar off your mouth before kissing me again.”

“Oh really? Reyes?” he jokes, tickling me and trying to kiss me with his disgusting overly sweet mouth.

I do let him though, because as disgusting as it, I wouldn’t have anyone else’s mouth on mine right now.

We continue our tour of the park, going on “West Coast Racers,” “Batman, the ride,” “Crazanity,” “Goliath,” and “Full throttle.” And after we’re done, we go play some of those good, old fair games that Logan loves so much.

It’s seven pm when we call it a day and go back to the hotel. I’m really glad he forced me to go out today. I know I have to work, but I feel a lot more refreshed and alive than I was yesterday. We stay in for dinner, though. All that walking wore me out, and I fall asleep in front of the TV.

On Sunday, my body is still aching from yesterday’s action-packed activities and needs to recover. Of course, our outing at Runyon canyon has been captured by some paparazzi, but we

don't really care. We're just walking next to each other in the picture. We order room service and stay in bed most of the day.

We're in bed watching *Hello* when Logan says, "By the way, Mercier. I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Yeah?" I raise my head from his chest to look at him.

"My movie premiere is coming up, and I was wondering if you wanted to come with me," he says, his eyes scanning me deeply.

"Really?" I turn onto my belly and put my chin on his torso to face him.

"Yeah, it'll be fun."

I can't hide my smile. "Sure. I'd love to."

"You do know what it means, though?" he asks.

"I do. I don't care. Do you?"

"I really don't, or I wouldn't invite you. We're having such an amazing time together. So what if anyone knows?" he says, kissing my forehead. "Let the world know."



## THE PREMIERE

AFTER LOGAN LEFT ON Monday, I extended my stay at the Maybourne a few more days to give Candice and Wat\$on a little more privacy and to focus on my book. Once again, it's proven very successful, and when I check out on Thursday morning, I've finished the rewrite of the French first draft. The colossal amount of work yet to do will be much harder, but at least I made some progress. When I enter Candice's living room, they're snuggled up on the couch, watching a movie. I don't want to disturb them, but they hear me.

"Hey, girl!" Candice peeps.

"Hi, guys." I smile.

"How are you doing, Louise?" Wat\$on asks, offering a warm smile. I haven't seen him in months, but he hasn't changed one bit. The same military haircut and cheerful gray eyes.

"I'm good. Thanks. Sorry to disturb you." I blush.

"No worries," Candice says. "We're just watching a movie. How was Logan's?"



“Great!” I keep up the charade because I know she’d scold me for sleeping at a hotel, and it’s only a half-lie anyway, since I was with Logan all weekend. “We went hiking and to Six Flags this weekend.”

“Yeah, I know. About hiking anyway. I saw it online. I couldn’t believe it, but pictures don’t lie.” She jokes, her eyes gleaming.

I shake my head. “Why?”

“*Hello?* Louise + sports? Not your usual combo.”

“Yeah, true.” I chuckle. “But it was fun, and it’s not really a hike. It’s more a stroll on a canyon trail. I actually had a lot of fun! So, Wat\$on, how was the tour? Happy to be back?” I ask.

“Yeah, it was dope! We played in a bunch of cities around the world, but I’m glad I’m back. I missed this one,” he says, kissing Candice’s hand. “Thanks for keeping her company.”

“No problem.” I lean against the doorframe. “She’s the one who took me in, really. But I should be out of your hair in about a month. Anyway, I shouldn’t bother you guys too much. I have a lot of work, so I’ll be cooped up in my room most of the time.”

“Shut up, girl!” Candice cuts.

“Yeah, you’re not bothering anyone,” Wat\$on adds. “Don’t worry about it. And by the way, congrats on the book deal. Candice told me. You must be stoked! I know how hard you worked on that. Jack told me about it a few t—shit, sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” I wave a hand in dismissal. “You can talk about Jack. It’s not taboo, and he’s one of your best friends, so...”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know about that. I haven’t talked to that SOB since December. And for the record, he might be my friend, but what he did to you was wrong. Dead wrong. I know he has problems and stuff, but still, he’s such a dumbass.”

“Thanks. Don’t worry about it. It was rough at first, but I’m a lot better now. Thanks to your girl.” And maybe also thanks to a cute Latino guy.

“She’s good at making people feel better, isn’t she?” he says, kissing her all over her face.

“And that’s my cue!” I laugh. “Bye, guys.”

Their laughter nips at my heels as I hurry up the stairs. I definitely don’t need to witness any of that. I get to my room and before I start working on my book, I notice I have an email from Elodie, my book cover designer. She sent me two covers proposals, but I really don’t like any of them. One screams teenage reading, and the other one is a little too intense. My story is a modern romance with a bit of steam. I need a cover that says that. I explain this to her by email, hoping that she’ll get the vibe. As a former marketing assistant, I know how important it is to have an eye-catching book cover. It’s the reason why people want to pick it up and read it, so we really need to get this right.

I’ve been writing for a few hours when my phone rings.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Louise. This is Justine from the Maison Gaumé Atelier. How are you doing?”

“Hi, I’m great, thanks, and you?”

“I’m good! I’m calling about the first fitting for the Designer Charity Ball dress. Are you available on Friday the seventh at ten am?”

“Yeah, sure, that works. Where should I meet you?”

“Oh no, we’ll come to you. Are you still staying at Candice Anderson’s?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Okay, we’ll see you then,” she says before hanging up.

I’m getting excited about this now. I’m sure the dress will be amazing, and I can’t wait to try it on. I still cannot believe I was invited to participate. It’s such an honor.

Thursday and Friday, I once again do nothing but write. On Saturday, though, Candice and Logan keep pestering me to go out. And they’re right, I need to do something other than writing for one night, so we decide on Nobu in Malibu as a triple date with Brina and Cole, her new, but also ex, beau. There are a lot of paparazzi in the front but honestly, I don’t really care because with the premiere coming up, they will find out about us anyway. The recurring conversation subject is Coachella, of course, which is coming up in three short weeks. Brina is headlining on both Saturdays and spends most of her time getting ready for it.

Obviously, I've never been, but I know about it. A two-weekend-long of music festival in the desert, crazy headliners, a lot of parties and a lot of celebrities in attendance. I'm really excited about it, and Logan says he'll come with us, too. He was supposed to stay with his friends, but since Brina rented a huge house near the field for both weekends, he's coming with us. We'll only go to the first weekend, though. She'll be taking her family to the second one.

For the next ten days, all I do is work, only seeing Logan a couple of times. Finally, the day of the premiere is here. Candice called Stella and Carla to do my hair and make-up. I told her it was totally unnecessary, but she insisted. My hair is left down but blow-dried to get the full volume effect on my waves, and Carla goes with a purple and silver eye make-up since my dress is dark purple. I pair it with silver stilettos I've breaking in at home all week, and a silver beaded pouch.

By five pm, Logan's limo is at the door. He gets out to greet me, like a perfect gentleman. He's very handsome in his traditional smoking suit.

"You clean up well, Mercier," he says, giving me a kiss.

"You're not so bad yourself, Reyes." I grin.

In the car, I meet Bruce, his bodyguard, Hector, his manager, and Heather, his publicist. We go over the evening plan during the short drive to Hollywood Boulevard.

The street in front of the theater has been closed, and there is a long red carpet in the middle. People are lined up behind railings to get a glimpse of the celebrities. As always, for the

first few minutes on the red carpet, I can't see anything, blinded by the flashes. I stand on the side with Hector and Heather as Logan gets his picture taken. He also joins Jessica Carlton, his co-lead, and they take a few shots together. Then he turns around, asks me to join him, making the photographers go wild. He takes me into his arms, hugs me, and kisses me on the cheek while they take pictures of us. Then I go back to the sidelines while he's giving interviews alone and with Jessica. It's *déjà vu* all over again. Trying to clear the memories of Jack from my mind, I force myself to smile when Logan grabs my hand.

Finally, it's time to make it into the TCL Chinese Theatre, the famous Hollywood landmark a sight in itself.. The interior décor is so fabulous, you'd think you stepped into ancient China.

Hector asks me to follow him to our seats, while Heather and Logan are waiting by the stage for the movie introduction with the cast. I sit down in an almost empty row with the man I recognized as Jessica's boyfriend and three women, probably the plus ones of the actors and directors. After a short moment, the lights fade, and the cast goes up on stage to talk about the movie. Logan talks a lot, of course, being the male lead and the chatterbox that he is. I'm so happy to be here to witness him in his element like this.

Once they're finished, they take their seats, Logan next to me, of course. He gives me a swift kiss, and the movie begins. I feel Logan's eyes on me throughout the entire movie—which is really good—but I've been sucked in to the story so I don't

want to take my eyes off the screen. And at the end, of course, I shed a few tears of joy. That's how you know they did a good job. If you don't cry and smile at the end of a rom-com, they didn't do it right. The room bursts into applause, and so do I. Logan, Jessica, and all the people sitting near us are beaming, but I'm the only one with tears in my eyes. What's wrong with these people?

The next day, I'm at Logan's when I receive a call from his sister, telling me that we'll sign the papers for the house and get the keys in five short days. She also congratulates me for my red carpet appearance last night. The pictures are gorgeous, and the articles are really kind to us, so I'm glad. Logan even snapped a picture of us in bed this morning and posted it on Instagram with the caption.

*Yeah, so that happened <3*

At eleven am, it already has over five million likes. Everything always moves so fast in this world, but I'm relieved that it's out. He's so wonderful and caring, and I trust him completely. It feels so right, so good, so easy. I thought I wouldn't be able to find someone again after Jack, and I'm glad I was wrong.

I'm so excited by the house and lost in my love bubble that I almost forget I don't have a bed to put in my new home. Crap. I call Candice, because only she would know where I can get a king-size bed with a headboard and a mattress delivered in less than a week. And I'm right. A few hours later, she sends me pictures of several beds. I pick one, and she says it'll be there

next Monday at three pm. This girl is a genius. I thank her and promise to be home tonight. I don't want to leave Logan's, but I have to work, and I have my first gown fitting tomorrow morning for the gala.

When the Maison Gaumé team arrives on Friday morning, it's like the entire living room has been taken over by a fashion studio. The gown is absolutely breathtaking. It's like nothing else I've ever seen.

Inspired by Sleeping Beauty's dress, it's light pink with three-quarter length sleeves and a huge train. The dress is a work of art. As Valentin announced, it is made with hundreds of tiny sparkling beads and looks too pretty to be worn. It takes three people to fit me in it, but when I look in the mirror, I'm speechless. It's incredible. The way the dress clings to my body like a body suit down to my hips, and then billows around my legs like a halo, is truly spectacular. Everything sparkles, and I truly feel like a princess. They ask me to do all sorts of movements, like put my arms up, then behind my back, and sit down. Then they ask me to walk, which proves to be really difficult. They will need to make some adjustments, particularly to the train, but they still want to keep it over the top and long, because this is for the Designer Charity Gala, and the theme is Fairytale Princesses' Inspiration after all. We schedule an additional fitting, this time also including jewelry, shoes, hair, and make-up on April 24, which will take the entire afternoon. Man, this is a lot of preparation.





## NEW BEGINNINGS

BY THE END OF the weekend, I am half-done with the French rewrite of the book, which means about ten more days of writing, and it should be finished. I can't believe I'm actually going to pull this off.

On Monday, I drive to my new house, and Bella is already there with Logan. They look even more alike next to each other.

"Hi, Louise," she says. "Sorry about bringing him. He was such a pain in the ass that I had to let him come," she jokes.

"Don't worry." I laugh. "I know how he is," I say, hugging her, then give Logan a playful glare.

"Hey, women! You do know I'm right here and can hear you, right?" He chuckles, bringing me in for a hug.

"Yes," we both reply at once, giggling.

"So, this is it," Bella says, handing me my keys. "Here are the keys to your new house."

This is my house. Mine. This gorgeous two-story house standing at the end of a cul-de-sac. I can't believe it!

“Let’s go inside. We’ll sign the final documents there, and I’ll leave you to it.”

We walk to the front door, and I open it with the key she gave me. From the front door to the living room is a trail of pink rose petals, and in the living room there’s a big banner saying “*Congratulations on your new home*” with balloons, flowers, and a bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket.

“Wow!” I gasp. “You shouldn’t have gone through all that trouble.”

“I only did the champagne really,” she says, looking at Logan.

“What? You did all of this?” I ask him, warmth flooding my cheeks.

“Yeah,” he replies, putting his hands in his jeans pocket, as usual when he’s nervous or embarrassed.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “This is amazing.” I wrap my arms around his shoulders and kiss him, hard.

Bella’s smile turns into a tight line. “Right,” she says, clearing her throat. “You just have to sign here and here. And I’ll leave you to it. The maid and landscaper I found will call you later this week to interview with you.”

I sign the documents and thank Bella once more for her all of her wonderful help and expertise. Once she leaves, Logan opens the bottle of champagne, and we toast to my new house. It’s still so weird to say it out loud.

“So,” Logan says. “Let’s go christen that bedroom, shall we?”

“I don’t have a bed yet, remember?” I reply, finishing my drink.

“Mmm. Are you sure about that?”

“Oh, no you didn’t...”

He offers a wide smile. “Oh, but I did.”

I literally run up the stairs and into the bedroom to find the bed and bedside tables I chose already installed and ready to use with beautiful cream silk sheets.

“Are you happy?” he asks.

“Yes! Of course, I am. Thank you! How did you pull it off?”

“Well, Bella got the keys late last night. I came up here with a team so we could set it all up before you arrived.”

“Oh my God! You’re crazy.”

“I know, but only about you.” He smiles, pulling me closer. “Now, how about that bed, huh?”

I wrap my arms around his neck and he picks me up, kissing me hungrily before throwing me onto the silky sheets.



WE’RE BOTH LYING DOWN, panting. “Thanks for the bed,” I say.

He laughs against my lips. “Anytime, Mercier. I’m starving. Let’s go get some lunch?”

We go out to eat before heading to Candice’s to get my stuff. I had already started packing a few days ago, and most of the things Mel brought are still in boxes. Candice and Wats follow us with the boxes that won’t fit in my car so they can see the house.

After unloading it all, Candice and I go upstairs and start organizing my closet while the guys figure out the security system. It takes us about two hours to organize the entire closet: clothes, shoes, accessories, jewelry, and I’m relieved to see that not even half of it is full. Then Logan and Wat\$on explain to me how the security system works, and pair my phone with the cameras. By the time we’re done, it’s already starting to get dark out. I would love to have them stay for dinner, but I realize that not only do I have no food, but I also have no utensils whatsoever. I don’t even have a glass or a plate. Instead, I invite them to eat out at Kitchen, a French restaurant in Beverly Hills, to thank them for all their help.

Logan comes back home with me afterward, and I’m so glad because once I’m in bed, I feel a little uneasy, even scared. I knew that buying a house would mean being alone a lot, especially at night, but I didn’t think it was going to be that scary. The house is huge and dark, and as of right now, I can’t see myself sleeping here alone. I toss and turn, afraid of every noise, and that’s with Logan next to me. Will I ever be able to sleep here on my own?

The next day, I'm completely lost. I don't know where I am. The space around me feels so foreign. The only comforting thing is Logan's smell next to me.

"Morning," he says, feeling me watching him.

"Hey," I kiss him on the forehead.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Um, not really."

"Come here," he says, pulling me in his arms. I feel so good snuggled up next to him, so warm, so protected. "I need coffee," he whines.

"Me, too. My head hurts," I say, rubbing my eyes. "We'll have to go out, though. I don't have any."

"I know. Argh!" he says, taking the cover off in a swift movement.

We both take a shower, and Logan growls because the only body wash I have smells like orchid. He's so groggy before coffee. But I can't really say anything about that because I'm the same way in that respect. We get dressed quickly and go to The Beverly Hills Hotel, where we have breakfast at the Cabana café.

After we're fed and caffeinated, I feel a lot better, and Logan is back to his playful self. I have many things to do today, or rather many things to buy.

"Can you stay over tonight?" I ask Logan, trying not to sound too desperate.

He scratches his head. “I can, yeah. But only if you buy food and coffee.”

“Deal. I’ll get it today.” I promise, before driving him back home.

IKEA is a maze, and by the time I get out three hours later, I can barely push my heavy cart. I’m exhausted and sweaty from the experience, but I found everything I wanted for the kitchen— pans, bowls, plates, glasses, cutlery, mugs, oven dish, scale, all kitchen utensils—and also bath mats, towels, throws for the couches, and a magnifying mirror.

It takes me a while to unload my purchases, but I don’t have time to put it away now. After a quick shower to wash the sweat away, I change and head back out, this time to Target. Four hours later, I arrive home with another full trunk.

When Logan arrives, I’m exhausted, and I’ve barely had time to put everything away. He helps me with the rest, and orders pizza so we can relax.

I sleep a bit better this time, but only because I was so tired. It still feels so strange. I think once I put some pictures on the walls, my room will feel a lot more like mine.

In the morning, I sneak out of bed to make some toast and coffee before Logan wakes up. When he arrives in the kitchen, his hair is all messy, and I just want to jump into his arms. He’s so hot in the morning. He’s in a much better mood than yesterday morning since I provide food and caffeine. I’m disappointed that he can’t stay tonight because he has a night shoot at the studios, but I try not to show it. Anyway, he can’t

stay here every day. I have to get used to it. Plus, it's really just for tonight since he said he'll be back the night before Coachella.

At one pm, I meet Linda, my new housekeeper. She's a short brunette with big, brown eyes. She seems very nice, and we go over everything she would need to do. Or since she's very experienced, I should say she's the one telling me what she thinks she should do. She will do my grocery shopping, in addition to my laundry and general housekeeping. I feel a little weird about all that, even if, let's be honest, since I arrived in L.A., I haven't done any of it myself, except grocery shopping, once. With everything going on in my life, I do need the help.

Next, I meet Diego, my landscaper. He tells me that he'll come around once a week to do the lawn, the flowers, and bushes, and clean the pool. He also will regularly clean the patio and outdoor area and is available for any kind of maintenance needed in the house. As I'm closing the door behind him, I get a phone call from Kim.

"Hi, Kim! How are you?" I ask, padding over to the couch.

"Hi, Louise. I'm good, thanks, and you? Congrats on the new house."

My gaze sweeps my new living room with the gleaming white walls and floor to ceiling sliding glass doors. It still feels so new. Like it's not even mine. "Thanks! I'm good!"

"Listen, I wanted to call to apologize," she starts, as I kick my feet up on the coffee table.

My chest tightens. What did he do now? “Um, what for?”

“I haven’t really taken care of you the way I should have.”

“What a—”

“As my client,” she continues.

“Oh,” I reply. I’m not quite sure what she means. Since the Ivory deal, there hasn’t been much to do, anyway. All the things with my book are handled by Griffin and Alexandra.

“I know it’s not an excuse, but everything happening with Jack is really complicated, and I’m in damage control mode one hundred percent of the time, in addition to trying to find him,” she explains.

“Yeah, it must be exhausting. Don’t worry about me, I’m fine. I don’t have much going on.”

“Well, actually, there should be a lot going on for you. You are the face of Ivory, you have a book coming up, you are dating Hollywood’s most eligible bachelor, attending premieres, there’s the Designer ball soon, too. And I’m sure you’re going to Coachella on Saturday, right?”

“Yeah, I am, but just as a friend. This has nothing to do with —”

“Yes,” she cuts. “Yes, it does. All of these events are great publicity, Louise, and I haven’t been doing my job properly. I’ve received requests for you from brands who want you to be their sponsor, invitations to parties that I haven’t replied to or talked to you about, and that is just so unprofessional.”



“Oh. I see,” I reply.

“Yeah, so I think it’s best that I stop being your publicist. I’m not doing a good job at it, and you need someone who is one hundred percent committed. You are a rising star. You should have somebody advising you to make the right decisions and booking you deals, parties, and appearances.”

“No, but—”

“Don’t worry, I already found the perfect girl. Her name is Kendra Miller. She’s thirty years old. She’s been working with me for five years, and she knows everything and everyone in this town. She’s a younger version of me, with a lot of ideas and passion. She will help you rise. You would be her first and only client, for now.”

“Okay?” I ask more than answer. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. When are you available to meet her? She’s very eager to start.”

“Well, I don’t leave for Coachella until Saturday, so if we can meet before, it’s good.”

“How about tonight? I’ll set you two up in a nice restaurant, my treat, and you can talk this through. Okay?”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks Kim. That’s very nice of you.”

“No problem. It’s the least I can do after my poor work these past months. And congrats on the book deal, Louise. You deserve it. I’ll send you a text with the details for tonight.”

“Thanks, Kim. Bye.”

I feel bad about ending my relationship with Kim, but I understand that Jack has to be her priority. After all, she only became my publicist because I was engaged to him, and it was easier to manage. Now, I'm dating someone else and starting my own career. I get that she has to distance herself from that and focus on her client, who clearly needs her help right now.



## KENDRA

AT SIX THIRTY, I make my way to Chateau Marmont, where I'm meeting Kendra. I give my name to the hostess, who leads me to a table. A young woman with shoulder-length dark brown hair is already sitting there.

"Hi, Louise," she says, standing up to shake my hand. "Nice to meet you, I'm Kendra."

"Nice to meet you too, Kendra. Kim spoke highly of you."

"Oh, really? I love Kim. She taught me so much."

We order some champagne—obviously—and she tells me a little about herself. She graduated from Stanford University with honors where she studied marketing and public relations. She's been working for Kim's firm since then, helping her land clients, managing their images, and getting them the best deals possible. I'm very curious why someone with this kind of experience would be interested in me as a client, so I listen to what she has to say.

"I think you have a lot of potential, Louise. You're charming. You're a natural in front of the cameras—"

I cringe. This has never been my strong suit.

“Even if you don’t think so.” She smiles. “You might still feel scared or uneasy, but I can tell that you belong there. I saw your red carpet appearances this year, at the *Music Gazette* party, and more recently at the movie premiere. You’re good, and people like you. But I think you could do more. You are the face of Ivory, that’s amazing! But you could form more brand partnerships. You could make more appearances, go to more parties. Your Instagram account is kind of dormant right now, too. Except for the occasional picture or your Ivory or GLOW promo, you’re not very active, and that’s a shame. You lost a lot of followers when things ended with Jack, but you also gained a lot after The *Music Gazette* party, and even more since then. Which means people that stayed, and the new followers are interested in you, and not in Jack.”

“Oh, I didn’t see it like that. Actually, I don’t really look at the numbers, to be honest.”

“Right, and you shouldn’t. It’s not your job to take care of that, but it would be mine if you’d give it a chance.”

We’re interrupted by the waiter, who comes to take our order.

“So anyway, that’s what I’m offering.” She finishes once he leaves.

“Okay. It seems like you know what you’re doing, so I’d love to work with you. I just hope that the potential you see in me is real because I don’t want you to get your hopes up and then be disappointed.”

“Louise, you already have millions of followers on Instagram. You are the face of the most worn streetwear clothing line in America. You’re about to have your book published by one of the best publishers in the world. You are friends with two of the biggest pop stars on the planet. You are dating a movie star, and you’re invited to model for the Designer Ball, one of the biggest fashion events of the year.” She enumerates. “All of this without really trying, and without a hardcore publicist by your side. This is a dream come true for someone like me who’s launching her career. A lot of the work has already been done. You’re also friends with TV hosts, like John Greenway and Hollie Barker. You made appearances on both their shows, and both were a success. You were on the cover of *Fashion Warehouse*. Should I go on?” she jokes.

“You’ve done your homework.” I chuckle, wringing my hands.

“Of course, I did. I’ve been following you closely since Kim became your publicist. I followed most of the work regarding your deals so I know all about them, and I know everything you could become.”

“Wow, you’re very enthusiastic.” Someone wants to work with me that badly. Me. And not just because of Jack or Logan. Talk about having your ego boosted.

“Yeah, that’s just me!” she peeps.

Our food arrives, and as we eat, Kendra tells me more about what her thoughts are for my career. First, we talk about

Coachella because apparently, it's a pressing matter.

"But it's just a concert festival I'm attending with my friends," I blurt, making her almost choke on her chicken.

"It's not just a concert festival that you're attending with your friends. It's one of the biggest events of the year, and the friends you are attending with are a headline performer, a another pop star, a rising rapper, and a movie star. So, no, definitely not just a hang out with your friends."

"Yeah, I know that's how you see it. But I really want to have a good time, and it's Sabrina's moment. I don't want to use it for publicity."

"You won't be using anything or anyone, trust me. Coachella is always packed with celebrities, and it's a great place to be seen, especially with your friends, that's all. I'm not asking you to do anything in particular. Except behave properly, as I'm sure you will. Don't get too wasted, have fun, take a lot of pictures, and post them on your Instagram. It will be good publicity for all of your friends, not just you."

"Okay, I can do that. I was going to have fun and take pictures, anyway."

"But you wouldn't have posted them."

"No, I wouldn't have." I admit.

"Oh, and dress the part, too. You know, Coachella is an indie festival in the desert."

"Okay. I don't have much indie stuff, but I'll find some." Something else to add to my growing to-do list, pushing my

edits further down the line.

“I can do that for you,” she offers.

“You don’t have to. You’re not my assistant or anything.”

“I’m your publicist, slash assistant, slash manager, pretty much everything right now. You’re my only client, and I want to help you as much as I can, okay?”

We finish our food, order dessert, and even another glass of champagne. It’s on Kim, after all. Before we leave, Kendra says that she’ll come by tomorrow afternoon with my clothes for Coachella.

It’s the first time I come back home alone at night, and I’m freaking out a little. It’s all very dark and so empty. I lock the front door, make sure all the other ones are closed, and set the security system in night mode. But even then, I still feel a little weird. I try to call Logan, but he doesn’t reply. He’s probably still working. It takes me a while to fall asleep, and I toss and turn all night.

When morning comes, I’m more tired than I was last night, and even the long shower I take doesn’t fully wake me up. Thankfully, Linda is here, and I’m happy for the company. We chat for a bit, and I call my parents and Mel. As promised, around one pm, Kendra arrives with clothes for my Coachella weekend.

“You do know it’s only two days, right?” I ask when I see the number of shopping bags she brought.



“Yes, but I wanted you to have options. Plus, it’s really dirty out there, so you’ll want to change often.”

She got me two pairs of high-waisted jeans shorts with big brown belts, and at least five different tops to match. A white, long sleeve crop top, a cool macrame beige top, a brown suede top, a khaki fringe top, and a yellow bralette. She also got me a few long dresses and skirts, in floral patterns, animal prints, and tie dye, and she brought some funky bathing suits, too. Of course, she brought just as many accessories, like flower crowns, fringe shoulder bags, and bangles. She also included caps, sunglasses, hats and, of course, shoes. Closed shoes only. Because of the dirt, I assume. Fringe boots, cowboy boots, and combat boots.

“Do I really need all of this? It seems a bit much. It’s just —”

“Yes, it’s a concert,” she cuts in. “But given your status and the status of the people you’re going with, it’s important that you dress the part, that’s all. You are going to be photographed a lot at the concerts, but you also will attend parties there.”

“Parties? I don’t think so. No one mentioned any parties.” My head spins just thinking about all the events she wants me to attend. It was just supposed to be a fun festival. Now it’s turning into a full-time job!

“Yes, of course! You and your friends are invited to exclusive parties, and to the Neon Carnival!”

“But when?”

“Neon Carnival is on Saturday night, and the parties are on Saturday and Sunday afternoon.”

“Oh, okay. I didn’t know any of that. Are you sure I’m invited? Me? Not just Candice or Sabrina or Logan?”

She quirks her brow like I’m the one being silly. Like I’m some big somebody pretending to be a modest nobody. “Yes, of course you are. That’s what Kim was talking about when she said she wasn’t doing her job properly. Thankfully, Sabrina’s publicist responded yes to the offers for you when she heard that you’ll be staying with Sabrina at her rental house.”

“Oh, okay.” is really all I can say right now. I’m trying to process all this information.

“So, now you see why these outfits are very necessary,” she continues. “And of course, we have to look for Ivory attire as well. It would be great if you could wear at least one outfit there. It’s the right scene to do it, and they would really appreciate it.”

“Of course, yeah. I actually wear them a lot.”

“Great. Should we look at the Ivory clothing, and then you can try everything on?”

We spend the next four hours rummaging through my closet to find Ivory looks that match the spirit of the festival. I also try on all the different outfits she brought me, and we settle on two Ivory outfits. The first one is a white bralette, denim destroyed shorts, and black sneakers. I’ll also wear my Ivory

white cap I love so much and a pair of aviator sunglasses. The second one is a pink denim skirt with a black and white crop top. We match it with the pink cap and black and white sneakers.

We begin packing all the outfits she brought along with the two from Ivory, and we end up needing two big suitcases for everything. I feel like this is way over the top, but I understand why it's important, and I trust Kendra. She seems very competent, and now that I agreed to have her as my publicist, I have to listen to her, otherwise there's no point. Anyway, I'm not too worried. I know Candice will always pack more clothes than I do.

"Okay." She claps her hands. "We did well! Now just enjoy yourself and don't hesitate to call me if needed. I would normally ask to come with you, but I already know you well enough to know the answer. Anyway, Sabrina's publicist will be there if something major happens. Do you need anything done while you're gone?" She offers.

"No, I'm good. Thanks."

"Are you sure?" she insists. "You just moved in. You must have tons to do. Are you done decorating?"

"No, I'm not." I admit. "But I'll have plenty of time to do that when I get back."

"I can help. What were you thinking?"

"Well, I need to make this house more personal, especially my bedroom and my office. Maybe some pictures of my

family and friends, stuff like that. So, I'll just do it when I get back. You could get me some frames, if you can? That would help me a lot," I add, sensing she won't let this go.

"Okay, sure. No problem. Well, then I'll leave you to it, and I'll call you on Tuesday."

"Thanks, Kendra," I say, walking her out.

She leaves only five minutes before Logan arrives. As soon as he passes through the door, I jump into his arms.

"I missed you," I say.

"I see that, Mercier." He laughs. "I missed you, too," he says, giving me a long kiss.

"You don't have your bag for tomorrow?"

"I left it in the car. What time are we leaving?"

"Well, Candice texted me with the address, and they said they'll be there around twelve. Sabrina is already there, of course."

"Okay, good, then we can leave around nine because we might hit some traffic. That leaves us plenty of time. But first, let's go back to that bed of yours," he says, picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder.



## COACHELLA SURPRISES

THE DRIVE TO THE desert is really fun, and I can feel it getting hotter by the mile. We stop a few times to admire the scenery and take some pictures, including some with the notorious huge dinosaurs on the interstate. True to my promise to Kendra, I post an “on my way to Coachella” picture on Instagram, and we get to Sabrina’s rental house by twelve pm, as scheduled.

The house is enormous, of course, boasting six bedrooms and bathrooms, a large living area and kitchen, all decorated in a Mediterranean style. But the coolest thing is the backyard. The pool is enormous with a lot of loungers around it. I love that the firepit area has plenty of seating, and the view of the surrounding mountains is spectacular. Plus, as Candice notices when she arrives, we’re only fifteen minutes away from the festival, which is convenient. The six of us, Cole is here too, enjoy some drinks by the pool before having a delicious lunch prepared by Sabrina’s cook.

Afterwards, it’s time to change into our first set of outfits for the weekend. We are going to a party first. As expected,

Sabrina and Candice went over the top, so I'm glad I listened to Kendra about my carefully selected wardrobe. I wear my bathing suit underneath my clothes, as they suggest, because there will be a pool there.

Sabrina rented a GMC with a driver to take us to the party while she and Cole are going to the field directly. She has to do sound check for tonight. The party is really a festival of its own. It's set up in a gigantic estate. So big that we can't make our way on foot. Golf carts with drivers are waiting to take us around. There are carnival rides and games and a lot of different food trucks. The party takes place mainly in the pool area, which is swarming with people: in the pool, on loungers, at the bar... Music is played and there's even a stage. We each get photographed as we enter, and we're taken to the VIP area, which is right next to the main area. Only the cabanas are separated by cordons, and security guards are posted in front of it.

The party is a blast. We hang out by the pool, dance, drink, swim. It's a very laid-back atmosphere, and the crowd is really fun. There are a lot of celebrities here. I'm introduced to quite a few that we bump into, like Ivy Gilmore, the singer, who's friend with Logan, Bronislaw, Islay-J, Tania, Ava, Hannah Hayes, and more. What's cool about this place is that even if the party is packed with celebrities, no one seems to care, or at least they're respectful enough not to accost them every minute. We also enjoy some musical performances, from Islay-J, Hannah Hayes, and Ivy Gilmore.

Around five, however, after eating too many burgers and drinking too much alcohol, we go back to the house to shower and change before heading out to the festival.

Candice and I don't do it on purpose, but we match in our pink outfits, which amuses the numerous paparazzi waiting near the VIP area. There are a lot of people here, and we keep stopping because Candice, Watson, or Logan bump into someone they know. There are a few brand tents and booths, and several different buffets. We spend a little time here, and then Logan and I go into the general area field.

I've never been to Coachella. I don't want to stay in the VIP section. And I'm glad I don't because this is absolutely amazing. It's a lot bigger than I expected. There are many stages, music playing everywhere, people dancing, lying on the ground, and there's even a big Ferris wheel. The atmosphere is really laid back, fun, and indie for sure. No one seems to care or even look at us, which is perfect.

We check out a few performances, dance, lie down on the grass, kiss. It's like a mini holiday, and we're making the best of it. We watch Marvin-P's show. I love his songs, and I know every word. We also watch some unknown artists and discover some incredible styles and voices.

After a while, we go back to the artists' lounge and join our friends and a really-stressed-but-excited Sabrina backstage. We hang out in her trailer and all eat together at the buffet in the artists' lounge.



When the show starts, we stand in the wings with Candice, Cole, and Watson. We have a great time, and I even think to post an Insta live. Eventually, they agree to come with us in the crowd, and we have an even better time there, mingling with people, dancing, singing, and cheering on our friend. At that moment, I really feel like we're a normal group of friends hanging out at a concert. Sabrina is amazing, of course. She delivers an amazing, over the top show, changing costumes four times in total, and boasting crazy displays of lasers and fireworks.

After a while, we do get recognized—well more likely my three companions get recognized. Since Ryland is our only bodyguard, we are escorted on the other side of the barriers by security. That way, we still can enjoy the show from the audience without putting them at risk.

My bladder is killing me, so I tell the others to enjoy the show, and that I'll be right back. I enter the almost empty backstage tent and make my way to the restrooms. I'm finally relieved and ready to enjoy the last songs of the show, but I crash into someone. A tall, blond girl wearing too much make-up. She wasn't looking straight. She wasn't paying attention because she was messing around with her boyfriend.

It's Jack. I close my eyes for a second. They must be playing tricks on me. I must be hallucinating. Someone slipped me roofies—this is a festival, after all. I open them back up, but he's still here. My chest constricts, and my heart threatens to explode. He looks so different from *my* Jack. The Jack I knew. He's much thinner, he looks worn out, and his eyes are

empty, lifeless. We look at each other. I don't know for how long, but it seems like hours. It hurts so much to see him. I want to scream at him, punch him, tell him how much I hate him. But I can't. I lost the faculty of speech.

My first instinct is to leave. Run. I order my legs to move, but they don't obey. It's like they're cemented to the ground. His girlfriend is still holding his arm, even tighter now, glancing back and forth between the both of us, not daring to break the silence.

It's Liam who speaks first. He was standing a few feet behind Jack with a group of people, but now moves to stand between Jack and me.

*“Mademoiselle. You look beautiful. Voulez vous coucher avec moi, ce soir?”* he asks, kissing my hand, making their group of friends laugh and whistle. I don't want his disgusting mouth on me, but I don't have mobility in my arm either. Jack frees himself from his bimbo and pushes Liam to the side. He's very close to me now. So close I can smell his strong alcohol breath. We look into each other's eyes, but I see nothing in them. They're blank. *Empty.*

“L,” he whispers.

That single word makes my heart shatter in thousand pieces. I look at him, unable to respond. He's shaking, and his eyes are watery. All the anger I had toward him disappears at once. He's not the cocky boy in the video anymore. He looks lost, broken. All I want is to help him. Ease his hurt. His pain. But I don't know how.

“What the hell are you doing here, Jack?” Candice just entered the tent. She sees my distress and hurries to my side. “Haven’t you done enough already?” she says, pushing him. He loses his balance and nearly falls. His eyes are still on me.

“L,” he repeats.

My body twitches, lost in the way he says my nickname.

“Jack! Get out of here. Leave her alone. She’s been through enough already. Give her a break. She’s finally happy,” Candice yells.

He looks at her, then quickly back at me. For a second, I thought I saw something. A feeling? A reaction? Something. Like he’s still in there somewhere.

Candice takes another step forward. “I’m calling Adrian,” she warns, taking her phone out.

He looks at her and at me again. It’s like he’s hesitating.

“Fuck this,” he spits and turns his back on us, joining his friends, the blond girl following in his tracks. They pat him and laugh, saying things like, “yeah, man,” or “let’s get the fuck out,” as they walk away out of the tent.

It takes me a few seconds to regain control of my body. My breathing is ragged, and I feel like I’m about to pass out.

“Are you okay, girl? What did he say to you?” she asks, taking my hand in hers. The warmth of her touch brings me back to reality.

“Nothing. He said nothing.” A part of me is mad at Candice. He was trying to talk to me, and she interrupted us. He seemed to be in distress. Maybe I could have done something. Maybe I could have saved him.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through this. Let’s go find the guys. The concert is almost over.” She puts an arm around my shoulder, and we turn to go back to the show.

“Hey, you! Stop!” she yells to a man leaving the tent at the far corner.

The guy tries to flee, but Ryland is faster and grabs him by the shirt.

“You were filming the scene, weren’t you?” Candice says.

What? Oh no, please no. The last thing I need is a video of this online.

“Wha—no, I swear,” he says, defending himself.

“Listen.” She pauses to look at his credentials around his neck, “Tom Hart, A&R for One Record, if you want to still have a career after today, give me your phone.”

I don’t know if it’s Candice’s words or the menacing look of her bodyguard, but he obeys, and I let out a long breath of relief. Candice checks his social media and deletes the video off his phone before giving it back to him. She turns around, and I follow her eyes. Shit, two waiters are here as well. They raise their hands to show they don’t have their phones and one says, “We’re not allowed to have our phones in the backstage tent.”

Ryland still searches them for good measure, but they're not lying. I sigh with relief.

"Hey, guys! What's going on?" Logan, Cole, and Watson just entered the room.

"Are you okay?" Logan says when he comes closer.

Candice opens her mouth, but I'm quicker.

"Yes. Food poisoning, I think." Yeah, more like Jack poisoning.

"Yes. She wasn't feeling well. I helped her out. Must be all that junk she's been eating," Candice says, looking at me. I glance at her. *Really? Junk food?*

"Okay, Mercier. Let's skip the carnival and go to bed then," he says, taking my hand.

I'm glad she went along with my lie, though. I'm not ready to talk about this. The truth is, I don't really know what "this" was.



## HOUSE WARMING

THE NEXT DAY WE all wake up late, tired and still dirty from yesterday. I didn't sleep much. I kept having dreams about Jack. He was walking dangerously close to a cliff, and I had to save him. But every time I tried, he fell, and I woke up in a sweat. We spend the day at the festival with our friends, and I try to relax. But I can't help but go online to see if Jack was noticed by anyone yesterday, and I know Candice is doing the same thing.

Logan asks if I feel better several times. I keep saying yes, but my eyes must say otherwise. I pretend I'm just tired, and he doesn't bring it up again. I feel so guilty for lying to him, but I don't want to share this with anyone, at least not yet.

I try to get Jack out of my head, but I can't. So as soon as I'm back home, I call Adrian to tell him, as promised, that I saw Jack. He's very grateful, but as I said, I'm not sure he'll show his face at Coachella next weekend. They probably left already.

Something looks different in my house. There are flowers in the foyer, and in the living room, I notice candles and

magazines on the coffee table. What is going on? I know it's not Logan. He was with me all weekend. Maybe it's Linda?

I go up to my room to unpack when I see it. There are about a dozen frames of different sizes hanging on the walls with pictures of me with my parents, with my sister, Mel, Sabrina and Candice on a red carpet, and even a selfie of Candice and me I don't remember taking. Next to my bed is a frame with two photos of me and Logan. The first one on the red carpet at the premiere, and the second one is the selfie he posted on Insta the next day.

Kendra. It has to be her who put this together. When I enter my dressing room to change, I find two pictures of me above my coiffeuse, taken at the *Music Gazette* party, and at the *Grammys*. Those were truly amazing gowns, and I still can't believe I was lucky enough to wear them.

Once I put everything away, I call her to thank her, and she's thrilled. She tells me she's on her way for this weekend's debrief, and five minutes later, she's here.

"You got here fast!"

"Hey! Yes, I actually live really close by."

"That's convenient. Especially since you come here in your free time to redecorate my house." I laugh. "Thank you again, by the way. It's amazing."

"No problem! My pleasure. It's not a big deal. Did you like the pictures in the office? I can change the selection if you want."



“The office? I haven’t been there yet.”

She did a wonderful job. Once again, there is a huge bouquet on the desk, and several framed pictures on the walls. One of me at this year’s *Music Gazette Party*, at the *Billboard Music Awards* last year, and one of Candice and me at the *EMAs* in Milan. On another wall, there’s also a large print of the picture they called *one of the best red carpet moments in history*, at the *VMAs*, with Jack, Candice, Wat\$on, Bronislaw, Hannah Hayes, Sarah Kimmons, Opal Davis, John Greenway, and me. There’s also a picture of me at the *Hollie Barker show*, and on the side wall, a life-size poster of me for the Ivory campaign, and the framed cover Jack and I did for *Fashion Warehouse*. I almost cry when I see it.

*You gotta keep it together, Louise.*

“Wow! This is amazing. Thank you so much for this.” I say, trying to sound ecstatic.

“Obviously, there will be even greater moments to come, so we’ll have to choose what to keep and what to replace, but I wanted this space to be filled with pictures of your different achievements. I hope it’s okay. Some of them have Jack in them. I really wanted to include the picture of the *VMAs* and the magazine cover because these are important accomplishments.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re right, these are great memories, and I’m glad to have them here,” I painfully say. I would have been fine a few days ago, but after seeing him

again, all the pain resurfaced. Thankfully, she doesn't realize anything.

“Awesome. Now, to the debrief?”

“You're all work and no play!” I joke. “Can I at least get you something to drink?”

“Yeah, thanks. Water's fine.”

I come back with two bottles of water, and she says she's eager to get started. Apparently, there is a lot of content. I have a pit in my stomach. What if videos or pictures of Jack and me finally came out?

“What do you mean?” I say, trying to hide the trembling in my voice. “We only took a few pictures, if I remember correctly.”

It turns out I do remember correctly. She shows me the “official” pictures, taken at the different parties we went to, and when we arrived each day at Coachella. But there are a lot more photos and videos that I wasn't aware of. Naturally, there are a bunch of paparazzi shots, but also photos from when I was with Logan in the general area. Pictures and videos of us dancing, kissing, singing, or being silly. And on Instagram she also found a lot of content taken by concert goers who recognized us. We're dancing in the background of a girl's video, kissing in a picture of a guy's selfie, and so much more. I'm relieved. There is no mention of Jack, and most of the feedback is positive.

*“Logan Reyes and Louise Mercier take Coachella.”*

*“Logan and Louise enjoying themselves in the desert.”*

*“Couples doing Coachella together stay together,”* a caption says.

*“Logan and Louise are really just normal people dancing to Marvin-P.”*

“Wow! I didn’t notice any of them. I can’t imagine why anyone would be interested in us. We’re just a regular couple. We didn’t do anything crazy,”

“And that’s only Saturday. There are a lot more on Sunday, too. Pictures of you guys chilling on the grass and making out. There are like hundreds of these. And then there are the ones at Sabrina’s concert.”

She shows me pictures and videos of Cole, Candice, Watson, Logan, and me, dancing, singing, and laughing.

“And that’s not even the best part. It’s this article by The Celebrity Journal. They pretty much did a story on your first Coachella weekend, and it’s very popular. There’s even a hashtag trending on Twitter and Instagram because of it.”

“What?”

“Here, look,” she says, handing me the printed article.

**“Louise Mercier went to her first Coachella, and she had the best time!”**

*She rocked the Coachella looks all weekend.*

Her outfits included a bunch of Ivory attire, of course, but not exclusively. Looks like the hit girl is a fan of Levi’s, H&M

and Forever 21 as well. Best news is you can get her looks for under \$100!

### ***She really had some fun***

Louise really is just your typical kind of gal. Like all of us, she came here to have fun and mingle among party goers. And she did! All weekend you could see her dancing and singing her heart out. Really, we just wanted to party with her.

### ***She spent time with her boyfriend***

They really look like the perfect couple. Here they are, dancing together, sharing an ice-cream, and even making out on the grass. Pretty normal thing to do at Coachella. They're just like us!

### ***She shared a lot on Instagram***

For our absolute pleasure, of course, the French model gave us a lot of content. From her drive there with Logan, to the different shows she watched, including some backstage videos at her friend Sabrina Evans' concert.

### ***She indulge in delicious food***

The French really are the taste masters, and Louise is no different. Contrary to your usual models, Louise didn't hesitate to bite on big juicy burgers, eat Pretzels at the Neon Carnival or indulge on some fries by the pool.

### *She hung out with her friends*

Which is also what Coachella is all about. But as much as Louise is one of us, she's also friends with a ton of celebs, and she had fun with them, too. She hung out with Ivy Gilmore and Hannah Hayes. She lounged by the pool with her two besties, Sabrina Evans and Candice Anderson. She danced with Islay-J and had a drink with Bronislaw. What else do you need?

So really, Louise's weekend is the ultimate Coachella goal! If you too had a great weekend there, and can check off the Louise Mercier's Coachella checklist, send us your pics to prove it. #LouiseCoachellaGoals #Coachellaweekend1 #LouiseMercier #TheCelebrityJournal

I'm speechless. Literally. They wrote a story about my Coachella weekend?

"That's insane. And the way they called me: 'hit girl' or 'model,' feels really weird,"

"Yeah, but that's what you are. And I think a lot of people just appreciated how much fun you had there. The hashtag is trending and has received already millions of pictures,"

"Really? Of what?"

"Well, it's just people showing what they did this weekend, checking off the 'Louise Mercier checklist' basically. Look, this guy posted a picture eating a hot dog at Coachella and captioned it 'Number 5, check', followed by the hashtag. Then

there's this girl showing off her Coachella outfit who captioned it 'Number 1, check,' followed by the hashtag. A lot of people are doing the same. You also got a lot of views, likes, and new followers. I don't know if you checked it yet, but the video of you and Candice singing during Sabrina's performance hit ten million views!"

"What?"

"Yeah. It's been reposted and reposted thousands of times, too. The picture you took with Logan lounging in the grass got six million views. This is really crazy."

"It is! Especially since I didn't do much, except have a good time and hang out with my friends." My mind flits back to Jack without my permission. But I shove it to the side and force a pained smile on my face.

"Exactly, and that's why people liked it. Usually celebs don't mingle as much, especially big stars like Candice or Logan. But with you, they did, and they just showed how normal they are. Everyone wanted to be you, or be with you this weekend. A lot of celebrities are also doing the checklist on Instagram, so it's getting even bigger."

And she was right. Two days later, the hashtag is still trending, and more and more people, including celebrities, are posting their checklists. I would have never imagined the magnitude this would take on, and the best thing is I didn't have to act any differently. I just had to be myself. Maybe Kendra is right, and I am a natural, after all.



## THEY'RE ALL THE SAME

I'M GETTING BETTER AT sleeping here alone now. I haven't had much of a choice though. Since Logan has had to work early every day, he's been staying at his place. Jack has stopped appearing in my dreams, so that helped, too. I'm still worked up about seeing him, so fragile, so lost. I feel guilty somehow, so I call Mel, hoping she'll answer.

"Hey, babe. What's up?"

"Hey, Mel! How are you? How's the tour?"

"Great. Demanding, challenging, but honestly, I'm having the best time."

"I'm glad to hear it. I can't wait to see you, though."

"Me, too! Six months. I hope I'll still be able to stand!" She jokes. "So, what's up?"

I tell her about the awkward encounter with Jack at Coachella and how I've been feeling since then.

"Babe, you've come so far. You can't lose all your progress now. I get it. Seeing him must have been difficult but, as you said, he had the opportunity to stay, and he left! Don't beat



yourself up over this. You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved."

"I know. He was just so different, so hopeless. I wish there was something I could do. It breaks my heart to see him like that." I bat away the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.

"I know, Lou. But don't forget what he put you through. You're finally above water. You're finally living your life again. Don't waste all that energy on him when he's not even there."

"Yeah. You're right. I have to keep moving on. There's nothing I can do for him now."

He left with his friends, after all. He had a choice. I've just started to move on. I can't stop now. We talk about her tour and the upcoming Designer Gala before she has to go to rehearsals. Even thousands of miles away, she's able to make me see clearly. What would I do without her?

The fact that my house, and especially my bedroom, has been redecorated makes me feel more at home now. Still, I'm happy when Logan comes to sleep here the night before Candice's birthday. I miss waking up in his arms.

The day of her birthday, Logan and I go hiking at Runyon Canyon in the morning, and this time, we make it up there in forty-five minutes. I'm really proud of myself. Progress is progress. After lunch, we go shopping because he didn't know what to buy her. I struggled a little too, I admit. I wrote her a note offering "*an all-expenses paid shopping spree with*

*Louise*” and wrapped it nicely in a box. My lack of creativity is going to cost me, but honestly, she deserves it. She’s been such a good friend to me and really helped me to get to where I am now. After browsing a few stores, we decide on a cute necklace from Van Cleef & Arpels.

Candice’s birthday party is held at the rooftop restaurant of The Beverly Hills Hotel. The main entrance of the hotel is, as always, packed with paparazzi. The party is fabulous, of course. It’s Candice’s birthday, after all. It looks like a giant, sophisticated candy store. There are several “Candice Bars” with all sorts and sizes of candies, and even cupcakes with her face on it. We drop our gifts at the dedicated table and make our way through the crowd. It doesn’t take us long to spot the birthday girl in her beautiful pink and white dress. She makes me think of a candy cane. We wish her a happy birthday, chat with her and Wat\$on, and go find something to drink. Tonight, the champagne is rosé, naturally. The party is a success. The food is great, and the DJ is fantastic. He has the crowd dancing all night. Candice opens her gifts. Each more over the top than the other: a Hermès bag, sumptuous jewelry, a custom piano, and perfumes and cosmetics. No one beats Wat\$on’s gift, of course: a light-pink Lamborghini and a song.

I’m taking a break from dancing, hanging out with Ava and her friend Amber, when I see Logan in my line of sight. He left a while ago to go chat with some people he knew. Right now, he’s talking with a girl. A very beautiful girl with long, sleek black hair. They laugh. She speaks in his ear, and he gives her a hug. A very long, tight hug. The kind of hug I’ve

only ever seen him give to me. His hands are really low on her back, and it takes a little too long before they let go of each other.

“Do you know that girl who’s talking to Logan?” I ask Ava, pointing toward them.

“Oh yeah, that’s Jennifer. Logan’s ex.”

Her words slap me in the face.

“She’s an actress, a model, and a real bitch, too. They were together for a while. Oh, look at the text I received from Kayla. She’s in Dubai with—”

But I don’t listen to her. I couldn’t care less about Kayla. Jennifer is laughing, throwing her head backwards and her chest, even if almost nonexistent, to Logan’s head. He’s laughing, too. And then she gently brushes her hand down his forearm. I close my eyes for a second to make sure my mind isn’t playing some kind of trick on me, but when I open them, he’s whispering something in her ear. I’m going to be sick if I stay here a second longer.

“Can I borrow your driver, please?” I ask Candice, even if I’m aware my tone is more demanding than asking, but I don’t have time to be polite right now.

“Yeah, sure,” she replies, puzzled. “Why? Where’s Logan?”

“I’m just not feeling well. Thank you, Candice, and Happy Birthday again!”

I give her a quick kiss on the cheek and go down to find Candice’s chauffeur. I smile and try to keep my head high as I

exit the building because I know the paps are still here, waiting for any drama. But as soon as I enter the car, I burst into tears in the backseat. Candice's driver is kind enough to ask me what's wrong and if he can do anything for me. But no, he really can't. I wish he could, but honestly, no one can.

The truth is, I was stupid enough to fall for another guy, another hot, rich, famous guy, and it bit me in the ass once more. I can't believe this. Of course, he'd have a stunning ex-serious girlfriend, and of course she's an actress, and of course he was bound to see her regularly at those parties, and of course all the feelings would come rising to the surface. I wish I could say I can't blame him, that I don't know what would happen if I saw Jack today, but I know I would never leave Logan and just go make out with Jack! Okay, true. He did not make out with her, but it was close enough. The whispering in the ear, and that hug. Argh, that hug bothers me so much. More than the laugh, or the arm touching, or even the whisper. Logan gives great hugs, and they're so sexy, full of meaning. It's not just a hug, not the one he gave her, anyway.

When I make it home, my phone keeps buzzing and buzzing. It's him, of course. He must have realized I'm gone. I can't talk to him right now. My emotions will get in the way if I talk to him now. Turning it off, I throw it on my bedside table and lie down on my bed, not bothering to take off my clothes or get under the sheets. I don't really sleep. I itch to look at my phone to see if they left the party together, or call Candice to ask her what happened between them after I took off. But I

don't, afraid of what the answers to those two questions will be.



## WELCOME BACK

THE SUN STREAKING THROUGH the window wakes me up. That's what I get for not shutting the blinds. I turn my phone on to see the time. It's eight am, and I have seventy-two missed calls. I look at the call log, all from Logan, of course, except for the last one, which was five minutes ago, from Candice. I call her back.

“Hey! How are you? What happened last night?” she asks.

“Sorry I left. I just lost it for a second. I saw Logan with that Jennifer girl and—”

“Oh yeah, right. Shit. Sorry. I didn't invite her, I swear. She was someone's plus one. I would have never invited her.”

“Well, I didn't even know she existed before yesterday.”

“Oh girl, I'm sorry. That sucks.”

“Yeah. Big time. So, now you get why it was such a shock.”

“Yeah. I get it. Logan was frantic, though. He was looking everywhere for you.”

“Yeah? Well, he was flirting with his ex. So, I thought I’d just give them some privacy,” I snap.

“Okay, girl. But for what it’s worth, I still think you should talk to him. He’s a good guy. There’s probably an explanation for that.”

“Yeah, I will call him. I don’t have a choice, but I just wanted a few hours to think about it.”

“Let me know how it goes.”

I press on Logan’s name, and he answers even before the first tone.

“Louise,” he roars.

“Hi,” I reply. I know I’m the one calling, but I don’t really know what to say. It feels like he should be the one explaining.

“What happened?” he blurts. “You just left.”

“*What happened?* Are you serious right now?”

“No, shit, Louise! I don’t know why you left like that without even telling me!”

“I left because you were flirting with Jennifer, and I had seen enough.” The memory of it all is still fresh in my mind, still stinging my heart, keeping my breath hostage.

“What the hell!” he explodes. “I was not flirting with her. We were just talking!”

“Right, and whispering in her ear, and touching hands, and hugging her tight.”



“No! She’s a friend, I swear. Please, let me come by, and we’ll sort this out,” he pleads.

“Fine.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Ten minutes? He must already be on his way then. I hurry upstairs to change, and I’m barely done before he’s at the door, panting, his hair amess.

“Louise,” he sighs, entering the house. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you in any way. She doesn’t mean anything to me. She’s just a friend. I haven’t seen her in a very long time, so we were just hanging out.”

“And the whisper?” I cross my arms.

“It was a party. It was loud. She couldn’t hear me, so I just talked in her ear. And actually, after she touched my hand, I told her I was seeing someone.”

“Really? Then what about the hug?” I snap.

“Okay. I’ll admit that the hug was a bit long, and that wasn’t cool, but I promise you it was more like a habit than anything else. There wasn’t anything behind it.”

He comes toward me, but I take a step back.

“Please, Louise, you have to trust me. I’m so into you. I don’t want anyone but you. She and I are ancient history. We’re just friends.”

His words make my heart melt and soften my anger. Of course, they do. It’s exactly what I wanted to hear, what I’d

hoped to hear.

“Okay,” I say. “I’m sorry I left without telling you. That was wrong, too. I just saw red. I was so mad and hurt. Most of my relationships ended because I was cheated on, so it brought back a lot of memories and feelings.”

“I’m sorry.” He sighs. “Come here, you crazy woman,” he smiles, opening his arms. I get into them, and it’s so comforting here, I already feel better.

“I promise to never hug any other woman. Ever. How’s that sound?”

“Well, that sounds quite perfect, actually.” I chuckle, and he kisses my forehead.

“It’s a deal, Mercier.” He laughs. “You drive a tough bargain, but you’re totally worth it.”

Logan stays with me the entire day, and I’m so glad he does. I feel a little silly about the way I acted and more than a little scared because it means that my feelings for him are much stronger than I’d imagined. We’ve been dating for only about a month, and I’m already so into him.



ON MONDAY, I SPEND the entire day with the Maison Gaumé team and Valentin Guérin for my dress fitting. I try on endless pieces of jewelry specially brought by the Cartier security team, as well as shoes, pouches, and purses. They

style my hair in a million different ways before deciding on leaving it loose with a small tiara.

They also fit me in a second dress, a more laid-back version of the Aurora dress that I will wear after the fashion show to the dinner and after party, while the fabulous dress will be put up for auction. This dress is equally gorgeous, just less extravagant. It's also a light pink mermaid gown, but with a shorter train and less beading. I'm getting a little nervous about actually walking the runway, so after we're done, Valentin and I go for lunch, and he gives me pointers.

The rest of the week is mostly back to work, and come Friday, I'm happy to see I'm almost done. I think in maybe two or three more days, I'll be finished! I worked a lot faster than I imagined. Yesterday, Alexandra called me to let me know that printing had started for the English copies, and I couldn't be more excited about it. I can't wait to have it in my hand. My book is being printed as we speak.

A few days later, all of us board the jet by eleven am and are on our way to New York. I say all of us, because there are a lot of people traveling with us. Logan has his manager, his publicist, his hairdresser, and his security detail. And I travel with Kendra and Ashley, a hair stylist and make-up artist Kendra hired for the occasion. I'm so excited to go back to New York. I miss the city, and since Candice is having her launch party there on Friday, we'll be staying for an entire week.

We're staying at the Four Seasons, on E57th, between Park and Madison, right in the middle of the action. My suite is breathtaking, boasting a big bedroom and bathroom, a living area with a dining room, an office space, and a balcony. Logan's suite is the exact same. Both are decorated in beige and wood. It's very modern and elegant. Logan's team and Kendra insisted we get two suites, but they made sure they were next to each other.

After we settle in, Logan and I go out for a walk and stop at a restaurant for dinner. He doesn't ask Dave, his bodyguard, to come with us, which I really appreciate. I was a bit apprehensive when I heard Dave was coming on this trip because I rarely see him in L.A. Logan sleeps in my bed tonight, and I already know getting two suites was really unnecessary.

On Sunday, we wake up and have breakfast at the hotel's restaurant, which is decorated in an African décor, making us feel as if we're in an oasis in the middle of the desert, before meeting Candice and Ryland in the lobby. She arrived late last night and decided to cash in her shopping day gift today.

We start with Chanel, Dior and Dolce & Gabbana, followed by Longchamp and Jimmy Choo. We stop at the Rockefeller Plaza to eat at a tasty vegan restaurant I used to go to when I worked here.

"Oh, by the way, I wanted to ask you something." Candice says, between bites. "My parents are going to France this summer, and they wanted to talk to you, you know, get local

tips and stuff. They'll be in town next week, if you're available?"

"Yeah, sure no pro—" My eyes flicker to the front door, and I freeze, unable to produce any more words. The reason for my new mutism? My ex-boyfriend, Jared freaking Lion just entered the restaurant.



## FIRED UP

“HEY, LOUISE!” HE CALLS.

*Shit.* He saw me.

“Hi, Jared,” I say, trying to sound as if seeing him didn’t hurt one bit.

“Wow! You’ve changed so much,” he exclaims. “I wasn’t even sure it was you. How are you?” He says, running his hand through his black hair.

Bastard. Acting like nothing happened. Like we’re just old friends running into each other. I don’t think so.

*We dated for two years, and you cheated on me with your assistant before having me fired because you couldn’t handle the shame.* That’s what I want to say, but I don’t.

“I’m good, thanks,” I reply coolly. If he thinks I’m going to ask him how he is, he can keep on waiting. I won’t and really don’t care.

“So,” he says, tugging at the end of his shirt. “I can officially say I dated a model! You’re, like, totally famous now.” He laughs. “How’s that been?”

Seriously, the guy doesn't take a hint. *I don't want to talk to you, asshole.* Candice is trying her best to stay still, and not burst into laughter. She doesn't dare to turn around and look at him. She knows all about him and what he did, of course.

"Yeah," I fake-smile. "It's good, you know."

"That's cool, Lou! I'm proud of you! What brings you to New York? You're living in L.A. now, aren't you?"

Jeez. I want to throw up right now. *And don't call me Lou, that's reserved for my friends.* I want to tell him everything I'm thinking, but I don't want to make a scene, and frankly, I don't have the balls. Candice does, however, and even though I know how fearless and frank she can be, never in a million years would I have imagined that she would go after him like that.

"Listen, man," she starts, really slowly, not to be overheard. "My friend here is too nice to say it, but I'm not. Leave her alone. She doesn't want to talk to you. She doesn't want to see your stupid face. You only bring back up some shitty memories. Like when you cheated on her like a loser. Does that ring a bell?"

"I, I," he stutters. "Sorry, Lou. I didn't realize you still weren't over that. It was two and a half years ago, and so much has happened since then. I'll leave you guys alone then. It was nice seeing you, Lou," he says, turning away.

"Wait," I call. Candice's speech gave me confidence, and I don't want to let him leave thinking that I'm still hung up on him or something.



“First of all, don’t call me Lou. That’s reserved for my friends and family. Second, I am *so* over you and what happened. I just don’t want to talk to you because what you did was low. Especially the getting me fired part, and—”

“I didn’t...” he starts.

“I’m not done.” I cut off. “And to finish, I want to thank you. Thank you for being a cheater and a coward because my life is so much better now.” I smile brightly. “You’re right, I’m ‘like, totally famous now!’” I air quote, “I do live in L.A. I just bought myself a nice multi-million-dollar mansion, and I’m in New York because I am modeling for Maison Gaumé at the Designer Charity Ball tomorrow. So yeah, my life is *freaking* amazing, and I owe it all to you. If it weren’t for you, I would have never gotten fired, I would have never worked as a waitress, and I would have never met Jack Rose. So yeah, thanks a lot for that because you really changed my life, and I couldn’t be happier.” I grin, one hand on my hip.

Damn, it feels good to let it out. I didn’t know how much I needed to say those things to him. I haven’t seen him since the day I caught him in the act, and I was so shocked and embarrassed that no sound came out of my mouth. But now it does, and it has the intended effect. For one, his smirk has been wiped off his stupid face, and he’s speechless. Jared Lion, not able to find his words, is something I had never witnessed before, and I’m savoring every second of it.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he says, looking at the ground. “You’re welcome then?” He dares.

“You’re welcome? Seriously?” Candice speaks before I can. “You’re fucked up, man!” She roars with laughter, and I join her because, honestly, there is nothing else to say. Today is the day he decided to grow a pair, apparently.

“Bye, Jared,” I say before returning to my salad and my conversation with Candice. He stands there for a second, and I’m afraid he won’t let it go, but he turns around and storms out the door.

The scene with Jared didn’t go unnoticed, and we got recognized by a group of girls in the restaurant. Thankfully, they are respectful and only ask for a quick picture.

Next, we walk back up the street to SAKS, the department store. This is one of the most beautiful stores in New York. I used to come here a lot since I had been working right across the street. Of course, I couldn’t afford much then, so today it’s a real treat to be able to buy myself and Candice whatever we want. We start with accessories, mostly handbags, and then make our way up using the iridescent escalators.

Freed by the talk with Jared, I splurge on a few dresses, three sexy lingerie sets from La Perla that I can’t wait to show Logan, and numerous pairs of shoes (have you seen their shoe department? It’s literally shoe heaven.)

When we exit the store, it’s a different world out there. Paparazzi and fans are posted on the walkway. Ryland ushers us into a black van to take us back to the hotel, where an army of paparazzi is waiting for us.

*Click Click.*

*“Looking good, Candice!”*

*“Ready for the album launch, Candice?”*

*“Candice, are you excited for the ball?”*

*Click Click.*

*“Louise, you already moved on from Jack?”*

*“Louise, you forgot Jack already?”*

I turn my head, and I’m about to respond when Candice pulls me by the arm and gets me inside.

“It’s better if you don’t say anything, girl.”

“Argh, I know. But it’s pissing me off!”

“What’s going on?” Kendra asks. She was waiting for me in the lobby.

“Paparazzi running their mouth about her forgetting Jack too quickly.” Candice replies. “Don’t listen to it, girl. Anyway, I have to go change. I’ll see you later, okay? Thanks for today.” She gives me a swift hug and makes her way to the elevator.

“Did you say anything?” Kendra asks, drawing her brows together.

“No, but I wanted to.”

“Good, you should never reply to stuff like that. Just ignore them.”

“I know, but this is such bullshit. Jack was seen partying and kissing girls in public a few days after we broke up. I date

someone five months later, and somehow, I'm the whore." I clench my fists.

"They're just trying to get your attention, that's all. Don't worry about it."

"I know... I'll go get changed. We're leaving soon for the restaurant."

"Okay. I just wanted to ask you if tomorrow you could stop by the Ivory and Maison Gaumé stores? They're quite close to each other, and it would be really good if you could do an appearance there. Valentin will be at the shop in the morning, so I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

"Oh, yeah, cool. Of course, I'll go. I'll see if Logan wants to come with, too. I don't think he has anything tomorrow."

"That'd be perfect. If he comes with you, maybe see if Dave can tag along because there'll be a lot of paps there. It might be good to have back up, especially if you both go."

"Okay, sure. Thanks, Kendra."

When I make it to my suite, all my purchases are already waiting for me, and boy, it's a lot. I go over to Logan's room. He opens the door, fresh out of the shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. And just like that, my forty-five-minute time window just got reduced to fifteen.

At the restaurant, the main topic of conversation is, of course, the Designer Charity Ball. Now, I'm very nervous and almost dreading the moment because I learn that I won't be seated with any of them for dinner. Candice will be sitting at

Versace's table with Watson because he's her plus one. Logan will be at Lucacci's table, and I will be at Maison Gaumé's table. How did I not think of that? I will be at a table full of strangers, and I don't know what the hell we're going to talk about. This scares me even more than the fashion show. Candice gave me some pointers, in addition to Valentin's lesson, so as long as I don't trip on the dress, I should be fine. At least Valentin will be there, which is a relief, because he's kind and fun to be around. But he's the only one I'll know there, and I'm sure he'll be very busy since it's his table. What did I get myself into?



ON SUNDAY MORNING, LOGAN and I drop by the Ivory flagship store where we are welcomed like royalty, or more like celebrities. They knew we were coming and closed the store for the time we're here. We browse through the endless clothes and we find a lot of very cool stuff. And of course, they gift it all to us. Next, we go to Maison Gaumé. The boutique is beautiful, airy, pure, and modern. Valentin is beaming as I admire his many designs. I try on a couple of dresses, a jacket, and a pencil skirt, and I'm a little embarrassed when he gifts all of it to me, because they're worth a lot of money. We take a few pictures with him, and then Dave takes us to the Lucacci store, since it's right around the corner. Naturally, they're thrilled to see Logan, since he's modeling for the brand at the ball tomorrow. They gift him a

lot of items too, and I even find a pair of sunglasses for myself.

In the afternoon, we discreetly go out, using the side entrance of the hotel. We get onto the subway, and it works. No one recognizes us. I'm tired of the paparazzi, and I just want to be able to walk in New York, breathe the air of this city that I love so much, without the frenzy. I take Logan to the street my old apartment is on.

"Joe!" I say, seeing the newsagent in his booth. "How are you?"

Joe looks at me for a second as we approach. "Louise? Is that you?" he says, narrowing his eyes. "Oh boy, it is you!" He comes out of his booth and gives me a warm hug. "How are you? What are you doing back here?"

"I'm good! I'm just visiting. This is my boyfriend, Logan," I say, when we break apart.

"Nice to meet you," Logan says, shaking his hand.

"Likewise. It's so good to see you again, Louise! I always check the magazines to see if you're in it, you know? How is your career going? And what about your book?"

"Oh, thank you, Joe. It's going great. I'm doing a bit of modeling, and my book will be published in about two months!"

"Oh wow," he says, tearing up. "I'm so proud of you, Louise. I remember watching you write it on that very chair."

He points to the café's terrace where I used to write two years ago.

"I know. This is crazy. How's your life going?"

"Great. My youngest daughter is going to college this fall, so it's a big change for us, going from a family of five to only having two people left in the house."

"Wow, yeah, I can imagine. I remember when you showed me pictures of her sweet sixteen! Time flies. But I'm sure you and your wife will enjoy having more time for yourselves."

"Oh yeah, that's for sure." He chuckles. "How's Mel? I haven't seen her since she moved out."

"She's great. Dancing in a big Vegas production was her dream, so she's having the best time."

"I'm glad to hear it." He smiles fondly.

"We'll let you go back to work," I say, seeing a customer approaching, "but it was good to see you again, Joe."

He takes me into his arms again. "It was so good to see you too, Louise. Say hi to Mel for me," he says, as he shakes Logan's hand again.

"Of course, I will."

"And send me a copy of your book when it's out, will you?" he asks, going back into his booth.

"With pleasure."

Talking to Joe was such a treat. When you move out of your country and don't know a lot of people, all relationships are

vital, especially with caring and sweet people like Joe. He always found the right words to brighten my days.

After a last walk around the neighborhood, we go back to the hotel. We don't do much that night. We eat at the hotel's restaurant, and I go to bed early, hoping I'll get more sleep than the night before, otherwise no amount of concealer in the world will be able to hide the dark circles underneath my eyes.





## THE DESIGNER CHARITY BALL

THE DAY OF THE gala is finally here, and I couldn't be more nervous. Logan is laid back, as usual. "It will be fine, Mercier. Don't worry about it." Right, easy for him to say. It's his second time modeling for the charity ball. I take a long shower, trying to relax, and I'm getting out when Kendra comes knocking at Logan's door.

"Hey, Louise. can we go to your room?" she asks. And as I follow her out of Logan's and into my suite, she says, "Okay. So, Ashley will be here in about an hour for hair and skin preparation for tonight—"

"What? Already? It's ten am!"

"Yes, I know. It's just preparation though. She'll do your hair and make-up around two thirty. Then at four, the Maison Gaumé team will arrive, followed by Cartier. At quarter to six, you will meet the driver out front to go to the Ball."

"Okay." I nod, trying not to let my stress take over.

"So, tonight, when you arrive, smile and follow the assistant. He or she will help you navigate the red carpet but

—”

“Wait! You’re not coming?” I gasp.

“Oh no, I’m not allowed in, I’m afraid. They stopped allowing crew a few years back because the red carpet gets too crowded.”

“But Candice said that Aaron is coming with her.”

“Yes, they do grant some celebrities an assistant, but it depends on the needs, and on the celebrity, of course.”

My eyes widen, and I can’t hide my irritation. “Right, but what am I supposed to do, then?”

“Don’t worry about it. You will be fine. There will be an appointed person waiting for you when you get out of the car. Just follow the assistant on the red carpet, stand and pose where you are asked to, and you’ll be fine. Then for the interviews—”

“Do I have to do interviews?” I interrupt.

“You don’t have to, but I suggest you do a couple. It’s a tremendous honor to be asked to model for this event and I’m sure Maison Gaumé will appreciate it if you talk about your collaboration, the dress, etc.”

“Okay. Yeah, of course.” I smile nervously.

“Just be yourself. You will be fine. The assistant will help you spot the reporters who want to talk to you, and then it’s up to you whether to stop or not. Usually, they shout the questions directly, so if you hear an interesting question, you can just

reply to that. Valentin should meet you on the red carpet at some point to take pictures with you, so maybe he'll still be around for the questions, and he can help answer them.”

“That’s fine. As long as it’s about fashion, I should be okay. I’m more scared to fall down on the runway or be isolated at the table.” I admit.

“You won’t.” She waves her manicured hand in dismissal. “The runway will be fine. You just walk, twirl a little, show off the dress, and that’s it. And for the dinner, you’ll be seated next to Valentin, and you’ll only be with six other guests. And of course, you can still visit other tables to mingle with people. It’s a formal dinner, but people do stand up and go talk to each other.”

A few minutes later, Ashley arrives and puts a ton of product on my face and hair, masks, serums, and patches. Then she lets it rest for a few hours. I eat lunch and spend time with Logan, whose preparation is way easier than mine. Being a girl sucks so much sometimes. He will start getting ready around four thirty. No pressure on him.

The rest of the day goes by in a flash. Ashley styles my hair and does my make-up. She keeps it very simple, but even simple requires at least an hour or so. I have to admit that I look great. She is very talented. My face is flawless yet very natural, with the right amount of shine. The only place the make-up is noticeable on is my eyes. She applied pink and glitter eyeshadow, which is very much in accord with the dress I’m wearing, of course.

At exactly four pm, Kendra arrives with the Maison Gaumé team. It's the same team who did my two fittings, and now I understand why it was necessary that Logan and I each have our own suite. Mine is a battlefield. The dress is huge and absolutely beautiful, laid out on the large table. They put it on me, adjust it on my body, and make sure I can move properly in it. Moving is much easier than last time since they shortened the train. I practice walking and manage pretty well, which reassures me a lot. They also provide me with some facts about the dress to be able to answer questions, and now that I know everything that went into it, I'm officially afraid to wear it.

And the insanity continues. A few minutes later, Kendra enters the room, followed by two men with a briefcase. It's the jewelry from Cartier. The necklace, the matching bracelet, and the tiara are made from diamonds and encrusted with pink amethyst stones. It's so sparkly! It feels so unreal that I am allowed to wear such magnificent jewels. We put them on, and the entire look is perfection, except maybe the tiara, which is a bit much for me. I don't dare say anything, though, because they put all this together, and it's their creation. But when Michael, one of the stylists, says he's not sure about the tiara, I take the opportunity to agree with him. There is a small debate, and they decide to settle it by face-timing Valentin. He's already on his way to the ball but answers quickly. He looks carefully at me and decides it's a no on the tiara. Thank God. I just didn't feel comfortable with that thing on my head.

Once they're satisfied with my look, they take a few pictures and tell me they'll meet me backstage before I walk on the runway. Ashley applies some pink gloss on my lips and puts the tube in my purse for touch-ups during the evening.

"It's showtime," Kendra announces.

Oh, God. Okay. I'm ready. I can do this. She rides with me in the elevator, reminding me to smile, be myself, and try to have fun.

"Wow!" Logan calls when we exit the elevator. "You look IN-CRE-DI-BLE!"

"Um, thanks." I try to smile. "You're sure, though? It's not too much?"

"No way, Mercier. You're perfect," he says, giving me a swift kiss on the cheek and making me blush.

Outside, a few paparazzi are waiting, but we get into the black van quickly. On the way to the ball, no one talks much, and I'm trying to keep as calm as possible. Finally, we arrive next to a big tent, and the van stops. Here we go. Logan gets out first and helps me down.

"Relax, it's going to be awesome. See you in a few." He smiles, and I nod, unable to speak. I wish I could walk by his side, but we've received strict orders and two different red carpet rendezvous times, six minutes apart. Shockingly precise.

"Good evening, Ms. Mercier. My name is Mia. I will escort you through the red carpet. Here, I can hold your purse for

you,” she offers, holding out her hand.

“Thank you,” I mumble. I think I lost the faculty of speech.

She gestures for me to follow her into the tent. The atmosphere in here is really unique: the noise, the smell, the air, it’s all packed and heavy. There is a bit of a traffic jam, so we have to wait. I only see one or two photographers from where I am, but I can hear them loud and clear. It’s even scarier now that I’m here. Logan is behind me, waiting for his turn, but I don’t dare to talk to him. A few minutes later, the line moves and I can now clearly see the entire red carpet area. This is pure madness. This is the longest and widest red carpet I’ve seen in my life, and I’ve seen quite a few by now.

Reporters and photographers span both sides. I don’t know what’s crazier. The fact that I haven’t seen a red carpet like this one before, or the fact that I have so many to compare it to. I walk a little awkwardly toward the spot Mia points on the ground.

*Click “Louise, Louise,” “Louise, look here please,” Click Click “You look great, Louise,” “Look this way,” Click “Beautiful dress, Louise,”*

It’s really overwhelming. The flashes and the screams make my head turn. I’m doing my best to look everywhere they ask me to, but I’m not very confident. I feel a hand behind my back. At first, I think it’s Logan, but it’s Valentin. Thank God. Someone, help me.

“You look *magnifique*”, he says, before giving me a swift kiss on the cheek. I smile, and we take a few pictures together,

serious and funny ones. Thank God for him. He's made me feel so much calmer already. I'm about to follow Mia to the interview area when I hear, "*Louise, come back. One more picture with Logan, please.*"

I turn back and join Logan. He puts his arm around my waist, and we take a few pictures. I always feel so much more confident when I'm posing with somebody else, especially Logan. After a few shots, I let him get his picture taken alone, and I follow Mia. She tells me she'll let me know which reporters are asking to talk to me, but I can hear them, too. They're also holding signs, so we know what magazines or news outlet they're working for.

"Louise, here, please." A reporter from *Fashion Warehouse* is waving at me.

"Hi, Louise! How are you?" She beams as I come next to her. "It's your first time at the Designer Charity Ball. Are you enjoying yourself so far?"

"Hi! I'm great, thanks! I am, yes. I'm a little nervous, I'm not going to lie. But I'm thrilled to be here."

"Do you have any expectations for tonight?"

"Not really. I'm just beyond grateful to be invited and asked to model. I hope I'll do justice to the dress and help raise a lot of money for the charity."

"There is no doubt in my mind. This dress is amazing! Tell me more about it. It's Sleeping Beauty's dress, right?"



“Well, it seems more like a piece of art than just a dress.” I joke. “It took them two hundred hours to sew this dress. The silk is imported from Lyon and the four hundred beads from Florence.”

“It is a stunning dress, indeed! Good luck in the fashion show.” She smiles.

“Thank you,” I reply, waving her goodbye.

I continue to walk down the red carpet when I hear someone speak in French. I turn my head and see a reporter from *A la mode*, a French magazine, jumping up and down and calling my name.

“Hello, Louise!” he exclaims when I approach him. “*Bonsoir!*”

“*Bonsoir,*” I reply.

“We are thrilled to have a new French girl on this prestigious red carpet! You look radiant. Can you tell us more about your collaboration with Maison Gaumé, please?” he asks in French.

“Thanks! I’m honored to be here as well, especially to represent a French designer. Valentin and his team have put so much work and passion into this dress, and I hope I’ll be able to make them proud. This dress is incredible,” I say, giving him the facts about the dress.

“It truly is! Good night, Louise, and good luck! I hope your gown raises a lot of money.”

“Thank you.” Giving him a little wave, I walk away.

As I continue my walk down, a few more reporters ask me to stop, but I don't want to stop at all of them. I'm more relaxed now, but I'm still eager to finish with the red carpet. I'm starting to sweat, it's really hot in here.

"The *Music Gazette*," Mia says, showing me a reporter who is calling my name. I make an exception for this one. I like the Gazette, and I love their annual party in L.A.

"Louise! We're so excited. Our *Music Gazette* party French regular." He jokes.

"Yes," I smile. "It's always so incredible to be invited! Definitely the best party of the year."

"Don't say that here," he whispers playfully. "So darling, this dress is fabulous! And this body is a-ma-zing!" He marvels.

"Thank you." I laugh, feeling my cheeks warm.

"What's your preparation? Your diet? Tell us your secret!" he asks.

"Um, I don't have a specific routine. I actually ate pancakes this morning, so—"

"Pancakes! Oh, my Lord! You are a breath of fresh air! So cute!" He gushes. "Logan, my man. Come over here, you dashing little prince," he jokes, and Logan joins us.

"What do you think of your date? Isn't she divine tonight?" he asks.

Logan puts his arm around my waist. “She looks amazing. She always does, whatever she wears.”

“Look at you two love birds! So cute! Love it! Enjoy your night guys!”

“Thank you,” Logan and I both reply before walking away. We are now at the end of the red carpet and Mia gives me my purse and tells me to go inside. Another assistant will find me for the fashion show. I can’t believe the first scary part of the night went so well and, apart from the heat, it was really fun. I hope the rest of the night goes just as well.



## THE IMPOSTER SYNDROME

THE ROOM IS MUCH larger than I imagined. The long, heart-shaped runway twists all around the room and is surrounded by at least fifty tables. There are at least a hundred people, all dressed in evening gowns and elegant suits.

“Whoa!” I gasp.

“It’ll be fine.” Logan reassures me, taking my hand.

“I didn’t know it’d be this big! I thought it would be a regular runway, not a freaking fitness trail! How long does it take to go around?” I ask.

“I don’t know, but it’s actually really fast. Less than five minutes for sure, even with the stopping. It’s no longer than the red carpet.”

My palms are sweaty, and I’m starting to hyperventilate. My head feels loopy. I need a drink. We make our way to the bar, and I go for the water. Not a good idea to drink champagne when I have a freaking marathon to run in front of hundreds of people while wearing a priceless couture dress.

Half an hour later, Candice and Watson arrive. I had heard a bit about Candice's Cinderella-inspired dress before, but I hadn't seen it until now. It's absolutely breathtaking. It's an off-shoulder ballgown made of light blue tulle, with sparkling white roses sewn onto the bustier. She looks so beautiful. Her hair is neatly arranged in a braided chignon, and her face is flawless, as usual.

We compliment each other, and Logan takes a picture of us with his phone. No photographers are allowed inside. I feel a little less silly with my huge gown now that she's here. All the girls around us are wearing beautiful dresses too, though they're less sensational and not fairytale-inspired since they're not walking the runway. More people have arrived. A girl with a headset, holding a clipboard, asks us to follow her backstage to get ready for the fashion show. We make our way through the crowd of people and racks of clothes to the dressing rooms section. There's one for each of us. Maison Gaumé's designers are already waiting in mine. They fuss over me a little, adjust my hair and jewelry, and touch up my make-up.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, if you would take your seats, please. The show will begin shortly," someone says from afar.

At the same time, Valentin enters the room and gushes over me again, when, really, I should be the one complimenting him and his team for creating this amazing dress they are letting me wear.

"The show starts in ten minutes. Guys go first and then the girls. You'll be the ninth to go," he says, looking at me from

every angle.

I rub my moist palms together.

“You are *magnifique*, Louise. No stressing,” Valentin says, squeezing my hand.

“Thanks,” I say, forcing myself to smile.

“You can go to the lounge now. I’ll be in the audience. *Bonne chance!*” He winks, before leaving the dressing room.

*It’ll be fine, Louise, get a grip!* I tell myself. I take a deep breath and open the door.

When I enter the lounge, I’m even more nervous. Everyone is here now. Five men and four women. All in incredible designer outfits, looking confident and not at all stressed. I’m the only non-celeb, naturally. Besides Candice and Logan, my co-models are actors Kyle Jenkins, Joseph Cole, and Skylar Barker, singers Hannah Hayes and John Pierce, and supermodels Marcia Brown, and Justin Murray.

“Relax, Mercier. I can see you shaking,” Logan whispers in my ear. I don’t reply, but I take his hand.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” starts the host. He’s standing on the runway and talking into a microphone. “I’m Francis Brewer, founder of The Fashion Cause, and it’s my honor to welcome you to the Designer Charity Gala. Every year, we raise millions of dollars here, thanks to you and the incredible designers. Your generosity goes toward an important goal for the fashion industry: stop modern slavery and improve garment workers’ workplace conditions all around the world.

So, thank you for being here tonight and supporting this important cause.”

“Now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for: the fashion show. Each designer has been asked for their take on a fairytale character outfit. You each have on your table a device to allow you to place your bid. It automatically changes when the new design is up. Just type the amount you want to bid, and place enter. Staff are available all around the room to help you if you require assistance.” He pauses for a moment, and a classical waltz ballad begins to play in the background.

“We’ll start with the men. First up is Kyle Jenkins, representing the Tom Ford house with a Prince Adam outfit inspiration from the *Beauty and the Beast*,” he announces, and Kyle steps on the runway. The guys all look dashing. Next up is John Pierce whose outfit is inspired by John Smith for Armani, then Justin Murray, Prince Henry from *Cinderella*, representing Michael Kors. Joseph Cole’s outfit is inspired from Li Shang, Mulan’s prince, for Yves St Laurent, and then it’s Logan’s turn in his Prince Eric Lucacci suit from *The Little Mermaid*.

When the men are finished, it’s the women’s turn. Marcia Brown goes first in an amazing Rapunzel gown made by Dior. She looks magnificent and so at ease. I wish I could be more like her. Next, it’s Hannah Hayes’ turn. She’s wearing a dress inspired by Tiana, made by Carolina Herrera.

“It’ll be fine,” Candice keeps telling me, squeezing my hand. I’m not sure if she’s trying to comfort me or herself at



this point. She's stressed too, but there's nothing I can do to make it better. I'm not sure I can even speak. The show is going well, though. They're all so amazing up there. The models and their outfits are receiving thunderous applause from the audience, and the donations are through the roof.

*It's for a good cause, you can do it.* I keep telling myself. Candice is up. I watch her step on the runway with a radiant smile on her face under the cheers of the guests.

"Louise, you're up next," the assistant says, beckoning me.

"Make me proud," Valentin calls behind me, and I give him a tensed nod. I'll do my best.

"Next is Louise Mercier with an outfit inspired by Sleeping Beauty's dress, created by Maison Gaumé," the host speaks into the microphone, and I step on the runway. It's even more imposing from here, but I don't let it intimidate me. I start walking amidst the applause and cheers, doing my best to keep a big smile on my face the entire time. I stop a few times to twirl like the other girls did before me, in order for the bidders to get a good view of the dress, and I make my way backstage through the applause once more.

Skylar Barker goes after me, in a marvelous Chanel dress inspired by Belle. Thank God it's over. And it went well, too. I'm so glad I did this. It was fun and I'm so proud to be representing Maison Gaumé and Valentin's creation.

After slipping into the more comfortable version of the dress, I drop by the restrooms. Stress pee, as always, is holding me back.

“Did you know Louise got Kiara’s spot?” a feminine voice says when I’m about to flush the toilet. I freeze. What are they talking about?

“What? No way!” another girl says.

“Yep. Someone from the agency told me. She didn’t take the news well. But as I told her, at least she didn’t sleep her way through this business. She became a model because she’s actually talented,” she says, turning on the tap to wash her hands, I assume.

“True. I mean, how more obvious can she be? Jack Rose, Logan Reyes, who’s next?” she chuckles.

My chest constricts. Is that really what people think of me? Still, after all this time? The paparazzi yesterday, now this? I thought it was all behind me. Is this true? Do I owe all my successes to Jack or Logan? *No! You’re the one who wrote the book, did the photoshoots, the one who actually showed up and did the work when Jack bailed on his commitments.*

I hear a bag zipping and heels echoing on the tiled floor. I wait for five more seconds and open the door. They’re gone. I don’t know who they were, but it doesn’t matter. Their words fueled my imposter syndrome, big time. I take a deep breath and wash my hands before heading back to the dining room.

“Louise, here you are, *ma* gorgeous *princesse*,” Valentin says, bringing me in a tight hug. “You did a marvelous job. I am so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Valentin,” I say, my voice breaking a little.

“Let me introduce you to some people. Especially my fellow designers.” He winks before taking my arm.

Valentin’s words boosted my confidence a little, but the out-of-place feeling haunts me for the rest of the night. It gets a little better when the host announces a record-breaking amount of fifteen million dollars raised for The Fashion Cause, making me proud of the small role I played in this success, no matter how I got there.



WAKING UP IS REALLY hard today, but I still feel good. Valentin kept telling me how happy he was he chose me to represent his creation, and that he wouldn’t have it any other way. Logan is still sleeping, so I take my phone quietly and look at the pictures from last night. I’m glowing, radiant even. The dress is beautiful and sparkles under the flashes of the photographs. These are with no doubt, my best red carpet pictures yet. The dress and the jewels, of course, are a big part of the reason. But I look happy, too. Especially in the ones with Logan. I’m really glad to have him in my life. I thought I would never get to feel this way again.

I’m happy to spend the day with him relaxing at the hotel’s spa. It’s a pleasant change of pace after last week. Candice and Watson join us later in the day, and we all enjoy the pool, the hot tubs, and get some wonderful massages.

At five o’clock, we’re back in Logan’s room, watching TV in bed, when he asks, “I was wondering if you’d like to go on

a little trip with me?” He shifts to his side to face me.

“Sure, where?” I reply.

“San Antonio, my hometown. I really want to see my dad. I haven’t seen him since January. He hasn’t been able to come visit either because he had surgery last month,” he explains. “Nothing life threatening,” he adds, seeing the worried look on my face. “He had knee replacement surgery, though, so he still can’t travel. There’s a Six Flags nearby too, so we will have a lot of fun!”

“Sold! I’m going then.” I laugh. It does seem a little soon to meet his dad, but everything has been so casual between us, I don’t think it’ll change anything.

“Cool! I know it’s not Bora Bora or anything, but—”

“Bora Bora?” I repeat, arching my eyebrow, and he grimaces.

“Sorry.” He shrugs. “I couldn’t help myself. I had to look you up online.”

“Stalker much!” I accuse, laughing. “Anyway, I’d love to go with you. Seeing your hometown and meeting your family is way better than any tropical island, trust me.”

“Really?” He grins.

“Of course! When are we going?”

“I don’t know yet. I wanted to talk to you first. Maybe the second half of May?”

“Okay, perfect. That way, I have some time to write before we go. I’m almost done.”

“Cool, then we could go on the nineteenth? My birthday is on the twentieth, so my dad would love to have me there—”

“*What?* How did I not know that?”

“Never came up.” He shrugs.

“Do you want to know when mine is?”

“September the second.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I forgot who I was talking to.” I chuckle. “Stalker.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Actually, I just asked Candice. But okay.”

“How long do you want to stay there?”

“Mmm, I don’t know. Maybe five or six days? We could do some fun stuff. Six Flags, of course. There’s Sea World. We can go to a ranch with my dad and my cousins. That could be fun, and of course, see the city. It’s pretty cool, actually. I think my sister will come as well, so we’ll see if we can do something together, too.”

“Awesome. I want the full Texas experience!”

“Then you shall have it, Mercier. And you know what they say about Texas?” he whispers.

“Nope.”

“Everything is bigger in Texas.” He grins before taking his shirt off and hovering over me.



## THICKER SKIN

THE NEXT DAY, I meet Kendra in my room after lunch to debrief the Designer Charity Ball. She's already there when I enter.

"Hey!" she peeps, raising her head from her laptop. She's sitting at the oval dining room table.

"Hi, Kendra. How are you doing?" I ask, giving her a hug.

"I'm good! Great, actually. Did you have a look at the press yet?" she asks.

"I only looked at the red carpet pictures. I wanted to see the rest with you."

"Okay. First of all, you were gorgeous. Valentin and his team were thrilled to have you as an ambassador of the brand, and your gown sold for 1.2 million dollars."

"Oh, wow! That's incredible!" This definitely helps with the imposter syndrome.

"You did really well on that runway and on the red carpet. Your pictures are beautiful. You're a natural, as I told you

before. Your interviews went great, too. Here, let's watch the videos and look at the articles."

We watch and read them in silence, and then she shows me the comments. People are saying I'm funny and naturally beautiful. And the *Music Gazette* reporter said "Louise is a breath of fresh air. A pure joy and delight to be around."

*A delight?* "Wow! That's incredible!"

"*A la mode* magazine was overjoyed, of course, with you being French. And there's a lot of positive feedback from France too on social media, saying how proud they are of their French girl."

"That's so cool! I'm excited! So, what's next?"

"Well." She claps her hands. "I already received a request to do the cover and an interview for *Beauty Owl*."

My mouth falls open. "What? Really?"

"I know. I still wanted to make sure you were interested before saying yes, but obviously, this is a big opportunity."

"I love that magazine. Of course, I'm interested."

"Great. They want to talk about you, your success, your book. We decided on the July issue since your book comes out a few days before. I don't have the date of the shoot and the interview yet, but they told me it'll be before May fifteenth."

"Perfect. I'm leaving on the eighteenth for San Antonio with Logan. We'll be gone for five or six days, I think."



“Oh, that’s cool! We shouldn’t have any promo for the tour before June, anyway,” she says, locking her phone.

“And I’m almost done with the rewrite, so they should have it even before expected.”

“You’re a machine, I swear!” She laughs. “Oh, and for the launch party tonight, Ashley will do you hair and make-up again, and I will come along this time. Do you know what you’re wearing?”

“I have a few options. I bought a few outfits the other day with Candice, so I just have to pick. She already validated them for the Pink Paradise theme, so I’m good.”

We chat a little longer, and then I go back to Logan’s room. He’s hanging up the phone when I enter.

“Hey, what’s up?” I ask, seeing his worried expression.

“It was Hector. I have good news and bad news. Which one do you want first?”

“Bad first, always.”

“Really? You have to pick good first, or that’s not gonna work.”

“Okay, then.” I roll my eyes.

“The negotiations for my next movie are finally over. We start shooting in July with a location shoot in Paris.”

“What? That’s awesome! Maybe I could come along, and we could make a trip out of it!”

“Yeah! That’s what I was thinking, too. That’d be great.”

“Well, then, what’s the bad news?”

“I know who my co-lead is going to be.” He pauses.  
“Jennifer.”

“No way.” I cross my arms.

“Yeah. They just signed an agreement this morning. I didn’t even know they were talking to her.”

“They can’t do that. You guys have history. It’s not right!”

“They don’t really care. As long as we don’t hate each other and can work together, it’s not their problem.”

“This is unbelievable!”

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do. I signed the contract already, and it doesn’t have a retraction clause if I don’t like my co-star for no valid reason.”

“Are you going to kiss her? Make out?”

He grimaces. “It’s a rom-com, and she’s my romantic lead, so...”

I glance through the window. “Great. That’s just great.” Just what I needed. For my boyfriend to fool around with his ex on screen.

“I’m sorry. But what do you want me to do? I swear there’s nothing between us. She’s just a friend. I don’t have any feelings for her. I hope it won’t ruin our relationship. But it’s my job. I have no choice.”

I sigh and look him in the eyes. If I don’t trust him, this will never work. “I know. It’ll be fine. Like you said, it’s your job.

It wouldn't be fair of me to be mad at you. I'll do my best not to be jealous."

"Thanks Mercier," he says, taking me in his arms. "I promise only you will experience the real, breathtaking Logan Reyes kisses."

I laugh. "Breathtaking, huh?"

"What, do you disagree?" he says, taking my head into his hands and kissing me hungrily.

"Mmm. I'm not sure. Can you do that one more time?"

A few hours later, I have to go back to my room and get ready for tonight's event. When Ashley is done with my hair and make-up, I get dressed in my new pink Versace dress, and we go down to the lobby to meet Sabrina and Cole, who came to New York to support Candice. Naturally, the front of the hotel is swarming with paparazzi. Great. My back stiffens as Logan leads me outside.

*Click Click "Logan, how do you like New York?" Click "Sabrina, you look great," Click "Sabrina, over here." "Louise, are you gonna start a career as a model?"*

"Congratulations again. You were wonderful," Sabrina says, when we're in the car. I'm sitting in the back with her. Jacob, her bodyguard, and Bruce are seated in front of us, and Logan and Cole are right behind the driver.

"Thanks," I say, looking out the window.

"What's wrong?" she whispers.

“What do you mean? Nothing’s wrong.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Your face is telling me otherwise.”

I sigh. “It’s just... People say I got where I am because I slept with Jack and now Logan.” Saying it feels really stupid, but it’s like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders by talking about it.

“What?” she says. “That’s bullshit, and you know it. Plus, you weren’t dating anyone when Ivory asked you to be their sole brand ambassador, or when you got your publishing deal. They wanted you because you’re talented, because they loved your story, and because you’re a beautiful, genuine girl.”

“I don’t know anymore. I don’t feel like I deserve all of this. Paparazzi are saying it, and at the gala I overheard girls talking about it. I can’t shake the feeling that they might be right.”

“Girl, this business is full of sharks. You have to have a thicker skin. And you know, once they start to talk about you like that, it means you made it. No one hates on irrelevant, untalented people,” she says, squeezing my knee.

“Thanks, Brina,” I say, relaxing my back against the seat. She’s right. I can’t let people bring me down because they’re jealous, and paparazzi are always looking to stir up trouble. I should know better by now. Maison Gaumé, Ivory, Delacroix—they all made the choice to work with *me*, and my relationships have nothing to do with it. It’s time I accept that.

As with every Candice Anderson party, there’s an army of paparazzi outside, and the guest list is fabulous. The

decoration is over the top, pink and glitter everywhere, matching her album's jacket. I've already heard some of the songs, including the single "Bad Bitches," for which we did an impromptu unofficial music video at Candice's pajama party. The rest of the album is equally good, and we have a wonderful time. She sings a few songs, and we dance a lot. It's a frank success and I'm very proud of her. She worked so hard on this, and so fast too, because she had to fill in for Jack to please the label.

I'm getting refills for Logan and myself when I see Adrian at the bar, buried in his thoughts and looking worried.

"Hi, Adrian," I say.

"Hey, Louise," he replies, hugging me.

"How are you? This is a huge success!"

"It is, yes! She's amazing. Such a hard worker. I'm so proud of her."

"I know. Me, too. She deserves it."

"Yes," he says, looking down at his drink.

"Are you okay?" I ask, but the second I say those words, I regret them. I know what's coming, and I'm not sure I want to hear it.

"Yes, sorry." He forces a smile. "It's Jack, you know. Still no news. Thanks for your call after Coachella, though. Even if we didn't find him, I appreciate it. The label is pissed off. They're on my back every single day. The album should have come out more than a month ago. I don't know what to do

anymore. We even asked paparazzi and private detectives to track him down, but he changes places too often, and he's getting good at avoiding the media. I'm starting to really worry. Not only for his career but also his life, you know?"

"Yeah... I'm sorry. I wish I could help. I have no idea where he could be."

"I know you don't." He stares into his glass. "It's okay. It's not your fault. I just wish he would call, you know? If the album doesn't come out before June, the label will drop him for sure. I don't get it. We've been down this road before. He went AWOL, but he always came back after a few weeks or months top, and after rehab we would be on track again. I don't know... This time, it feels different."

"Yeah," I whisper. I'm not sure what to say. I still can't help feeling I have a huge part of responsibility in the matter.

"Anyway," he says, catching my eyes again. "We're not here to talk about Jack. We're here to celebrate Candice's success, so let's forget about him for one night. Enjoy yourself Louise," he says before walking away.

This was really weird, and I'm starting to worry about Jack again. Mel's right. He treated me poorly, but I can't help being concerned about him and his situation. Will he ever come back? What's going to happen to his career? Can something really bad happen to him? What if he overdoses? My heart tightens at the thought.

"Mercier! What's taking so long with these drinks? My throat is aching dry." Logan grins, but it fades as soon as his

eyes meet mine.

“What’s up? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, shaking it off. “Sorry, I was just talking to Adrian.”

“Okay,” he says, looking at me, expecting more. But I don’t divulge the topic of the discussion, and he doesn’t ask.

We get our drinks, and I shift the conversation to San Antonio instead. The rest of the night, I try to forget about what Adrian said, and about Jack altogether. After all, he’s the one who threw me away. Sure, he looked like he wanted to say something at Coachella, but maybe it was just another insult. And anyway, he left. So why should I spend one more minute worrying about him when I have an amazing boyfriend, a new career and supporting friends? But my subconscious decides differently, and when I fall asleep, I meet once again a tormented blond boy dangerously walking on the edge of a precipice.





## WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE

MAY 10 IS A big day for me. I finally finished the rewrite of my book. I sent everything to Paul, and now I just have to wait for him to finish the check. I'm thrilled with what I did. I feel I really managed to translate the essence of the characters, the powerful speeches, and important moments in French. Alexandra and Griffin are ecstatic, and we schedule a meeting next week to talk about the marketing plans.

Logan and I are trying to hike at least twice a week now, and I'm doing it in thirty-five minutes now, which I'm very proud of. I've been sharing my hiking exploits with my followers, who are very encouraging. This also started a hiking challenge that has been tried by over ten million people all over the world to encourage people to exercise more. If you'd told me a few months ago that this would happen, I wouldn't have believed it. Me encouraging other people to do sports? But that's the power of social media, I guess. I love interacting with my fans, too. Now that I have a bit more free time, I share a lot more about me, my life, my upcoming book and projects, and they really seem excited.

I also use that time off to find a gift for Logan's birthday, and damn, is it hard. After consulting with Bella and Brina, I make a big donation and sponsor an animal in his name at the San Antonio Zoo. One of our common interests is the love of animals, so it seems to be the perfect gift. I choose the San Antonio Zoo because it's his hometown and that's where we'll be for his birthday. I just have to figure out how to get him there to meet Olaf, the polar bear. We will meet his keeper at eleven am on Sunday for a special experience.

Finally, it's the day of my *Beauty Owl* cover interview and photoshoot, and the villa they chose for the photoshoot is breathtaking, perched over a cliff with a magnificent view of the canyon, boasting a swimming pool with a cascade. This is my second solo photoshoot so I'm a little more relaxed than the first time. We first shoot the outdoor scenes, and the pictures are really nice. I wear a pretty Balenciaga golden swimsuit with a lot of jewelry, at least a lot more than I would wear in any pool, but the look works.

For the summer attire, they chose a sheer, black Gucci kimono over the swimsuit and Jimmy Choo golden high heels. Again, I would never wear these shoes near a pool or at the beach, but well, this is a fashion magazine. The photographer is hilarious. He's Italian with a thick accent, and he sometimes asks me to do weird things, but when he shows me the shots, it's really good. I look like a model, and seeing these pictures makes me actually feel like one.

The last shoot is in a closet. I'm sitting in front of my coiffeuse getting ready for an evening out. They chose a black

satin Maison Gaumé dress and Louboutin black stilettos. He takes a few shots of me applying make-up, looking in the mirror, putting my shoes on, etc. and finally, it's over. I'm exhausted. We barely had thirty minutes for lunch, and I was on my feet all day, in heels. So, it's with great relief that I step back into my beloved Karl Lagerfeld sneakers and join Kendra in the living room to wait for the reporter.

Katerina Vokova, the journalist, is a tall, blond blue-eyed girl, who looks like she could be the model.

“Hello, Louise. It's nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” I reply.

“Let's dive right in. As you know, the article will be titled: *'Louise Mercier: The American Dream,'* so we'll talk about everything. From your childhood to where you are today.”

I nod and wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

“So, let's start with France. Tell me about your family, where you grew up, and how you came to live in the US?”

“Well, I come from a middle-class family. My mom is an accountant, and my dad is an insurance officer. I have an eighteen-year-old sister, and they all live in the Champagne region in France, which is about two hours east of Paris. When I was eighteen, I decided to come to the US. I wanted to learn the language, and I had been passionate about the American culture from a young age. So, I worked a lot of different jobs, and, in addition to a scholarship, I was able to move to New

York on a student visa to study at NYU. I studied marketing and graduated with honors four years later.”

“And then? Did you find a job?”

“I did. I worked in a marketing company for about two years. Then they were cuts, and I was let go.”

“That’s when you met Jack Rose, wasn’t it?” Her eyes are gleaming with anticipation.

My mouth goes dry, and my stomach sinks. I knew it was coming. Kendra prepared me, but it still stings. It’ll be the first time I’ve talked about this in public. At least, it’s my chance to put everything on the table.

“It is. We spent two weeks together and then reconnected a few months later. He asked me to move in with him so we could give our relationship a try, and I agreed.” I reply, playing with a hole in my jeans.

“Yes, but then you broke up. There has been a lot of talk about this in the media, but you never publicly talked about this. How did that happen? Can I ask?”

“I guess we just wanted different things, so he ended our relationship. It was hard at first, but I got through it thanks to my amazing support system.”

“And now you’re dating Logan Reyes,” she says, adjusting her glasses.

“Yes. That was very unexpected. I didn’t want to date anyone for a while, but we met, and Logan is such an amazing

guy. It was very hard to resist,” I say, relaxing my back against the couch.

“I bet it was.” She winks. “You guys looked so cute on the red carpet at the Designer Charity Gala. How did you feel to be invited to model at such an exclusive event?”

“Thank you. It was such an honor. Valentin Guérin and the Maison Gaumé team designed an incredible dress, and I truly felt like I was in a fairytale.”

“You are also the face of Ivory this spring. How does that feel?” she says, leaning forward a little.

“It still seems unreal that they chose me to represent them. I guess they wanted a regular girl and not a model, but it’s crazy for me to see that I’m following in the footsteps of so many talented models and celebrities like Hannah Hayes, Ellen Carlton, and Jessica Sheer. I’ve always been a big fan of the brand, too, so saying yes was a no brainer for me.”

“And now, the next big thing is your book *What If?* coming out. Tell me more.”

“Yes!” I clap my hands. “I’ve been working on it since I first came to the US. I wrote it on and off for a couple of years, and I finally finished it last year. It’s about a French baker entering a baking competition against her arch nemesis from cooking school, and it’s coming out on June thirtieth, just in time for the summer holidays. I actually wrote it in both French and English, so it’s pretty special.”

Her eyes widen. “Wow! That must be a tremendous amount of work.”

“It was. I had to shut myself in a hotel room and in my home office to finish it, but it was worth it. It’s so much more genuine that way. I can’t wait to see what people think about it, and I hope they’ll adore it as much as I do.”

She turns a page of her notebook. “So, would you say that you’re living your own American dream?”

“You know what? I never thought about it like that, but yeah, I think I am. I have a life here that I would have never had if I hadn’t moved to this country, so I’m forever grateful for all this.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Does that mean you will apply for citizenship?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I actually haven’t thought about it. For now, I have a green card. I’m not ready to forgo completely my French roots either, so maybe dual citizenship? But I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

“Okay, that’s it for today.” She closes her notebook and puts it back into her bag. “Thanks a lot for your honesty and this delightful moment,” she says, standing up.

I shake her hand. “Thank you. It was a pleasure.”

She shakes Kendra’s hand and exits the room.

“That went great!” Kendra says, clasping her hands.

“Yeah. It was surprisingly easy to talk to her. Oh, wait, it’s Candice,” I say, seeing my phone light up on the coffee table.

“Louise! Guess what?”

“What?” I ask, sitting down on the couch.

“Wats asked me to marry him,” she exclaims.

“Oh, my God, Candice! That’s so amazing. Congratulations!”

“Thanks. I’m so happy! He asked me this morning, in bed. It was such a surprise. Listen, I don’t have much time, I have a lot of people to call, and I have to do press for the album, but I wanted you to be the first to know because I wanted to ask you if you’ll be my maid of honor?”

“What? Of course, I will. I would love that, Candice!”

“Awesome, girl! I’m so excited. Talk to you soon. And if I don’t see you before you go, enjoy your trip to Texas.”

“Thanks. I’m so happy for you, Candice,” I reply before hanging up. And I am. She deserves so much happiness. She and Wat\$on are such a cute couple. They’re perfect for each other.

But then, why does it feel like my heart has just been stabbed? Why can’t I help but think about my failed almost-marriage? Why can’t I just feel pure joy for my friend? And why am I still thinking about Jack when I’m going to my boyfriend’s hometown in a few days to meet his family?





## THE MARKETING STRATEGY

A FEW DAYS LATER, Kendra, Griffin, Alexandra, and Mark from Delacroix's marketing team are all sitting on my patio for our meeting.

“First, we have a little surprise,” Alexandra announces. She takes a yellow book out of her bag. My book. I, Louise Mercier, published a freaking book!

“Ta-da! We thought we'd bring you the first printed copy.”

“Oh, my God!” I gasp, looking at the book like it's some kind of UFO. I can't believe it. It's here, in my hands. I love it, I love the beautiful color, the lettering, the picture. It's perfect, everything I ever hoped it would be.

“Thank you,” I say, a few tears escaping my eyes. “It's amazing. I love it!”

“Good! We love it, too! Now let's talk about how we're going to bring about the success this book deserves.”

The meeting lasts for about three hours. They tell me everything they imagined for promoting the book in France and the USA. Copies will be sent book reviewers, bloggers,

magazines, and Amazon top reviewers in both countries. They will also send a copy to the *Culture Journal* in the hope of being featured in their top ten best books of the month, which is apparently always followed by a surge in sales.

Then they show me the schedule around the launch, and it is packed. They did a wonderful job.

I'll start on June 27 with the *Hollie Barker Show* and *Cook-a-long* with John Greenway. The next day will be two radio shows and a Q&A on social media, and on the 29<sup>th</sup>, we'll travel to New York. The book will launch on the 30<sup>th</sup>, and I'll appear in a talk show and do an interview for *New York Trends* magazine that morning. In the afternoon, I'll have a book signing at Bookmarked on Times Square. Me, signing my book in Times Square! This is insane!

Same type of schedule goes for Paris, but I'll stay there for four days. A reporter from the biggest French TV channel will follow me around during my stay to do a story on me, which is beyond belief. I watched that show so many times, talking about the success stories of the rich and famous, and now it's my turn. I'll have more TV and radio shows, too, as well as a book signing. I'll also do Q&A on social media again, and I have interviews and cover photoshoots *Hera* and *A la mode* magazines, *A la mode* being the one whom I talked to on the red carpet of the Designer Charity Ball. They also added a meeting with Delacroix publishing on the last day. This is Intense, but I'm excited!

“That’s really cool, guys! Thank you so much. You did a great job! So, what happens after the fifth?”

“Well, we thought we’d let you have some time off. You’ll be in France, so we assume you’ll want to stay to see your family?” Kendra says.

“Yeah, that would be great, actually. I wasn’t sure I’d have the time,”

“Of course! We’ll let you know if we have more requests, but I believe it won’t be before August or September. We’ll see how it goes. The first two weeks will be a big determining factor in the success of the book,” Alexandra says.

“But, no pressure,” Griffin adds in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“I’m sure it’ll be a success. The story is great,” Alexandra says. “You have an enormous fan base already. We will rely on it a lot, so make sure to post tons of content on your Insta. Plus, with the book tour and all the media interviews, we’ll have good exposure. I’m positive you’ll have a best seller in no time.”

“Okay.” I laugh, fidgeting with my bracelet. “I’m not sure about that, but thanks for believing in it so firmly.”

“Then we were also thinking about promoting it in a different way. Using influencers, like we would promote a perfume or make-up, for example. Since it was your idea, Kendra, I’ll let you explain,” she says.

“Yes. I thought we could use even further social media and tap into your impressive followers. I’m talking about all the celebrities who follow you. We would send them the book in advance so they can read it and showcase it on their social media. It’s used a lot nowadays, but as Alexandra said, it’s usually for perfumes, make-up, or health-related items. It’s also perfect timing with everyone going on summer vacations, they will have the time to read it.”

“Okay. That sounds cool, but I’m not really sure who I’ll send it to. Sure, I have some celebrities following me, but I don’t personally know a lot of them, so it might be weird. Plus, if we do this, I don’t want to send the book just like that. I want to make it personal, write a note, and maybe add something else? I don’t know. But just sending the book feels a little empty, cheap,” I say. “I hope I’m not offending anyone, but I can’t see myself sending a copy with a note saying *‘Here’s my book, read it please and tell your followers about it.’* It’s not my style.”

“Of course not. What you say is exactly what I was thinking,” Kendra replies.

“What else would you want to include, though?” Griffin asks.

“We need to find something to make it more of a gift and not just a promotional ask,” Kendra says.

“Exactly. I don’t want them to feel used. I’m happy to gift them the book, and I hope they read it, even if they don’t promote it.”

“Well, the first purpose of sending the book is for them to promote it,” Mark says.

“Sure, I know, but not the only purpose. At least, not for me,” I reply.

“Um, okay.” Alexandra says. “Let’s think about it then.”

“Ivory products? I’m sure they would be more than happy,” Kendra suggests.

“No, it has to be separated from her other ventures,” Alexandra says.

“And it has to be linked to the book, too, not just something random,” I add.

After two more hours of brainstorming, we finally come up with the idea. We will send it along with macarons. It’s perfect because in the novel, the main character is a French baker girl working in a macaron shop in Paris. They will ask several bakeries, including Petit Fours and Etienne Poussin, my personal favorite, to make macaron boxes with one letter on each cookie to spell the title of the book, “*What If Now* I just hope everything will be ready on time. The launch is in just over a month.

We then have to make the list so they can send me the right number of books, and I can start writing the notes. They advise me to keep a low number, under twenty people. I start with the obvious: Logan, Candice, Wat\$on, Sabrina, Ava, Tania, Hollie, John, Valentin. Then we talk about Sarah Kimmons, Opal Davis, Jayde Barnes, Clarissa Goodman, Sophie Mills, and

Elsie George. I've met them a few times, and we've chatted, but still, can I send them my book like that? It sounds a little personal, but Kendra tells me it's perfectly acceptable. We are acquaintances, and they all wrote or called after my accident, after all. In addition to them, I also ask that they send copies to my friends, even the non-famous ones, like Mel, Jody, Sandra, Adrian, Kim, Gwen, Joe, as well as French versions to my friends and family in France. , I go to sleep, ready for my trip to San Antonio tomorrow, exhausted but excited about how everything is now falling into place.



WHEN WE TOUCH DOWN, I immediately feel the heat piercing the aircraft. I expected it Though since Logan said the temperature can reach as high as ninety degrees in May. It's five o'clock, so the sun is still shining brightly. I can feel Logan's excitement rising as the flight attendant opens the door and lets us out into the warm air.

"Logan! Man, good to see you," calls a tall guy leaning on a gray pickup truck. He looks a lot like Logan, only a bit older.

"Hi, cous!" Logan says, shaking his hand and hugging him. "Theo, this is Louise. Louise, Theo, my cousin."

"Hi, nice to meet you!" I try to act cool, but I'm far from it. What if he hates me?

"Nice to finally meet you, too. Heard so much about you." He winks. "Those all your bags?" he adds, pointing to the luggage that has just been delivered next to the plane.

So, he talked about me with his cousin? I didn't expect that. The boys are loading our luggage into the back of the truck, and the three of us climb in the front. I let them talk to each other while I admire the scenery. The drive to Logan's dad's is short, around fifteen minutes, and I'm surprised by the size of the house. It's in a colonial style. A large balcony stands above the front door, supported by two columns. The lawn is manicured, and colorful flowers line the path to the house. I thought he grew up in a more modest environment.

"You coming in, Theo?" Logan asks.

"Nah, I'll see you guys tomorrow. I gotta go get the kids from school. Bye, y'all!"

"So, this is where you grew up?" I ask as we walk up to the front door.

"Wha—No! I bought this house for my dad when I got my first Hollywood deal. We used to live in a much smaller house in a very shitty neighborhood. We never really had much money. It was only my sister, me and my dad, you know, so it was rough."

"Oh, okay. That's incredibly generous of you." It doesn't surprise me one bit. Logan is such a caring person—of course, he'd buy his dad a new house.

"It's normal. It's family," he says, knocking at the door.

"Logan. So good to see you, son!" a curly brown haired man exclaims. His skin is a little darker than Logan's, and he

has the same eyes as his two children. “And Louise! So happy to finally meet you!” he says, pulling me into a hug.

Guess he talked to his dad about me, too? Logan’s glancing back and forth between the two of us. “Hi! Nice to meet you too, Mr. Reyes.”

“Oh, no, no. You call me Juan! Now, come on in. I just made some fresh iced tea for you guys,” he says, patting his son’s shoulders.

We step into the entryway and enter a large room. There is a staircase on the left, and on the right, there’s a big dining room and a kitchen. Large sliding glass doors overlook the patio and the garden, boasting a swimming pool.

We have a pleasant talk with Juan. He’s very kind and curious, too. He asks me a lot of questions about myself, my family, and my job, and he tells us about his new prosthetic knee. He’s very talkative, so it definitely makes me at ease right away. I learn that when he was young, Juan used to work as a tour guide in a tourism agency and was working nights in a factory to make ends meet. With Logan’s help, he bought the company a few years ago and now employs about twenty people. We talk more about his work, and I promise to go see the agency with Logan while we are here. Afterward, Logan takes me on a tour of the house.

The backyard is huge. Besides the big swimming pool, there’s a stone grill, some loungers, and a large table that seats at least fifteen people. Behind the living room, there’s a corridor leading to the garage, a small gym on the left, and



Juan's bedroom and bathroom on the right. Upstairs, there are two bathrooms and three bedrooms. We put our luggage in one of them, and I tell Logan to go back down while I unpack. I want to let him have a few moments alone with his father, since they haven't seen each other in five months.

When I come back downstairs, they've already started making dinner, and it smells delicious. I now know where Logan got his cooking skills from. We enjoy a tasty meal, just the three of us. And Logan says to savor the peace and quiet, because tomorrow, it will feel like a tornado hit the house.



## WHISPERS

HE WAS RIGHT, OF course. Today is Logan's birthday, so we spend the morning decorating the house with balloons and banderoles that his dad bought for the occasion. They really go all out for birthdays, and I like that a lot. We're like that in my family, too. It's always twenty to thirty guests for a simple birthday gathering, not even the big ones. The house looks great, and we set up the table outside which can, it turns out, comfortably fit eighteen people. There's also a small kids' table with paper plates and goblets. Juan, despite his bad knee, is cooking, using his cane to help him balance his way through the kitchen.

Once we're done with decorating, we help him by cutting the vegetables and making sauces for the tacos. Around eleven, Bella arrives with Jay, her boyfriend, and they help us finish setting everything up.

"Mercier," Logan says, taking me by the arm. "Come with me?"

I'm intrigued. I follow him upstairs to the room we're staying in.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“I wanted to give you this,” he says, fetching a small jewelry box from his bag.

“What’s this? It’s your birthday, not mine.” I chuckle, my sweaty fingers clutching around the box.

“I don’t need a reason to give you a gift.” He shoves his hands in his jeans pocket. “You make me happy.”

I blush hard as I’m opening the jewelry box. It’s stunning, a very thin diamond bracelet, discreet, yet stunning. “Oh, wow, Logan, this is beautiful. Thank you so much,” I say, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him.

“You’re beautiful, Mercier. This is just a nice accessory.” He winks and puts the bracelet on my wrist. I wiggle it slowly so the bracelet catches the light.

“Thank you, Logan. I love it.” I kiss him on the cheek.

“Let’s go downstairs. I think someone just arrived.”

By twelve thirty, the house is jam-packed. Little kids are running around screaming, everyone is talking and laughing loudly, and music is playing in the background.

I meet all his cousins and aunts and uncles, and they all seem genuinely interested and happy to meet me, and I definitely share the sentiment. Maria, Logan’s grandmother, is especially excited to get to know me and asks me a lot of questions. She asks me to sit next to her for lunch, and I have a fun time, as she tells me many funny stories about her youth

and Logan's childhood. Fifteen minutes in, and I feel I've been part of this family my entire life.

Needless to say, the tacos are mouthwatering, and we all have a wonderful time. As it's getting hot, two choices appear: plunge into the pool, or go back inside. The kids already chose the first option a while ago and are having the best time. The younger crowd joins in, so I do the same. We have a lot of fun splashing each other and playing water polo.

After a while, Juan calls us for dessert. As we dry off, Fabiola brings the cake with two candles, a "2" and "8". We all gather around and sing happy birthday to Logan, who blows out his candles in one breath.

It's now time for gifts, and he receives a lot of cool things. San Antonio Spurs outfit and accessories, so he doesn't forget where he comes from, his cousin Ian says, which is funny because Logan is an avid Los Angeles Clippers fan. He also gets video games, fun pocket games to play on the go, new headphones, a travel bag, season passes for the upcoming Clippers games from Bella, who is then considered a traitor, an overnight stay at a nearby San Antonio ranch from his dad, and from his grandma, he gets a basket filled with homemade goods, like honey, cookies, muffins, liquor, jams, apple juice, yogurts, and olive oil. I learn that she actually used to make all of this herself on her farm. These days, she only makes the jams and the baked goods, but the rest still comes from her ranch. Young farmers are helping her keep the estate running since the death of her husband.

Everyone else has given him their gifts, and I tell Logan that he will get his gift from me tomorrow, and that this is all I can say for now. Everybody is intrigued, but I don't give in. I want to surprise him. We enjoy some coffee with Maria's pastries, and soon enough, everyone is on their way back home.

Only Bella and Jay, who are staying in one of the other bedrooms, are still here. I'm about to exit the bathroom when I hear whispering coming from the corridor.

"... careful... again.... Money... Louise... Jack," someone says.

Oh, no. Not again. I'm tired of this. This time, I'm saying something. I storm out and find Logan and Bella in front of her room.

"Oh, hi, Louise," Bella says, her face reddening.

"What's up?" I ask, trying to remain calm.

"Nothing." Logan's lips tighten into a smile, but I can tell he's lying. He's not even looking me in the eye.

"I heard what you were saying," I say.

"Don't worry about it, Mercier. My sister is delusional." He rolls his eyes.

"Well, I'm tired of people whispering behind my back. So, please, Bella, by all means, tell me what your concerns are." I put my hands on my hips to seem confident, but really, it's to steady my trembling hands.

“Mercier, let it go. It’s fine,” Logan says, trying to take me by the arm, but I’m standing firm on the ground.

“Tell me, to my face.”

She hesitates for a second and says, “I’m just worried about Logan, that’s all. He’s a good guy. Too good for his own good sometimes, and people tend to take advantage of him.”

“Why would you think that about me?”

“It’s just... the bracelet and your former boyfriend also being a celebrity. You have this grand lifestyle now because of it, I—”

“Bella, stop!” Logan says, clenching his fists.

My jaw literally drops. Of all people, I really didn’t think Bella would see me as a gold-digger. I take a deep breath. I need to stay calm.

“It never occurred to you that you didn’t know the whole story? That what you see or read in the tabloids isn’t true? Here’s the story you heard. The short version. I was a middle-class girl living in New York. I met Jack Rose, and we fell in love. He asked me to move in with him in his big L.A. mansion and showered me with designer clothes and jewelry. But then, we broke up. And now I get to live in a four-million-dollar house and have a career as a model with a book coming out. Then, I met your brother, and we started dating. Does that sound about right to you?”

“Mercier, you don’t have to...”

“Oh, but I want to. I’m so fed up with this, you have no idea.”

Bella stays silent, so I continue. “Now, let me give you the long version. I was a middle-class girl living in New York. I met Jack Rose, and we fell in love. He asked me to move in with him in his fancy mansion, and I said no. A few months later, he came back and, unable to deny the connection we had, I said yes.

We moved in together, and he bought me clothes because dating him comes with a certain pressure, clothing wise. This new life came with a lot of scrutiny, which eventually landed me in a coma for six days. After months of recovery, I was finally able to walk again. Then, out of the blue, Jack left me. I thought I would never recover. It took me days to get out of bed, weeks to go outside, sixty-freaking-nine days to start to feel like myself again. I didn’t keep anything Jack gave me. I left it all in his house and went to live with my best friend. Thank God for my friends because I’m not sure I would be here today without them and their endless support.

“I met with a publishing house, and they told me they didn’t want my book if I wasn’t dating Jack Rose—how humiliating, right? It hurt, but I didn’t give up. I finally ended up with a book deal. Jack’s disappearance led to Ivory asking me to be their only brand ambassador for their spring campaign. I accepted, and with that money, I was able to buy myself a four-million-dollar house. Then, I met your brother, and we started dating. Now, that’s the actual story.” I take a deep



breath to calm my heart racing. Damn, it felt good to lay it all out.

“Louise, I’m sorry. I didn’t know any of that. It’s the just the optics, you know? It was bad, and given Logan’s history, I tend to be overprotective,” she says, swaying slightly.

I glance at Logan.

“Um, I was a little careless in the past,” he says, taking my hand in his.

“What do you mean?”

“Careless? No, you were played because you didn’t see what was right in front of you!” Bella says, looking at her brother.

“Yeah, I guess,” he says, scratching the back of his head. “I met this girl; she was an assistant on my first big movie. We started dating, and it was the first time I had that much money in my life, so I wanted to splurge a little. I was crazy about her, and she was crazy about designer everything. Handbags, clothes, shoes. She loved to shop, and I wanted to make her happy...”

“Long story short, she was only with him for his wallet, and it took him months and half of his paycheck to realize it,” Bella adds at once.

“Oh, wow. I’m sorry this happened to you,” I say, squeezing his hand.

“Yeah... so while it doesn’t excuse Bella for being such a nosy, judgmental sister, it does explain where she’s coming

from.”

“Yeah. I get it.” I sigh. “Sorry I went off on you like that, but I’ve heard it so many times since I moved here, and I just couldn’t take it anymore.” I giggle, feeling the pressure drop.

“I’m sorry I accused you in the first place. You didn’t deserve it. He’s always so generous, giving everyone gifts. I was just overprotective, I guess. I just want him to be happy.”

“So do I.” I smile. “I’m glad we had this talk, actually. Everything’s on the table now.”

“Yeah, me too,” she says, squeezing my arm

“Aw, look at you two. So cute, bonding over me,” Logan says, putting one arm over both our shoulders, making us laugh.

“What did I miss? I heard voices,” Jay asks, getting out of the bathroom, a towel around his body.

We all laugh. “I’ll fill you in,” Bella says. “But for now, let’s go to bed. I’m exhausted.”

We say goodnight and go to our respective rooms. I feel like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. A weight I was carrying for a long time, ever since I entered this crazy world. And tonight, I feel like I belong in it just a little more.



## UNEXPECTED

ON SUNDAY, WE GET up early to go to the zoo. Well, Logan doesn't know that we're going to the zoo yet. We're taking one of Juan's cars, a Ford SUV, and to keep the gift a secret as long as possible, I'm doing the driving. When we park in front of the zoo, Logan looks both puzzled and very intrigued.

He keeps asking "Is this my present? A day at the zoo? It's amazing! Did you talk to my sister? We used to come here all the time."

I pick up a map and casually direct us to the polar bear enclosure where the keeper is supposed to meet us for the special encounter. When we arrive in front of Olaf's enclosure, I have a hard time spotting Craig, the keeper, because there are so many people here. When I finally see him, I wave, and he approaches us.

"Hi! My name is Craig. I'm Olaf's keeper," he says, holding his hand out for us to shake. Logan looks surprised. He glances at me, then at Craig, and he begins to make the connection. "You guys can follow me."

“Happy Birthday!” I tell Logan as we follow Craig through a small gate.

“This is my gift? No way! You didn’t! Are we gonna go in?” His eyes are wide with excitement.

“Yep! Actually, I made a donation in your name to the zoo, and I sponsored Olaf for you. You are now one of his godfathers so we get to meet him,” I say, unable to hide my grin.

“You’re incredible, Mercier,” he says, stopping for a minute.

Craig tells us to wait in a small cabin while he gets Olaf to come near us. A few minutes later, it’s safe to go out. Olaf, the 1,500 pound polar bear, is on the other side of a fence, a few feet from us, and his almost 10-foot-long frame is very impressive. Craig tells us some cool facts about Olaf. He loves to swim and can do so for days at a time. His skin is actually black, and not white. His fur is translucent and only appears white because it reflects visible light. We also learn that his species is highly endangered, mostly because of global warming, and while it’s not ideal to have polar bears in zoos, it helps to protect them and allow their species to continue to evolve and reproduce. We feed him some fish with a large clamp, and we take selfies. Not too close, though. Our new friend could still kill us with one paw.

Once our encounter is finished, we thank Craig for this wonderful and unique experience, and I take the map out to decide where to go next.

“You’re amazing. You know that, Mercier?” Logan asks, pulling me into a tight hug.

“Mmm, yeah. I would say so.” I smile.

“Really, this is such an awesome gift. Thank you so much,” he says, cupping my face in his hands and kissing me.

The rest of our day is great. Logan is recognized a few times, but the fans are respectful, so it doesn’t get out of hand, and we can continue our visit peacefully.

On Monday, we wake up early to go to Aquatica, a water park. We decided on a water park instead of Six Flags since it will be ninety-one degrees today. It’s further away than the zoo, but it’s well worth it. We enjoy a fun day in the hot Texas sun. We rent a private cabana to lounge and cool off peacefully. We spend a lot of time at the wave pool and have a blast on the incredible rides they offer here. Some even gave me a real scare.

At night, I invite Logan’s family out to dinner. Juan has been so welcoming, and he’s always standing on his feet, cooking for us when he should be resting. We go to the Riverwalk and enjoy a nice meal at a steakhouse. Afterwards, we take a walk on the crowded riverbanks. Juan is eager to show me his favorite spots and tell me about the canal and the architecture of the buildings.

The next day, Juan asks Ben, one of his best guides, to take us on a tour of the Alamo fort, Juan being too tired, and his knee still sore from our walk last night. The fort is very cool. Logan has seen it many times, of course, so he doesn’t pay

much attention to the guide. Instead, he takes pictures of me every five seconds, which is very distracting. I learn that the fort was built around 1718 by the Spanish military. Alamo means cottonwood in Spanish, and it was named after Mexico gained their independence from Spain. It's also famous for being the site of the notorious battle between Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett.

After the tour, Ben takes us on a boat ride on the canal, and we enjoy a drink on the banks before he goes back to Juan's agency. Logan and I have lunch followed by a post-meal walk along the water where I buy some souvenirs, including a key chain for my collection. Before we go back to Juan's, Logan takes me to his childhood home, and indeed, it's nothing like Juan's current home. It's small, old, worn out, and in a very poor neighborhood. I'm sad for a second for the hard-working dad and his two children who had to endure their mother leaving, but it makes Logan's success even more significant.

We spend our last night in Texas with Juan, Bella, and Jay, but also with Maria, Fabiola, and Jorge. We share a final delicious home-cooked meal and play some board games. I learn that Logan's generosity goes far beyond the occasional gift. He took care of Fabiola's medical bills when she was battling cancer. He's the one paying for the running of his grandma's estate, and he put two of his cousins through college. It makes me appreciate Logan even more and understand why his work is so important to him.

At last, it's time to say goodbye to Juan, who's been such a wonderful host, but also to Bella and Jay, who are staying here

a few more days. This time, it's Bella who takes us back to the small airport. I suggest that we take a taxi instead, but in the Reyes family, no one takes cabs to and from airports. It's "too depressing," Juan says. "We Reyeses stick together."

On the jet back home, we talk about our plans for this summer. I share my crazy book itinerary with him, and I'm thrilled to learn that he will be in Paris the same time I am, since he's filming on location for his new movie. If his schedule allows it, we could even take a trip around France, or Italy, or both. Resting my head against the window, a smile spreads across my face.

A successful modelling job for Ivory, a new house, a book deal, a book tour, summer holidays in France, and an incredible boyfriend to share all of that with. Life works in mysterious ways sometimes. Five months ago, I was at my lowest point. I'm proud of myself for not giving up. Jack will always be a part of my life, and even if I sometimes think I could save him, I know I have to let him go, hope that he'll clean himself up and find happiness the same way I did.

We get into Logan's car and drive directly to my house. But when we arrive, there's someone sitting on my doorsteps. I look at Logan, half-scared, half-surprised. We get out of the car and discover it's a young man. He looks rather disheveled, and his leg is bouncing impatiently. As I come closer, I realize it's not just any young man, but my former fiancé, Jack freaking Rose.

*To be continued*





Frustrated by the cliffhanger ending?

Don't hate me.

Only Love will be released on March 30 and is available on [pre-order on Amazon at a discounted price.](#)



In the meantime, [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive a bonus scene from Broken Boy (Jack's POV): their run-in during Coachella.



ALSO BY MARION DE RÉ

**ONLY GIRL TRILOGY**

#1: Only Girl

#2: Broken Boy.

#3: Only Love. March 30. [Available on pre-order on Amazon at a discounted price. Subscribe to my newsletter](#) for an exclusive sneak peek!



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I can't believe I'm writing acknowledgments for the second book! I'm so lucky to be thanking the same people I did for *Only Girl*. Here they are:

First, to my husband, Etienne, thank you for allowing me to bounce ideas with you even if you've never read a romance novel before. Your outside eye gave me new perspectives. I know being married to me isn't always easy. I love you.

To Caline, my faithful companion, thank you for your cuteness and your meow of encouragements.

To Hannah, my critique partner, thank you for following Louise's journey with so much passion and for helping me improving my craft.

To Sandra Carlton for editing this book. I'm so lucky to have you in my corner. Thank you for making me a better writer.

To my beta readers: Brooke, Hamida, Polly, Klara, Keleise, Julia, Victoria, Kelsey, Laura and Ellie. Thanks for helping make this story shine.

To my ARC readers: thank you so much for your incredible support for Only Girl. It was my debut and you made it the best launch I could have possibly imagined! I hope you'll love this one as much as the first one.

To ND at House of Orian, the incredibly gifted artist who designed this beautiful cover, a big thank you. You're amazing.

To Meghan at Literary Perl Editing, thank you for making sure this book is free of grammatical errors and for your helpful suggestions.

A mes parents, Martine et Patrick. Deux livres ! Vous pouvez vous vanter deux fois plus maintenant ! Merci pour votre soutien. Je vous aime.

Last but not least, thank you, my fantastic readers who stuck around to follow Louise's journey. This means the world to me. I apologize for this second cliffhanger, but I PROMISE the next book won't have one. See you there.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marion De Ré is a French national with an American heart. She lives in the French countryside with her husband, Etienne, and her cat, Caline. Growing up with books and being passionate about the English language, she naturally started to write stories in English. She's always been a huge fan of laugh-out-loud rom coms and tropey romance novels. When she's not reading or writing, you can find her on a plane to a far-away destination or in a Champagne cellar, indulging in a tasting of her favorite drink.

Marion loves hearing from her readers. Visit her website [www.marionderewrites.fr](http://www.marionderewrites.fr) and sign up for her newsletter to be the first to know about her upcoming books and for exclusive content.

You can also find her on social media:

[Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [TikTok](#): @marionderewrites

