

KRIS VANC

CHANGING CHORDS



DESERTED LILIES

BOOK ONE

Contents

[Copyright © Kris Vanc 2023 All rights reserved](#)

[OTHER WORKS BY THE AUTHOR](#)

[Trigger Warnings](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[8](#)

[9](#)

[10](#)

[11](#)

[12](#)

[13](#)

[14](#)

[15](#)

[16](#)

[17](#)

[18](#)

[19](#)

[20](#)

[21](#)

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

42

43

44

45

46

47

48

49

50

Authors Note

Acknowledgement

Changing Chords



By
Kris Vance

Copyright © Kris Vanc 2023 All
rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photography, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system without the prior written consent from the author, except in the instance of quotes for reviews. No part of this book may be uploaded without the permission of the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is originally published.

This is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, actual events or locations is purely coincidental. The characters and names are products of the author's imagination and used fictionally.

The author acknowledges the trademark status and trademark ownership of all trademarks, service marks and word marks mentioned in this book.

Alpha reader: Saphira

Proofreading - Bearly Vanilla Proofreading

Cover: getcovers.com

OTHER WORKS BY THE AUTHOR

The Charlington Chronicles

Roots

Tempest

Dominium

Tellings of the Time

Hidden by Hours

Mourning the Minutes

Seconds to Silence

Deserted Lilies

Changing Chords

Breaking Bridges

Elided Endings

Trigger Warnings

Changing Chords deals with sensitive subjects, such as addiction, near death experiences, attempted murder, drug use, violence, strong language and graphical descriptions of sexual encounters. Everything that happens in this book is consensual.

If you can't handle these kinds of subjects, I suggest you pick another book. Reading should make you happy, not make you anxious, sad, or anything else. If you have questions about certain things before reading this book, ask me for spoilers. I'll gladly give them. You can reach me at kris@krisvanc.com.

Take care of yourself!

Dedication

This one is for all of you
who are fighting past or current
demons.
I see you.

CHAPTER ONE



“Don’t, Nathan,” I beg him, tears streaking down my cheeks, the scorching desert sun burning on my face. His dark eyes look down on me, sitting on my knees on the hard and hot ground in the middle of Death Valley. The name has never been more accurate, because according to the man looking down on me, he’s going to leave me here and drive off on his bike.

“Are you willing to reconsider?” he asks me, voice gruff.

“I can never get behind you being in the drug trade,” I answer. I should lie. I should lie my fucking face off. Do my morals mean more to me than my life? Am I willing to die for this? He’s going to sell the drugs when I’m dead anyway, so maybe it’s best to let him do it while I’m still alive.

He sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose with the hand he uses to hold his gun. “You leave me no fucking choice, Evangaline.”

Rage conquers my fear. I try to get up, but the hands that have been tied behind my back make it difficult. So I stay where I am, on my knees, hopeless. “No choice but to leave me in the desert to die? You don’t have to expand by dealing drugs!”

“It’s how it is. It’s club business.”

That’s what I’ve been hearing for the last two years. Everything is club business. But he chooses to tell me anyway. And now that I want to walk

away, because I don't want to be involved in what he's about to do, he believes I know too much. I'm a liability.

The only liability on this deserted piece of fucking land is him.

He rubs a hand over his face, pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes his head. His slumped shoulders imply defeat.

"Goodbye Evan," he says while he turns around and walks to his Ducati Desert Sled.

"Don't fucking leave me here to die! I loved you!"

And I did. I did with everything I was, but that's over now.

"That was your first mistake," he answers, his bike between his legs and his hands fumbling to put his helmet on. "I've never put you first. That position has always been for the club. You just never understood."

He revs his engine, looks over his shoulder one last time and drives off, leaving me alone with nothing but endless desert and my time running out.

I've managed to get up on my feet and I've been walking ever since. Which feels like a week ago. But the sun isn't even starting to set. How long can I survive out here without any water or protection?

That motherfucker took me out here first thing in the morning, driving for what felt like hours before we got here, probably making sure I wouldn't be able to walk home or be saved.

Don't get me wrong, I know I'm a goner. There's no way I'm making it out of here alive. But I'm too stubborn to give up yet. I've got a lot of living left to do, but I mostly don't want to let the overgrown biker mouse win. And at this point, dying would mean he wins.

So there's really no other option than to simply not die.

Mind over matter.

Whoever said that the desert is empty has got it all wrong. The desert is full of harsh truths, ugly thoughts and empty regrets.

I should never have fallen in love with the bad boy everyone warned me away from. But no, I had to go and burn my hands on the dirty blonde, raw biker. I saw the cut, I saw the tats, I knew what they meant. But I also saw the lust in his eyes and the way his ass filled out his pants. And the smell of motor oil and grease sure seemed like an aphrodisiac at the time.

Before I knew it I was his girl and I was so deep into the club life that it seemed to be the only option left. So I went along with it. And now I'm the only one left to deal with the repercussions.

My lips are chapped and I try to keep myself from licking them constantly. My tongue isn't in any better shape than my lips, so it's useless. Being a nurse, I know that a human body can go three days without water. But having no shelter and non-stop burning sun can speed that process up to three hours. Which would be around the time that I've been walking around.

I don't really feel like I'm dying. I mean, I don't feel exceptionally awesome or anything. But dying? No. That should feel way worse.

The backs of my arms are burned, and my shoulders hurt as well. The tanktop and jeans I'm wearing aren't really doing anything to keep the sun off of me. Usually I like my black hair, but right now it's containing all the heat and making my skull feel like an oven.

At least my biker boots protect my feet from the heat, enabling me to keep taking step after step. But the hope they say that's at the horizon is nowhere to be found.

What is to be found is the outline of something tall in the distance. I'm aware it might be a product of my imagination - dehydration will do that to you - but it's not like I've got a better destination.

I spent way longer than I thought it would to reach it.

The something tall turns out to be a Joshua tree. It's in full bloom, which is something I've never seen before. If I wasn't in such a crappy situation I'd appreciate the beauty of it.

The real treasure is the shadow at the base of Joshua tree. There isn't much of it, but it's more than nothing and I force myself to close the distance to it and let myself fall on the ground.

So I guess this is it.

This is where I'm going to die.

Beneath the slim shade of a blossoming Joshua tree, in the middle of Death Valley because the man I thought I loved loved his job more.

I'd be sad if I had any energy left for it.

But I have none.

"Kitten," a gruff voice says.

I feel hands on my face, and something wet on my lips. Did I die? Is this the afterlife? The last thing I remember is my eyes falling shut, because they were too dry to keep open - the sun shining too brightly to keep going. I swore I'd just closed them for a second.

"Drink," the voice says.

The sound of it rings a bell somewhere in the back of my head. Did he call me kitten just now? Don't I know someone who calls me that? I open

my cracked lips, feeling wetness on my tongue. It's water. I try to swallow it, but my throat is too dry.

"Come on, Evan, drink."

I force the water down, half of it ending up in the wrong windpipe, starting a coughing fit. But it gets my blood pumping again and gives me the strength to open my eyes. A large man hovers a water bottle over my face, his brown eyes worried. For a moment I recognize Nathan, until I remember he's the one who put me here.

Kitten.

This is Dominic. Nathan's little brother.

I try to speak his name, but no sound comes out. He pours another sip in my mouth and this time I manage to make it all go down the right way. With my feelings returning, so does the pain. Everything hurts.

Perhaps I was better off being left for dead.

"Here, sit up, Kitten." He pulls up my upper body, laying it against his chest when he moves on the desert floor and sits beside me. "Drink some more. Just a little. Then we're going to go. Don't drink too much right now. It'll only make you sick."

I think life is making me sick right now. At the very least, life is playing a very sick joke on me.

"You came," I finally manage to stumble out.

He inhales sharply, turning his head away from me. "I was almost too late."

"Or right on time," I try to joke, but he's not having it.

"We need to get you out of this desert and away from here," he stumbles, tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear. "Nathan thinks you're dead. It's best for your health if it stays that way."

I swallow.

Surviving this means I have to start all over. Somewhere far away from here. Where I know nobody, and nobody knows me.

It's not like I'm leaving a lot behind. In the two years I've been with Nathan he managed to become my life. I no longer saw my own friends or family. It was all about him. Or as it now turned out, all about the club. The only friend that I have left is the man that crossed a desert for me. Dominic.

Guess I'm losing him now too.

"I'm glad you came," I whisper, filling my mouth with water yet again.

"Me too, Kitten. Me too."

I sigh. Even that movement hurts. Above me, I see the blossoming Joshua tree. It's a lot more impressive now that I don't think it'll be the last thing I ever see. It's a sight I'm going to remember for the rest of my life. Which will hopefully be long and healthy.

Staring at the horizon, I still don't see hope. But I do see possibilities, and that's kind of all I need.

“Make me disappear, Dominic.”

CHAPTER TWO

ONE YEAR LATER



“Twenty-three,” I mumble, my eyes closed. I’m lying on my back on the bed, my feet up against the wall. My toes wiggle in my socks and my fingers drum on my thighs.

“Twenty-three what?” she asks me. I open my eyes, staring at an upside-down version of her. She stands in the doorway scribbling on a paper file. Her long dark hair falls over her shoulder, almost touching the file. It’s one of the reasons I’m here, in this clinic.

They don’t do digital. Meaning hackers won’t be able to access it. Guaranteeing my privacy. Which is a big pile of bullshit if you ask me, because privacy doesn’t exist in my world.

“Twenty-three hours until I’m out of here,” I elaborate. I’ve been here for five months, one week and three days. That was after my heart stopped for a minute and fifteen seconds. All

because I took a little too much. I'd love to be able to say what quantity of the heroin I took, but I guess I'll never have a better answer than that it was one too many.

"You ready?" she asks me, her violet eyes capturing mine. I asked her about it once. If they were contacts or not. But she said they were all natural and it was a real, albeit rare, eye color. Something she and Elizabeth Taylor had in common she told me.

"No," I answer truthfully.

"Then why are you going?"

"Because we've got a tour, and I kind of need to be there."

She cocks her head, closing the file and sticking it under her arm. She sucks in the bottom lip of her heart shaped mouth, looking every bit the serious nurse she should be. All the nurses here are a whooping exact of zero fun, but she's different. I connected with her. And as long as I worked on my recovery, she was there for it.

"Can the tour be postponed?" she asks me seriously. The way her eyes study me makes me feel seen, really seen, and I like that. It's rare for me; as a world famous rock star I'm used to people seeing the picture that's being painted of me instead of the real me. And in rehab I've quickly discovered that people see the drug problem, and not the person behind it.

She doesn't tell me that I shouldn't leave if I'm not ready, which is exactly what I need. I tend to get a little obstinate when people tell me what to do.

"There's about a hundred personnel that expect to start tomorrow and a buttload more fans that expect me to show up in time."

She nods, accepting my answer.

The fact that she doesn't fight me on it makes me realize I'm really getting out of there in less than a day. And *that* makes me fucking nervous. I gnaw on my lip, picking up my drumming again. It's not something I usually do, that's Xem's department, but I found that counting the rhythmic ticking soothes me. Counting the beat of drums relaxes me more than

focusing on my breathing. I've found out that my breathing can stop, but in my experience the music always goes on.

"Have you got all the tools you need to fight the cravings once you're out of here?" she asks me. There's a crease between her eyebrows, but she's not butting in, she seems genuinely concerned. "Getting out of rehab is hard enough going back to a regular life. Getting out and going on a nationwide tour is nuts."

I grin. "I never do shit the easy way."

"I know," she immediately says. "That's why you almost OD'd."

That's cringeworthy.

But she isn't wrong. Her bluntness is one of the things I like about her. She's actually been a really big part of my recovery. It started off by physically taking care of me. Then it became conversations. Walks. Making me feel human again.

"You should come with us," I say on a whim, but as soon as the words leave my mouth I know it's the best idea ever. Getting out of rehab and going straight back on tour? That's a disaster waiting to happen. And what almost dying made me realize is that I want to live.

"I can't," she answers, looking down at her papers even though I know she was done with them. She's avoiding looking at me.

"Sure you can. I can pay you. I'm good for the money." I give her my best smile, knowing full well what effect that has on most ladies.

"That smile doesn't work on me, Madden. I've sat with you through withdrawal jitters and cleaned your vomit. I need a little more than that."

The fact that she can say that to me with a straight face while I'm giving her my best shot is impressive. I've worked out the last months I spent in here, I've stacked some muscle and lost some of the skinniness of a regular drug user. And my skin is fucking glowing.

“And what exactly would you need to be convinced to come with me on tour, Evan?”

She gives me a coy smile. “Probably a nationwide change, banning the opium problem and leaving me jobless because there aren’t any people going to rehab anymore.”

I scoff. “Right. One of the few things money can’t buy.”

She sits down next to me on the bed, grabbing my pack of smokes and handing me one. “Why don’t you find a nurse who can go with you on tour? It’s a good idea.”

I turn around, sitting up. “Because the others are all assholes who try to teach me a lesson. And they don’t hand me my smokes, they want to make me stop.”

I get off of the bed, put on my kicks without tying them and start walking to the patio.

Evan follows me, slapping a hand on my shoulder. “You should quit those.”

“I know,” I answer.

“But not right now,” she says, echoing what she’s been saying to me for months.

“But not right now, no.”

I huff. Guess I’m going to have to make it on my own in the next few months.

Water drops from the shower and falls over my face. There’s a debate going on inside of me whether or not I’m having an anxiety attack. One thing I’ve come to realize in the last couple of hours is that I’m not ready to go back to my normal life. There are way too many temptations there. My normal life isn’t what most people consider to be normal anyway.

I sigh, trying to listen to the voices on the radio instead of those in my head. My inside voices are screaming to get my hands on anything as soon as I’m out of here to numb this feeling in my chest.

“...and in just a few days, the long awaited 4A tour will start.”

“That’s right, Jim. We’ve all been waiting for this moment for months. It’ll be a new tour. The first since Madden St. James disappeared from the face of the Earth. Rumor has it he’s done a stint in rehab. But wherever he’s been, we’re all glad he’s coming back out on tour, right?”

The other radio host starts answering, before they start playing ‘*In Kind*’, one of our greatest hits. Little do Jim and his co-host know that rumor has it all right, and I’ve been right here rehabbing my little heart away.

4A, short for Amazingly Awkward, Awkwardly Amazing, is my band. My life. And the only thing that keeps me standing up straight right now. Because if it wasn’t for my guys, my friends, my brothers, and the music, I’d let it all go to hell and quit right then and there.

Five months, one week and three days since I’ve last seen Wolf, Bryson, Xem and Miles. That and a day longer since I’ve performed. And fuck if I don’t miss it. The fame might be just as addicting as the drugs, but the real habit I’ll never be able to kick is the music.

It started with the music, and it’ll end with the music.

I can do this for my boys, right? Get out of here, keep my nose clean, don’t cause stress and don’t kill myself by overdosing. No biggie, right?

Yeah.

Who am I kidding?

CHAPTER THREE



“Rise and shine, Mister Rockstar,” I chipperly say when I enter his room the next morning.

It’s his last day and I’m going to miss him. I connect with most people who come here, but some are just special. Madden and I have an understanding that we both appreciate, and while being in rehab might not have been fun for him, he made coming into work a lot nicer.

He’s still in bed, arms and legs all over the single mattress. His pillow lies on top of his head, but I know there’s a whole bunch of long dark hair hidden beneath it.

“Too early,” he grunts, waving me away like that’s going to have the effect he wants.

“Get up. You’re getting picked up in three hours and there’s no fucking room service here to pack your bags for you.”

He throws a little notebook at me, which I manage to grab mid-air.

“You finally ready to share what you’ve been writing all these months?”

“I’m going to write a song about you,” he answers, turning from his belly to his back and pulling his face out from beneath the pillow. It’s a good face. And a good body. Which is not the main reason I’m going to miss him, but is at least a part of it.

“How does it go?”

“Not sure yet. You should come with me on tour so you can find out.”

I laugh, creating a smile on his face as well. He opens one of those amazing gray eyes he has, almost tempting me to say yes and go with him. But that would be dumb. Going on a very public tour with a very famous band? A band which I happen to know my ex listens to? You know, that ex that left me for dead in the desert and who can’t know I’m still alive?

No.

That ain’t gonna happen. “There are people here who need my help.”

“I need your help,” he counters.

“You absolutely need my help. But you’re going to have to stay here to get it and that’s not going to happen.”

He sighs.

“So, get up, start packing, and come get breakfast. Patty has this whole plan on making you breakfast and wooing you with her womanly wiles now that you’re still here.”

He laughs when I tell him, sitting up and showing off his tan and tattooed body. Patty is one of the other residents at this moment. She’s kicking a lifelong habit of alcohol and painkillers, and she’s sure she has a chance with Madden St. James, the lead vocalist of 4A. I’m actually surprised not more residents try to hit on him, but maybe he’s just a little intimidating to most.

“Okay, I’m up.”

“Great. Now get dressed and start packing. And for God sakes, brush your hair, you rebel.”

“Yes mom,” he winks, and I leave his room.

“He’s all set to go,” Doctor Williams tells me, going over the discharge pages.

“You think he’ll be okay?” I ask the doctor. He’s worked here for numerous years and has seen all sorts of people come and go.

“Honestly? He’ll be back here before the end of the year. If he’ll make it out next time.” His eyes are glued to the papers he’s holding, looking at God knows what. He doesn’t even notice me swallowing after his last statement.

I know that most rehabs are designed to get you out of the door just healthy enough to go home, but are relying on you financially to fall off the wagon and go back there. The revolving door of patients is what keeps this place going.

“What makes you say that?”

“He’s going right back to the same situation that got him here in the first place. Same friends, same pressure, same access. Being that famous? That’s pressure that nobody needs. And once they know the comfort of numbness, it’s pretty damn hard to go back to feeling every shitty thing there is to feel.”

I know this. Having worked here for the last year has taught me all of these things. He’s not the first celebrity I’ve treated in here, but he’s the first I’ve created something resembling a bond with.

My downfall is and has always been that I want to save them all.

Is that what attracted me to Nathan as well?

I’ve been trying to figure out where exactly I went wrong with Nathan, but I haven’t found any of the answers yet. Dominic got me out of the desert, fixed me up in an old motel room for the next two days and then drove me to California by

himself. Sitting on the back of his Harley, driving to my brand new future was bittersweet.

The wind blew through my hair, the smell of leather and oil filling my nostrils, making me feel both nostalgic and free. My arms wrapped around Dominic made me feel brave, while deep down I was really fucking scared. I've always been a people's person, and now I was going to have to make it on my own?

Despite the fear, I did it. Found a job, found a place to live, started to meet new people.

And it felt good.

I force myself to stop thinking about the past and remember to stay in the present. Doctor Williams hands me the paperwork I need to discharge Madden and I tell him goodbye before I go find the lucky man.

I find him in the dining room, being fed strawberries by Patty, who has her top skirted down to indecent heights, showing off her bra and bending forward to him. I force myself to hold back my laugh. There's nothing subtle about her last chance at seduction. Madden looks remarkably uncomfortable and I wonder if it's the flirtation or the prospect of leaving the facility.

When I walk up to him to put him out of his misery, I walk past a TV that shows the news. Something that the newscaster says piques my interest.

"...all signs showing that the motorcycle club known as Victorious is taking over California. New chapters are being opened all over the state. There have been reported incidents with other clubs.

"The governor of California is looking into a possibility to prohibit the opening of the new chapters, but has yet to find a basis on which to stop the club from doing what it's doing.

"Victorious is mostly known as the biggest motorcycle club in Nevada and is known to deal in weapons, having fingers in the sex trade and has been reported to run drugs."

A large V is shown on the screen, the sign affiliated with Victorious. The hairs on the back of my arms stand up. My heart is beating so hard I can literally hear it. My throat goes dry and it feels like somebody is sitting on my chest. I'm frozen in front of the TV, stuck in my head and in the past while the newscaster goes on to report about different issues like nothing is going on.

They're taking over California. Which means I'm no longer safe. I can't be found, I need to get the fuck away from here.

I blink away my stupor when I hear my name from somewhere inside the dining room. Gray eyes find mine, giving me a million dollar smile and waiting for me to answer, but I have no idea what he just asked me.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"You got something for me?" he asks again, pointing with his chin to the papers I have in my hands.

I shake my confusion off of me, stepping inside the shared community room, effortlessly falling back into my role as a nurse.

"Why Mister St. James. How do you feel about going home?" I ask him, a fake smile all plastered over my face.

"Thought you'd never ask, Evan," he beams.

An hour later, I watch him pick up his duffel bag. There's a car here for him to drive him back home. He stands in the middle of his room, looking around as if he tries to make a good memory of it. I have no idea why he'd like to remember this hellhole. Maybe it's so he can remember where he doesn't want to end up again.

"Ready?" I ask him.

He nods.

He looks different. All five months he's been in here it was all sweat pants and tees and quirky socks. Right now, he's wearing skinny jeans and a form fitting shirt. His hair even looks styled. Guess it's really back to his old life for him.

He walks over, a smile so big it's splitting his face in two, but it doesn't reach his eyes. Because in his eyes, I can see fear. He isn't ready, he said so himself, and I can't blame him for it. Starting over, making new habits, is fucking scary. I know all about it.

"Can I give you a hug, to thank you?" he asks.

"Sure," I answer, not thinking through what that means. Because let me tell you that I've had extensive thoughts about Madden St. James hugging me, which I could tell myself couldn't happen because I'm a professional. But now it *is* going to happen, and those jeans and that shirt are really fucking tight.

He wraps his arms around me, and I grab him right back, enveloping my arms around his waist. He lays his cheek on the top of my head and squeezes.

"You'll be alright," I try to comfort him after I let him go.

"No, I won't," he answers, his warm voice soft but honest, almost on the verge of trembling. "But that's not because of anything you did. You were amazing. Thank you so much for taking care of me. Even when I was being an improbable asshole."

I tap his arm with my fist, looking up at him to find him smiling at me. This time the smile does reach his eyes.

"Just behave and everything will be fine."

"You haven't taught me how to behave," he counters.

"That's because I'm not your mother."

"Might be for the best. She disowned me when she realized I had a drug problem."

We stand there in silence, both unsure of what to say.

"So I guess that's it."

"I guess," I answer, walking him through the hallway to the exit of the facility. He waves to other people, who all want to say goodbye to him. I patiently wait for him, being amazed at

how far he's come and what a shame it would be if he were to fall back into old habits again.

It's people like Nathan that put Madden back in danger again, purely by getting product on the street, ready for the grabbing. Nathan, and his awful MC. Taking over California. My stomach sinks.

When Madden finally reaches the exit, an unfamiliar man in a black suit is waiting for him, grabbing his wrist and tapping each other on the back as soon as they reach each other.

Madden lets out a joyful 'Mack' and hugs the man like he's one of the seven world wonders. This so-called Mack is trying to get him out of the building and into the car that is waiting outside, but before he can do so, Madden turns around and seeks me out in the group of people that has gathered here to see him out.

When our eyes lock he lifts his chin, as if he's asking me what's up.

And before I can back myself out of it, I blurt: "Does that offer still stand?"

Madden's face lights up.

CHAPTER FOUR



The song is horrible. Absolutely, disgustingly horrible. The melody has been stuck in my head for three weeks, and it's missing something. I've written it down, I've done our usual thing with it. And it's good. But it's missing something, making it *horrible*.

I'm praying beyond all fucks that Madden can fix it. He just knows. I might be the musical child prodigy, but Madden is the genius. Maybe it's his misery that makes him better at writing lyrics. I can hear all the different instruments, but I can't vocalize the sound.

Fuck, I've missed the motherfucker.

I've been worried as shit since his little stunt of almost dying. He got taken to rehab once he was stable enough to leave the hospital. We've spoken once in the five months he

was there. And while we both hated it, we knew that this was for the best.

We haven't been sitting still either.

Yeah, we've been screwing our way through Los Angeles, minus Miles, who's now a boring married fucker, but we've also cleaned up our act. Yes, I love to indulge in some mood enhancing products every now and then, but not so much I want my friend to die.

Well, we've mostly cleaned up our act. The cigarette hanging from the corner of my mouth while I scribble down notes is proof that I haven't gotten everything under control. And maybe the string of girls I've worked my way through isn't very conducive to his new lifestyle.

It'll probably all go to shit once we're on the road anyway.

The door to my hotel room opens, Xem walking in without any warning. My face lights up, seeing him walk in and sit down on my bed. He's wearing his cap backwards, which seems to be his signature style, no matter where we are. I dare to bet that if he was invited to the White House he'd still wear the freaking thing. Paul, from marketing, says it's a good thing. That people want to be like him now.

Me? I just like to wear what the fuck I want to wear and not give a damn.

"Still working on that same piece?" he asks me. His voice is rich and warm and perfect for our second voice pieces. Madden can scream with a certain raw character, but Xem smoothes it all out.

"The same, horrible piece of shit. Yes. Yes, I'm still working on it."

I push the paper away, open a drawer and pull on a pair of short navy chinos. Then I grab a rosary necklace and put it on. It's not like I'm religious, but it's just shiny and I like it. And it makes my chest look good. Who needs a shirt anyway?

"He'll be here in ten," Xem tells me, looking at his phone.

"Let's go welcome our boy then."

Xem gets off my bed, and we make our way to the lounge. We're in a hotel that has an entire floor reserved for us, with a hotel lounge on the floor itself, connecting all our rooms. It's easier security wise anyway. And it's good to all be around each other. After a tour we can get pretty sick of each other, but that usually only lasts for a week or two. This time? With Madden almost dying? Being apart felt like torture.

Bryson is already in the lounge. He's strumming his guitar, playing a tune I don't know, his head pulled into the hood of his sleeveless hoodie. I can't see his eyes, which isn't unusual for our selective mute. He isn't really though, he just doesn't like talking as much as I do, which is fine with me, because that leaves all the more time to talk for me.

He looks up and acknowledges Xem and me by lifting his chin to us as we walk in and sit down. Xem starts nervously tapping his foot immediately. I don't know if it's a habit from being behind his drums so much, or if it's just a habit he's always had that just happens to help him with his drumming.

"Bout ten," Xem tells Bryson, who nods and rubs his hand through his dark beard after putting his guitar away.

"It's been long enough," he says. His voice is just as deep as Madden's, and he can probably go even deeper, but Bryson speaks with his fingers strumming chords, not using his vocal cords.

We're a bunch of unlikely artists. We've got Xem who probably has anger issues and takes it out on his drums, Bryson who doesn't like to speak, Madden who can't handle the pressure of fame all too well and me, the classically trained musician who's joined a rock band. Miles is the most regular guy out of all of us, but he decided to get hitched and have a kid, and that's just mocking the whole rockstar lifestyle if you ask me.

He isn't here yet when the door to the lounge opens and Mack brings our boy Madden inside. It's like a collective weight gets lifted from all of us, and before I know it I'm up on my feet racing to Madden to hold him tight. Bastard is looking good as well. Rested and fed and fucking alive.

He clasps a hand on the back of my head, leaning his forehead against mine and I've never been happier than to see the smug bastard's face. Once he lets me go, he gets pounded by Xem and Bryson. I now know how the Blues Brothers felt getting the band back together.

My eye falls on a tiny girl that stands a few steps behind Madden. Long dark hair in an intricate braid that falls over her shoulder and mesmerizing eyes I can't quite seem to place. Who the hell is she? She gives me a crooked smile and a wave with her fingertips. Did Madden pick up a fan on the way back from rehab?

"Who'd you bring?" I ask Madden.

"Oh, right, guys, this is Evangaline. My uh, well, my rehab nurse. She's here to make sure I don't fuck up."

"Aren't you supposed to learn how to do that yourself in rehab?" I blurt before I think it through. Might not have been the best thing to say when I see both Madden and Evangaline cringe.

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm a bit slow," Madden says, rubbing the back of his head.

"You're not slow," Evangaline says with a voice like a rich honey. "You're doing awesome. But the tour just came a bit too early and you convinced me that postponing wasn't an option."

That might have been the best idea he has ever had. If you can't stay in rehab, why not take rehab with you? Definitely don't mind this version of rehab, I can't keep my eyes off of her.

Madden walks to one of the couches and sits down, looking a little uncomfortable. Evangaline hesitantly takes place next to him, as if she's unsure if she's supposed to be here. Well, if she's going to make sure Madden doesn't fuck up she's going to be in our business a lot. And we don't do privacy. Certainly not between the band members ourselves.

I sit down next to Bryson, throw my legs over his lap and make myself comfortable. He grunts, but doesn't push me

away, so that's almost consent.

One of the doors opens, and Miles and his little family enter. Miles' wife, Keshia, holds Pip, their daughter, who's trying to escape her mother's embrace. Madden turns, sees them enter and lights up. Keshia sets Pip on his lap, and he's all eyes for the little girl. We've all been here for the unexpected pregnancy, the birth and the trying to keep a tiny baby alive. We've done a great job of it, but it's mainly been Keshia who's responsible for that to be honest. We all adore the tiny toddler though, it's impossible not to. It's been that way since she was born a year and a half ago.

And she has Madden wrapped around her little finger as well, tiny pigtails and all.

"You've got five months of diaper duty to catch up on," Miles jokes, grabbing Madden from behind and hugging him over the couch. Pip stands up in Madden's lap, coming eye to eye with him.

"Gladly," Madden says, trying to get Pip's hand out of his hair. That girl has got a deathgrip and she can hold on like a Pitbull when she sets her mind to it.

My eyes fall on Evangaline, who's observing what's going on with curious eyes. She catches me, and lets her eyes roam over me as well. Damn.

Can I seduce my best friend's rehab nurse?

Let me think about it.

I'll find a way.

CHAPTER FIVE



It's unreal to be in this room. No, I'm not a huge fan of 4A, but I know their music. They're everywhere, and you'd have to be living under a rock to not know them. And now I'm in a room with all of them, where they're just people and not some kind of rock gods. Well, they still are, but they're not acting like it.

And I'm going to go with them on tour.

On the drive over to the hotel I made some arrangements with Madden. Under no circumstances will I be in public. I'm not coming to press events, and nobody speaks about my presence. I do not tell him it's because of Nathan and let him think it's because I want to protect him, so nobody knows about his drug problem.

Part of me feels bad for letting him believe that. I'm just incredibly proud of him for working on his addiction and I

don't think he should have to hide that fact at all.

He's asked Mack, who turns out to be his manager, to arrange people packing up my apartment tomorrow. The tour might only be a few months, but I can't come back here. I need to find some place new after traveling through the country. Likely somewhere far, far from here.

But we'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

The funny thing is that being here in this room with the five band members of 4A, they don't act like the party hard, messed up, celebrity junkies.

Sure, Wolf looks like he always does. Eccentric and barely dressed. It's exactly like I've seen him on TV and in magazines. But he's acting kind, even if he's keeping a close eye on me.

"So, want a drink?" Xem asks.

"Just a water," Madden answers.

Xem raises an eyebrow, his near black eyes darkening even more. "No alcohol?"

"It's much easier to make bad mistakes when I'm buzzed," Madden answers, playing with a little girl on his lap. Miles is the lead guitar player of 4A and the only one who's married. The little girl is a perfect mix between her parents, her skin somewhere in between the white skin of Miles and the black skin of her mother. I don't follow these guys every move, so I don't know their names. But she's fucking cute.

"You're here to prevent him from making mistakes right? So that means he can drink?" Xem says, eyeing me, arms crossed in front of his chest, fingers in his armpits but thumbs out.

"He really shouldn't," I answer.

Xem sighs, rolls his eyes and walks away.

"I don't think you're getting a drink," the mother of the kid says. She walks over, and reaches out her hand. I grab it and give it a firm handshake.

“Keshia,” she says. “And the demon spawn on Madden’s lap is Pip.”

I snort because of the way she describes her kid. “Evan, nice to meet you.”

“Not Evangaline?” Wolf says.

I shake my head. “That’s my full name, but I mostly go by Evan.”

“Preaching to the choir, baby,” he says while combing a hand through his hair. I raise my brow.

“His parents named him Wolfgang,” Madden elaborates. “They decided he was going to be the next big composer. And they gave him a head start by naming him after Mozart.”

“You’re fucking lucky the abbreviation is kick ass. Wolfgang? Ouch,” I say, checking the man out again. It’s like I see him with different eyes once again. “That why you play violin?”

“Yeah, I was raised for this. Pisses my parents off immensely that it’s in a rock band instead of in an orchestra.” He smiles at me, gleefully, and I can’t help but smile back.

Xem walks back in, holding out a water bottle for Madden.

“So this is just gonna be a lame welcome home party?” he asks.

“I’d rather there be no party at all,” Madden answers, scrunching his face. “I’ve really missed you guys, and I’ve missed making music. So I thought maybe we could do that?”

Perhaps he was selling himself short when he said he wasn’t ready to go home. He’s making all the right choices right now.

Keshia walks away, and Madden sets Pip on the floor. She stands on two wobbly legs, but then takes off, exploring the world around her. Bryson grabs a guitar that was leaning against the back of the couch and starts playing a tune. I don’t recognize it, but that doesn’t mean a thing because I’m not that familiar with all the music they play.

Pip has made her way to me, standing before me and leaning against my legs. Her two little hands go up in the air, and she opens and closes them letting me know she wants to be picked up. And there is nobody in this world who can resist that. So I sit her on my lap, and she starts playing with my hair that falls in a long braid over my shoulder.

Xem has joined Bryson, tapping a rhythm on his legs, and with just those two things they manage to make it sound like a song. These guys breathe music, it's coming out of their pores, and it's amazing to see up close.

Keshia comes back, handing Miles an acoustic guitar and gives me a water bottle before she sits down right next to me.

"Yeah, right, no worries, I'll get my own shit," Wolf says before he gets up, throwing his hands in the air. Keshia flips him off with a smile on her face. I get the feeling he might be the diva of the group, but in the short time I've been here he's made me laugh as well.

Madden sits back with his feet on the coffee table, humming along with the song that is unfolding right then and there. His pants went up his ankles, showing dull black socks and I wonder what happened to his quirky ones. Don't they fit his outside persona?

Wolf comes back in, carrying a classical violin. He climbs over the back of the couch, crosses his legs, and starts playing a melody going along with the rest of them.

"Watch closely, this is going to be epic," Keshia says, leaning towards me. Pip notices her mother, climbing over me to get to her. She still has strands of my hair in her hand, pulling it and hurting me. I laugh and try to get my hair back, but she's got a good grip.

When Madden starts singing, I jerk my head to watch him.

It's amazing.

His voice is deep and raw, and even if the tune they've created is something almost sweet, he manages to give it words, making it deeper and heartbreaking.

"Told you they rock their jam sessions," Keshia whispers.

Me? I have goosebumps. He sings about darkness, and losing himself, before finding light and deliverance in friendships. His head leaning back on the top of the couch, his eyes closed and his body more relaxed than I've seen him in the last five months.

Wolf starts playing a countermelody, going in against everything all the others are doing, but still making it work. He has his eyes on Madden, checking if what he's doing goes along with what the man is singing.

Something grows inside of me, and I'm in awe.

I don't know how long I sit there, but it's a while before I excuse myself. I need to go pack some shit and make arrangements so I can go away on tour with them in a couple days. It's beyond crazy that I was just working my job this morning, not a cloud in the sky, and now I've quit my job, am moving out of my apartment and going on tour with a world famous rock band.

"You sure I will be okay?" Madden asks me, one eye opened, still hanging back on the couch.

"Just keep jamming, and straight to bed after. And I'll be back in the morning. Make sure your hair is brushed when I get here."

He snorts, closing his one opened eye again.

"Combing your hair?" Xem asks.

"It's an inside joke," Madden answers.

I lift one of the corners of my mouth. Guess we have inside jokes again.

With that I leave for home, or well, what tonight will still be considered my home. After today I'll be homeless and on the road.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER SIX



“Night,” I say to Madden when he leaves the lounge. We spent hours talking and jamming, someone ordered pizzas for dinner and now he’s off to bed. It’s not even really that late. Miles and the wife and kid have already gone. They live on a baby schedule right now. But that’s all about to change. That doesn’t work with all the late night shows we’re about to give.

Bryson is still in the same spot he was in before, and Wolf is spread out on a couch seemingly dramatically overthinking his life.

“So,” I state, “That was a bit underwhelming.”

“What’d you expect?” Bryson asks, finally throwing his hoodie back and showing his bald head. He’s got a Maori tattoo around his fucking ear, that nobody ever sees because he always wears his hood up. That kinda defeats the purpose in having a tattoo if you ask me, but Bryson will be Bryson.

“Some of the old Madden,” I answer.

Wolf huffs a laugh. “That was Madden, baby. Did you listen to a word he sang? This is Madden without the mask.”

I scowl. Because I know. I fucking know. I just have a hard time accepting that everything will be different, starting now. I stalk to the other side of the room, grabbing three beers and take them with me to the coffee table. No drugs I understand, I don’t want any of us to die. But no alcohol? That’s pushing it.

And now there is little missy goody two shoes, who is here to keep him on the straight and narrow.

I fucking hate it.

“Whatcha think about the little nurse?” I ask, taking a swig of my beer and savoring the feeling of the cold liquid in my throat.

“Good for him,” Bryson grunts, playing with the bottle of his beer.

Wolf folds an arm behind his head, getting a glassy look in his eyes. “She’s something.”

“She’s trouble,” I mumble.

“Why’d you say that?” Bryson asks.

I down the remainder of my beer before I answer. “Because she’s gonna change everything. And I like things the way they are. Minus the nearly dying part.”

Madden and I started 4A half a lifetime ago, in the exact way a good rock band should start – in his parents’ garage. Bryson joined soon after, when we put up an ad in the high school cafeteria. The three of us made quite a decent sound, our own sound, and we started playing everywhere we could. Miles practically forced himself upon us after one of our first shows in a little hole in the wall grunge bar. We were already making quite a name for ourselves when Madden picked Wolf up off the streets. Literally. The fucker was homeless with nothing to his name but his violin, playing in subway stations. But Madden convinced us he completed our sound, and he wasn’t wrong.

That was the last change before we made it big that I'd been comfortable with. Every day after that things were familiar and the same. Until now.

"You're always so fucking angry," Wolf says. "Lighten up man. She's fucking gorgeous and she'll be there all tour. I don't know 'bout you, but I'd rather look at her than Mack's ugly mug."

I just don't respond to that, and both of them let me. Wolf shutting the fuck up is a miracle in itself, he's always talking.

"You excited to get back on the road again?" I ask none of them in particular.

"Stadiums filled with screaming people, playing music, spotlights, cheap beer and endless travel," Wolf muses.

"Willing girls throwing their panties on stage," Bryson adds with a smirk. He doesn't like those kinds of girls, rather takes their panties off himself. But he knows I don't give a shit. I'll grab whoever's willing and spikes my interest.

"You know what I don't understand?" Wolf starts.

Now we're bound to hear something good.

"How the hell do you get them into bed when you don't even talk to them half the time?" he directs at Bryson, making me laugh out loud.

"I'm just that more appealing," Bryson says with a smug smile.

"It's the mystery," I add. "Chicks dig mystery."

"Well, I'm more into miracles than mystery," Wolf says, emptying his beer.

"Face it, second-rate Mozart, you have to sweet talk them before they want to see your miracles. I don't have to say a thing to make them come willingly."

"That's exactly what I don't understand. Why would you tap someone without talking to them? It's infuriating," Wolf says, his fingers tangled in the rosary he's wearing.

“Try shutting the fuck up sometimes. If you don’t say anything, you can’t scare them away,” Bryson says. He tries to say it jokingly, but I can hear the hurt beneath it. He really believes that he’ll scare people away with his words. He talks with us, because he knows we’ll never leave him, but the rest of the world gets the shut off version of him.

My foot is nervously tapping on the floor. I’m excited to get on the road again; touring is addictive. But I wonder how it’s going to go this time. Is Madden still the same man he was before he OD’d?

“You guys think he’s going to make it on tour?”

Both guys share a look.

“He seemed okay,” Wolf says, his eyes distant as if he’s mentally seeing the Madden from before rehab.

That version of my friend had bags beneath his eyes, bloodshot eyes and a lack of life. I force myself to not even think about the way he looked when they rushed him to the hospital. The sounds of the EMTs coming to get him brought on a whole other trip down memory lane that I’d much rather not go on.

“We just gotta make sure he stays okay,” Bryson says.

“Yeah,” I mumble, guiltily staring at the empty beer bottle in my hand. Wolf catches me, giving me a crooked grin.

“Maybe don’t ask him if he wants to drink anymore?” Wolf asks, his mismatching eyes looking at me intently.

“Yeah,” I repeat even softer this time.

“If we want something to change, somethings gotta change,” Bryson says, putting his hoodie back up and getting off of the couch.

And while I know he’s right, it’s exactly what I want and don’t want to happen.

“Really?” I half shout walking out of my room while I put on my cap and then turn it backwards. “We’re now not only going to bed on kiddies’ bedtime, we’re also waking up at the butt crack of dawn?”

Pip has been crying for the last half hour, and it's early. Miles and Keshia go through this every day, although Pip usually is a lot more quiet. She's a happy kid. Except for today. I walk up to the little terror, sit down next to her on my haunches and give her a glare.

"What's wrong, you little menace?"

"Don't bother," Keshia says. "She's crying because she asked for a banana and I had the audacity to give her said banana."

"Nana," Pip cries, huge tears tinkering down her rosy chubby cheeks.

"Are you crying because you want a banana or not?" I ask her, confused to what the fuck is going on.

"Nana," Pip repeats.

"You're infuriating, you tiny version of a woman," I scowl.

Madden starts laughing and as much as I don't want to admit it, that shit is good to hear. He's sitting with one foot folded beneath his ass on the couch, playing with an unlit cigarette in his hands. He's spinning it as if it's a baton.

"How'd you sleep?"

"I fucking starfished the whole night," he says with a twinkle in his eyes. "Rehab only had single beds. So I took advantage of this huge bed."

"That's incentive to never go back," Miles says, nurturing a cup of coffee.

Before the conversation can go any further a small army of people walks inside. It's Mack, our manager, and Andy, his assistant-manager. And a whole horde of people whose names I don't know. There's assistants of the assistant, interns and lord knows who else. Boxes full of breakfast pastries and cups with different beverages are brought in. It's refreshing to see, I usually wake up long after this phase. I see Jay and Victor, who are our primary assistants. Jay is Keshia's brother, and Victor is his husband, and they've been with us since the dawn

of time. They take care of all five of us, because we trust them and they are awesome at what they do.

Pip crawls away from me as if she's on a mission. The kid can walk, but on hands and knees she's lightning fast. She sits down in front of the freshly loaded full table, holds her hands up in the air and claps.

“Nana!”

Andy grabs a banana, peels it and hands it to her. She accepts it and happily starts munching on it.

“Little traitor,” Keshia says with squinted eyes.

I grab a drink and sit down right next to Madden, bumping his wide spread legs to the side so I can fit in. Mack is giving people orders, mostly to gather everyone so he can say what he's come here to say. We've been here before. My foot taps against the seating of the couch, playing the rhythm to '*Kites in Thunder*', one of our first songs. Madden softly hums the lyrics with a smile on his face.

After Bryson and Wolf have joined us, I shift my attention to Mack, who seems to begin right on cue.

“So, tour is coming up.”

“Did I have to get dressed for that wonderful piece of information?” Wolf asks. Get dressed is a bit far-fetched if you ask me. He's wearing yoga pants and nothing else.

“Shut it,” Mack says. The man is in his mid forties and despite not being that much older than us he acts our dad most of the time.

“Snappy this morning, Mister Mackager.”

Miles chuckles, picking Pip off of the ground and getting sticky banana hands in his face. You can tell me what you like, but kids are gross, even if Pip is my exception to that rule.

Mack goes on as if nothing happened. “We've got today to arrange the last things, then we're off early tomorrow morning. We've got a six hour drive, then it's rehearsals in the stadium. Day after that is the first show. You still okay with winging the set list each evening?”

“That’s still the plan,” I deadpan. Like we’re going to change something like that with two days to go.

The door to the main hallway opens and Evangaline walks in. She acts timid, but unfreezes when she sees Madden who waves her over.

“Ah, there’s our last minute arrangement,” Mack says. “Kind of you Madden to give us a lot of extra work right before we all take off.”

“Yeah, well, if you’d rather I relapse and have to go back to rehab?” Madden counters.

Mack gives him a glare. “I never said it was bad to have to make these extra arrangements, I’m just glad you’re taking this seriously.”

He looks us all in the eye.

“Now, go and have fun today. But behave.”

Wolf leans into me. “What does he exactly want? Us to behave or us to have fun? Because they are mutually exclusive in my book.”

I snort. He’s not wrong.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The whole band is gathered around the coffee table in the hotel lounge when I enter the next morning. Madden waves at me, and I walk over, catching the last part of their conversation.

I understand that coming along on tour at the last minute is a hassle. Hell, I've wrecked my home trying to get all my luggage ready to be able to go away tomorrow. There's strangers in my home right now packing up all the stuff I didn't need. It was really strange waking up and finding a small army worth of people standing outside, ready to pack up all my belongings minus the three bags I got for the tour. Makes me wonder if I should've lost a lot of my stuff a long time ago.

Mack, the manager, has a conversation with Madden, telling them to go have fun and behave, and that's an assignment I

can come to grips with.

I sit down next to Madden, quietly observing which way the conversation is going to go. All of them go back and forth a bit, moping about what fun they'll be able to have from a hotel lounge.

"Aren't you able to get out at all?" I ask before I know what I'm doing.

"We're security's worst nightmare," Wolf answers. "Everyone knows us and some of us have a tendency of walking off."

"Some of us meaning you," Bryson mutters, his eyes glistening while he raises the corner of his mouth in a crooked smile. I think these are the first words I hear him speak. I like his voice, it's got a certain edginess to it.

"Possibly," Wolf mutters, making one of the guys guarding the doors chuckle. "Don't make me fire you, Kyle!" Wolf yells at him.

"Empty threats," Kyle responds.

"There's gotta be something you could do," I say, thinking about a million possibilities of having fun. "If you promise to not run off that is," I direct at the half naked man who's bound to cause trouble. Does he always go half naked? Both times I've seen him now he's naked from the waist up.

It's a good sight though. One of the million ways to have fun.

"You'll never take my freedom!" Wolf yells in a fake Scottish accent, and before I know it I'm laughing out loud.

"I can see if we can go to the horse sanctuary. It's completely private and they only open to the public on appointment. The owners take in horses who've retired or have some form of disability. There's a big fence, so I guess it'll be easy to secure, but I know nothing about stuff like that."

"Horses? You realize we make rock music, right? Not country?" Madden jokes.

“These are horses who’ve lived long and hard lives man, that’s rock. Besides, Pip will love it.”

“That’s true,” Miles mumbles.

“And staying in a hotel lounge isn’t very hardcore either.”

“You really had to bring a mouthy nurse?” Xem asks. “Now we gotta go see horses.”

“Better than seeing the inside of this hotel lounge,” Bryson grumbles

“Kyle!” Wolf bellows. “Can you make us go see the old rock horses?”

Madden actually chuckles.

“I’ll see what I can do,” the security man says.

“Sies!” Pip squeaks in delight while she’s chilling on Miles’ arm later that day. The owners of Horses Happiness Sanctuary and 4A’s security made arrangements for the band to come and visit.

It’s a beautiful place. We took some of the rehabbers here sometimes as part of their therapy. Being out, working with animals, it’s all soothing for the soul. And both horse and man shared some commonalities, like getting a second shot at a better life.

The horses are everywhere – some in the stable, some in the pasture. They just get to chill the fuck out as much as they want to.

Madden and Wolf are strolling to a fence on the far side of the farm, where horses have gathered. The former is wearing his signature black ripped skinny jeans and the latter went all out. I don’t know how he pulled it off, but he’s wearing chaps, a sleeveless leather vest, cowboy boots *and* hat.

Beneath the vest he’s naked.

Of course.

I’m following them, because I guess that’s what’s expected of me, carrying a bag full of brushes. I just fail to see how I’m really needed here. There’s no danger here, nobody is going to

offer him drugs, he's with his friends and there's no temptation. Not too sure what my role exactly is here.

Not too sure what I'm doing here anyway.

The connection I have with Madden made a lot of sense in the rehab setting, but right now it's changing. There's more people involved, and my position is changing. I guess I'll have to wing it.

Madden reaches the horses, holding out his hand to meet a gorgeous piebald mare. Once she figures he doesn't have any treats for her, she stops searching him out and goes back to grazing. Madden absentmindedly starts stroking her neck while Wolf just hangs on the fence, doing absolutely nothing.

"Come help curry them," I tell both of them when I start climbing the fence.

Wolf raises his brow to me. "Are you allowed to do that?"

"Of course. They love it."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Grooming a horse?" I ask in disbelief. "Uh, no. It's part of taking care of them."

Madden starts climbing the fence, following me in and grabbing a brush out of my bag. Wolf seems confused.

"Lies, all lies. Fucking, fucking lies," he mutters.

"What the hell, man?" Madden asks his friend.

"Did you know I had horses? I had three. Perfect, pretty horses. Orion, Cassiopeia and Andromeda. Family trees and blood lines the Queen of England would be jealous of. But I couldn't brush them, because that would be dangerous according to my parents."

The more he speaks, the more alive he becomes. He's climbing the fence and jumps off on the other side. A tiny piece of my heart breaks for him, just by that small admission.

"I couldn't ride them either, because that was dangerous too. So there were people who brushed and rode them for me."

He reaches me, grabs a brush, looks me dead in the eye and smiles so wide it's near manic.

"I just realized those were all lies to make sure I wouldn't break my precious hands or arms, because what would a broken musical prodigy be?"

He steps up to a brown mare, pats her back and starts brushing her. How sad is it to have everything in the world, including three horses, but not being allowed to enjoy it?

I take Wolf's last question as a rhetorical one, but Madden takes the question literally. He stops brushing the piebald the moment Wolf voices the question and stares around, until he speaks, his gray eyes staring in the distance.

"A broken musical prodigy would be a fucking rock star, man."

He focuses on the horse again and picks the grooming back up. I'm not sure who he's talking to the most Wolf, himself or the horses.

After a few hours spent with the horses we sit down on a checkered plaid to eat a meal the crew prepared. I'm not used to having everything done for me, but in this instance I can see the appeal.

Keshia and Miles are trying to get Pip to sit still long enough to get some food into her, but she just keeps escaping and crawling into the direction of the horses. If anything, the day was a hit for the youngest band member.

Madden passes me a club sandwich which I sink my teeth in immediately. Being outside, working with horses, has made me hungry.

Stealthily glancing at Madden, things seem to be going alright. He has a healthy glow on his cheeks and his posture is relaxed. An unlit cigarette twirls in his fingers while he prefers to use his mouth for eating food. He observes his bandmates quietly, when Wolf and Miles have an argument about Pip getting a horse of her own. Spoiler: Wolf wants to get her one, Miles is forbidding it.

Xem gets up, goes through the cool boxes and starts getting everyone a beverage. My focus goes solely to him, because somehow he doesn't seem like the type to do anything for someone else, yet here he is, passing out drinks.

"Sure you can't get a drink?" Xem asks Madden, whose face scrunches and he looks away. Xem isn't being serious, I can tell by the tone of his voice, but I'm not having it. It's hard enough staying sober without the questions.

"Stop asking him."

His eyes find mine, and there's nothing friendly to be found in them.

"Who are you, his keeper?" he snaps.

"Sort of," I shrug, turning towards Madden who's very quiet all of the sudden. He's picking daisies from the lawn and casually flipping them away.

"He can speak for himself," Xem says.

"I'm sure he can, from what I've heard in your songs he's quite the wordsmith. The point is he shouldn't have to."

"Let him make his own decisions!"

"His own decisions got him killed, Xem! He wasn't just nearly dead, he died. For real. Until they brought him back!"

Everyone is staring at me right now, the looks varying from the white as a ghost Bryson to a bright red and furious Xem.

"Do you know how an addict's brain works? His literal brain structure is adapted to searching for his next high. The way his neurons shoot through his brain is searching out shortcuts to the next high. And it's taking all his willpower to create new habits. Habits his brain isn't adapted to. You, asking him to drink? That's making his brain light up like a fucking Christmas tree on steroids, making him remember what a swell idea it is to use again."

Madden's big eyes stare me down, his look somewhere between awe and shame. He shouldn't be ashamed. He should be fucking proud. And until he can voice things like these himself, I'll be his voice for him.

“So stop being the world’s lousiest friend, and stop fucking asking him!”

I stalk away, stomping actually, creating as much distance from the uncaring, selfish bastard who brings out a violent side in me. Madden gives me a coy smile when I walk right past him in my search for some senior citizens horses who appreciate my attention.

The moment I leave Bryson and Wolf behind me, I swear I can hear the violin playing bastard say ‘I think I just fell in love’. I’d smile if I wasn’t so angry.

CHAPTER EIGHT



It's so dark I can't see shit. Normally I like that, because when I can't see, I can't find any imperfections. But tonight it's bothering me. The evening before going on tour should be a haze of excitement and a party. Instead, I'm sitting in the windowsill of my hotel room, the window tilted open, letting in the fresh air that has finally cooled down after the warm day we've had.

It's not exactly what I had in mind when finally getting Madden back. Then again, I don't know what I should have had in mind, because realistically I knew things couldn't go back to the way they were.

Did I know he was bad?

Yeah, we all could see that.

Did I know he was in so fucking deep?

Hell no. Madden can be a secretive little shit if he wants to, and people suffering from addiction become really good at hiding it. I just wish we would've noticed sooner.

So instead of binge drinking all day and partying all night, we picnicked and went to see horses. And now it's dark out and all I see is how empty everything looks.

I grab my phone and call my father on a whim. He picks up, panic in his voice. "Bry, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, old man. Just wanted to hear your voice before we head out and everything starts getting crazy."

The silence that follows is about as empty as the darkness I'm staring into outside. My fingers start itching and I want to grab my guitar.

"Well, okay. You could've come home sometime in the last five months," he says. "We could've used some help. They're a handful."

I ball my fists and grind my molars. This is the whole reason I'm not calling more often or going home. The guilt trip it leaves me on is just not worth it.

"Then maybe you shouldn't have had two kids in two years and have nannies raise them. Maybe you and mom should just, I don't know, try to give them some fucking attention yourselves instead of going to the club."

"Jesus Bry, not this again," my dad sighs, his voice tired.

"Well, sorry for bothering you and wanting to have a chat. I guess I'll speak to you when the tour is done or when you need something."

I disconnect the call without waiting for his response. Heat courses through my body, leaving me more angry by the second. I push myself off of the windowsill, grab the neck of my guitar and push the door to the lounge open with my shoulder. The hotel lounge is empty, but I still use my free hand to pull my hoodie over my head. There's a small light next to one of the big ass leather chairs, and I let myself fall down into it unceremoniously.

When my fingers strum over the strings I feel like I can breathe again. A melody fills the void, and it's mere seconds before I'm lost in a trancelike kind of state. My fingers act on their own accord, and my mind goes numb.

When I blink, I stare into one green and one blue eye. Wolf hangs upside down, legs over the back of the couch, head hanging down, watching me very intently. I hadn't heard him come in and I couldn't tell you how long he's been there.

"Catchy tune," he says.

I wave his comment away. "It was nothing."

"It was something. But it's gone now, isn't it?"

He's right. The tune was there in the moment, but it's gone now. I wasn't paying attention, I was just playing to get it out. Couldn't repeat it if my life depended on it. He doesn't need an answer to know he's right. The thing with being together all of the damn time is that you really get to know someone. I can use my words with the members of my band, because they understand me on a primal level even when I don't have to use the words.

"What's wrong?" Wolf asks me, grabbing the packet of smokes he threw down next to him on the couch. He takes one out and lights it up, almost burning his fingers, because he didn't think through the fact that if you lie upside down, the flame coming from a lighter will still go up. He curses with the smoke between his lips, but manages to take a drag.

"Tonight's been too quiet," I finally answer.

"That's rich, coming from you."

I answer with more silence, only proving his point. I pluck at the strings, just to create some vibrations, not actually playing something. When the air is filled with something besides emptiness, I say: "Called my father, got frustrated."

Wolf, who would rather cut off his little toe than stop talking all day long, shuts the hell up for once, just nodding. They all understand my issues and that I feel absolutely no need to talk about it. He just takes a few drags of his smoke,

trying to get the ash in the ashtray on the coffee table and only partly managing to do so.

“Oh, I came out here for a reason.”

He lifts one of his buttocks, reaches in, what I hope is, some kind of pocket and not just the inside of his underwear, and he grabs a folded paper, holding it out to me.

“Play this, I made some improvements.”

I grab the paper, unfold it, and stare at the notes.

“No,” I say resolutely. “Bohemian Rhapsody does not need improvements, Wolf.”

“But...”

“No.”

He gives me big puppy eyes, grabs the paper and folds it again before finishing his smoke and disappearing to his room again. The silence is still there, but it doesn't bother me as much as it had the rest of the evening. The phone call with my father has gone to the back of my mind, and random notes push away any intrusive thoughts that try to get into my head.

I startle awake when someone quietly sits down on one of the chairs on the left side of me. The moment my vision focuses I find eyes with a purplish hue looking at me. Where the fuck am I? Who's looking at me? The moment I glance at the chair again I remember I'm in the hotel lounge and I've probably fallen asleep there after fucking around with my guitar for a bit.

The purple eyes belong to Evan, her long black hair surrounding her round face in a loose braid. She's observing me, which I guess is a fair thing to do when you find someone asleep on a crappy couch when a perfectly good bed is available. But what the hell is she doing here? She was supposed to come in when we take off. Which isn't for at least another... what time is it again?

Fuck.

Six o'clock according to the clock on the wall. Falling asleep resulted in having a full night's sleep in the hotel

lounge. I'd love to say it's a first, but it's not. It's the first time without copious amounts of alcohol though.

Sitting up, I stretch my muscles and check to see if the hood of my shirt is still on my head – which it is.

“Why are you here? We don't leave until ten,” I grumble, my voice raspy this early in the day.

“Madden is gonna be up soon, and I thought that this morning would be stressful, so I figured I might as well be there for him.”

She looks earnest when she speaks, the perfect arch of her heart shaped mouth molding into different shapes on the cadence of her words. I haven't figured her out yet, or how I feel that she's coming along on tour. We've got new people coming in every tour, but they're not in our face all of the time. And they definitely don't have anything to say to us when it comes to personal matters.

But that's the whole reason that Evan is here.

As if there's some cosmic cue, the door to Miles' room opens, and he steps out, the little kid crawling around his feet. She sees Evan and makes it her life mission to reach her as fast as she can. Miles is rubbing his eyes, his dark hair standing sideways. What I've learned these last few years is that having a kid does not make you a morning person, no matter how early the mornings may be.

I get up from the couch, stretch my arms above my head until I hear a satisfying pop and roll my shoulders. I automatically start making coffee. Many have tried to make my coffee right, even more have failed. They all make those lame attempts, where you have to search for the caffeine in the water they've brewed.

Okay, so I might like my coffee a little strong.

Once the machine is going I get back to the couch and sit back down, pulling my guitar in my lap again, just to have something to do with my hands. I watch how Pip reaches Evan and climbs on her lap, grabbing two fistfulls of hair and pulling while happily babbling. Evan's smile is more of a

cringe. I'm glad that I'm bald, because when that little demon gets her hands in someone's hair it seems to freaking hurt.

"Black?" I ask her.

"What?"

The moment her eyes land on me I can feel something shift in my body.

"Coffee."

"Oh, right. Yeah, black," she says.

Miles grabs Pip, untangling her fingers from Evan's hair, and moves her to his hip. He looks equally natural with a guitar in his hands as with a kid on his hip, and that has always amazed me. Out of the bunch of us he's the most mature as well – which is a good thing, considering he's in charge of raising another human being now. He grabs a banana from the fruit bowl and offers it to the little girl, but she's more interested in the crackers that lie beside it.

While they fight it out, I get up and pour three coffees. Two sugars and half of the cup filled with milk for Miles. He never acquired my taste for coffee.

When I hand the coffees out, Madden's door opens and he steps out, fully clothed, resembling something looking more like a human than every other day we spent together last tour. His eyes look more alert this early in the morning than they have for a long while. And they seem to light up when he finds Evan sitting on the couch. I can almost see the magnetic pull between them.

"Coffee's still good, right?" I ask softly.

Using your voice exerts power – I see it every time we perform on stage. The voice is a mighty weapon, and I like to keep my power close. So when I do, I choose to speak softly.

"Coffee is more than okay," Evan answers, scrunching her face when she takes a sip from her cup. "Can I get some sugar as well please?"

"You said black."

“Yeah, to coffee. This is more like kerosine.”

I roll my eyes and grab her the sugars, as well as a cup for Madden. He always drinks it the way I do. The smile he gives me when I hand it to him seems genuine, and he tastes it without letting it cool down, probably burning his mouth, but it's worth it.

“Are you nervous?” Evan asks him, grabbing the sugars I hold out to her.

He shrugs. “Not any more than when I left the clinic.”

That doesn't tell me anything; he seemed fine when he got here, but he also seemed like a different person than the one that left.

“Just let me know when something changes,” she says, her plump lips around the rim of the cup, enjoying the coffee now that there's some sugar in it. “We'll work something out if need be.”

I'm curious how Madden will respond to that. The boy I met in high school would have rebelled against the idea of someone helping him out if he got nervous, the Madden I met wouldn't even know what nervous is. But before I can see how all of this unfolds, the room begins to buzz with people walking in from all directions, carrying in food, coffees and whatever else we might need.

It's time to get this show on the road.

CHAPTER NINE



The bus is motherfucking huge. I've seen buses, but I've never seen one so big. It's made especially for this purpose: people living on the road and wanting to do so in comfort. When I stop and think about the fact that this is one of five buses, my mind is blown.

The first one is for the band members. Minus Miles, because he, Keshia and Pip have their own bus, which they share with Jay and Victor. Then there's a bus for the rest of the personnel and two buses that are filled with equipment. Which is nuts if you ask me, but kind of necessary if you really think about it. It's not just instruments, it's lights and electrical equipment and clothes and make-up. And adding all of it up leaves you with a lot of fucking stuff.

I take a deep breath and tell myself to go along with it and let it all come over me. It's okay to not be familiar with this

scene, it's okay to get used to all the new things. I've done it twice before. Once when I fell in love with a biker and became an old lady by default overnight and once when I was left for dead in a desert and had to start over from scratch.

This? Having all the help in the world while getting used to new surroundings? It's not so bad. The discussion where Xem argued I should be in the third bus with the rest of all the staff and Madden arguing he needed me close was the hardest part about all of this. They ended up letting Mack make the decision, and he put me in the first bus after a whopping point two seconds of mulling it over.

So now I'm standing in my new home for the foreseeable future: a huge shiny silver Prevost tour bus.

The exterior of the bus is completely different from the inside. Black floors, black couches, a black kitchen, black doors leading to equally black little rooms. All the guys have their own space, and I get to use Miles' old room. Mack figured it was best to keep me close and the room was available anyway, nobody had to get sent to one of the other buses.

"So, welcome home," Madden says, grabbing his duffel and throwing it in one room. If you really think about it, they're just glorified bunks, but it's enough. If world famous rock stars can live in these accommodations, surely I can as well.

"It's very black," I state, letting my eyes glide over the living area we just passed before reaching the sleeping area in the back of the bus.

"It's supposed to be very rock."

"Isn't that a little shortsighted? Can't rock mean color as well?"

"Rock can mean anything we want rock to mean, but we all like black," he says, shrugging. He opens a little door right next to his room, showing me a single bed with a few cupboards directly opposite to it. The curtains are black, the windows are blackened, the bedding is black and the cupboards are black. It'd almost be depressing.

“This is you,” Madden says. He combs a hand through his hair and rakes his teeth over his bottom lip.

“We usually don’t spend a lot of time here,” he elaborates. “We crash here after a show and move to the living area as soon as we’re up. We jam outside if we get the chance and we spend a lot of time inside stadiums. It’s about as much as I can make of it.”

“It’s okay. I’m not here for the fame, Madden. I’m here for you.”

He sighs, putting his hands in his pockets and making himself appear smaller than he is.

“I’m sorry for taking you away from your home.”

“Home is what you make of it.”

“I wish I wasn’t the reason you had to leave.”

Our eyes lock, and he looks fragile. The tough bravado is gone. What most people don’t get is the shame that goes hand in hand with addiction. People who suffer from addiction are viewed as selfish, which they are to a certain extent. But let’s be honest, everyone is. Or should be, at least a little. People who realize they’re addicted are more aware than anyone what they’re doing. They’re just stuck in a shitty position, and too ashamed to ask for help to get out of it. And they can’t do it on their own.

“I’m happy to be here, Madden,” I say with a smile on my face. Which is true. This is the opportunity of a lifetime.

He looks away, biting his lip. Ever since he’s left the clinic he’s back into his rock star persona, no longer wearing sweats but walking around in tight clothes that show off every part of his toned body. His attitude doesn’t match the exterior though.

“Okay, so truth time,” I say in an attempt to get him out of his mood and normalize the addiction by not making it a secret. “Where’d you hide your stash?”

A crooked smile appears on his face, and when the worry is gone from his physique he looks five years younger.

“Who says I had to hide it?”

“Having drugs was just tolerated?”

“We all used,” he explains. “Most of us stuck to the soft stuff. All of them like to smoke some weed. We’ve partied on Molly. Miles was the first to back out, because once that second stripe appeared on the pregnancy stick he chose being a father over everything. If that would’ve meant he had to leave the band, he would’ve, and we all knew, so we supported him. It was around that time that we started to realize that what we were doing wasn’t very healthy either.”

I nod to his words and follow him when he walks to his own little room.

“Wolf, Xem and I experimented with some coke, Bryson never wanted to touch the stuff. Or maybe he tried it once and didn’t like it. The particulars are kind of blurry. And I guess I’m the only one who ever crossed the line to heroin.”

He opens a little drawer beneath his bed and takes out the bottom of it. “I did try to hide it from them though. Somehow it felt too wrong, even for me.”

“Most people want what’s best for them, even addicted people.”

He looks away, non-verbally telling me to leave him alone for a while. But for some reason I do the exact opposite. I let myself fall down on his bed.

“So, where else should I look if I ever think you’re having a hard moment and might be falling off the wagon?”

He scoffs. “Probably just on my nightstand. Most people look in hiding places but fail to see what’s right in front of them.”

He’s probably right as well, it’s the last place I would look if I thought something was up.

Our conversation gets caught short when Xem storms into Madden’s already crowded room. He gives me a once over, looking at me in disgust, and drops down on the other side of the bed, his feet pointing towards my face.

“The bus still smells the same,” he complains.

“Really?” Madden says. “Hadn’t noticed. Last tour I had a permanently clogged nose.”

Xem waves his comment away. “Please tell me you’re not cut off from pussy as well.”

I’d love to have an opinion on this guy based on comments like these, but the fact is that I lived with bikers for two years, and it’s made me insensitive to guys being rude. Working in a rehab facility for a year just taught me that he still has some growing up to do.

Madden just looks lost.

“The twelve step program urges people not to start any personal relationships in the first year of being sober,” I tell Xem, not telling Madden what he should or should not be doing, simply stating what the program says. Whatever he does with it is up to him.

Xem gives me a glaring look, his dirty blonde hair falling in front of his eyes. He’s got all his features going for him. Strong jaw, light scruff, defined Adam’s apple, cheekbones that could be on the cover of a Vogue magazine. But the moment he opens his mouth he fucks it all up.

“What the hell has random fan pussy have to do with starting personal relationships?”

“Sure, because it’s just sex right? That won’t harm anyone?” I say, the sarcasm thick in my tone of voice.

“No, it’ll just make him feel good.”

“Listen, Madden should do whatever the hell he wants to do, but having sex is just as addictive as using drugs. We’re not interchanging one addiction for another. I’m not his mother, I’m not his keeper, I’m just here to keep him alive. So if he wants to dip it in somewhere, I’ll be the last to stand in his way, but we recommend against it for a reason.”

Xem’s look only gets more stern. “But you also said he shouldn’t get rid of all his vices and that’s why he gets to keep smoking.”

“If you want to convince him to give up his smokes as well, then by all means, be my guest.”

I get off of the bed and head to the tiny room that’ll be my home for the foreseeable future. Everything I’ve ever read in tabloids points to Xem being a proper prick. I’m willing to give everyone a chance, and certainly not go for what magazines claim, but damn, they sure seem to be right.

I’m angrily getting my stuff out of my duffel bag and starting to put it away in my cupboards. I have no idea where to leave my toiletries, because we never reached that part of the tour. I just hope that if I have to use the restroom right now, at least one of the guys will be decent enough to point me in the right direction.

A lengthy sigh leaves my mouth, because I’m not being fair. Just because Xem is acting like a grade A asshole doesn’t mean all of them are.

Fuck, what have I gotten myself into? I’m going to try to keep a rockstar sober on the road? I’m way in over my head.

The door to my room opens again, and my body gets ready to continue my verbal fight with Xem, but instead of the bastard with an anger issue, Wolf leans against my door frame. He’s dressed modestly today, meaning it’s the first time I’ve seen him fully covered. He’s wearing pants with legs that get wider the further they go down with a flower pattern. All the colors of the flowers are mismatched. On top of it he’s wearing a black button-up and to make everything come together, he’s wearing a leather necklace with white feathers dangling down.

I’ve come to realize that it doesn’t matter what he’s wearing. It’s the way his mismatched eyes take me in that have my attention.

“Home sweet home?” he asks me.

“I guess.”

“Just holler if you want some pointers in which positions work best in a space this small.” His eyes glint, and it has *nothing* to do with the lightning in the room.

“Oh, no worries, I’ve made sex on the back of a bike work, I’m sure I can wing it in here if need be.”

He raises a brow, a naughty smirk covering his lips. “Maybe you can teach me something.”

“Not the virgin Mary you expected?”

He blatantly gives me a once over. “Oh, I’m pretty sure there’s nothing innocent about you.”

I’m fully aware that I steered the conversation in this direction myself, but I swallow hard when my mouth goes dry and I feel my temperature rise. He gives me a wink, turns around and walks away, while whistling “Country Roads”.

A laugh leaves my mouth.

This is going to be something. But the one thing it isn’t going to be? Boring.

CHAPTER TEN



It's all going to go to fucking hell. Right before sound check was supposed to start, one of the strings of my violin broke, meaning that I had to replace it, making us late to start. I'm a free spirit, I've claimed so myself, but I'm punctual as well. That's one thing my parents taught me. Always be on time, be respectful to other people's time. And then the dozens of musical teachers I had taught me to hit the right measure as well. It's part of who I am.

So the fact that I'm making people late doesn't sit well with me.

We've had two hours after arriving here before we're starting sound check. We've got a team of technicians and stage crew that can set up our stage in record time, and to not make any use of it is shameful. If it would've been anyone but me, I'd have chewed their ass out.

But I'm here now, and all my strings are in place and functioning, so the show must go on.

I take a deep breath, bring my violin to my chin and look at my boys, my brothers. All have assumed their positions on the stage, and for the first time in almost half a year I feel like I'm exactly where I need to be.

Don't get me wrong, I'm my own person, but I feel more whole with Madden around. Since the first day we met, we've clicked. He *saw* me when I was performing songs on the subway, sleeping in housing projects for homeless people, or just on park benches whenever I had no other option. He saw me, he heard me, he grabbed me and he never let me go. He saved my life, because I was toeing the edge.

And how ironic is it that I was homeless while my parents were sleeping in a mansion with about twenty times as many rooms as people that lived in it. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't be anyone other than myself for a second longer. If I would have done that I wouldn't just have toed the line, I would've dived in face first and not even come to regret the decision halfway down.

The day I left home was the day my life started, and the day Madden found me and forced me into his band was the day I finally became a whole person.

I haven't looked back.

That doesn't mean that my parents haven't tried to suck me back in though. But that's a thought that doesn't belong on the stage. The stage is meant for happy thoughts, so I can fly.

We all check our mics, speaking into them when the sound technicians ask us to, and when everything is ready to go, Xem gives us a countdown and we set in our first song. We always start with "In Kind" for soundchecks, because it shows off our strengths equally. There's a nice violin solo, we end with an outro of bass notes, Miles gets to show off his strengths, Xem gets to set a nice rhythm before Madden kicks it off with a high note.

My insides buzz when we start, and I'm skipping in place because I can't hold my excitement back. Yes, it's an empty stadium, there's nobody here to appreciate the fine piece of art we're performing. But we're here. And the arrogant version of me thought that we'd always have this – right up until the point where Madden got taken away in an ambulance sans heartbeat.

I position my fingers for my first note, hold up my bow and start creating magic.

And it feels like life.

Is it a perfect performance? By any means, no. No, no, no. None of my bandmates have the perfect hearing I have, and I can always pinpoint several things that could use improvement. But this is not a classical performance we're giving. No, we're playing rock, and it's meant to be raw. Flaws and imperfections and all, making it better than any fucking sonata could ever have been.

The song ends, and my vision returns. I'm smiling so widely that I'm pretty sure that the corners of my mouth could touch my ears.

It's like I can breathe again.

When I look around, I see Evangaline standing in the wings, awe in her eyes. My smile shifts crooked. *Hell yeah.*

“Whadya you think boys? Wanna try a classic?” Madden says. We like to play around during sound check. We wing our setlist every concert, because who the hell wants to play a set setlist? Not us.

“Sunday?” Miles says.

And when I see Xem nod, I know that's what we're going with. He gives us a countdown, before he starts the rhythmic intro of the song. Right on cue I fall in, adding melody to his rhythm. Madden sings a groan, his warm voice adding a second harmony. Miles and Bryson aren't far behind, completing the sound.

Yeah, Bono might not be most people's version of a rock god, but damn, does he know how to write a song and stick it

to the man with his words alone. Madden's always able to do something with his songs, there's a big variety in the way he can use his voice, making the song completely his own. "Sunday, Bloody Sunday" is one of the songs we frequent in our sound checks, making both Miles and Xem able to sing backing vocals in perfect harmony.

I know I'm an artist, and I should get off of all the people in the audience, but playing this song to an empty stadium, hearing the notes echoing off of the far side of the wall is my favorite version of it.

By the time the song ends I'm smiling broadly and I'm vibing to the music. When my eyes fall on my brothers, who all look equally blissed out, I feel perfectly right. That unicorn moment where the right version of yourself is in the right place at the right time – where everything just seems to fit.

By the time the song ends, Bryson calls out "One" and we transition in our own version of the Metallica song. After that we push out some of our own songs, mixing it up with a classic every now and then, and by the time we've played about ten songs, sweat is dripping from the side of my head towards my neck. Something I've fucking missed.

There's a reason I'm at least half naked most of the time.

But I'd probably be equally naked if I wasn't rocking it out on a stage on the regular as well.

I lower my violin, holding my bow in the same hand as the neck of my instrument, and use my free hand to squeeze Madden's shoulder through his wet t-shirt. He pulls me in, and we hug it out, each feeling the thrill of the music, the performance, the energy of being out here, being on the road again.

When he lets me go, he rushes to the wings, where Evan is waiting for him. He bends his head forward, lowering himself to her height while he starts talking with her and takes off.

I take a deep breath, because as good as that felt, I'm sure it brought up more for my man. Let him have it out with her.

The other guys put their stuff away in the way they like it. Me? I take my violin with me. Everywhere. I'm not sure if it's something that stuck from the way I was raised, but I had a Stradivarius that cost my parents a pretty penny, and I was instructed to never let it out of my sight. I'm pretty sure the insurance on that thing was more expensive than the electric violin I have now. The moment I picked out an electric one I made sure to get one that felt completely right instead of just getting the most expensive one. Yamaha is my flavor nowadays, and I love the minimalist look of them.

When I get off the stage, Vic is waiting for me. His blond curls are perfectly styled as always. I think part of the reason he gets up at the ass crack of dawn is to make sure he looks like this. The fact that he can use those hours to do all kinds of stuff for us as an assistant is just an added bonus.

The crease between his eyebrows isn't usually there though.

"What's wrong, loverboy?" I ask him, grabbing a bottle of water and downing it in one go. Can't stay healthy and live the life of a rockstar without staying hydrated.

"Got mail," he says, holding out a rolled up magazine towards me.

I raise a brow, because we don't follow the media. To my surprise, my face is on the cover. It's an old photo as well. Like, really old. Which is all very strange, because I haven't given any interview for an article and I certainly haven't given permission to publish this photo. I'm wearing a three piece for crying out loud.

It's only then I read the accompanying headline.

"How we raised the next generation of rock music."

My stomach rolls.

Motherfucking, self centered, egotistical bastards.

"Stick it in the toilet on one of the other buses," I tell Victor. "I don't need that shit."

"Thought so. Just didn't want you to be blindsided if someone is going to bring it up in the near future."

“I would’ve told them where they can stick that magazine if they had.”

“I know, babe, that’s the whole reason I’m telling you, because I can tell you now that HQ would not be pleased with you saying that on the record.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“Well, then I could tell HQ where *they* could stick it.”

“Don’t bite the hand that feeds you,” Victor says, taking the magazine back from me.

“I’m the hand that feeds me! Me and my brothers! We make the magic happen. Not HQ and certainly not my birthing canal and sperm donor!” I might grab his bicep a little harder than I mean to, making him look at me with those blue eyes of his widened to the max.

“Don’t shoot the messenger!” Victor yelps.

I take my hands off of him. “Right. I’m not the angry one. I should let Xem treat you this way.”

“Xem’s Jay’s problem,” Victor mumbles, making me laugh. Between him and his husband, Jay, Keshia’s brother, they assist all five of us. Both of them have a hard time taking Xem on, so they switch who gets him every now and again.

It manages to break the tension between us.

“Seriously, I need you to take that magazine away from me, it might be contagious and I might start playing Bach tomorrow if it stays here.”

Victor laughs. “Done. Now go get a good night of sleep.”

I smirk at him. “Now that’s a perfect waste of a good night.”

I get waved away with rolling eyes, and start making my way to the bus. I’m thinking a shower, a wank, and some tunes. Pretty perfect if you ask me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



There's a laminated card hanging from a key cord around my neck. There's a very unflattering picture of me on it, stating I'm with the crew and I'm allowed backstage. Basically, this little thing says I can go everywhere and snoop around. Tonight, it means I'm backstage with the band, because Madden admitted he was nervous and felt better if he knew I was close.

He hasn't said it out loud, but I get the feeling that it's been a *long* while since he performed soberly. Add being out in the public after rehab for the first time, and you've got a nice basis for some nerves. Based on the sound check and seeing him sing I'd say he has absolutely nothing to be worried about. He's the embodiment of rock, and I'd pay good money to see that.

The band that opens for 4A, Pirates' Gold, is finishing up their last number. From what I've understood it's a quick stage change after that and then they're off. Bryson sits on one of the spare amplifiers, mindlessly scrolling on his phone, ignoring everything that's going on around him, Xem is doing some kind of gymnastics with his drum sticks, Wolf is skipping from one foot to the other – obviously very excited to get going – and Madden is standing next to me, stiff as a board. I can see his pulse quicken in the vein in his neck, and his eyes are wide. I've never seen the guy right before a show, but something tells me this is not his normal behavior.

Coming in from his side, I wrap an arm around his waist and pull him against me. He startles, but settles into the hug quickly.

“It'll be fine,” I tell him. “Just go make some music, have some fun.”

“What if I suck without the high?” he whispers.

“What if you actually get to enjoy what you're doing without the high?” I counter.

He looks me in the eye, the light from the preshow lighting up the gray even more, keeps them locked on me, nods once and starts looking at the stage again.

Pirates' Gold finishes up, and they get a roaring applause. I did notice the audience before this moment, but somehow I now truly see them, and holy fucking hell, that is a lot of people. I've been to concerts, I've stood in crowds like that, but seeing it from this point of view this high on stage is something else.

The guys from Pirates Gold all give manly hugs and high fives to the band members of 4A and then disappear. The stage goes dark, and all I can see are thousands of lights from phones in the audience. The stage gets set up for 4A's show, and the guys huddle in a circle. Before Madden leaves me, he grabs my hand and squeezes my fingers, leaving me in a dark spot in the wings all alone.

I watch with curious anticipation while they give some sort of a pep talk, Miles giving Wolf shit for his lack of an outfit. I'm with the guitar player on this one; Wolf is just wearing swimming shorts with the American flag and a rainbow flag bowtie. But hey, I've seen Flea in nothing but a sock, so who am I to judge what a rockstar wears on stage?

I force myself away from them, somehow feeling like I'm invading their personal space. There isn't really anywhere else to go though, I'm staying right where I am, and I'm semi sure that if I take off now I'll get lost.

When I turn around, I find Keshia, who is wrapping Pip in some sort of wrap and throwing the kid over her shoulder. The move reminds me of Santa getting his sack on his back, and for just a moment it has me worried for Pip's safety. The kid lands on Keshia's back though, and she expertly starts wrapping endless strokes of fabric around her. Every now and then she adjusts the position of Pip's body, or wiggling the wrap-thingie. I blatantly stare while she takes perhaps three minutes to entrap the little thing on her back, and by the time she's securing the last knot, I'm sure the kid is going nowhere.

And Pip?

Her eyes are getting heavy, her chubby cheek already against Keshia's back, her mouth slightly ajar.

"You are like superwoman," I whisper in awe.

She laughs, waking Pip back up, and answers, "No, just a mom." She stands up straight and Pip looks like a compact little package against her, all snuggled up inside her little pouch on Keshia's back. The woman holds out a set of tiny headphones, and asks me to put them on.

Probably smart to protect those little ears if she's going to be around loud music so much so early on in life. I lift the little girl's head and gently put them on, but by that time her eyes are getting heavy already and when the headphones are on she's out cold. I've always been amazed by some people's ability to fall asleep literally in the blink of an eye.

"Thanks," Keshia says.

Before I can answer, the lights on stage go on, and the crowd goes wild. If I thought they made a lot of noise when the pre-show ended, I was severely mistaken. That was nothing. My ears are seriously hurt by the amount of noise that comes from the crowd.

Madden looks over his shoulder, finding me, and I give him a reassuring smile, before he composes himself, straightens his back and walks onto the stage with swagger.

They all assume their positions, and Madden grabs the mic in his hand. I see him take a deep breath before his mouth opens.

“Good evening Las Vegas!”

A smile appears on his face, and his rock star persona is in full play. The fragility of the man wearing odd socks in rehab disappears, and in his stead stands Madden St. fucking James. He looks glorious in nothing more than black ripped skinny jeans and a black tight tee. His kicks are red though, breaking his dark look.

“I’m so happy to be here tonight. 4A is absolutely delighted to kick this tour off with all of our closest friends here tonight. So, Miles, Wolf, Bryson, Xem and myself want to thank you for being here. We’re, uh, well, kind of winging it tonight in terms of the setlist. So who’s ready to go on a little musical adventure with me?”

The crowd goes wild.

Madden gives Xem a look, and he gives a countdown before they start “Silence in Solitude”, one of their more heavy songs. It’s quite a bold choice to start with if you ask me, because the song is hard and raw and goes over wonderfully when your audience is pumped and maybe a little tipsy, but to start a show off with it? I don’t know. The intro is a total contradiction to the rest of the song – it starts with a horrifyingly beautiful violin solo, a single spotlight on Wolf. While he’s barely dressed in the ridiculous swimming shorts and bowtie, it’s the intense look he has and the dark kohl lines around his eyes that suck me in.

I can feel every note coursing through my body.

And then Madden starts singing.

His warm voice sings guttural words that send shivers down my spine. He grabs the mic stand, puts it between his legs, and thrusts his hips suggestively. And I know it's a performance, but *damn*. The lyrics to the song are very tame if you take the words literally, but if you've got a little bit of a dirty mind, the song is about rubbing one out and finding more pleasure in it than trying to do it with someone else. I'm not the only one who thinks it, it's been spoken about in interviews and they confirmed it.

Now that I think about it, it might be an awesome way to start a show.

"They're a sight to behold, aren't they?" Keshia says, her head close to mine. I forgot she was here with me, fully mesmerized by the magic that is 4A.

"Is it like this every time?"

"I've always thought so," she says, her eyes on Miles. I'm pretty sure that he could be the only one on that stage and she'd still be equally impressed. She's got a severe case of the googly eyes.

The song ends, and Madden already has a simmering sheen of sweat covering his skin. It must be scorching beneath all those lights, and he's giving it his all. "Who's ready for 'Kites in Thunder'?" he asks the crowd, and now that they're all warmed up, they're ready for anything. I'm not sure if there's some kind of signal or anything, but they start the song effortlessly.

I let myself be seduced by the warm tones of the song, and it's a completely different experience to hear the song played during a concert than when they were just jamming. I get goosebumps all over my body, drifting away on a tune that both soothes and energizes me.

Keshia hands me a bottle of water, and I once again forgot she was here. Now that I take the time to look around, there's a lot of people working really hard backstage. I have no idea

who most of them are or what the hell they're doing, but the moment I watch the band play, they all evaporate.

Wolf gets up close and personal with Madden when there's a bridge that's heavy on the violin, and he manages to use it in a way it sounds like a second drum riff. Madden and Wolf stand back to back, both of them doing their thing, giving the show all these people paid for.

I look into the audience and have some kind of out of body experience. People are sitting on shoulders, holding up signs, I even see a woman flash her tits, a nice red heart painted between her perky breasts. It's complete mayhem and nuts.

I take a moment to take them all in. Bryson is hardly visible, he's wearing his signature sleeveless hoodie and hiding his head just like I've seen him do the whole time I've been around. He works his bass like he owns it though, jumping in on the music on the moments he's really feeling it. Sweat drips from his nose down on the stage when he's hunched forward over his guitar, his eyes focused on his instrument, his fingers making love to the strings.

Miles is jumping around while playing riff after riff, taking his solos when he gets them. He's wearing a bright yellow bandana, holding his black hair out of his face. The rest of his attire is pretty normal. Just some jeans and a tee. But the smile he has on his face the whole time he's playing is his best feature, and it's something money can't buy. I can see his happiness. Every now and then he glances this way, and I'm pretty sure he's watching Keshia and Pip – who is completely knocked out on her mom's back, little spit bubbles coming from her plump lips in the little pouch that Keshia created.

Xem is bended over his drumset. He's shirtless, wearing bleached jeans and nothing else. His hair is messy, and I think it's the only hairstyle he can pull off, because he's beating those drums like they deserve it. He's all arms and strength and completely lost to the music. When he sings the backup vocals for Madden's lyrical masterpiece, his eyes are closed. Sweat flies around, his movements so big it's unavoidable. Now that he's not out for my head, doing something he likes, not criticizing anyone, he actually looks like he fits.

Everything just seems right, and I feel a little high myself. I blame the adrenaline.

The song ends, and Madden looks in my direction, his shoulders lowering when he finds me, the strain leaving his body. I wink, and he turns to the audience again.

“I suppose there isn’t anybody here tonight who has ever been in love?” he asks, and the audience roars. “Well, this one is for all of you who have ever experienced those first lust-filled nights before anyone started dividing chores like doing the dishes.”

He starts singing “Burn yourself”, and even without the introduction he just gave it, everybody knows what this song is about. It’s pure filth in a nice jacket and a catchy tune. But what it does is remind me of ripping someone’s clothes off and having your wicked ways with them. The drums even sound like a headboard banging against the wall in a particularly heated moment.

And the heat? It spreads.

Goddamn, having to watch this show regularly for the next few months is going to burn me alive.

CHAPTER TWELVE



My name keeps getting called from every direction the moment I've sung the final notes to our encore song and I head towards the wings. Evan is exactly where I left her at the beginning of the concert, and she's been a great comfort all throughout the performance. The moments I felt anxiety creeping in about everybody seeing through to me, what a poser I am, how bad my performance is, she was there, and she looked at me in awe. It gave me everything I needed to just power through and keep going. She's one of the few people backstage who isn't trying to get my attention though.

I head over, feeling hands all over my body. The guys, the assistants, people working for us. I'm sure there's a reason they're plucking me like I'm some sort of chicken, but right now it's making my skin crawl. I've been cut off from everyone and everything so long that standing in front of a full

stadium and giving the show of a lifetime has drained my social battery and I need to get out of here, right fucking now.

“Mad, are we doing autographs?” Miles asks.

“Do you want the Evian or Mount Valley water?” Jay.

“Have you seen my other bowtie?” Wolf. Not sure the question is directed at me, but everything registers in my brain, and it feels like everyone is trying to fry my brain.

“Get me the hell away from here,” I beg Evan the moment I reach her. Her arm goes to my bicep and she grabs me. Suddenly all sounds are too loud, the lighting is hurting my brain, my heart is racing like crazy and I feel like I’m looking down on myself without actually being inside of my body. I’m being pulled away from everyone behind her, and somewhere in the back of my mind it registers that Kyle is walking in front of us, creating a path that I can use to do exactly what I asked her. Get away.

Fans are going to be pissed that I won’t be here to entertain them, talk with them, sign some photos, shirts and tits. But every neuron in my body screams for its need of a total blackout, and backstage at a stadium isn’t going to give me that.

I lose a few moments right then and there, because suddenly we’re at the back entry and Evan takes me out through the back door into the open air. It’s like my body gets an overdose of oxygen, and my stomach roils, almost making me vomit because of the air I’m suddenly able to breathe again.

I close my eyes, my feet still going forward, letting myself be led back to the bus by the nurse I stole from rehab to haul my sorry ass back to a fucking tour bus. Look at me, living the literal dream of millions across the globe, and running away from the stage because of an episode I’m starting to suspect is at least a mild anxiety attack.

“We’re here,” she says, her voice a balm to my bleeding ears. It’s warm like honey and has been there for me in hard situations before. It was familiar and comforting, and taking her with me on tour seems like the only smart idea I’ve ever

had, smarter than starting a band and becoming world famous even.

I walk up the few steps into the bus, and she lets go of my bicep once we're inside. What I want to do is crawl in my bed, pull the covers over my head and push-push-push this feeling as far away as I possibly can. But without her pulling me ahead, I'm lost and don't know where to go, frozen in the torturing here and now.

"Sit," she says, turning me around in the direction of the couch. My feet move on their own, and before I'm aware of what I'm doing, I'm sitting in the corner of the couch, my knees pulled up, my arms wrapped around my legs and my forehead resting on my knees. My ears are no longer hurting, because the bus is blissfully quiet, but I can still hear my blood going through my veins and that annoying inside voice telling me all kinds of nasty shit.

"Drink," she commands. She seems to be a fan of the one word commands tonight, and I feel a cold bottle getting pressed in my hand. For just a second I think it's a beer, and I can drink myself into stupor and forget all about this bullshit, but I soon realize it's just a bottle of water and I don't have the luxury of numbing myself. I gotta sit this through and ride out the waves.

She sits down next to me, completely at ease in her silence. She toes off her shoes and crosses her legs. The tiny second I take to look up, I find her patiently studying me. I feel more comfortable with my eyes closed though, so I open my bottle of water and down half of it.

"I figure that's not normally how you leave a concert?" she asks me. The calmness in her tone convinces me that she won't judge me either way. She's just curious about my experiences, both in the past and now. It's the human connection she excels in.

"No, usually I'd be somewhere in the private dressing room now, shooting up or fixing myself something, having a drink, having a smoke, and then go back out to talk with the fans. Depending on how fucking hard I was going I'd pick out the

prettiest girl to take back here, or go home all by my fucking self when I know the drugs will make it impossible to get a hard-on.”

“Ah, the glorious side of fame nobody ever talks about,” she teases.

“Yeah, it’s like the shrivelled balls of steroids.”

She snickers, and somehow the sound of it grounds me. I can talk to her about these things without her freaking out. And I know that I won’t be able to scare her away with any of the drug stuff. She’s probably heard it all. Unlike anyone I’ve ever tried to make a real connection with. I’ve been scared shitless of scaring them away. That doesn’t just apply to the girls I’d possibly, in some kind of far-away universe, start catching feels for, it also applies to my brothers, all the people who work for me, the few friends I have.

Hell, look at my parents, I already scared them the hell away. My father by being born, my mother by using drugs.

But not Evan. She’s here to help with this shit.

And that’s the one thought I hold onto while slowly coming back to myself.

“Finish your water, and let’s go have a smoke,” she says.

I look at her with one eye. “You’re going to come smoke with me?”

“I think that tonight deserves a celebratory smoke.”

“I don’t want you to smoke,” I argue. She doesn’t, so she shouldn’t start.

“What are you, my mom?”

The crooked grin on her face ensures me she’s just fucking with me. I don’t know what to say, or what to do, but ever since she said the word smoke, my mouth has gone dry and all I can think about is sucking on one.

“I’m fucking with you,” she says, putting me out of my misery. “Listen, just finish the water, you’ve sweated out like a

gallon during that performance, then we'll go out, you can have a smoke, and I'll just stand nearby, judging you."

She noticed how much I sweated.

That's the only thing that registers. The rest just goes over my fucking head. On autopilot I bring the water bottle to my lips and drain the rest of the contents. Maybe I was dehydrated. We drank some water during half time, but I'm just now feeling how parched I really am. Getting some water into my system again also seems to ground me a bit, and I wonder if lack of fluids can contribute to having an anxiety attack, or if that was courtesy of my body, and my body alone.

She gets up from the couch, holding out her tiny hand towards me, and I grab it before we move outside again. She doesn't bother putting on shoes again, just stands bare-toed on the sand beside the bus while I try to find my smokes. I think I left them on the bus, but the moment I try to turn around to go grab them, she holds them out for me including the lighter.

"Thanks."

"Hey, it's your cancer."

"Lemme see if I make it to the getting cancer age first," I joke, but it feels empty, even to me. I grab one of the cigarettes and light up, inhaling deeply and keeping it down, before releasing it in one long breath. I can feel myself calm down, and I'm judging myself hard for that. Having a smoke shouldn't have this much of an effect on me, I should be able to do so myself. But I'm nothing but weak, and I literally need someone to hold my hand to make it through a regular night I've had hundreds of before.

"So," Evan says by way of conversation, her back against the side of the bus, looking at the stadium we just came from. People are buzzing around it, like ants going in and out of their anthill. "What would you be looking for right now if you were trying to pick up the prettiest girl?"

I scoff. "Depends on how much I would've had."

"Let's say it had been a good day, and you used, but you weren't out of your mind. What would you go for?"

“Literally anyone who’s willing.”

This time she scoffs. “Bullshit, all of them are willing.”

I rake my teeth over my bottom lip, sucking on my cigarette again, the crackling cherry the only sound right then. “Probably the one with the nicest voice would have the biggest chance to come back here.”

She looks at me with her big eyes, waiting for me to elaborate. And for some reason I’m completely at ease in doing so.

“Look, whenever a girl gets to come back with someone famous, they get this idea they’re special, and extraordinary, which they are to some extent. But they also start to believe they’re some kind of porn star and they start to moan and scream like they’re God’s gift to Earth.”

She raises her brow in amusement.

“Now, don’t get me wrong, I can appreciate a real, genuine moan. The ones that make my balls retract. But those fake moans are a fast way to make me lose all will to live. So yeah, I’d go for the girls with the nicest voice, because then when they start their gospel of Madden at least it doesn’t make me deflate.”

She laughs so hard I can’t help but feel my lips curl upward. The sound of it makes me feel more at ease than since the moment I sang the last note of the concert and rushed off the stage. I sigh.

Don’t get me wrong, I knew my habit was a problem. But I thought it was just a matter of quitting and everything would be the same again. It just goes deeper than that. Being addicted has become part of my personality, and now that I’m no longer using, I’m supposed to figure out who I am without the comfort of substances. It’s harrowing when you think about it.

I finish my cigarette, stomping it out, trying to figure out where to go from here. Before I know it, another cigarette gets held out towards me, and I look at her in confusion.

“Gather your thoughts. You’re not there yet.”

I nod, lighting it up and inhaling.

“What’d you go for?” I ask her.

She stares into the distance, mulling the question over, biting on the plump bottom lip of her heart shaped mouth.

“Always the wrong one,” she answers. The purple hue in her eyes darkens, and I take a drag from my smoke rather than pry for any additional information. We’ve all got our demons.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Warm water falls through over my head, wetting my hair, washing away the day. Last night was a night to never forget, the show something I'll always take with me. Madden's little freak out was to be expected, and wasn't all that bad looking back. He found me when he needed to and he took himself out of a situation that could've escalated quickly.

The moment the other guys started coming back he was calmed down enough to go to bed. I stayed up for another half an hour before I tucked myself in. I had to trust that he would wake me up if he needed it, but we both got out of bed after having slept okay. Well, I know I slept okay, and I just have to trust his word that he did as well.

What I hadn't expected were the random moans throughout the night from both band members and the groupies they brought back. To my knowledge Wolf was the only one who

came back alone. Bryson had a cute redhead over his shoulder when he came back, and Xem had a blond on each arm. I'm kind of curious as to how they fit in the small bed, but if the thumping was anything to go on, they didn't actually fit. I fell asleep while the noise was still in full effect, so I'm not too sure when they exactly ended their fun.

Lathering up my hair with shampoo, I start humming the tune to one of the songs they sang last night that has been stuck in my head ever since I heard it. It's catchy and won't leave. By the time I'm rinsing my hair I'm belting the words. If you can't beat them, join them and all that shit.

The moment I turn off the shower I feel more human again and like I've gotten rid of the song. I wrap myself in a big towel, toss one over my hair and quickly brush my teeth. There's stuff from the guys everywhere in the small shower, so I take my bag full of products back with me to my room.

The moment I open the door, I stare into one very green and one very blue eye. Wolf's hair is sticking out in every way humanly possible, and he's smirking in a way that can't possibly mean anything good. Dressed in nothing but tight fitting black boxers, he leans with one arm above his head against the doorframe, his ankles crossed.

"So you are a fan?" he asks.

"Excuse me?"

"Nice little concert."

"Oh fuck, you heard that?" My cheeks heat and it's the first moment I want to run for the hills.

"Babe, if the late night concerts of the groupies in Xem's and Bryson's bed didn't give it away, these walls are fucking thin. We can hear everything."

"Fuck."

He laughs. "Don't quit your day job."

"Oh hell no, I wasn't planning to. I know I can't sing for shit, but bathroom concerts don't count, you know?"

"Actually, I do. The bathroom is the only place I sing."

I squint my eyes, letting them go up and down over his body, appreciating the taut muscles for a moment. It's widely known that Wolf can play just about every instrument, so he's definitely musical, but rumor has it he can't sing.

"So it's true you can't sing?"

"Wanna hear it?"

The look in his eyes turns devilish, and I feel like I'm being tricked. "Sure?" I say, uncertain if that's the right answer.

"Okay, let's go." He pushes himself away from the wall behind him and motions me to turn around.

"Go?"

"Yeah, I only sing in bathrooms, remember? So get in the shower with me and I'll show you."

I laugh so hard my head falls back in my neck. I should've seen that coming. I like the cheeky violin player, but in regards to having sex he mostly falls in the second part of that description: player.

"I'm sorry, I'm not going to be one of many."

"You won't be," he says, his face earnest. "No girls allowed in the bathroom."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, you know how much hair girls have? You don't want clogged pipes on a tour bus shower. Trust me. Things will get ugly fast."

"Dude, both you, Miles and Madden have just as much hair as any girl."

"Still, no girls in the bathroom. Bus rules."

"You don't even let them shower after getting them dirty?" I ask in disbelief.

"Of course not. Letting them shower implies that they can stay. And they can't." Right when he says so, the two blondes emerge from Xem's room, about to do the walk of shame. They're semi clothed, or well, they're covered up, but I'm not

sure all pieces of clothing are exactly where they should be. One of them is still putting on her shoe as they try to get away.

Xem steps into his doorway, wearing just a pair of boxers, showing off his ripped body.

“Bye,” one of the girls says, but he ignores her. The other girl is getting the message, and makes sure both of them exit the bus.

“You reek of sex,” Wolf says, scrunching his nose.

“I smell like a good time,” he answers, yawning widely and stretching his arms above his head. “But I do need a shower now, so move it.”

That last part is directed at me.

I step aside, not at all bothered by his attitude. I was leaving anyway. “All yours.”

“Your singing sucks, by the way,” he says when he passes me.

“Yeah, well, your groupies sound fucking fake when they suck.”

“At least they have the excuse of having their mouth stuffed. What’s your excuse?” He shuts the door before I can answer him, because that guy has the ability to get my blood boiling in zero point two seconds.

“Don’t listen to him,” Wolf says, wrapping an arm around my still naked shoulders. “He’s an ass.”

I huff and push his arm away, making him chuckle.

“How are your drumming skills? Maybe we can replace him with you?”

This time I chuckle.

“I’d be like a toddler banging on pots and pans, and doing a bad job at it as well.”

“Shame,” he says, letting his eyes roam over me.

“Shame,” I repeat, giving him a wink when I walk into my tiny room and shut the door in his face. The anger I just felt is

replaced by happy nerves. This is going to be interesting.

My hair hangs in a wet braid over my shoulder while I eat a bowl of cereal on the couch in the lounge. I learned yesterday morning that breakfast is a kind of all you can eat buffet, because all the guys like something different and they all want it at different times of the day.

Madden hangs on the chair on the other side of the lounge, spinning a cigarette between his fingers, looking at sheet music Wolf gave him. He hasn't had breakfast yet, says he's used to coffee and nothing else. I'll get him to start eating breakfast sometime though, I'm sure of it.

Xem reappears after his shower, dressed in faded jeans and a pale blue shirt that match his eyes. His dirty blonde hair is slicked back and wet from the shower, and he looks remarkably fresh for someone who's had about zero hours of sleep.

He grabs a coffee and a banana before he sits on top of Madden, making the frontman laugh. He wraps an arm around his waist while I quietly observe a side of the drummer I've not seen before. There's a friendship there that I haven't seen before now; all I've seen is Xem giving me a hard time. But these two have a long history and they're still friends for a reason.

Xem steals the sheet music and looks it over. "He trying to make you fix it?"

"Nah, the music's perfect. He just needs the words to match."

"No pressure," Xem scoffs.

"We've done it before," Madden says, his arms still around his mate.

"No. You've done it before. Fucker might not know how to drum, but he does know how to compose. The words are all you."

"Fuck that shit, you know just as well as me that you've come up with enough of the lyrics."

Xem sits back, and notices me sitting there, spoon halfway to my mouth. He gives me a wide smile and flips me the bird.

I squint, flipping one right back, and going back to my food again.

The door to Bryson's room opens. The redhead from last night leaves, her little black dress back in place, her kick ass heels dangling from her hand. She's giggling when she leaves the bass player's room. She catches me watching her, and her face turns from happy post-orgasmic glow to sour.

"I thought we weren't allowed to shower," she says to Bryson, who just shakes his head in response, head in his hoodie. Guess the lack of words is in effect for his nightly conquests as well. I wonder if he whispered dirty little nothings in her ear and if she got to see him without the hoodie on. Somehow he intrigues me. What the hell possesses you to join a rock band when you're not too fond of talking?

"What's she doing here with wet hair then? If you want to get rid of me, you could've just said so."

"He wants to get rid of you," Xem says, his eyes stoic and his voice flat.

Bryson walks to the kitchen, fills up a coffee cup and turns his back to the redhead, who is quickly turning the same shade as the hair on her head.

"I'm not one of you," I blurt, even if I have no idea why I feel the need to defend myself.

"One of us?" she says, walking towards the exit.

"Yeah, you know, in their beds."

"Sure, you're special," the bitch scoffs.

I liked her better when she felt like she had a good time and wasn't taking her dismissal out on me.

Bryson just quietly observes, drinking his coffee. He waves at her with the tips of his fingers when she leaves the bus, two huge guys from security guiding her away from the bus the moment she steps outside.

“That was kinda rude,” I mumble.

“Hope she was better in the sack than what she showed just now,” Madden says.

Bryson shrugs. “Nothing special.”

“You guys are equally rude,” I say out loud this time.

Three pairs of eyes look at me in shock.

“What? Just because they put out doesn’t mean they’re life blow-up dolls for you to use. Have you ever thought about if you were giving her a good time?”

“Yeah,” Bryson deadpans, staring at me straight. From the look he gives me, I actually believe him. So, okay, maybe one of these guys actually cares about what they’re doing to a woman and not just their own pleasure. But I’m pretty sure that doesn’t go for all of them.

“How about you don’t judge what you don’t know,” Xem snaps. “You have no idea what kind of magic I can do with my dick.”

“I’m pretty sure you do a mean disappearing act,” I answer, making Bryson and Madden laugh. Xem just flips me the bird, which I reciprocate with a smile on my lips.

Asshole.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The stars look the same in Boise, Idaho, after darkness has fallen and being on the road all fucking day. They always look the same, no matter where on the fucking Earth I am. I've been on every continent except the North and South Pole, and everywhere I went, it looked the same. Some places they shone brighter, making them look closer, but I couldn't tell you shit about what stars I'm looking at right now.

There was this one time I tried to impress a chick in high school by telling her what constellation we were looking at, and she flat out told me I just made her look at a satellite. Turned out her father was an astronomer and I just made an ass out of myself.

I grab my smokes from the pouch of my hoodie and light up, the fire lighting up the area around me for a moment before darkness returns. I'm not some kind of freak who gets

off on darkness or anything like that. I just like the darkness every now and then. I take a drag, feeling the nicotine rage through my body.

“What the fuck,” a female voice says. “Uh, guys? Help? I think the bus is on fire?”

I chuckle when I hear the panic in Evan’s voice, who clearly doesn’t know I’m on top of the bus. “No fire, just me,” I say, the volume of my voice louder than normal. I sit up, put my hoodie on again and scoot to the side of the bus to look down.

Big eyes look up, and I can see the surprise when she sees me.

“What the hell Bryson!” she says, the agitation clear in both her face and her voice.

I silently chuckle. I like her when she’s like this. “Get up here,” I tell her.

She looks around, unsure on... well, I guess what to do.

“I... I think I’d love to join you, but how the fuck do I climb a bus?”

Smoke dangling from the side of my mouth, I climb off the same way I got up there. There are a few handy things to hold onto if you know where to look. And after years of touring with this bus and climbing up on it to gaze at the stars, I know how to do it. With a few quick steps I’m back down on the ground, and I find the petite nurse standing there, eyes wide and something resembling awe.

“You do that often?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she answers in the same curt way I answered her. Maybe I need to open up to her a little, she doesn’t seem to be so bad. Getting her up on the bus will be a great first step, right? She’s helping Madden, and I’m really grateful for that. I do *not* want to lose my friend, which I know will happen if he doesn’t fight his demons. We’ve all got them to some extent,

that's the whole reason I'm up on the roof of this bus. Out here, it's so quiet that I can hear my own thoughts clearly.

Down on the ground, I give Evan a quick once over. She's always dressed casually, but looks amazing anyway. She doesn't need anything to look good. She's one of those classy women who looks effortlessly gorgeous. Not at all like the girls dressing up to go to a concert and then waiting backstage to get picked up. There's a difference there, and it's a difference I've been thinking about since she called me out this morning on the way I treated that girl.

As she should.

I mean, I've forgotten her name already. Sure, I'm a gentleman, I think about her when we're sharing a bed, I make sure she comes before I do and I need to be convinced she's having a good time, but that doesn't make me mister romance. I still use their bodies because I want to and because they offer so freely. Evan would never allow that. She's a *more* girl. The kind of woman songs get written about.

"Here," I say, taking a quick drag from my cigarette to prevent the light from going out. I place my foot on the wheel of the bus, grabbing the side mirror to hoist myself up. Then I place my foot on the doorhandle, before I climb up, using the mirror as a step and placing my toes between the opening of the top of the door and the bus. It's not that hard when you know what to do.

She follows me without comment, trying to copy my moves, even if she's a whole foot smaller than me.

I'm already laying flat on my back, finishing my smoke, by the time she's climbed up.

"What are we doing?" she asks me. She sounds a little out of breath, and maybe that's a normal response for someone who's just climbed on top of a bus for the first time.

"Enjoying the quiet," I answer truthfully.

"You always enjoy the quiet," she says, laying down right next to me. The skin of our arms is touching, and while I can

feel the heat radiating from her body, it sends cold shivers down my body.

“I like silence.”

“Why?” Her face is pointed towards me, the white of her eyes the only thing lighting up in the darkness of the night.

“Because most people don’t listen to what you have to say anyway, so why bother telling them?”

She takes a moment to think about that, and I let her. I’d much rather she doesn’t answer me at all than she just talk for the sake of talking.

“So, tell me something,” I grunt.

She faces me, lifting a brow. “You literally don’t speak if you don’t have to, but you expect me to start talking to you?”

“You’re in my domain, seems fair.”

She faces back up, staring at the night sky, looking at who knows what. Every time I look up there I see this major universe and all my troubles and worries seem to not matter anymore. What does she see?

“What do you wanna know, mister silent?”

I chuckle. I’m anything but silent on stage. I just use my hands to produce sound instead of my vocal chords. “Everything.”

“Well, I was born on a Wednesday. Jupiter was in the second house according to my mother.”

More laughter. When I look over, I see her shiver slightly. The moment the sun sets, it cools down quickly. She isn’t dressed for staying out for long periods of time; she was heading back into the bus, where it’s nice and warm. I scootch over, the side of our legs now touching as well, sharing body heat. Her arm is soft, her skin smooth and virginlike.

Mine? They’re all inked. Nothing bare about them. It’s why I like the sleeveless hoodies so much. My art feels like I’m already wearing clothes.

“I don’t know what to say. I was a regular kid, had a regular childhood, attended nursing school right after high school, worked in a home for the elderly, took a hiatus and then started working rehab. I liked rehab more than the home for the elderly. I guess it has something to do with the psychological aspect of helping addicts get their life back. With the elderly you know it’s a battle you’re going to lose eventually, because old age will win every damn time. But people willing to work on their recovery? They get their life back every now and then. I like being part of that.”

I let her words sink in, but somewhere during her speech, she gave me goosebumps. It’s the passion I can hear. It’s how I feel whenever I make a melody so perfect I can move someone with the music I make.

“What’d you do on hiatus?”

The silence returns, and it takes forever before she answers.

“I made a lot of mistakes.”

“But you lived?”

She takes longer than I would’ve expected to answer that.

“I made it out alive.”

There’s more to the story than I’m getting right now, but I don’t pry. She’ll tell me if she wants to.

“Does it ever get tiring, being on the road?” she asks me. I can hear the genuine interest in her voice. She’s not just talking for the sake of talking, she just wants to know.

“Sometimes.”

Her face falls to the side, observing me while I keep staring upwards.

“The concerts, the music... It gives me energy, makes me feel good. But after a few months on the road, never staying in one place for too long, people getting on each other’s nerves, yeah, it gets tiring.”

She turns her face back, staring up again. I look at her from the side of my eye. Her profile is striking. A cute little button

nose, plump lips, a gorgeous jawline – everything just seems to be right. And I like that she climbs on a bus with me, lies down and doesn't ask any questions, or at least inspect the rooftop for bird excrement or something, which I'm pretty sure at least three thirds of all the girls I take with me after a concert would do.

“You like it?” I ask her.

Once again, she takes her time to think her answer through. “It's different. Thrilling. But I can also see it becoming exhausting down the road. Everybody wants something from you guys, all the goddamn time. The most relaxed I've seen you all was during the hours-long drive today, and usually being on the road isn't what I consider relaxing.”

“I asked if you like it.”

A half smirk covers her face, seemingly happy I caught her giving me a non answer.

“Yeah, I like it.”

She's a free spirit, and being on the road suits her.

“Even when Xem is being an asshole.”

“He's not that bad.”

“To you.”

“No, really. He's not that bad. He just has different demons than Madden. I'm not condoning his behavior, but there's a good guy in there.”

She scoffs, and I guess she has every right to. I know Xem, but Evan has only gotten to see his ugly side so far. He's given her no reason to like him whatsoever. But that's for them to fix, or not. Hell, she's here for Madden, they don't have to get along.

I push myself up, getting up until I'm standing on the bus, holding out a hand for her to grab to get up as well. We get to the side of the bus where we climbed on it, and I go down first, showing her where she can put her hands and feet. Full of trust and without question she follows me. Trying to focus on if she's reaching for the right places on the bus, my attention

gets drawn to her ass, and it's just as perfect as her face, filling up her jeans with a nice rounding that I'd like to get my teeth in every other day of the week.

But she's not some girl who will go away when the morning comes, so I'll have to restrain myself. She's here to keep Madden okay, and that's all there is to it.

Too bad.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



I'm playing around on my phone while the band is busy doing a sound check. They're playing "Back Door Man" by The Doors. Wolf's suggestion. Miles had made them play The Cure before this and I guess it made the rebellious violin player a little too serious. If you'd have asked me if a violin and The Doors would work, I'd be pretty sure it wouldn't, but he's making it work. The notes reach my ears, and it's kind of pleasant. Everything feels natural and smooth.

But when I'm not paying attention, Xem's drumstick flies through the air towards Madden, Bryson drops his guitar, and jumps the drummer. And I've got no idea what's going on. My heart thumps like crazy in my chest, and I'm looking around to see if I can figure out what the hell is going on.

Xem and Bryson are rolling around on the floor, doing something that's between fighting and wrestling, and because I

have no idea what's going on I'm not sure if this is just friendly boys being rough with each other or if this is something serious. Miles has left the stage and is talking to Kyle, who's now making his way towards the fight to break it up, so it seems to be serious after all.

Madden is rubbing his hands over his eyes, Wolf casually rubbing a hand over his back like there isn't a cloud in the sky. My feet take me towards Madden, and before I know it I'm standing in front of him, seeing the way his muscles are trembling.

What. The. Fuck. Happened?

"Do the tech guys have everything to wrap this sound check up?" I ask Wolf. He weaves a hand through his dirty blonde hair, combing the big curls away from his face.

"Whether they have it or not, they're not going to get more than this."

I grab Madden's elbow and start steering him to the wings towards the exit of the stage, much like after his first concert when he started having anxiety and asked me to get him away. I have no clue where I'm going, but when I see a door leading to a dressing room, I yank it open and get both of us inside.

There's a couch and clothes that definitely aren't Madden's. Going on the endless sleeveless hoodies I'm going to go out on a limb and say this is Bryson's dressing room. I push Madden down on the couch, and he sits down, covering his face with his hands, bouncing his leg nervously.

"What the hell was that?"

His big gray eyes find mine, and silence lingers between us. I realize I yelled the words, and the cool, calm and collected rehab nurse he has gotten to know is nowhere to be found.

"I fucked up and Xem's anger issues came out to play."

I try to calm myself, taking a deep breath before I talk again.

"Okay, so explain this to me, because I was happily just reading buzzfeed and suddenly you're being attacked and

Bryson is re-enacting the Bodyguard. I thought you were just playing an old song with obvious double innuendo!”

See, the start of that sentence was calm, but it ended angrily, because I still don't understand what just happened.

His hand shakes when he reaches for his smokes, and he has to try to light it twice to make it catch.

“I had a flashback of the last time we played this stadium. We went out the day before the concert last time we were here, and I pulled an all nighter. I think I did an eightball all by myself. And standing there made me crave just numbing every fucking thing. I don't even know why, there isn't any reason to, but it was there. And I started my chorus late, setting Xem off.”

I get the first part of what he's saying, I don't get why that would make Xem throw his drumstick to him.

“Explain the last part again.”

The confusion must be showing on my face, because he starts chuckling. I don't fail to notice that his hands are trembling less than before. For some reason he seems to think I'll not condone all his drug-like behavior, that I'll punish him for having cravings or whatever, but it's all part of recovery.

“Xem and I go way back. We went to elementary together. And we've always pushed each other to do better, to be better. We had to be, because both of us wanted to make it big. To something bigger and better at least. Not to be cocky or anything, but I can sing that song with my eyes closed, my hands tied behind my back and having a microphone dangling in front of me like a pinata. But I missed my cue, and Xem lost the plot, because I should be better than that.”

I stare at him, because there are so many things in that statement that I'm blown away by that I don't know where to start.

“And Bryson jumping him?”

“Was to protect me. Xem sees red whenever he gets mad.”

I let myself drop on the couch next to him, hugging my knees.

“And tonight?”

“Everything will be back to normal, and we’ll give an epic show, but we won’t be playing The Doors anytime soon.”

“I was impressed how Wolf made the violin work with that song.”

He lets his head fall back onto the couch, staring at the ceiling, cigarette dangling between his lips while he combs a hand through his unruly black hair.

“It’s just one extra tone. He can use it to amplify the drum rhythm or the guitar’s. Or he can add a whole new counter melody. It’s pretty brilliant. I don’t know why more bands won’t do it.”

“Maybe because most bands don’t dare doing anything out of the ordinary.”

He scrunches his face. “It’s the fastest way to stand out though.”

“Yeah, but don’t record labels like sure things?”

He tilts his head and nods, giving me the argument. I startle when the door opens and Jay steps in. It doesn’t matter that he’s the assistant of rock stars, it doesn’t matter what time of day it is, it doesn’t matter how he feels, he’s always dressed immaculately. Today it’s a lavender Gucci three piece that looks exquisite on his complexion.

“Here, drink,” he commands. For a tall, black man, he has a very high voice.

Madden accepts the bottle of water, uncaps it and drinks the whole thing. I didn’t think to grab him any, I just needed to get him away and find somewhere quiet.

“How’s Xem?” Madden asks, starting to rip the paper off his water bottle. He mindlessly throws the little pieces he manages to get off on the ground, making a mess without noticing it. The way he avoids looking at both Jay and me makes him look guilty.

“Calmed down again,” Jay says. He doesn’t seem all too phased with what happened. He grabs a little jar on Bryson’s side table, picks it up, reads the label and opens it. “Bryson got him under control.”

Jay dabs his finger in whatever it is he’s found in Bryson’s room, walks towards Madden and lifts his head by putting a finger under his chin. Then he applies the cream he got from the jar on Madden’s T-zone, and I watch in amazement at what he’s doing. Madden doesn’t seem to think this is weird behavior.

“You’ve got to primp, darling. You’re not always going to be this pretty.”

“Way to make me feel better, Jay.”

“At least you’ve stopped drinking alcohol like it’s water and started actually drinking water.”

Madden rolls his eyes.

“Don’t you give me attitude, M. I like having you around. When you’re not shooting up all hours of the day you’re actually a very pleasant client to work with.”

I silently chuckle. Jay is chewing his ass out by giving him compliments. The man is one of those silent forces who can move mountains without you actually seeing him do it. Vic is much the same. I wonder what they’re like when they’re together. If they plan and plot the day ahead, making sure everything goes the way it should. Or if they’re just winging it. The fact that they’re married means they know how the other person rolls.

“How are we going to get through this, Jay?” Madden asks, the desperation thick in his voice.

“One day at a time, M. That’s all we can do. Sound check sucked, tonight’s show is going to rock. Maybe speak with the guys, see if you can do a set list that’s different from last time you were here. Keep the flashbacks to a minimum.”

Madden nods. “Might be hard. We’ve got some hits they will be expecting.” He rubs his hands over his face. “Maybe

we should make some new music. Some fresh songs that don't hold any memories."

"That will deal with your issues," Wolf says when he steps through the door. "It won't help with Hyde coming to the surface."

"There is not enough anger management to get through to that guy," Madden says.

"Has he always been like that?"

"Yes," Wolf and Jay say at the same time when Madden answers 'No'. I squint at him in confusion.

"What happened?"

"That's his story to tell, not mine."

Wolf lights up a cigarette, takes a puff and passes it to Madden, who accepts, sits back and starts smoking it. When Wolf is lighting up his own smoke, he points at Madden with one finger. "You are way too good of a friend to him sometimes."

Madden's shoulders sag. "We have to have each other's backs, guys. Nobody else will do it. The press will kill us and without the fans we're left with nothing."

Wolf lets himself fall down on the couch, throwing his legs over Madden's. "So fucking what, babe? Remember you found me in the subway, literally homeless? We've made enough money thus far to retire now. Buy a nice little house somewhere in the Bahamas, learn how to catch our own fish and grill them over an open bonfire on the beach. Doesn't that sound like heaven?"

Jay scoffs. "You're going to scale and gut your own fish. Now *that's* something I would pay good money for to see."

I start laughing really loudly when I see the look of utter disgust on Wolf's face. Even Madden seems completely relaxed again. I make sure to remember that these guys aren't just bandmates, they're friends first, brothers. And while the whole world can go to shit, they will pick one another.

And as long as that basis is there, they'll make it. I just need to make sure I make use of it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four. I'm drumming on my knee, blinking along to the rhythm I'm setting for myself. My whole life is divided up in counts, and on days like these, where I'm nervous for no good reason, I tend to measure everything.

Perhaps my need for control is what makes me act out in every other aspect in my life. I'm the regular punk that doesn't like to get told what to do. There have been professionals trying to tell me I'm acting out, but fuck them and let me be.

Chewing the inside of my cheek, I spin a drumstick between my fingers. My bed has been freshly made after last night's escapades. Jay and Vic always make sure everything is clean after I've had someone over. Probably for the best as well, because I wouldn't take care of that myself. I've never been taught how to do that. Always been left to my own devices.

My chest hurts.

It's not a physical pain. It's a hollowness that surfaces every blue moon, and that I try to get rid of as fast as I humanly can whenever I get the opportunity. But we'll be going on stage in about two hours so I won't drink or use, because I don't want to tempt Madden. I might be a grade A asshole, but fuck if I'm the reason he falls off the wagon and relapses.

I rub my eyes so hard they hurt, and don't give myself any time to think through what I'm about to do. My fingers find my phone, and while counting a steady rhythm of fours I dial my mother's phone number.

It rings.

And it rings.

And it rings some more.

But nobody picks up.

Before I can feel like I've let myself down, I dial my father's number, only to repeat the little ritual I just experienced with my mother.

Fuck.

Why the hell did I think they would answer the phone for me? They're never here when I need them to be. I should've learned ages ago that it all comes down to me anyway, as it has always been.

Flashbacks of days spent in hospital cafeterias come to mind, and I shove that shit down as fast and as far as I can. My body itches with the need to do something, to not think, to get lost in something. I push myself off of my bed, figuring I'll go hit the drums on my own for a while. It's not very convenient timing. The stadium is slowly filling with people who'll attend the concert, and they'll hear me play. But whatever. They'll appreciate a little extra music right?

I storm out of my room, only to literally run into Evan, who's just leaving the bathroom, her hair knotted in a towel on her head.

"You look like shit," I shout.

A flash goes over her face, only to end up with furrowed brows and the corners of her mouth pointing down. If I can't numb and I can't play, then I'll pick a fight. And she really does look like crap.

"I don't recall asking for your opinion, asshole," she hisses through her teeth. Even when she's obviously angry at me and her whole face shows it, her features are fucking perfect, which only aggravates me more. *Real* people don't look perfect when they're angry. They look raw, and flawed. They certainly don't have perfectly pouty heart-shaped mouths.

"You came on tour, you stay in my bus, you're going to get my opinion whether you like it or not!"

"What the hell happened to you to make you act like you should be in permanent anger management classes?"

Her mentioning my past almost makes me think of all the things I'm trying to get away from. I slam both of my hands on the wall directly next to her head, caging her in and bringing my face directly in front of hers. We're standing so close she must be able to feel my breathing. I can feel her breasts scraping my chest every time she inhales.

"Who the fuck do you think you are to come here and just say whatever you think? Hell, as far as I'm concerned, 4A is the reason you have a paycheck. You should be a little more grateful, bitch."

My vision goes white from pain when she knees me. She fucking knees me. I roar, push myself away from the wall and storm out of the bus, before I do something really fucking dumb, like hit her. As much as I feel like doing it, I'm positive I'll regret it the moment I've calmed down and I'm not seething.

The pain in my nuts crawls over my spine, until it finally fades into a still there, but dull pain. I'm not paying attention to where I'm going, but I know I need to do something to pull myself out of this mood. If fighting, playing or using isn't an option, there's just one thing left to do: fuck.

My feet take me to the entry of the stadium. People are already waiting to get in, and the hardcore groupies are waiting by the back entrance, waiting for us to go in. It doesn't matter to them that it's several hours from now before that will be happening. Today is a pretty clear day, it's not too hot, not too cold, perfect weather to stand outside of a stadium for several hours, but they're always there, no matter the circumstances.

The security greets me, and quickly back off when they see my scowl.

I let my eyes glide over the horde of girls outside. All of them are dressed in the same skimpy outfits, mascara thick on their lashes, perfect to smudge. They start screaming their fucking lungs out when they see me. Some of them are here for one of us specifically, the girls with the 'Marry me Madden' shirt for instance. Shame. She's just my type. Blond, full chest, and big fuck me eyes. So I search for the next blond girl that does look excited to see me. She's a little taller than I usually like them to be, but hell, for what I want to do it doesn't matter how tall she is. It's not like I'm going to be dating or proposing to her.

I stride towards her, a soreness from before still covering my sac.

"Hey," I say, lifting my chin towards her.

"Hey," she answers, her voice a little shrill, but hey, who can blame her, she's meeting one of her idols.

"Wanna come hang out for a while?"

Her eyes grow wide, and she nods, biting her bottom lip. I can only imagine how hard her heart must be pounding in her chest right now. One of the security guards lifts her over the fence, and I hold out a hand for her to grab when she lands on the other side.

We get into the back of the stadium, and I don't even bother taking her to one of the rooms. Just around the corner of the entry, I let myself fall against the wall and pull her against me. We don't exchange any words before I devour her mouth, and

she willingly lets me fuck her mouth with my tongue. She starts out a little timid, but I quickly convince her to go along with it.

I hope she wasn't expecting Prince Charming, because I'm not fucking it.

When a soft moan leaves her mouth, my patience breaks. I took her here for one reason only, and I'm making sure I'm getting it. Evan hurt me, now I need someone to kiss it and make it better.

While I use one hand to unbutton my pants, I lay a hand on her shoulder, pushing her down. It doesn't take any convincing, she goes willingly, looking at me with blissed out eyes.

The hardness in my pants has nothing to do with the girl in front of me and everything to do with me just wanting to blow my load. I free my cock from my briefs, holding it in front of her face.

I make sure to make eye contact with her before she opens her mouth and I lay the tip of my cock on her tongue. I might be a royal dick, but I'm not forcing girls to have sex with me. There's enough of them who'll do it willingly. I'll just never assume they want to. Somewhere down the road I got some manners.

The moment my dick comes in contact with the wet heat of her mouth, all bets are off though. I push forward, and she sucks me in. She tries to adjust to my size, but gags when I hit the back of her throat. Her big eyes water up, and it's just not what I'm in the mood for.

Holding her head with two hands, I start fucking her mouth.

"Close your eyes," I command, and thank the fucking stars she listens. I'm not looking for some little girl trying to play with the big bad wolf. I just want to feel ecstasy, blow my load, and reset my mood.

Once she gets a rhythm down, I get into the sensations I'm feeling, letting my head fall back against the wall. The first

time my balls draw up because I'm close to coming, the pain returns and the nearing climax staves off.

I grit my teeth, only fucking her mouth in a harsher pace. Her hands are wrapped around the backs of my legs, her fingers pressing into them. I wish she'd use that hand to stimulate the base of my cock, because she's in no way taking all of me in. But not all of them can be pros I guess.

It's not long before I start myself feeling building again. I chase the feeling, starting at the base of my spine. This time when my balls draw up, it still hurts, but I welcome the pain.

At the last moment, I pull out, letting go of her head and grabbing my own dick, stroking myself through my release, shooting ropes of thick white cum all over her open mouth, face and closed eyes.

It's the first sight of her I actually really enjoy, and it doesn't have anything to do with her personally if I'm being honest.

I tap my dick against her cheek before I put it back in my underwear and button my pants again.

"Thanks, doll," I say, before turning around, walking away while she's still down on her knees. I just can't fucking be bothered.

I feel lighter than I did before busting a nut. It just doesn't fix anything. I still don't exist in my parent's eyes, I'm still an asshole, and I'll still willingly hurt the people around me when I feel like it.

Some things in life aren't meant to change.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



There's a block of energy in my chest. It's growing, and it's getting bigger and bigger and right now it's ready to snap. We gave an awesome show tonight, fans were happy, screaming and loving every second of it. I felt good with the way I performed, hit all the notes, gave my all to the music, even had it in me to sign some autographs and take some pictures with fans before I had some kind of outer body experience and went back to the hotel where we'll be staying for the night.

Whenever we have a schedule that allows it, we try to sleep in a hotel. We've got all day tomorrow to do something fun before we'll be traveling during the night while we sleep on the bus.

Last year? Last year that would've meant that I'd have found some groupie, took her with me to the too tiny room,

made sure I had enough substances to keep me going for the whole night and had a little private party.

This year? I'm afraid it'll mean that I try to sleep while the others have their own private party. It might be without the drugs, but I'm sure they won't turn down a good time with a girl.

But that's not what set me off. There's something inside my chest, a feeling that gets amplified by a little voice inside my head that says I'm going to fail. That one of these days I won't be able to resist the temptation and fall right back down the rabbit hole again.

I'm not so sure I'll make it out if I ever go down again.

I'm not sure what possesses me, but I pick up my phone, and I call my mother. The phone rings, and keeps on ringing, until it gets forwarded to an automatic answering machine. She didn't even leave a personal message for those who call her.

With the impersonal message I have no way to be certain it's even her number anymore, so I decide not to leave a message. Can you imagine what would happen if I leave a rambling voicemail to someone and they sell it to the press?

Fuck. I've screwed up enough.

My throat feels thick, and my hands are clammy, and I'm pretty sure this is the moment I should go and get Evan, but for some reason I don't want to bother her with my issues. Screw the fact that that's literally what she's here for. It's late, and she's probably all settled in her room and asleep already.

My fingers itch, and I throw back the covers off of my bed. Which feels good. So I don't stop there. I wiggle the nightstand, and it isn't bolted down or anything, so in a fit of insanity I grab it and throw it to the other side of the room.

And the neurons in my head light up like those lights at the landing stripe at an airplane, signalling 'This feels good', 'This feels fucking epic', 'Keep going, that's the spot'. So I jump over my bed, grab the other nightstand and throw it across the

room as well. This time it shatters, and I even like the sound it produces.

I try flipping the bed, but it's too heavy. I can, however, flip the mattress and throw it across the room.

My heart is pounding in my chest, sending a steady signal that lets me know I'm still alive, I'm still here, I didn't die.

Oh. My. Fucking. God.

I OD'd. I did die for a minute and fifteen seconds. I didn't just fuck up a little, I fucked up so hard I died. I'm pretty sure that's the ultimate level of fucking up. By the time that thought settles in I'm hyperventilating and have worked myself up into a nice little panic attack. My breathing is shallow and feels like it goes in through a straw.

I'm making my way over to the cabinet. Throwing all my clothes out seems like a reasonable next step? Doesn't it?

But before I reach the cabinet, strong arms wrap around me. I didn't notice anyone coming in, but Kyle has grabbed me from behind and is restraining me from causing any more damage. I'm not sure who's interest he has in mind; mine or the interior. Fuck, I'm going to get banned from this hotel and get a bill.

Not the first time that has happened though.

First time that it happens while I'm sober. So, well, yay me?

Next thing I see are Xem's eyes. He grabs my face roughly in both his hands, forcing me to look at him. I expect him to be angry, but instead he looks worried.

"Should I get Evan for you?"

"No."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

That's the moment I break. My anger ebbs away and a soul shattering emptiness is all that's left.

It must be showing in my eyes, because Xem's look softens as well. "I've got you brother."

He winks his head towards the bathroom, and before I know it Kyle is hauling me in there. Xem starts the shower, takes off his shirt and toes off his shoes, before he kneels down to get my shoes off as well. He tries to get my shirt off, but Kyle stops him, and only after both me and Xem reassure him that I'm not going to harm him or anyone else, he lets me go and I let Xem take the shirt off over my head.

Next thing I know, he pulls me into a hug and pushes me under the stone cold water of the shower. My body shivers and tries to protest to the cold, but at the same time it lets me know I'm here. I survived. I'm not fucking dead and six feet under. I still get to have fun with my friends, I still get to see the sun set and rise in the morning, I still get to make music and move people with the things my mind comes up with. I still get to experience love, even when it's not reciprocated and I get sent through to voicemail.

Hell. I'm still here.

Next thing I know, Xem and I are sitting on the ground, knees pulled in. His arm is around my shoulders and I'm crying big tears that relieve everything that I'm feeling. My head keeps chanting: I'm still here, I'm still here, I'm still here. It's a thought that both soothes me and makes me aware of the vastly different result that little stunt could've had.

All the guilt in the world takes over.

"God, I'm such a fuck up," I whisper, my body sivering from the cold of the water. Xem doesn't seem to care though, he just sits with me in the cold spray while he's probably freezing his balls off as well.

"Yeah? Well, so you died? I got the clap from some hookup a month after you went to rehab."

I can't hold back a laugh, it goes so deep I can feel it all the way in my belly.

"How'd you find out?"

"My dick didn't stop itching and it hurt when I peed, so I got tested and then got proper treatment, and *then* I got to call all the girls I've been with in the last six months."

I chuckle. “Damn.”

He gives me a mischievous grin. “I made Vic call them all for me. What are assistants for otherwise?”

“Are you sure he’s done calling everyone? Because I’m sure it’s been a long list. NDAs probably helped track them all down.”

“Vic swore at me for two weeks straight. Some of the girls thought I was ready for a repeat, but when they heard why I was calling they didn’t know how fast to get away.”

I silently chuckle, shivering all the while.

“Let’s get you dry,” Xem says, getting up and holding out his hand to get me standing straight again. We don’t talk while we get undressed and dry off. We both end up in a pair of my sweats and a shirt. While I’m busy finding some socks, Xem is making my bed. In the time we’ve been in the shower, Kyle seems to have tidied up my trashed room a bit.

I let myself fall on the bed, grab one of the pillows and hold it over my head.

“I tried calling my mom,” I confess.

He huffs. “Yeah, welcome to the club of orphans while your parents are still alive, party of two.”

I know exactly what he’s talking about.

The door opens, and Evan sticks her head inside. Her hair is all messed up, and her face looks groggy. I think Kyle might’ve woken her up anyway.

“Everything alright?” she asks uncertainly.

“We’re all good again,” Xem answers.

“Yeah, no need to clap,” I jibe.

He hits me on my arm, and the look of confusion on Evan’s face is completely worth it. We both end up giggling like schoolgirls, and I think that’s Evan’s cue to get away again. Once she’s turned her back, Xem flips her the bird. I get that he doesn’t want her to be here, but I don’t know what she did

to piss him off so much. Then again, there isn't much of a need to set Xem off.

“What’s making you hate on her so much?”

He glares, but doesn't answer me.

“Come on, just tell me. If it's really bad I'll try to find another way to continue doing the tour without her.” Just saying the words out loud makes me feel uneasy. I don't feel like I can do this without her. In the time since I've gotten to know her, she's become a part of me. There's a connection I can't explain and don't want to miss. Perhaps it's circumstance; the way we met created a form of codependency that I'm not yet ready to give up. Perhaps it's something more.

But by God, whatever it is, she's beautiful.

“She's trouble,” Xem says reluctantly. His arms are crossed in front of his chest, his hands tucked beneath his armpits.

“She's keeping me out of trouble.”

“No, it's... she's messing with the balance. And listen, bro, I don't want you to die. But I mainly don't want you to die because I love the life we're living right now.”

It shouldn't, but it actually makes sense.

This? The hard life? It's all we've known since fucking high school. And school wasn't a doozy before that. But we've always had each other, and right up until the point where I started lying about my drug use, I'd say we knew everything about each other. Fucking hell, we both lost our virginity to the same girl. If that doesn't form a bond, then I don't know what does.

But it's always been our deep misery that has recognized the other the best.

I sigh deeply, leaning against my friend.

“Thanks.”

He bumps his head against the side of mine. “Any time, asshole.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



“We need to do some shopping,” Jay says, throwing his head back and feeling his forehead with the back of his hand to add an extra bit of drama to his statement. We’ve got a rare day without any traveling, soundchecks, or commitment to the guys, who will spend the day jamming and brainstorming on some new music. They all agreed on no drugs, no alcohol and no sex so they could focus on the music. I’m feeling good leaving Madden behind today, so I can spend some time on my own.

“You’ve got a whole bus full of outfits,” I tell him. Because one of the buses literally is stuffed with clothes and outfits.

“Yes, honey,” he says, giving me a stern look and pointing at me with his index finger. “But it’s the shopping experience we need. Touring is all music, and work, and we need some play.”

Vic smacks Jay on the ass, a naughty look in his eyes “We did some playing last night.”

“TMI, guys,” I yell. “I sleep on a bus with four rock stars, there’s enough innuendo and unfamiliar girls moaning.”

“I definitely made him moan like a girl last night,” Vic says, wagging his eyebrows with a smirk on his lips.

“Okay, that’s it, we’re going. We’re shopping, and I don’t want to hear any more about your bedroom escapades. Are we taking Keshia and Pip with us?” Whenever I start to feel uncomfortable I get into some kind of dictator mode, where I take control and tell everyone what to do. It’s my comfort zone, my control zone.

“Pip and Mom are already at the park. There’s a huge playground and Keshia hoped that Pip could play with some other kids. According to my darling niece, the world consists of half naked grown ups who make loud noises all day.”

I scrunch my face, because that is probably true. But then again, she also has a dad who grabs his guitar and sings her kiddie songs all day if that’s what she wants, and he’ll happily do that. The rest of the band give him shit for being a fake rock star, but if you ask me, being a good dad is way more rock. It’s the same conclusion Madden came to when we were at the ranch, brushing the old horses.

“Okay, let’s go shopping,” I say, walking towards the exit, because I’ll need my purse and possibly a jacket before we can go. At the last moment I turn around, looking Victor over, who’s wearing another fancy designer outfit, and I squint. “We’re going to a regular mall, right? Because I can’t afford the shit you wear.”

Both of them start laughing.

“Have you checked your bank account since you started coming here? Because I know what you get paid on a weekly basis, and I know what you spend: absolutely nothing. You sleep on the bus, you eat with the guys, and you don’t order stuff online. If you want to get a nice designer dress,” he cocks his head when he says this and gives me a once over, “or at

least a pair of designer jeans, then you should definitely buy it, because sweetheart, you can afford it.”

I take a step back, halfway out of the door of the bus, and think. I haven't checked my account, because there hasn't been a reason to. I've always been thoughtful when it comes to money, but when Madden asked me to come on tour and I saw it as a way to flee California and hopefully not run into Nathan again, I didn't care about the money. It just never came up.

“I make enough to go shopping like you guys?”

“Yes,” Jay states with a straight face.

Vic suddenly squeaks a little, and the sound startles me. “Jay, baby, you know what this means?”

Both of us look at him curiously.

“We're going to get her all the fancy, sexy and dirty lingerie that we can't wear, but she can pull off and look fabulous in.”

I snort, because hell will freeze over before I let two gay men pick my underwear, but both of them give me such an earnest look that I have a feeling that's exactly what will happen.

Sighing I give in. What's the worst, that I can look awesome beneath my clothes?

I'm looking at some cute boots when I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The sound of revving engines reaches me, and while that had been a soothing sound for the time I was in the MC, it's something that makes me nervous now.

I put the shoes back on the rack and slowly lift my head.

The street behind me has gone silent again, and as slowly as I can, I lift my head, looking over my shoulder.

My heart practically stops when I see two bikers wearing a cut with a prominent V on their back. Sworn members of Victorious. My heart is hammering in my chest and my mouth's gone dry. My eyes practically bulge out of my head, but I can't alarm them by staring at them like this.

My head snaps back to the rack of shoes. I don't think I recognized them, but I don't know all the members of Victorious. I don't know if they recognize me, and I don't know if they think I'm dead or not.

It's like I'm being slammed back in time. I can smell the leather and the motor oil, the hard liquor and the concrete after it's been mopped with chlorine. The copper of the blood on the broken knuckles after yet another fistfight. I can feel the fingers pressing into my hips, while I'm up on all fours and he's pounding into me from behind, the smell of sex permeating the room, the burn of his beard between my shoulder blades. The excitement, the ecstasy, the living on the edge and not giving a fuck about tomorrow.

The certainty that this was it, that it wasn't ever going to get better than this, that he was the love of my life and he was the very best that life had to offer me.

The men, sticking up for me, the women, embracing me as one of their own.

It was such a mindfuck to be cut off from everything and everyone that I knew while doing it with love.

And I can't get over the fact how hard I fell for it. How much I wanted to belong. How badly I wanted to be the bad girl that ran with the bad boys.

God, I was so naive.

My heart is going a hundred miles a minute. Suddenly the feel of the boots I'm holding makes me feel like the woman I was back then. Weak, while appearing to be on top of the world. Controlled, while feeling like I held all of the reins. It's marvelous what a little distance can do to the way you see things.

"Ev?" Jay says, making me snap back out of the memories I'm having.

"Yeah," I say softly, because I'm afraid that the bikers will hear me and suddenly recognize me. The chances of that happening are practically zero, but my head doesn't always act rationally.

“You gonna get those boots? They’d look cute with jeans and with a skirt,” he says. His eyes are observing me though, as if he can see what’s going on with me.

I remember I have boots in my hands, but suddenly all they remind me of is times I want to forget. Times where I felt less like a woman, and more like an object, and I didn’t think anything was wrong with that.

“No,” I tell him. The boots are awesome, but they’re ruined now, and I’ve made quite a dent in my account with all the scraps of lace I bought that are supposed to be lingerie. Both Jay *and* Vic have promised me that they’ll help me get into the things. There’s so many straps that I’ll probably get lost, but I have to admit my butt and my boobs are going to look awesome. I don’t know who for exactly, but looking good for myself is reason enough I guess.

For a short moment I get a flashback to being at the club house, wearing something nice, only to get degraded to being a piece of ass. Sure, I was Nathan’s piece of ass, and I liked that, but looking back on it I did myself wrong.

I’ve always deserved more.

And it’s about fucking time I start remembering that.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



“I’m bored,” I state in the lounge room where everyone is doing their own thing. Usually I’d have called someone, got something to get the party going, but that’s not going to happen. I might be an asshole extraordinaire, but I’m not going to use around Madden. It was too close last time.

I don’t want him to end up six feet under, just like I don’t want to. Take The Peppers, they used their little hearts out in their early days, and then they cleaned up their acts. We can do the same, right? But we’ve always done all the shit ourselves, so it feels like we can do this ourselves as well, minus the annoying missus.

To my surprise, she’s the one that springs up. “Hell yeah, let’s go do something fun. I’m sick of this bus.”

“Come back to my room and I’ll make you appreciate this vehicle again,” Wolf teases. She hits him in the arm, and he

grins widely. His shameless flirting isn't working on her yet, but I've yet to see Wolf fail when he sets his sight on something. And unless Evan is as gay as can be, he's probably going to get his way.

I have no idea why the hell he'd like to work so hard for it, when he can get someone without any effort every night of the week.

"You busting a nut while I'm busy making a mental grocery list is not my idea of a good time," Evan says.

"Ouch." Wolf holds his hands to his chest as if he's being shot in the heart.

"As much fun as it is to see you tell Wolf the truth, I want to do something and I second the getting off of the bus part."

My friends don't answer, a whole bunch of not-fucking-fun.

"How tight is security when you go out?" Evan asks, looking around hopefully, bouncing in her seat like a fucking puppy.

"Figure things out with Kyle and everything will be okay."

Evan gets up, all happy and peppy and full of fucking sunshine. Wolf watches her like she's the second coming of Nirvana ever since she waltzed into our lives and Madden has been putting her on a pedestal ever since he left us. She's trouble, and whatever she thought of doing is probably going to be trouble too. Last time we fed and brushed horses, what the hell is she going to come up with this time? Braid each other's hair and sing kumbaya around a campfire? She's got the braiding part down, we've got the singing part down. As for the fire? We could probably both start one.

Without waiting for her to get back, I decide to get this show on the road myself. I walk towards my room, grab the baggy of little pills I've got hidden inside my box of condoms. Nobody thinks to look there, and all the guys have got their own stash of rubber, dutifully provided by Jay and Vic whenever we need them.

I didn't feel the need to bring drugs on tour necessarily, but I had some left after our last nights on the road, and I'm not

going to just throw a good time away. Fucking Lord knows I need it for the snoozefest we're about to have.

I pop one, down it with half a bottle of water, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and go back into the lounge. Nothing has changed over there. Everybody is patiently waiting until Mother fucking Mary-Evan gets back and graces us with her boring as balls plans. At least I'll be rolling by then.

Grabbing my phone, I sit down on the couch and start scrolling through my messages. I don't monitor my own official social media platforms, but there are some people who have my contact information. Most of them got it from me when I was too shitfaced to care, and they rarely get the message to stop trying after being ghosted. There's a text from a buddy back home, telling me he and his wife are expecting, and I have no idea what the hell got into him to think that messaging me about it was a good idea. Maybe it was one of those texts where you send it to your whole contact list?

The door of the bus opens, and Evan walks back in. It's the same moment I feel my hands get clammy, a nervous bubbling in my stomach. It's got nothing to do with the fun-wrecking nurse, and everything to do with the early effects of the Molly I just took. I've always had a fast metabolism, always the first to feel the effects of whatever our poison was, so the tingling in my stomach doesn't surprise me.

"Who's ready to go paragliding?" Evan asks, her face split in two by a wide smile.

Oh fuck.

I'm rolling so fucking hard by the time we get up on the hill. Kyle took us out in one of the vans after he and Evan arranged for the whole facility to be shut down for us.

I think I've told Madden at least five times I'm so glad he isn't dead on the way over here, and I'm pretty sure he can see I'm going so hard I can practically see sound by now. I can't sit still, I keep drumming on my legs and I think I've stroked Bryson's arm and traced his tattoo for the last five minutes.

Fuck, I need to go less hard and get my grip on reality back.

But then again, what is reality? Because this feels pretty awesome, and who says *this* isn't reality? Evan hasn't looked at me the whole way over, and for the first time I'd like her to give me some attention. Maybe she's a cool girl.

"I *am* a cool girl," she suddenly snaps, looking back over her shoulder.

Am I saying the stuff in my head out loud? Like the Cranberries? Zombie?

Wolf starts laughing while Evan keeps scowling at me, and as far as scowls go, she has a really cute one. Her mouth turns all pouty, and when you combine that with her full lips and the shape of her mouth, it makes her look kind of pretty and less like the pain in my ass she's been.

How does Bryson get his arms to be so fucking soft? Is he using some kind of lotion he's never told me about? Or is it his superpower?

My mouth is dry, and I keep on chewing on the inside of my cheek, but every time I catch myself doing so and I stop, I find myself doing it again three seconds later. Or is it three hours? What time is it? I don't care what time it is, I'm just so happy to be with these guys. They're so much nicer than my parents. Not nicer than my brother though. But he's dead, so nobody is ever going to win from him. He'll always be the nicest ever.

"Xem," Wolf says, his voice having this kind of groveling character to it. "I know you'll never admit it, but we all know you're rolling, and you're about to say shit out loud you don't want right now."

I furrow my brows, unable to believe that I'll ever have a problem saying anything. I'm an open book, anybody can know anything about me.

That's the thought that sets me off. Because I know when I'm sober I'm not an open book. Especially not with the rehab nurse out front. She doesn't have to know anything about me, and I don't have to know anything about her.

And as hard as I was rolling, I come crashing down in about the span of twenty seconds. Fuck. My heart is racing, my hands are clammy. I'm hot, but my body feels cold and I can't fucking sit still. Moving feels bad as well though.

The best thing about Molly is that it sets off your oxytocin, the happy hormone, so no matter what your mood is, you'll feel good anyway. It's the same hormone that gets produced when you're in love, or when mothers hug their newborns. When you use it too much, your natural reserve might become depleted, and you'll feel down after using, because you've got nothing left. But when the drug is pumping through your system and your brain is lighting up like a Christmas tree because of the neurons that are firing all the happies, it's pretty impossible to feel bad. Opposed to most other drugs, that'll just enhance how you're already feeling anyway.

It got invented when they wanted people with trouble in therapy to start talking, because one of the side effects is that you start yapping about *everything*. All your inhibitions disappear. Now don't get me wrong, I don't have that many inhibitions to start with, but there are some things I keep close to my heart. Like Thomas.

Evan's pretty purple eyes are observing me, and I hate it.

"Maybe you shouldn't paraglide if you're rolling," she says. She tries to keep her voice even, but I pick up on the judgment.

"Maybe you should stop mothering me," I tell her. Molly might make me a big freaking teddy bear, but I still have my hard limits. When somebody tells me not to do something, my first instinct will always be to do the complete opposite every single freaking time.

The instructor tells us how the paragliding works, and how all the safety shit works, and it's not that I don't listen, it's just that it doesn't really register what he's saying. Or maybe it *is* registering, but I'm just not remembering it once he's finished his sentence. Whatever it may be, I have no idea what's going on beside the fact that I'll get strapped in tied to some dude

who *does* know what he's doing and we're going to run off of a mountain. No biggie, right?

All whilst listening to the dude guy, I'm combing my hand through Madden's hair, marveling at how soft it feels. I try to give him a harsh look when he starts chuckling because of my behavior, but I don't make that much of an impression. I try to remember to peek in the shower at what kind of product he uses, because I want my hair to feel that soft.

And then, before I know it, I'm lifted in one of those overalls, and strapped into a harness that could be very kinky if it wasn't there to make sure I don't splatter to the ground and die.

Guess I'm going first?

I'm smiling goofily and waving to my friends when the paraglider and I start running down a fucking mountain, and then we're off of the ground, and now I'm not just *high*, I'm high up in the air, and oh fucking hellhounds and their balls, this is both thrilling and frightening. I notice that I'm screaming, but I don't even know if it's out of pleasure or out of fright, and *daaaaaamn*, those houses down there seem really tiny, which means I'm really high up in the sky and I'm like a giant who can crush all the tiny people like the ants they currently are.

Halfway on my way down, I calm down a little. While I can feel my heart pounding like crazy in my chest, I also feel a sense of belonging, of being one with the world, of having a place in it and not being the odd one out. My body tingles from the way the overall caresses my skin, the cold air breezing on my face, and a sense of perfect harmony thrumming through my veins.

My head starts playing the rhythm to a song, and I start playing air drums to keep up with it, snickering when I realize how literal air drumming is right now.

"Awesome, right?" the dude I'm strapped to yells.

"Best. Ever!"

He laughs, and before I know it we're coming extremely close to the ground, and I feel like I should've remembered what I should do, but I was rolling too hard to remember the things the instructor said. Strap-on dude starts yelling that I should pull in my legs and get ready to get running, but I can't even feel my fucking legs right now, so I don't see how the hell he thinks I should be able to do that.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap.

We hit the ground in a large meadow, and I just pray to God or fucking Satan for all I care that this isn't one of those paddocks where cows shit all over the place and I'm about to roll around in cow crap.

I'm not exactly sure how it happens, but suddenly we're on the ground again, and we're safe, and I'm laughing my fucking ass off so loud that my stomach hurts by the time the others land all around me.

This was some pretty fucking epic shit, and I try to remember to thank Evan for the great idea.

Chances are I'll have forgotten it in about two minutes though.

CHAPTER TWENTY



The violin sticks to my body when sweat drops form all over it. Being on stage is hot, the lighting being like giant heaters. And we're a jumpy bunch, we like to move. Even Bryson, who has embraced silence like he has taken a vow for it like those monks. We're finishing up one of our more energetic songs, and Madden is killing it.

I play a counter melody to what all the other guys are doing. Miles misses one of his riffs, playing it just a tad off key, but I'm probably the only one who hears it. Having perfect hearing is both a gift and a curse. I can hear Madden's gift, he has a reach that artists should be jealous of. And he does it effortlessly. He taught himself, having no resources to develop his gift.

I wonder what he could've done if he had the same lessons I had.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not bad myself, I'm actually quite a genius when it comes to most instruments, and I'm aware of it and arrogant enough to say it out loud, but it's different from his gift.

We form a very good group though. We complement each other. The session we had earlier, where we jammed and talked about music, those are the moments that are perfect. We're all very different, although we all have our share of demons, but it's in the music where we come together and make absolute magic.

I'm allowed to say so; I've got the expensive education to be able to say things like that and have the perfect hearing to back it up.

We finish the song, and the crowd goes wild.

As one, we get up, take a bow, and walk off of the stage. It's an act that every artist does, and we always come back for an encore. It's an unwritten rule to do it, and I never understood why we should fake going off stage while everyone knows we'll be coming back.

Right on cue, the audience begins screaming for an encore. I start counting to thirty, Xem is tapping his drumstick on one of the amplifiers in the wing and Miles is jumping up and down until we go back out.

When enough time has passed, we head back on stage. Madden grabs the mic and wants to start talking, but the crowd makes so much noise that he has to wait before they can hear him.

"Yeah, yeah," he screams through the mic, "we'll give you a worthy encore. How about we end the night with "A Sky Full of Tears and Stars"?"

It's one of our newer songs, and it never made the billboards, but it's one of my favorites. It's more artsy than our usual work, and I like it. The balance between all the instruments is right, and we mix everything up in such a way that it's different. And fucking awesome.

We give our all during the last song, and Madden finishes up with a note that not many singers would be able to perform so perfectly, giving me goosebumps and a fucking music boner.

It's a thing. Trust me.

We end at the same time, bow once again, and this time leave the stage for real. Vic gives me a bottle of water and a towel, and I quickly dry myself and down the water. It used to be a bottle of beer, but I have no problem supporting Madden. Fucker scared me to death when he tried to die on me, and I'll do everything in my power to keep that from happening again.

Once we've come down a little, all of us decide to do some autographs and talk to some fans. Tonight's been a good one, and even Madden feels good enough to join us. It can be hectic, because fans think we owe them something.

There's a room in the back where we can sit and chill and some fans will be allowed in. There's already a huge crowd full of hopefuls waiting. Kyle ushers us into the room, and when I walk past the crowd, a cute girl with bleached hair and nice tits howls at me, managing to make me smile. I like 'em a little crazy.

After my bender through Los Angeles when Madden was in rehab, I got my fill of girls. I knew that if he was gonna follow the twelve steps, he'd stay away from girls, and that was just another thing I was willing to support him in. But wolfie-girl has got this cute little dimple in one of her cheeks, and I think I can make a tiny exception. I've been a good boy so far, right? I deserve a little treat.

Once I'm in the room, I make sure Kyle has my attention and I lift my chin towards the girl. He gets me, understands me, we're a team. So he brings her in like he is Uri Geller and can read my mind.

Wolfie-girl doesn't waste any time, she comes in, and sits down on my lap, licking me from my neck to my ear.

Bold.

I like 'em bold.

So I turn my head, forgetting everyone else that's in the room, grab her chin and press my mouth against her. She playfully bites my bottom lip – and something snaps.

Normally I'd love this behavior. Go all Harley Quinn on me in bed, let your crazy out, but tonight I'm not having it.

I don't know this girl, I have no connection whatsoever to her. What in the freaking hell am I doing?

She doesn't have pretty dark hair, she doesn't have purple eyes. She doesn't put up with my bullshit, and she doesn't go out of our way to keep us all safe and entertained.

God dammit, she isn't Evangaline.

And the moment her name flashes through my head, I search her out in the room. She's at the far side of the room, leaning against the wall, her eyes flicking between Madden and me, observing us. Us. Why is she observing me?

Wolfie-girl tries to get my attention again, but that ship has sailed. It's so far gone it'll need a satellite phone to reach mainland. I stand up, without holding her, and because she was sitting on my lap, she falls down.

I don't get any chance to worry about it, because Evan rushes away from the wall, and for the briefest moment in time I think she's coming over to me to, well, I have no idea to do what. But she walks straight past me, towards Madden, who's talking to some guy and looks really uncomfortable.

Evan yells for Kyle, and I follow her, because obviously something is going on that I'm missing. The whole room has gone silent, until Kyle gets to the guy Madden is talking to, and starts pushing him outside. Evan looks like she's ready to explode, and while we're in some kind of high stress situation, I'm pretty damn sure she's never looked more beautiful.

“Get your filthy drugs away from him! He doesn't want it, doesn't need it, and you're not welcome!”

Ah.

Yes.

I'm all aboard now. We're going to fucking destroy that guy. Nobody is going to mess with my brother's sobriety.

"Make sure you call the cops before you let him go," I tell Kyle, and the main body guard nods and silently takes away the screaming and kicking man. I can see the white of his eyes, and the prospect of having the cops take him away must scare the shit out of him.

Evan is all over Madden, who's panting and looking like he's seen a ghost. Fuck, most of this whole addiction thing isn't physical I suddenly realize, it's all in the mind, fighting demons nobody can see. That's what Evan's been trying to tell us all along. Just because he isn't using it doesn't mean that he's better.

I rush towards him, and whether he wants me to or not, I wrap my arms around him from behind, hugging his waist, forcing an unexpected giggle from his lips. And I squeeze him close, *really* squeeze him, because I'm so fucking delighted he's still here, because he makes my life fuller.

I peek over his shoulder, finding Evan's purple eyes on me, observing me, with her perfect mouth up in a half smirk. I've always been okay with having the most extraordinary eyes out of everyone I meet, even if Bryson is freaked out by my eyes, but I'm fine with coming second place to hers. I'm so going to write a song about those babies some day.

"Let's get out of here," I say, making sure my voice is up and chipper. Madden nods, his shoulders a little less deflated than they were just now. I get a mouthed 'thank you' from Evangaline, and before we know it, we're off to the bus.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



The concert tonight was uneventful. Madden got through it all right, he sang wonderfully, he didn't have any freak out as far as I know, and I've made sure he got to his room alright after waiting with him while he had a smoke outside of the bus.

He just stared at the stars, while we had a general conversation about nothing too heavy. He looked dead ass tired, which I suppose is to be expected when you're doing a tour sober, performing multiple nights a week and being used to doing so while under the influence. Hell, I'm starting to feel the strain of the tight schedule that comes with a tour, and I'm only here for moral support.

When Madden was almost finished with his smoke, Xem took a girl on the bus. She gives me one of those knowing smiles, acknowledging me as one of their own, thinking I'm

just the flavor of the evening that Madden picked up. I almost feel sorry for her when I see ever so clearly that she's going to be dismissed in the morning, while I'm the one who gets to go on tour with him.

Xem just ignores me, which I'm more than fine with.

So when I've made sure Madden has taken a shower and has crawled into bed, I open the door to my own miniature paradise to go to bed myself. But my plans get messed up when I see two bare lady legs wrapped around a very naked, very firm butt.

"What the hell?"

Xem pushes himself up from the girl he's fucking, *on my bed*, and grins at me over his shoulder.

"Would you mind?" he says.

"Yes! I mind! Why the fuck couldn't you make it to your own bed? It's two doors down!"

"Just couldn't last that long," he says, his voice filled with asinine.

"Maybe contact your doctor if you can't last," I snap.

"Could you leave?" the girl says from beneath Xem. There's nothing left from the friendliness in our encounter earlier. Her eyes are hard, and she doesn't seem all too pleased with me barging in on her special time with Xem. I remember Madden telling me that the moment a fan gets picked to come up here, they start to feel like they're something special, and now that Xem is treating me like crap, she obviously feels like she's got the right to do so too.

"Fuck you, Xem," I yell when I leave the room.

"No thanks, I'm busy fucking Britney."

"Charlie," she corrects him.

I slam the door on the way out, fuming, because how fucking dare he? I've done nothing to him, I mean nothing to him, I've let him be and still he's pulling stunts like this. The guy just knows how to make my blood boil, and I have to fight

the urge to go back in my room, pull him off of her and smack him. I've seen stuff like that happen before. Big bad bikers finding their old ladies with someone they don't belong to, pulling them off of them and then throwing them across the room. It doesn't seem all that hard when you're big and bulky and have absolutely no issue with holding back.

Instead, I storm out of the bus, consider joining Bryson on the roof when I see smoke fumes coming off of it, but I need more space than that. I walk up to the second bus, where Miles and Keshia reside alongside Jay and Vic. There's still lights burning, which doesn't surprise me so shortly after a show. From what I understand performing releases quite the natural endorphins and adrenaline, and it might take a while before you come crashing down.

After knocking on the door, Jay comes walking down, looks at who it is, and smiles widely before he lets me in. His brows fold together when he sees the look on my face though.

"Come in," he says, "What's wrong?"

I loudly breathe through my nose. "Xem."

"Oh honey, say no more," Vic's voice comes from the lounge area of the bus.

I get in and find Miles trying to shush a moping Pip, Keshia laying on one of the couches, looking downright exhausted.

"Long evening?"

"Whoever thought of the concept of toddlers getting molars should rot in hell for all eternity," she says.

"I don't know who thought of that, but he can save a spot for Xem to sit down right next to him," I tell her when sitting down on the couch opposite to her.

Pip lifts her head when she hears my voice and practically jumps out of Miles' arms before she's nestled in my lap. Her wailing changes to cooing and telling me stuff in her own toddler language that I don't understand. Her chubby hands grab my braid and she starts playing with it, tugging on it every now and then up until the point it hurts, but I let her.

Going on the tired look on Keshia's face, I'm just glad that she's getting a reprieve from a crying kid.

"He was doing the dirty with some fan, on my bed, while I walked in on them," I grunt.

Jay and Vic have the presence of mind to look appalled, Miles softly laughs and shakes his head and Keshia just raises a brow in disbelief.

"But, why?"

"You know what they say about guys who pull a girl's tails..." Vic suggests.

I fold my brows together, playing with the end of my braid, because in no universe do I see Xem getting his dick wet in the same way as boys pulling girl's tails. I sigh, accepting the water bottle that Vic hands me. At the same time, Jay comes over, holding a little bowl and a brush, giving me an expecting look.

"What?"

"Well, it's facial night."

"That's what Xem said," Keshia jokes.

Before I can answer that, green goop gets smeared on my face. It's cold and it feels disgusting.

"What the hell is that?"

"Avocado masks, honey, it'll make your skin glow. Trust me."

Soon we're all sitting with green faces, talking shit about everything and nothing. Miles takes off with Pip at a certain point, trying to get her to bed and sleep some himself. Keshia confides in me that he'll probably go to bed holding the kid, not even bothering to put her back in her own crib, meaning that she'll wake up multiple times during the night with some toes stuck between her ribs.

It's nice, just sitting there and having normal conversations. Before long, I've forgotten about the stunt Xem pulled. I will

not let him ruin my evening, I'm the master of my mood, dammit, not him.

When I leave the second bus a few hours later, with skin that smells like breakfast if you'd add a bit of toast, I come back to the first bus, finding Bryson in my room, changing my sheets. I have no idea what I did to deserve such treatment, but he makes me feel warm and valued.

Overall I feel very loved after this evening. Not by Xem, but by the people who *are* here to not just make my life miserable. I feel like I've gathered some new friends tonight, and I might just need them for the rest of this tour if Xem's behavior is any indication on how it's going to be.

And Bryson? He pecks me on the cheek when he leaves my room after changing my sheets. We don't exchange any words, but our friendship feels solidified.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



For the first time in months I wake with morning wood. I've been focused on many things the last few months, but sex hasn't been among them. It feels like it's connected to my old lifestyle, and I want to be as far away from that as possible, making an exception for the band.

Giving myself a harsh squeeze, I will it to go down, but my body is responding to the lack of sex. I could just jerk off and make it go away, but I'm not in the fucking mood. I don't want to give in to the whims of my body. It's just a case of mind over matter.

Rubbing my hands over my eyes, I try to wake up a little. My hair is standing up in all kinds of directions, and trying to get it to lay down is useless. It's long, but it has waves and is thick, so it has its own agenda on what it's doing.

There's a nagging feeling in the back of my head.

A restlessness in my body.

Something that I'd usually try to numb.

God, if this is the way I'm waking up, today is going to be a day. We've got a sound check tonight, but until then we don't have anything to do. I could take a shower, but I don't want to walk through the hallway with a boner. Same goes for food. The kitchen is way too far away and people are bound to be up already. Mainly Evan. And she doesn't need to see me tenting my underwear.

My eyes fall on the papers that Wolf brought me. Sheet music. He made new songs while I was in rehab, and he did a fucking great job as per usual. He might think he's God's gift to music every now and then, but he's earned the right to act like that to be honest. He always makes sure that everyone's pieces in the music are equally important. Yeah, some songs are heavy on the violin, or the drums, or one of every one of us, but when you gather it all, it's always balanced. And he's always open for suggestions on how to improve the part. He writes the music, but it's our song. We do it together, and he never hogs a piece. Doesn't mean he can't fight tooth and nail if he has a strong opinion on something.

But right now, it's still notes. It's beautifully composed music, without any lyrics to accompany it.

That's where I come in.

I've got a thing for words, and that's where I work my magic. Xem is the one who helps me whenever I get stuck, or when he has an idea of his own.

I grab the paper on top of the stack, letting my eyes go over all the notes and playing the part in my head. I can hear it, it's a really fucking epic piece. Wolf, conniving bastard that he is, even thought to leave me a pencil on top of the stack of unfinished music. He knows I lose them all the time, and if I can't find one when inspiration hits me, I just give up.

Or that's what old Madden would've done. Old Madden didn't give a fucking crap about anything.

It's not who I want to be, it's not who I am now.

Taking the paper with me, I sit back on my bed, knees drawn in, papers leaning on them. Today's muse is powered by morning wood, because when I read the music and words start to come to me, they're very sexually frustration motivated. But the words flow like this is what I'm born to do.

I go over the lines of music, completing them with words, and the song starts living inside of my head. It's a good song, and it has potential to become great. But not until I've gone over it a million times and tweaked little things here and there. I go over it to write the second voices, hearing the way it'll start to sound in my head.

By the time I've finished the whole song, my sexual frustration has gone onto the paper, turned into the lyrics of a song. When I look at the time, I see two hours have passed. Fuck. I zoned out.

It was fucking epic.

The downside of having been addicted for so long is that I've convinced myself that I can't do the things I did when I was high when I'm sober. What if my brilliance in writing lyrics came from the drugs I took, instead of from me? But I'm very slowly starting to realize that everything I've done, whether being high or being sober, has been me all along. My gift with music is mine, and not that of the drugs.

Taking the paper with me, I leave my room. Coffee sounds awesome right about now.

In the living area of the bus, Wolf is draped over the couch, having a conversation with Bryson while he's hanging upside down. The latter is in his signature sleeveless hoodie, the former wearing bright pink skin tight leather pants, and a bikini top. I've stopped trying to make sense of whatever he does. Wolf will be Wolf. Evan is noticeably missing.

"Morning, sunshine," the violin player says.

"Here," I say, giving him the papers.

Wolf immediately sits up and starts going over what I've done. I take this time to make myself a cup of coffee. Two

strong arms wrap around me from behind, Wolf's scruffy three day beard against my naked shoulder.

"That is brilliant." He squeezes harder. "Let me hear what you want to do on this line," he demands, pointing at a certain note. I sing the line, which goes against the music that the guys will be playing there. Then I sing the line again, singing the second voice that will then go against what I'm singing. But when everything is going together, it's going to blend beautifully.

Bryson comes over, takes the paper from Wolf and starts going over it. Now that my coffee is finished, I focus on that, taking a sip from the beverage while it's still way too hot, but not giving a crap. It tastes awesome and like indulgence.

Bryson messes up my hair some more after finishing reading the lyrics and music. "That is good. We should play it this afternoon, see if it works."

"Make sure Xem and Miles are on board as well, chances are that Xem wants to change his part up."

Wolf shrugs. "He usually knows what he's doing."

Xem and Wolf butted heads, a lot, when Wolf joined the band. Xem used to be the musical mastermind, but he's just a kid from the wrong side of the tracks that taught himself how to play the drums as an outlet – and a cry for help if you ask me.

In comes Wolf, an actual musical genius with all the right training. Classical training. Making rock music like he was born to do so. And while Wolf can write masterpieces, Xem knows what he's doing as well. He feels the music, even if he doesn't know the rules, or follows the rules. Sometimes it just works. Those are the things Wolf doesn't think of, because he was never trained to think outside of the box. Which is a *contradictio in terminis* if you ask me, because Wolf doesn't do boxes.

Wolf learned to accept that Xem knows his art, and that together they can make things even better.

I've always listened to Xem. It might be my words in the lyrics, but sometimes he comes up with clever wordplays, or subtle changes in what I'm saying to give the music more power.

He doesn't get enough respect for what he does, because we all see him as the angry guy looking for a fight or a fuck, forgetting that he just knows. It's how the media portrays him as well. We all got a reputation that isn't completely true.

"Wanna talk about why you write songs that scream sexual frustration?" Bryson asks me.

I give him a look that lets him know that I do not want to talk about it.

"Our little Mads hasn't got his dick wet in a while is my best guess," Wolf intervenes, giving exactly zero fucks about me not wanting to talk about it.

I worked through it by writing an awesome song, one that could go high up on the billboards, but it isn't enough. We have to dissect why I'm feeling like this first.

"That's my choice, man. I could get some if I wanted to, I just choose not to," I defend myself.

"Is it what you want, or is it because of the staying sober rules?" Wolf asks me, grabbing a smoke, putting it between his lips, and beckoning me to come outside. He doesn't care that I'm just in my underwear. To Wolf, this is perfect outside clothing.

I rush into my room, grab a pair of sweatpants and put them on. When I walk back to join the guys outside, I almost bump into Evan. She's coming out of the bathroom, her hair wet, wrapped in just a towel.

"Sorry," she says, her voice hoarse and her cheeks pink.

"No worries," I manage to respond. We lock eyes, and I will myself to keep looking at her eyes and not look at the swell of her breasts. "I'm uh... going outside for a smoke," I say, taking the cheap way out. If I can't see her, I can't stare at her.

“Right, see you in a bit,” she answers and starts moving to her room. The little hallway we’re standing in is so small, she brushes against me. And my body doesn’t get the memo that we’re on a strike, pumping blood to places where it should not go to. So I flee. I flee that hallway, I flee from that bus, and I flee from the battle that is waging in my head.

Once I’m outside, breathing in fresh air and see the boys, I’m mortified by the way my body is reacting. Again. For the second time that day I’m hard as a fucking rock, and this time it’s more than just my body responding.

Fuck this.

Fuck sobriety.

Fuck following all the rules.

I grab a smoke and light up, basking in the irony of being relieved to breathe in fresh air, and then go smoking. Bryson and Wolf look at me expectantly, wanting to talk about why I’m not sleeping around. I simply shake my head, hopefully standing in such a way that they can’t see my hard dick in my sweatpants, but I’m not counting on it. I’m just glad that these guys and I have been through a lot together, and it won’t be the first time they see me having a boner, but for some reason I’m mortified.

Bryson picks up on my mood, changing the subject to the route we’ll be driving for the tour.

I just hope it’ll be time to head in for sound-check soon, because I can’t deal with the rest of this day.

Sleeping has been hit or miss since I’ve been sober. The nights I can sleep, the quality of sleep is better than the sleep I got when I was high. But the nights that my head seems to be going a mile a minute and I can’t fall asleep are torture. Being awake because you’ve got chemically induced adrenaline rushing through your body while you feel like flying is a ton more fun than being awake because your own goddamn thoughts make you go out of your fucking mind. The things I’m telling myself aren’t all that nice either.

I sigh. It's not that late, the guys are probably still all up, but I'm trying to maintain this semi regular sleeping pattern, and if I go to the lounge right now, I'll be there too long and fuck myself over even more.

Evan is trying to convince me that lying awake in bed is also resting my body, even when I don't fully sleep. And she might be right, but I still don't fucking feel like it.

It's dark in my room, my phone somewhere far away, because the blue light won't help with my sleeping problems, and while the dark usually soothes me, it makes me feel all alone in the goddamn world right now.

Cravings for something to numb me hit me fierce.

A shuddering breath leaves my body.

I try focusing on my breath, knowing it's always there, a thought that I've learned in rehab should be making me feel calm. But all it does is remind me that my breath *did* stop when I OD'd.

I try counting my breaths, but they're irregular and that only enlarges my panic.

Last resort before I get up and go get Evan: I start singing the first thing that comes to my mind. Which happens to be "Boulevard of Broken Dreams".

Don't know how it got there, it's not in my usual repertoire,. It would make more sense for me to start singing one of our own songs, because, hell, I wrote the lyrics to them, so if there are any songs that should speak to me about how I feel, those would be it.

My fickle head just disagrees.

I start out softly, just humming a little, but soon the words burst from my throat like a cry that's been buried deep down inside me, waiting for it to be freed. It doesn't take long before I don't hold back, singing how my shadow is the only one to walk beside me on a boulevard of broken dreams.

And then Wolf sets in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I'm in my room, scrolling aimlessly on my phone, trying to put the damn thing away before going to bed. It's a bad habit I have. I spend way too much time on the thing, especially when I shouldn't because it messes with my sleeping pattern.

Then I hear Madden's voice, speaking softly, as if he's having a phone conversation that he doesn't want anyone to overhear. He's been going to bed at a reasonable hour on the night's there's no concert, but he's admitted he still has trouble sleeping sometimes. Kinda hoped he'd be asleep by now, but that doesn't seem to be the case tonight.

While I'm wondering who he's talking to, his voice grows louder, and I realize he's not talking at all, he's singing. His raw voice comes straight through the thin walls once he opens those pipes, and I smile when I recognize it's Greenday he's

singing. Immediately I'm catapulted back to my teenage years, when I thought they were the shit. Haven't thought of the band in ages, but those songs you listen to during your formative years stick with you like they've been stuck to your skin.

My body relaxes while I listen to the way he sings. It's fragile and touches something deep within me.

That's the moment the harrowing sound of Wolf's violin starts coming through the walls as well. He doesn't play the notes to the song, he plays a completely unfamiliar counter melody, but it's soul shatteringly beautiful and complements the words he's singing.

The hairs on the back of my arms raise, while my ears fill with the most raw performance I've ever witnessed.

My throat feels thick – and that's before Xem somewhere starts banging on something, playing the drum part of the song, just two heartbeats before Bryson starts playing the rhythm of the song, and the effortless harmony they play fills me with something I can't yet pinpoint.

To my knowledge, all of them are in their own miniature rooms, thin walls separating them, but they come together in a song that seems to come from a place of desperation within Madden, making it into something beautiful instead of sorrowful.

And I feel so fucking blessed to just be here and witness it all.

I wipe a tear out of the corner of my eye. I'm not sad, I'm moved. I feel honored to witness this, and am blown away by the power that is music.

Madden reaches the last verse and chorus of the song, and Xem adds backing vocals that somehow seem to go along with Wolf's violin counter melody, and I can't keep the tears that streak over my cheeks back.

The moment I stepped out of the rehab facility and into that hotel lounge with Madden, I entered their world. I might not understand it, I might not speak the language, I might not have

a fucking clue to anything that's going on here – but I damn sure feel it.

It's something special.

God, I'm a blubbering mess. When the silence returns with the exception of Wolf who starts playing a beautiful classical piece, I wipe my tears away. Crawling out of bed, I make my way next door to Madden's room, entering without knocking. The first thing I see is that he's dressed in nothing but a pair of boxer briefs, obviously ready for bed, and that he's absolute mouthwatering perfection in terms of how he looks. He's hanging upside down on the bed, his head falling backwards over the edge of the mattress.

Fuck, if he can sing like that while chilling upside down in bed with no preparation at all, he must be extraordinary. His eyes are red rimmed, and he lifts his chin to ask me a wordless question.

“Couldn't sleep?” I ask in return, my voice hoarse.

“Busy head.”

Inhaling sharply, I throw my professional boundaries overboard. All this? This isn't some regular situation. There isn't a professional manual for how to act in an already formed group dynamic where one of the participants is trying to maintain sobriety. In this case I can't expect the situation to be flexible, so the only logical explanation is that I have to be.

“Wanna cuddle while you try to fall asleep?”

He furrows his brows. “Thought that wasn't allowed.”

“Well, I thought impromptu concerts on buses would be impossible without any form of communication, but you pulled it off with walls between you guys. So if you can cross boundaries to make the night a little better, so can I.”

He still looks at me in disbelief.

“*Just* cuddling, nothing else,” I elaborate.

He shrugs, then moves back on the bed, opens the thin sheet that functions as a cover and waits for me to sit in the opening of his arms that he created. It's right there, that I feel myself

calm down again, and before I know it, my eyes get heavy and I drift off.

“No, I swear to God, this is the most awesome plan I’ve ever had,” I half scream, half yell, full heartedly say with enthusiasm.

“I’m down,” Madden says, his eyes gleaming. Of course he’s down. He’s a fucking world famous rock star. There’s absolutely no reason for him not to want to go karaoke singing. I’ve managed to get one of the most fancy karaoke bars to set us up with one of their private rooms. Kyle has checked in and we can go around the back. It’ll be during the day, there won’t be any alcohol served, Keshia and Pip are allowed to come, and we get to have some fun all together without too much of a hassle. It’ll beat staying on the bus and trying to rip each other’s heads off. I’m totally not thinking about Xem when it comes to that statement.

For some reason he doesn’t want to go singing, even if he’s the best singer of the bunch right after Madden. In the past, Xem has been lead vocal on a couple of songs, but when they got more famous, he took his role as second voice and fans have seen him that way ever since. I wouldn’t even know about this if Bryson hadn’t told me a few days ago.

“Go! Go!” Pip squeals. She’s being held by Bryson and has a hand tucked very firmly into his beard. She hops up and down with the energy of a toddler. Her hair is tied up in a cute ponytail that’s smaller than the width of my pinky finger.

“You hear the girl, we’re going,” I say, turning around and walking towards the exit of the bus. We’ve got a few vans with blinded windows that can transport us through the city to the karaoke bar. I don’t even turn back, I’ll just see who comes to join me in the van and I’ll have fun with those people.

I don’t even hide the smirk when I see that all of them, including Keshia and Pip, and Victor and Jay follow us.

It’s motherfucking partytime.

I did not think this through. Absolutely, worst plan I’ve ever had. In payment for making them all come here, I get

shoved up on stage first. But when I set up this plan, I temporarily forgot that I can't fucking sing. I mean, I can produce sound, but I can't carry a tune if my life depended on it and I've got the rhythm of an elephant that has eaten too many overripe bananas and is drunk.

"So, pick one," Wolf says. His eyes have an evil gleam to them while he looks at me, arms crossed in front of his chest, fingers folded beneath his armpits.

"I haven't thought this through," I admit, panickingly flipping through the pages of a book full of song options. The pink neon light of the room gives everything a sultry feel, while it's the very last thing I feel right now. I was planning on listening to them sing some songs, not performing myself.

"What kind of music do you like?" Keshia asks, trying to help.

"Anything, everything. I just can't sing."

"You're meaning to tell me you're not a full fledged 4A groupie?" Vic practically screams in insult.

"No, and that's probably the main reason I could resist the charms of dear Madden," I mumble.

"So, how about some Lady Gaga?" Vic suggests.

"Hell no," I say, looking like a deer in headlights.

"What's the one song you could sing word for word, if you'd be able to hear the music or not? What's the one song that's stuck in your head every now and then that won't go away until you sing it along," Madden asks me, his eyes very serious and focussed.

I start laughing, really hard, because the answer to that song is in no way appropriate.

"Seems like you've found your song," Miles says, taking over Pip from Keshia and bouncing her on his lap.

"No way. It'd totally ruin the innocence of your sweet kid."

"What the hell kind of songs do you sing?" Vic blurts, looking at me with wide eyes as if he can't believe what he's

hearing.

All the guys of the band start chanting a chorus of ‘tell us, tell us,’ while bumping their fists on the table and I feel my cheeks heat. I inhale so deeply I don’t think my chest can expand any further. Instead of telling them the song, I gather all my bravery and select the song on the karaoke machine.

When the first notes of the song start, all the guys have a knowing smile on their face.

“You don’t always have to fuck her hard,” I start singing, my necks, ears and cheeks as red as a boiled lobster, my eyes closed because I can’t handle the smug smirks on their faces.

“In fact sometimes, that’s not right, to do.”

Vic and Jay are catcalling, and I think Keshia is rooting me on as well.

“Sometimes you’ve got to make some love.”

My eyes open in a moment of blatant bravery, and it’s then I see several things. Bryson looks heated, Wolf looks smug, Madden looks downright entertained, and Xem? He’s staring at me wide-eyed, as if he can’t believe the words I’m singing are coming from my mouth.

“And fucking give her some smooches too.”

It’s the moment Madden and Miles fall in with me, and start singing the song with me. I might be the one holding the mic, but with them singing second voice and actually giving the song a harmony, I feel like I’m not up there alone. The moment I get to the talking part, singing about Jack Black’s favorite position, Wolf is standing behind me, grinding his pelvis against my ass in tune to the music, and I’m smiling and laughing so hard I can’t imagine I ever felt reluctant to do this.

We finish the song, most of us singing along by the end of it, and the grin on my face is so wide, it isn’t going anywhere. Wolf kept his hands to appropriate places while his hips told a whole other story, gyrating against my ass. All of our spirits are lifted, and this is just the beginning of the evening.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



She looks very good standing on that stage, letting go a little. She always looks good to be fair. The way she laughs right now though? That makes all others fail in comparison.

She finishes up the song while Wolf is grinding behind her, and for the first time in forever I feel jealous of the fucker. I don't do feelings when it comes to women. Did that once, burned myself, never went there again. Wolf? I don't think he's even able to form some kind of emotional attachment to a woman. Somewhere along the way he got screwed up with commitment issues.

Hell. We all have commitment issues for some reason or another.

Miles is just fucking lucky he ran into Keshia and she bulldozed all over his commitment shit. She stuck around, not giving a shit he was pushing her away. There was a certain

attraction between them, making them gravitate towards each other no matter how badly Miles didn't want it. And as soon as she got pregnant, he gave in. To her, to commitment, to building a life with her and Pip.

The rest of us?

We're fucked.

Madden's father has never been in the picture, his mother all but disowning him when he started using drugs. Wolf's parents won't acknowledge him unless he goes back to classical music. Xem has never felt good enough after Thomas with his parents who want nothing to do with him. And me? Well, I've always been the kid they threw away.

It's not like we've had good examples of what a healthy relationship looks like. All we've had and have known is each other.

She finishes the song and lets herself fall down on the couch while Madden quickly pulls her feet on his lap. Usually, this would be the point we'd get shitfaced. But Pip is here, Madden is trying to stay sober and it just doesn't feel like the right thing to do. So when the waitress comes in to take our orders, I behave and get a soda instead of something stronger. Xem is the only one to order a beer, and in his world that's practically the same as ordering a water.

Vic and Jay get on stage together, singing "I Got You Babe" by Sonny and Cher and they manage to make me smile. Evan sits next to me while they sing, her legs crossed over Madden's lap and her back leaning against me. She seems relaxed, and for some reason I find myself intrigued by the fact that I care so much about how she feels. She's just here to take care of Madden, we all know it, but ever since she stepped into that hotel lounge, it's felt like it's been more.

The warmth of her body seeps into mine where we touch, making goosebumps appear on my skin when I feel the softness of her body leaning into mine. She smells like her shower gel, something citrusy, and I like it.

Me? I smell like tobacco and musk and sweat most of the time. I'm pretty sure it's not that appealing. I'm also pretty sure I don't give a flying fuck most of the time.

I swallow down my drink, unintentionally widening my legs, increasing the contact between our bodies.

And I crave more.

Fuck.

I'm fairly certain that this isn't an appropriate way to feel about someone on staff. I swallow hard, trying to lean away from her, but wherever my body goes, she seems to follow me.

And before I know it, one of my arms is wrapped around her and my hand falls on the side of her stomach.

She doesn't flinch, doesn't ask me what I'm doing. She just roots Keshia on when she does a rendition of "Baby Shark" for Pip, who twerks her little diaper ass off on stage. That kid can wind anyone around her little finger, but right now I fail to take notice of what the toddler is doing. All that registers in my mind is the way Evan's body curves and how it feels in my hands.

And I know for a damn fact I'm not seeing ghosts when she lays her hand on the inside of my knee. My cock stirs to attention, and I make sure that her back doesn't feel the way my blood rushes south and makes my dick stand half mast. I don't want to shift too much, drawing attention to it, but I'm not sure how long I can hide the way I'm hardening.

I usually seek out girls with one goal in mind, and it's a given that I have sex with them when I set my mind to it. It's one of the perks of being famous and having fans. But I pride myself on being an attentive lover and making sure my partner has just as much fun as I'm having.

With Evan?

All bets are off. I don't know where this is going, if there's something there, if I should pursue it anyway, or if it would be the professional thing to do to just let it slide.

My brain? Well, that has an entirely different opinion.

My thumb strokes up over her ribs, teasing the underside of her boob, and I swear to every Saint out there that she perks up at the contact and squeezes her thighs together.

My mouth goes dry, and I stroke again, just half an inch higher than before. Her breath stops, and she releases a sigh before she slightly arches her back and presses herself into my touch.

Fuck this, there's no fighting this. I'm so fucking hard I can feel my cock throbbing. When I let myself fall back some more, she just goes down with me.

Keshia finally finishes her version of the kids song, and because all my blood is rushing to my dick, I do not pay attention, and I get the mic pressed into my hand and accept it.

Adrenaline takes over, increasing my heartbeat, and blood pressure, and my head is trying to come up with a solution and is shooting blanks.

Wolf is staring at me, with his creepy green and blue eye. I've always said that it's unnatural to have two different colored eyes, but he says that if Bowie can rock two colors, so can he. He sees my panic, winks at me, and gets up to pick a song on the karaoke machine.

The notes of one of the few songs I can sing better than all the fuckers in this room start filling it while I keep sitting perfectly still, not wanting to end the contact between Evan and me.

"Hello darkness, my old friend," I sing into the mic, my voice a deep baritone that matches the song perfectly. My eyes fall closed, and I surround myself in darkness, enveloping myself in everything that is Evan. This girl has put a spell on me, making me search for her like two polar ends of magnets.

I sing the words to the song that feels like it was written directly for me, while the room falls silent as well. Even Pip seems mesmerized, wagging to the other side of the room, seeking me out. Her big brown eyes look up at me in awe while she climbs up the couch, nestles herself in Evan's lap

and starts pulling the hairs of my beard. Evan gently takes her hands away, enabling me to finish the song.

The song naturally builds up, up to a point where I almost have to growl the words. I've never had formal singing lessons, I have no idea what the hell it is I'm doing. All eyes are on me, I can feel it. Evan has goosebumps on her arms when my fingers graze her.

And suddenly it feels like everyone is coming too close. I can feel my walls going up.

This is what I hate about singing. It leaves me vulnerable. I know good music does that, but using my voice is more intimate than using my fingers for some reason. By playing the bass, I can still hide. I can be that little line in the back that makes the song without anyone noticing what it is I'm doing until I'm no longer doing it. When playing the bass, I can hide in my hoodie. People will marvel at what my hands do, and not be bothered that they can't see my face. With singing? I'm smack in the middle of everyone's attention.

And it's smothering.

I force myself to finish the song, but by the time the last note leaves my mouth, I've retreated behind my mental shields, and nobody can get to me anymore. This is the last time I'll be convinced to sing, I'm not falling for it again.

Fuck all of them.

They get enough from me. After this, I'm keeping the parts I want to keep to myself to myself.

Silence fills the room when the song ends, and I sit still as a statue, waiting for someone to take over and get me out of this situation. Evan is still looking at me in awe, and while I got off it a minute ago, I just need someone else to step in the limelight right now and leave me be.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



She's practically sitting in Bryson's lap, and I'm just not having it. I know this girl is here for a very specific reason, and I also know that reason is not to please me, but it's also not to please Bryson. He might have given an awesome performance while he doesn't usually sing, but that just means that so can I, right?

There's something brewing in my stomach that I can only rightfully describe as jealousy, which is kind of a new sensation. I usually excel in what I do, or I'm happy for my brothers. This nagging feeling inside me is one I don't know, and I have to say, it doesn't feel all that great.

Why did we have to go to a fucking karaoke bar? I'm an epic pool player. Throwing darts would work as well. There's tons of things I can do, but no, we have to go singing. The one thing I don't do.

My eyes fall on the way Evangaline is pressed against Bryson again, and then my brain does that thing where it disables all rationale, and I do crazy shit. It's happened before, like that one night I decided to go poke a skunk on a dare, or that one time we took mattresses out of our hotel and slid all the way to the ground floor from the fortieth.

This time, I get up, practically yank the mic out of Brys's hand and go pick a song.

Even the song I pick seems devoid of any logical explanation.

The way they all look at me is hilarious though. All of them seem shocked, eyes wide, open mouths, the whole shebang. They have the song my bad decision making brain is looking for, and I push play before I can change my mind.

The funny thing is that it's a perfect number to play on violin. I wouldn't even have to try hard to make it work. But I'm not playing, I'm singing, and goddamn my stupid brain is a motherfucking asshole and I hate the idea already. I'm so going to regret this.

The notes to "Come On Eileen" by Dexy's Midnight Runners start, and I see everybody look confused. They shouldn't judge. If Keshia can sing Baby Shark, I can sing old eighties songs. I just have different lyrics in mind.

"Come on Evangaline," I sing, trying to wriggle the extra syllable in the word and still make it work. Most of my brothers start laughing when they understand what I'm doing.

I'm serenading her.

And I'm doing it with a bad song, making the lyrics worse, and singing with my terrible voice.

They should all feel fucking special, because I don't let anyone hear what I sing. Dare I admit I feel nervous to see how Evangaline will react to my singing? She knows I never do it, she knows I can't sing. Then again, she doesn't seem to have a musical bone in her body, and she got up here and rocked her song without feeling embarrassed.

Her eyes are wide, and solely focused on me. Her lips are slightly ajar, with the corners of her mouth pointing up. There's a glint in her eyes that makes her look young and happy, which she is, I guess. She's no longer leaning back against Bryson, which is a win on its own, but she's sitting up, all of her attention on me. Bryson is looking like I just stole his favorite toy, hiding in his hoodie again. And I guess that's another win.

Singing this song? Not a win. I miss half the notes, but my timing is always spot on. Too much classical training will do that to a man. Adding the extra syllable to the song isn't making it any better, but it is making Evan notice me.

When the second chorus starts, I jump on the table in front of the couches, make sure I don't kick any glasses, and hold out a hand to her in invitation. She smiles so wide before she grabs my hand and starts dancing with me, that getting up here and singing is already worth it, every hellish second of it.

I wrap my free hand around her body, pulling her flush against me.

That brain that makes stupid decisions? Well, it shifts from the head on my neck to the head between my legs.

My free hand that's on her lower back slides lower, until I cup her jeans clad ass, and she chuckles right in the microphone before she pulls my hand back up. That sound, that laugh, it's everything. I give her a saucy wink, and the story her eyes tell me is a completely different one than what her hands just did. She's just as into this as I am.

I've never had a woman who played hard to get.

How exciting.

While keeping her body pressed close against me, I twirl us round and round, my mouth right next to her ear when I sing that thoughts are dirty, and I make sure she feels the hardness between my legs when we dance. She bites her plump bottom lip, looking at me through her eyelashes. She has such an expressive face. Everything that goes on in her mind is right there for the grabbing, but whenever you talk to her she keeps

certain things to herself. But not her face – you just know something is going on.

And right now, she's having a lot of fun.

We finish the song, and when the last words have been sung, I dip her deep, and press my lips against her heart shaped mouth. For the most perfect instance in time, she kisses me back, before she pulls her head back. A growl forms in my throat, but I'm able to keep it down. I want the feeling of her lips on mine to keep going, I want to lick her lip, make her open her mouth and let me kiss the fuck out of her properly. God fucking damn it, she's very addicting. Is this what Madden experienced when he took smack? Because I can't blame the fucker for wanting more if it's the same. My eyes keep getting drawn to her mouth, and I have half a mind to just go for it again.

"Nice try, Wolfie," she says with a wink when we stand back up again, her hands still flat on my chest. "But don't quit your day job," referring to the time I caught her singing in the shower and telling her the same.

The laugh that leaves my mouth is so loud, unexpected and genuine that I wonder if I've ever laughed like this before. This woman makes me feel things that I've never felt.

It's the moment I realize I'm completely, utterly, irrevocably, unashamedly and unabashedly in love with her.

Which is such a thrill that I feel high.

Am I being a royal asshole for falling for my best friend's rehab nurse? Yes. Absolutely. But I haven't minded being an asshole for a day in my life, so why start now?

When I get off the stage, Evangaline has sat down with Madden, looking at me every few seconds, and I unashamedly readjust my dick after I've sat down. When I catch her roll her eyes at the gesture, I know this girl is perfect for me.

It's dark out later that evening when I take a smoke with Madden. He lights one and hands it to me, before lighting one for himself. There's a cool breeze outside, and I'm only half dressed once again, giving my skin goosebumps and pebbling

my nipples. I don't mind though. The air on my skin feels better than fabric would. Sometimes I wonder if I should embrace the nudist lifestyle, but I don't think the record label would be very thrilled with that decision.

Madden is leaning with his back against the bus, one foot up, peacefully scouring our surroundings.

"So, today was fun, right?" I ask my friend.

He combs a hand through his long dark hair before he looks at me with twinkling eyes. "You sang."

"Yeah."

"You've got it bad."

Staring into the distance, I inhale deeply, trying to find it in me to lie to him and tell him I'm not falling for the one person who's here to try and keep him alive. But for one, I don't want to lie to him and secondly I don't think I have it in me to do it.

"It's infuriating," I end up saying.

He looks at me from beneath his raised brows with a humongous smirk, while strands of his hair fall over his eyes. "Infuriating? That shouldn't be a word that goes along with liking a girl."

"It's not just liking, man. It's like infatuation, and the last time I was infatuated with something, I fell in love with the electrical violin, left my billion dollar heritage behind and ended up on a bench in the park. While that's very Kurt Cobainy "Where Did You Sleep Last Night", it's not that much fun in real life."

His gray eyes bore into mine, and it feels so serious the air almost feels static. "That's a serious infatuation."

"As I said, it's infuriating."

Madden takes a long pull of his smoke, tapping the ash off before he acknowledges me again. "I get it, man. She has something. Some magical ability that makes people gravitate towards her. She was the only one in that whole facility that made me feel like I was a human being."

I shut the hell up, because he has said absolutely nothing about his stay in rehab since he's been back. I don't want to scare him off, let him say what he has to say. I have a tendency of running my mouth and ruining things with smart comments.

“She never made me feel like I was just some worthless druggie. She believed in my recovery, and that being addicted was just a bump in the road on my journey. Nobody, not even the people attending rehab, had as much confidence in people's ability to heal. Just her.”

He takes the last drag of his smoke before throwing it on the ground and stomping it with the toe of his shoe.

“If there weren't any rules about not dating the first year after recovery, I'd be all over her.”

He smirks, and I can see a little of the brash, naughty guy he used to be. It's nice to see he's still there beneath the shame and exhaustion.

“Since when have you been one to follow the rules?”

“Since I met this nurse in rehab who believed in my recovery, who I refuse to let down.”

I cock my head. “So you're doing this for her?”

He grabs his packet of cigarettes and lights another one up with his zippo, holding them out to me to grab another one as well. “I'm doing this for me,” he says with the smoke between his lips. “She's just the reason that I believe I'm redeemable and worth it.”

I nod, because I think I can maybe understand.

“Besides,” he continues. “If I don't go after her, you won't have to fight me for her attention.”

I scoff. “Please, as if there would be any competition.”

“I think there's competition going on already, anyway. I'm pretty sure Bryson is into her as well.”

I have noticed that, and that doesn't sit well with me. The guy can probably get any girl he wants to get, and he can do so

without talking to them. It's really annoying, because I normally talk so much the girls don't get a word in. Not that they have to, I'll narrate my own story, thank you very much.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



That was an interesting outing to say the least. I had an amazing time, singing and having fun. Eventually everyone sang, and we felt like a group. Bryson got really comfortable with me, which I didn't see coming, but really did not mind one bit. And Wolf kissed me.

It was a short kiss.

But my whole body short circuited.

I had to hold myself back in touching my lips the rest of the time we spent in the karaoke bar, where I could still feel the ghost of his on mine. The smell of his aftershave stayed with me the rest of the evening, and I have to admit I did not wash my face before I went to bed, solely to save his smell. I know the skincare gods will probably come down to smite me any second now, but it was worth it.

Breakfast was a little weird, because how do we proceed from here? But soon all the guys went about their day, and I read a book while the guys sound checked without any trouble.

Tonight is a bit different than usual. This stage is right out in the open. It's a big field, not a stadium, with just a podium and some essentials. It has festival vibes, but there's no festival going on. It was the biggest venue in the area, and management wanted as many people as able to attend. The concert is still completely sold out.

Every now and then I forget just how popular 4A is. It's easy to see them as just some guys instead of rock stars. They don't act like rock stars before they've had some coffee and breakfast in the morning, and I can safely report that they have morning breath just like us mere mortals as well.

But then I see the crowds during the concerts, and I remember that they are indeed very popular, and *very* famous.

I'm quickly eating some snacks, because if I don't the snacks will be gone before I've gotten a chance to eat anything. These guys can eat when they put their mind to it. Anyway, I've gotten the routine down. It's soundcheck, snacks, dressing rooms, dinner and then getting ready for the actual concert.

Today, I'm eating a banana.

Jay and Vic make sure that the stuff the guys eat is actually healthy and nutritious, and I'm thankful for it. It would be oh so easy to just binge everything because of the hard and grueling schedule they have.

I spent two years at a motorcycle club where all the food was prepared by all the old ladies on a daily basis, specific to the wishes of their men. And I can tell you most of them like their meat with a side of grease and vegetables are something you feed your pet bunny. Then I worked in rehab, and ate with the attendees. It might have been a fancy rehab facility, but hospitalized food is bad everywhere you go. It's like a global rule.

Suddenly I lose the few rays of sun I'm basking in, someone standing in front of me. When I lift my eyes, I find Wolf, looking cheeky and grinning widely. Everything about him lets me know he's up to no good at all.

"Come with me?" he asks me, the smile on his face spreading to his mismatching eyes.

"What for?" If there's anything I've earned about the violin player it's to never just trust him, especially not when he's looking like that.

"I need your help."

"I repeat: What for?"

"Just come and find out." He spins on his heels and leaves. I sigh, but then I get up. Better to regret the things you've done than those you've never experienced, right?

Wolf keeps walking without looking back whether I'm following him, which tells me he knew exactly that I'd follow him. We walk to the bus area, passing the first one, and heading to one of the buses with equipment. Wolf walks the few steps into the bus with a skip in his step, and now that he's got my interest, I follow him gladly. What the hell is he up to?

He stops in front of a rack of clothes, straight across a rack with several electrical violins. With his hands planted on his hips, he turns and looks at me with a very earnest look.

"I have no idea what to wear tonight and what violin to match it with."

I raise a brow.

"So I need your help."

For some reason I can't hold back the fit of laughter that leaves my mouth. "Me?"

"Yeah."

My giggles turn into full belly laughter, because dammit, that's *funny*.

His hands leave his hips, and are suddenly crossed in front of his chest, while he waits for me to calm down. Which takes

a lot longer than I'm willing to admit.

"I just wear pants and tees, that's as far as my fashion knowledge goes. You have people on the payroll to help you with this stuff. Ask them. I'd get you on People's worst dressed list."

He smirks. "Now *that* I can manage by myself. Mainly because I don't give a crap about what people think."

"Then why do you need my help?"

His smile grows so wide it reminds me of that one shot where the Grinch lifts the corners of his mouth to his ears.

"Because I want to know what you want to see me in. Tonight I'm playing for you."

Oh fuck, that's smooth. He's got game. Good thing I'm willing to play. I try to mirror his slick smile, taking a step forward, and letting my fingers glide over the rows of clothes.

"And what if I'd want to see you naked and wet?"

"Then I'd get down on one knee and ask you to marry me right now, gorgeous, because that would be proof you're my soulmate, fated mate, what do the kids call it these days?"

I snort, which makes Wolf laugh in turn. Something else I like about him. He doesn't expect me to act all proper ladylike. If there's one thing I forget about during my time at Victorious, it's to act like a lady.

"So, naked and wet it is?" he says, bending his knee and going down.

"At least wait until the third date before you expect a girl to put out."

"Good point."

I turn my attention towards the clothes, but it all looks like fashion to me, and I know absolutely nothing about it. I wouldn't have any idea where to start in making a choice, so I turn towards the violins first. There's a lot of them, and they all seem to be Yamaha's. They have a very minimalistic look

on them. There is no body on any of them, just the sleek outline of where the body should have been.

And then there's one violin that doesn't even have that outline. It seems like a big fat arrow. I'm not familiar with the terminology, I'm just going on what I can see and put into words. For some reason I like the idea of him crushing his music with something that looks as tough as an arrow. So I pick it up.

Part of me is curious about how he reacts to me touching his instruments. Some musicians seem to get a little possessive about it, and Wolf is always carrying his own violin around instead of leaving it on stage. Surely he must turn slightly alpha when someone touches his instruments?

But no such thing happens. He seems calm.

"This one."

He raises an eyebrow, looking curious, but shutting his mouth for once in his life. If Wolf ever wants to change his career, he could become one of those auctioneers who talk a mile a minute.

"Before you get your hopes up, I think you should wear clothes."

Turning back to the rack, I go through all the items as if I'm shopping the rack. There's a rainbow of colors there, all kinds of items. Nothing is plain though. Everything is eccentric in its own way. Everything is very Wolf.

I settle on a pair of cobalt blue leather skinny pants. For some reason I think it'd make his face light up when he wears his signature kohled eyeliner. Paired with the black arrow, he's going to look hot.

"These," I say, holding them out to him.

"With?"

An evil glint reaches my eyes. "Nothing."

"I knew it! You like seeing me half naked as much as I like seeing myself half naked!" He points two fingers at me in accusation, but I can't even deny that I like seeing his body.

He's pretty and he knows it. He takes the pants out of my hands, and starts unbuttoning the pants he's wearing, before he drops them.

"Am I wearing shoes or am I going barefoot?"

I'm staring at the way his muscular thighs disappear in his briefs, and for a second I forget what he's asking me. He catches me staring at him though, smirking knowingly. He's absolutely doing this on purpose.

"Barefoot sounds alright."

He tilts his head, accepting my choice, puts the blue pants on after wriggling his legs in and jumping up and down a few times to get everything in the right place, and rushes outside with his violin in hand, pecking me on the cheek once he walks past.

"Thanks."

"Any time," I say, half dazed, staring at his ass while he walks outside.

It's a fucking great show. They're the headliner of the evening, wrapping everything up, and they're killing it. But ever since they finished their first song, the weather has been turning and dark clouds have started stacking. What started as a soft drizzle is now turning into a full rain storm.

I'm in my usual spot in the wings, and I can hear the technicians, management and the organization of the concert argue about safety in going on. Somewhere shortly after the first little break, they asked the guys what they wanted to do, but they all agreed on playing.

And right now? They're having a fucking blast, playing the rain, jumping in rain puddles that start forming on the stage. And the crowd doesn't seem to mind. I did a little backtake when I saw a container in the middle of the audience, the container opening up and finding a person in the container hiding from the rain. I don't know if that's the craziest or most brilliant thing I've ever seen.

When the next song is about to get announced by Madden, Wolf steals his mic, looks to the wing and finds me. Then he

turns back to the audience.

“I asked a good friend of mine tonight how I should look while performing, and she said wet and naked. Now, we’ve got the wet part down, do I need to get naked now?”

I smile, shaking my head, but he isn’t paying attention.

“Nobody wants to see your dick when you’re jumping up and down, Wolfie,” Xem says. And there’s both yelling and booing coming from the crowd.

Madden pushes Wolf aside, making him glide over the wet stage, causing both of the men to giggle before Madden finally calls out the next song. On some cue I don’t get, they start playing the song, Xem heavy on the drums, kicking the atmosphere in the crowd up a notch.

It’s contagious, this energy, the fun they’re having. Somehow the rain is bringing everyone closer together. So I stand there, swaying to their music, having a blast, and just enjoying it.

This is what music does – it brings people together, it unites in situations that otherwise could get ugly. And then it starts to thunder. The lightning lights up all the people in the crowd, while the thunder doesn’t reach us for a good five seconds.

I can hear management calling the shots to pull the plug, and my heart sinks.

The band is just wrapping up their song, and besides the literal electricity in the air, something seems to be brewing, something beautiful, something rare that I’ve never experienced before. I can hear someone next to me telling over the mics all the guys have in their ears to shut it down, because it’s becoming too dangerous to continue, and my stomach sinks.

But what would a rock band be without a little danger?

“Guys,” Madden shouts in the mic. “We’ve got orders from higher up telling us to call it quits. But when I say hell, you say no. Hell!”

“No!” the crowd roars, and the hairs on the backs of my arms raise so fucking high I could braid them.

“Hell!” he repeats.

“No!”

“Heeeeeeeell!”

“Nooooooooo!”

He winks towards Xem, and he starts the first notes of “Kites in Thunder” and I don’t think there’s ever been a more appropriate song to the right moment. The rain turns into a downpour, the back spatter lighting up the stage, giving the guys an almost blue glow. Madden’s deep voice is cutting through everyone’s souls at that moment. Don’t let anyone ever tell you that rock music is empty and meaningless, or that it’s ‘the evil devil’s music’ – it’s just another form of art, and while you don’t have to appreciate it, you should accept that other people do.

They play their hearts out during those three minutes, giving their all, jumping over the stage, hitting all the notes, the background choir consisting of thousands of people in the audience.

And when I see these five men fulfill what they were quite obviously put on this Earth to do for, I feel so full I almost burst.

It’s the first time I truly feel what these guys say when being in the band is the most important thing they’ve ever experienced. It’s the first time I get Madden risking his sobriety for going on tour.

Because it’s worth it.

Every fucking second of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



“Bullshit,” Miles says, his forearms leaning on the little counter that is supposed to be the kitchen in our bus.

“Bull... pee? What’s the opposite of shit? I swear to God it’s true,” Wolf argues, crunching away on his cereal. It’s the thing that got this whole conversation going. Bryson asked if cereal is considered a soup, which led to a conversation about silly questions. And now Wolf is trying to convince us that the question that ever got him into trouble the most was ‘Why do men have nipples?’. In his retelling of the story, he was having a night out with some friends, walking home, drunk, when they started debating why men have nipples. He says he saw a man in a mesh shirt standing in the alley behind a club, and having his nipples out on display, he decided to go ask the man for the answer. Said man turned out to be working the alley

instead of just having a smoke, and the police thought Wolf was soliciting.

“I believe it,” I say, because the story is just too Wolf to not be true.

Bryson shrugs, fine either way.

Xem, who’s sitting on the little side table by the couch is staring at Wolf. “Nah, I’m with Miles. That’s bullshit.”

Wolf rolls his kohl lined eyes. “What do you want me to do to prove it? I tried to joke about it with officer I-forgot-his-name, who then thought I was flirting with him, because he was already convinced I was a dirty, dirty boy, trying to buy some of the nasty gay love, and then I had to call my parents to come bail me out! There’s probably proof of the money they paid him to keep his mouth shut somewhere!”

Miles snickers. “If that’s true, and I’m not saying I believe you, that’s actually quite a good story.”

I agree with him. The stupidest question I ever asked was probably ‘just a little more, please’.

“What was the answer though?” Xem asks.

“What?” Bryson asks, mouth full of crunchy cereal. For someone who likes silence so much, he makes a lot of noise while he’s eating.

“Why do men have nipples? It’s not like we need ‘em.”

“Get this,” Wolf starts, looking us all in the eye before he starts explaining, making sure he has our attention. “So, when you’re just a tiny clump of cells inside an uterus, you actually don’t have a gender. You start developing all these body parts, nipples amongst them, before the little embryo develops into a boy or a girl. They’re just there in case you might turn out to be a girl!”

“Get out of here,” Bryson spits.

“True story.”

“No, I’m calling bullshit again,” Miles says, rubbing his eyes with his index finger and thumb.

“It gets even more bizarre. What in girls develops to be their clit, is a guy’s dickhead, and testicles? They’re ovaries.”

We stare at him with big eyes. Then all four of us simultaneously grab our phones and start Googling, because that shit has got to be bullshit.

But it’s not.

“Told you I waz telling ze truz,” Wolf says with a spoon full of cereal in his mouth.

“That’s just weird man. I don’t even want to know how they figured that shit out,” Miles says, shaking his head.

“Research, probably,” Bryson says, finishing his bowl of cereal, or soup, and disposing of it in the little sink. We’ve got people surrounding us who do stuff like this for us, but we’re rock stars, not divas. We help where we can.

Without talking about it, we head outside and all light up a smoke, except for Miles, who quit when Keshia got pregnant. He still likes to hang with us like old times though. Some habits die hard.

“Last night was thrilling,” I say, remembering the way the crowd kept going despite the bad weather and the show ending early. Playing in the rain, having fun with my brothers on stage, the energy that hung in the air, it was everything.

“Should we’ve gone on?” Xem asks. He’ll always be the one to keep pushing a little extra.

“Nah,” Bryson says, as if that all explains it.

“We might have come home safely if we played on, but the audience probably wouldn’t have,” Wolf says, looking at the still wet ground surrounding the bus. There’s still puddles everywhere. After we ended the concert and got back to the bus, the storm really wrecked havoc.

“That version of “Kites in Thunder” was my favorite ever, though,” I say, cigarette between my lips as I look up at the sky, trying to remember the feeling I had last night.

“Yeah,” Bryson says, master of the one word sentences that he is.

After that, we stand in silence for a while, just enjoying being around each other. It's been too long since it's been just us, and this part of the tour, a few concerts in, usually brings us closer together.

"My night sucked though," Miles finally says.

"What? Keshia didn't wanna put out?"

The smirk on his face says enough about that department. He got some.

"Pip woke up in the middle of the night, screaming, because she lost Fenty, but she didn't realize she was holding the damn plushie elephant. She refused to go back to sleep after that, but we refused to get up at three am."

Xem snickers. "Usually you wouldn't even be asleep by then, but now the little demon has got you convinced it's time to wake up?"

Miles grunts.

"You're not really selling having kids to me to be honest," Wolf says.

"Like you're fit to be a father," Miles scoffs.

"Hell no, but neither were you," he counters.

The whole conversation makes me smirk. With certain people you have to watch what you say, but other people feel like home, making just being yourself perfectly fine and good enough. Funny thing is that I've felt that way with Evan ever since the first moment I saw her.

As if she's summoned by my train of thoughts, she appears from the other side of the bus, her eyes open and her mouth curled in a happy yet satisfied smile. She holds out her hands as if she's trying to hold us back.

"Okay, so hold up," she almost yells. "Just tell me, how rich are you guys exactly?"

We all give each other confusing looks, because what the hell does money have to do with anything? There's enough

gold diggers out there, in all shapes and sizes, but Evan never seemed like one.

“Rich enough,” Wolf answers hesitantly. “Why?”

Xem looks like he’s about to bolt. He doesn’t trust her. I don’t know why, but I know that it’s true.

“There’s a carnival, two towns over. They shut the whole thing down for the day, because of the bad weather yesterday and the bad shape of the lawn.”

I scrunch my eyes, looking at her in confusion, because what the hell is she aiming at?

“I just called them, and for the right price, they’re willing to open up, just to you guys. No outsiders allowed. There’s a ferris wheel!” she squeals, her voice going up at least two octaves at the end of that sentence.

“So you’re asking us to pay for a closed down carnival to open up?” Miles asks.

“Oh Miles, there’s all kinds of stuff. Pip would have a blast! You can get her all hyped on cotton candy.”

I snort, because her enthusiasm is contagious. “I get the feeling you’re a big fan of carnivals.”

Her enthusiasm dies down for a second. “Isn’t everyone?”

I shake my head, and almost laugh out loud when I see the extent of her confusion. Wolf grabs her hand, pulling her close against him.

“What kind of money are we talking about?”

She leans forward, whispers something in his ear, and he bends backwards, laughing so loud he gets tears in his eyes.

“Oh sweet, sweet Evangaline. You really have no idea just how famous we are, have you? Tell the carnival to open up. My treat.”

And while her cheeks and her ears turn a nice shade of pink, her smile also grows so wide I already know it’s worth every damn penny without knowing how much opening a carnival costs exactly.

“No,” I tell Xem for the third time.

“Oh come on, you’re no fun.”

“I told you, I’m not going into the haunted house.” I’m scared shitless of clowns, and nobody will tell me if there are clowns in there or not. Which means that there *are* clowns in there, and I will not go. Hard limit.

I join Keshia, who’s holding Pip as the toddler is busy trying to catch duckies. The little chick just refuses to use the poles to fish for them, and is grabbing them with her chubby hands. She seems to prefer the green ones, seeing as she’s got six green and one pink duckie around her.

“Quack quack!”

“Yeah, grab another one, munchkin,” Keshia tells her.

The lady who runs the booth is staring at the kid with big googly eyes, leaning with her head on her hands, not caring that the little lady is going home with all the prizes. It’s not like there are any other people attending the carnival anyway.

“Where’s Miles?” I ask Keshia.

“Going to the haunted house with Wolf,” she says, and that’s Xem’s cue to take off on a run, flipping me a double bird when he turns around. I roll my eyes in response. I climb on the counter next to Pip, helping her reel in another green ducky.

The lady from the booth shifts her attention to me. “You’re Madden St. James,” she says wide eyed.

I hold out my hand. “Yeah, nice to meet you, who are you?”

“S-sandra,” she answers while she shakes my hand. There’s no power to it though. The people here have been alerted that we were coming, and that they weren’t allowed to post anything on social media, and that we’re just people and they should treat us as such, but sometimes the effect we have on people when we meet them is involuntary. And let’s be honest, it’s still kind of flattering.

When I let go of her hand I hear her mumbling, ‘He said it was nice to meet me’ and she turns to grab the largest stuffed

animal, a teddy bear, from the wall and hand it to Pip.

The kid has got an opinion though.

“No. Teddy, boo.”

I smirk. “What do you want, Pipster?”

“Quack quack!” she shrieks.

“The ducks aren’t the prizes, little lady,” Keshia tells her, trying to pick her child up, but Pip isn’t having it, stands up with her little diaper butt in the air, and waggles her way over to me.

Then proceeds to give me the biggest, begging eyes known to men.

“Quack quack,” she says, using every bit of her cuteness to get her way. She knows what she’s doing, because before I know what I’m doing, I’m using my name to get her one of the green duckies. Truth be told, the lady behind the counter doesn’t take a lot of convincing. She just seems to be thrilled to do something for me.

Pip hugs the duck to her chest like it’s her most prized possession, giving me sloppy kisses for her treasure. Keshia rolls her eyes, because while the woman does everything for her daughter, she gets exactly zero gratitude, which must be a shitty job if you ask me.

“We’re going to get some cotton candy and head back,” she tells me, keeping a close eye on me, probably trying to figure out whether I’m going back with her or staying here alone.

“I’ll go find Evan,” I tell her, pecking Pip on the cheek and telling her to be good to her mom, but she’s already playing with her duck and making quacking sounds, having forgotten about me now that I’ve fulfilled my purpose.

Making my way over the carnival, I kick against pebbles on the ground, hands in my pockets. It’s kind of soothing to be outside, all alone with my thoughts. And it’s kind of enlightening to discover that for the first time in a long time I feel at ease. A cold breeze strokes my cheeks, and when they pinken from the sensation, I feel *alive*. The high that mood

enhancers can create suddenly comes naturally to me, making me feel kind of giddy.

I catch Evan and Wolf, laughing at the shooting stand. Evan is hugging a huge rainbow bear, and Wolf is tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He's really putting his moves on her, and I can't even blame him.

Doesn't mean I'm not barging in.

"I was promised a ride on the ferris wheel," I say by way of greeting. Evan lays her pretty eyes on me, the purple of her irises almost sparkling against the backdrop of rainbow teddy bear fur.

"Let's go," she says, taking strides through the wet grass, getting her kicks wet. She doesn't seem all that girly in a lot of aspects. She doesn't spend a lot of time doing her makeup, or dressing up in fashion. From what I've gathered from her style she likes being comfortable in skin tight pants and some kind of t-shirt with a print on it. I like the casualness of it.

"Are you having fun?" she asks me.

"Now that Xem has stopped bitching about going to the haunted house, I'm having a blast."

"Not a fan?"

"Hate clowns."

She laughs out loud, and it's a pretty laugh. It reminds me that not everything in life is a hardship, just like this whole outing has made me remember. She has a tendency to do that. Taking us to the horse farm, paragliding, karaoke singing and now the carnival. She's making us remember that there's more to life than rock. And while music is a huge part of my life, it's not the only part.

When we reach the ferris wheel, she pushes the big bear in Wolf's hands, who accepts it gracefully, throwing one of his arms over its shoulder as if he's holding onto a date.

We stand in the non existing line, and the man operating the ferris wheel lets us in, securing us before he moves back to his booth and starts moving the carriages. Our view of the carnival

changes, while I'm suddenly very aware of the fact that my leg is touching the side of Evan's leg, sending heat up my spine. It's been a while since I've been with a girl, and for some reason sitting this close to her reminds me of just how long it has been.

Wolf steps in the next carriage, setting the teddy bear next to him as if they're riding the ride together. I can hear him tell sweet little nothings to the stuffed animal, making me chuckle. Evan smiles widely, her eyes full of joy, and acting on muscle memory, I wrap my arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer to me. A soft gasp leaves her mouth, but it only takes a three count before she nestles herself in my arms.

It's as if both my body and my soul come home and I relax.

Without allowing myself to wonder what the hell it is I'm doing, I surrender to the feeling. Perhaps not all feelings are meant to be dissected.

"How's being on the road treating you so far?" I ask by way of making conversation.

"It's a lot. But I'm getting adjusted to it. Days like these make up for a lot."

We just sit in content for a while, as the carnival goes by and we hear pieces of the conversation Wolf is having with the teddy bear every now and then. By the third round, the bear is called Beary Potter and has a tragic backstory, where it got left in an orphanage for having rainbow colored fur and homophobic parents. Leave it up to Wolf to have an entire conversation by himself and still entertain those around him.

"So, how does a steady rehab nurse become so adventurous that she takes us out on all these exciting outings?" I ask.

She wiggles her nose, as if the question is making her sneeze. "I have not always been a rehab nurse, and I resent your implication that nurses are boring. Most of us thrive on sticking needles in people and don't even bat an eyelash at the sight of blood. I'd say nurses are way more adventurous than rock stars."

I hold up the hand that's not around her shoulder, signalling defeat.

"I might be a little bit of an adrenaline junkie," she finally admits.

I scoff. "Glad to know I'm not the only junkie."

"Former junkie."

"Former junkie," I concur.

"I like trying new things. I like the thrill. There was a time when things seemed really thrilling, but down the line just turned out to be... confining."

She turns her head away from me, and I can feel the tension seeping into her body. I guess I don't know everything about her, and that's fine. She's here to do a job, not to share her whole life with me. I'd love to hear about it though, but I'm not pushing.

"Wolfie," I call down.

"Yes, Maestro," he answers.

"Hum me a tune. I feel like we should write a song. About a ride on the ferris wheel while the sun is setting, and everything just falling into place, sitting in a carriage and holding on to precious things."

"Ah, Beary Potter very much appreciates the gesture," Wolf says, before he starts humming a beautiful tune that I've never heard before. I listen to it for a few beats before I start singing a wordless counter melody, going on the feeling that Evan is giving me. I promised to write her a song on my last day in rehab, and I intend to keep that promise.

Just a few more days like this and I'll be as in love with life as I am with her.

The heartbreak of not being able to act on it is worthy of a few songs if you ask me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



I know better. I know, I know, I know. But still I find myself reading up on news articles about Victorious. Turns out they're not just moving to California, but they're broadening their horizons in every direction.

I shift my legs from beneath my ass until I'm sitting with my feet straight in front of me on my tiny bed. What I've learned from being on a tour with a rock band the most, is that I'm an extrovert with introverted needs. Sometimes I just need to have a moment to myself among the business of the day to day life of rockstars.

Madden is in the other bus, spending time with Miles, Keshia and Pip, having Jay and Vic around him, giving me a second to just be alone with my thoughts. Thoughts that I use to check up on my ex. Classy.

Turns out Victorious is wreaking havoc all over the west of the country. News sites report about new chapters appearing left, right and center, all of them involved in local criminal activities. Nothing that can be proved of course. I even see Nathan's name appear every now and again, seeing as he is Prez of the mother chapter in Nevada. They suspect him to be the mastermind of it all, but I know that can't be the case. He doesn't have the brain for it. Don't get me wrong, he's not dumb, but he doesn't have the business mind to expand the MC like this. His strengths lay in breaking people down one by one after breaking through their barricades and getting into the depths of their minds.

Against better knowledge I open an article that goes in on who Nathan Carter exactly is and what we know about him. I never understood why newspapers and journalists would portray criminals like this, giving them a pedestal and glorifying what they're doing.

The article tells about his life, the son of the former Prez, being prepped for this life since the moment he was born. There's a picture of him on his bike, and if he hadn't left me for dead in a fucking desert, I would've found the guy very attractive. I mean, purely based on looks alone he's still good looking, there's a reason I fell for him. But that's my curse. I always fall for the broken boy turned bad boy.

Maybe I should start looking in the direction of Eric the Bank Clerk more.

But thinking about the guy's I'm currently touring the country with, I know that's a lost cause. The heart wants what the heart wants, and I like a little adrenaline with my crushes. Such as stepping in a shower with one of the biggest players of rock music. And nestling myself into the side of a bass player who does girls like it's his job.

I need to get a grip. Or at least a better judgment system.

Sitting in this room by myself and going through my phone isn't making me feel better. It's making me feel worse. I plug my charger into my phone, throw it on my bed, and leave my room, throwing the door open.

“Fuck!” Xem yells from behind the door. “Watch it!”

“How the hell am I supposed to know you’re standing behind my door?” I ask him when I get out of my room, shutting the door and finding him there with his signature backwards baseball cap, holding his nose. Guess I got him smack in the face.

“You could just open your door carefully!”

“What the hell were you doing outside of my door?”

“Walking back from my own room, you psycho bitch!”

My blood starts boiling. Nobody gets to treat me like this, those days are long and far behind. “Stand behind my door again, I’ll gladly throw the door in your face again just to show you how psycho I can be!”

“You shouldn’t be here! You’re a danger to everyone here!”

I take a step back. “A danger?”

“You’re breaking my fucking nose, you’re changing Madden into someone he’s not. You’ve got Bry and Wolf wrapped around your little finger. What is it that you want? You’re ruining our band.”

I stare at him with big eyes as he gets in my face while he’s screaming at me, his nose practically touching mine. He’s so close I can smell his sweat, and that should absolutely not be the thing I’m focussing on right now.

“Would you rather I leave, let Madden relapse and see you at his funeral in six months time? Because *that’s* what’s going to happen. That’s how it’s going to go! He might have everything under control right now, but the first time someone offers him some smack and there’s nobody there to help him say no, he’s going to cave.”

We’re now standing so close the toes of my brightly yellow socks touch the front of his Docs.

“You really think so little of him that he can’t say no? Some rehab nurse you are,” he first spits and then scoffs.

“I think the fucking world of him! He’s one of the strongest people I know! But the problem with addiction is that it’s a fucking silent killer. It’s a poison that crawls through your veins, dormant, until it’s ready to strike. It’s the way his brain is wired after years of use. And you and your attitude aren’t fucking helping!”

“I can’t fucking stand the sight of you!”

“Right back at you, asshole!”

“Get out of here before I do something we both will regret.”

“Classy, threatening a girl with violence. Why don’t you go sit on your drum stool and accidentally fall on your drumstick, because you’re acting like it’s up there already!”

I storm off after that, my blood rushing through my veins so loudly I can’t hear anything anymore. I’m not sure if Xem even answers me or not, but I don’t care. I can’t stand the look on his face. He awakens a part of me that isn’t around a lot, because I’m not a person who seeks out confrontation. But for those I’m protecting I’m willing to fight for.

Nathan almost snuffed out that part of me. Making me nothing but a pliant woman who listened to everything he had to say.

Fuck, I crave a cigarette, and I don’t even smoke. Outside of the bus I take a deep breath, wondering if the way I responded had more to do with my strenuous relationship with that bastard drummer, or that I was already in a foul mood because of the Victorious articles I read. Whatever the reason was, it was totally unacceptable. It’s not like I threw the door into him on purpose and I would gladly apologize if he hadn’t acted like a total douche. And total douches don’t deserve an apology. It’s the law.

Standing with my yellow socks on the grass that surrounds the bus, I wonder what I should do now. I’m not in the mood to go into the second bus and explain everything that’s going on. Besides, I don’t think I’d be pleasant company now anyway.

When the smell of a cigarette reaches my nose, I look up, finding cringles of smoke going up in the air.

Bryson.

Trying to remember to the best of my knowledge how to get on the bus, I climb up, finding big brown eyes staring into my direction. He's hidden away in the cap of his hoodie, as usual, and lying flat on his back, staring into the sky. He lifts his brow in question, but I shake my head. I don't want to talk.

He pats the empty space beside him, and I go over and lie down next to him.

Against my better judgment I steal his cigarette, take a drag, and proceed to cough my lungs out. Nope. Still not a smoker. Might be for the best anyway.

Bryson is observing me with an amused smile, harboring the silence between us. I wonder if Xem and I were screaming so hard he heard from the top of the bus. I don't really care to be honest. I stand by everything I've said, even if the way I said it might have been a tad too harsh.

Bryson finishes his cigarette while I stare at the sky, letting everything go through my head. He pushes it out and throws the bud off the bus. I'll need to have a conversation about the environment and the impact of cigarette buds with all of these guys soon, but after my little run in with Xem I'm afraid I'll get shunned if I bring it up now.

Bryson turns over, lies on his side, hand under his head, staring at me. Which isn't creepy at all. His silence covers us like a caress and is so contradictory to the yelling match I just had that it feels a little uncomfortable.

But then one corner of his mouth goes up, and he uses his free hand to push a strand of hair that is stuck on my face behind my ear. For a guy who's so big and looks intimidating, he's very gentle.

His hand lingers on my cheek, and our eyes lock when I turn to my side as well. We're now belly to belly, with just a few inches between us. His thumb trails down to my mouth, the pad of it going over my bottom lip. I've always thought the

gesture a little odd, but I can't deny it makes me feel sexy. Automatically, my teeth try to suck in my bottom lip, making the half smile on Bryson's face turn into a full one.

He leans in and captures my lips with his teeth, the smile never leaving his face while he does so.

I gasp, unsure of what's going on, and not knowing whether it's wise to proceed. But maybe I should live a little. I force myself to remember that I made it out of that desert alive, I escaped Nathan and his harmful ways – what a waste it would be to stop living after surviving that after all.

I return the kiss, our lips meeting and exploring each other. The hand he had on my face has never left there, and he uses it to pull me closer towards him. Unsure who does it first, we both open up for more, our tongues touching tentatively.

Before we deepen the kiss I pull back.

“This is not why I came up here,” I whisper.

“I know, I heard.” Guess that answers my question whether he heard our argument.

“I'm not so sure this is wise either. I'm here as a professional.”

He stares at me, his eyes taking in every part of my face, flicking towards my lips multiple times. “I'm not wise, I couldn't tell you about it if I tried. But I would suggest that for now, we live in the moment for a while, and when we get off of this bus, we go back to being professionals. And this will just have been a perfect moment between two adults. And if it never becomes anything more than just this moment, then we'll still always have that.”

“For someone who doesn't talk a lot, you sure know how to say the right things,” I answer right before I crash my mouth against his again. The kiss is less gentle now, us seeking the other out. But damn, he knows what he's doing. I notice that I'm having a hard time catching my breath, so into the kiss I forget about the world around me.

His hands stay in all the proper places all the while, and I wonder if I've ever enjoyed simply making out like this ever

since I was a teenager. I'm doubtful.

I couldn't tell you if it's been seconds, minutes or hours since we started kissing, but when we finally break the kiss I'm left breathless and a little confused.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



“How’s the wife and kids doing?” I ask Omar, our bus driver. He’s on a team that rotates, so they can take shifts on long drives. Omar’s been with us since the dawn of time, and I like him. He’s got good stories to tell. When we’re not touring, he drives limousines for hire, and the things that happen in the back of a limousine are whack. I’ve also learned that what happens in a limousine doesn’t stay in a limousine, so I’ve dialed back my behavior whenever I ride one.

Not that Omar doesn’t know of my wicked ways. He’s seen many a walk of shame whenever I took a fan back to the bus. Which used to happen a lot, and hasn’t happened in way too long now that I’m thinking about it.

“Wife and kids are doing fine, oldest one is starting to become a 4A fan.”

He says it like he’s in pain.

“I thought you liked us?”

“She’s twelve. She has a crush on all of you. I *know* all of you, and I know that twelve year olds should not have crushes on you. Fucking hell, she thinks the lines about beating the meat are actually about beating meat, and then she went off in a rant about veganism and how that’s going to save the world!”

I can’t hold my laugh back. Omar seems seriously distraught.

“I can’t even drink cow milk anymore! I gotta drink coconut or almond milk. I’m a grown ass man! If I wanna drink some milk from some cow titties instead of from nuts, I damn well will drink cow titties milk. But no, suddenly, I’m killing the environment!”

My sides start hurting from laughing too hard. Omar is a treat. Always has been, always will be. I need to make sure I stay friendly with him though, we’ve got a long way to drive today and I don’t want him to drive us off of a cliff because I annoyed him and his daughter wouldn’t let him drink milk anymore.

So the best thing to do is to extract myself from the situation. I squeeze Omar’s shoulder before I head back to the living area of the bus, which is empty. I haven’t seen Xem all morning, I know Madden is working on new music, because I can hear him humming through the thin walls and who the fuck knows what Bryson is doing. They’re a bunch of dull douchebags today, and they can’t possibly expect me to entertain myself. I need to be stimulated, or else I have a tendency of acting out.

Speaking of entertainment, Evangaline comes walking out of her room, looking like she could use some entertainment. And I have just the plan.

“Come on,” I tell her, grabbing her hand and pulling her behind me. I’m done playing it safe. There’s chemistry between the two of us, and I’ve never been one to hold back. Madden all but said he understood, so no more pussying around, I’m pursuing this.

“What are we doing?”

“You owe me a shower concert,” I tell her, opening the door to the tiny bathroom and waiting for her to step in. She looks at me from beneath those dark lashes with her purple eyes, and some primal urge inside of me makes me want to lick the side of her face. Which I won’t do. I’m not some kind of savage, but I’m not above wanting it.

“Maybe it’s not hair washing day,” she says hesitantly before she moves. The glint in her eyes tells a different story than her mouth does though.

“Well, then we won’t wash your hair.”

She still doesn’t look convinced.

“Oh come on, I serenaded you and all, just come shower with me. You can keep your underwear on.”

That makes her chuckle. “But you’re going in naked?”

“Of course, I’m an exhibitionist. I love forcing my naked dick on unwilling women. No, smarty pants, I’ll follow your lead. But I still want to hear you sing. Just for me this time, no other people allowed.”

She cocks her head.

“For fuck’s sake, come have some fun with me. We’ll keep it PG.”

Finally, *finally*, she takes a step forward and joins me in the bathroom. I turn on the water, knowing full well there’s only so much water in the tank. I start taking off my clothes, which there frankly aren’t a lot of, and act as if it’s the most normal thing in the world to do.

When she’s just staring at me standing there in my underwear, I take the hem of her shirt in my hands and lift it up. When she helps me by lifting her hands up, I proceed and take the whole shirt off.

The sight of her perky breasts in a pretty black bra makes me swallow thickly. This whole experience where I have to chase a girl before she ends up naked in my bed is new, and with that comes the new experience of anticipation. I’ve

thought about what she looks like, a lot, but reality does her more justice than my head has ever done.

Her bottom lip disappears beneath her teeth, her hands slowly going to the button of her pants. As soon as she's unbuttoned them, she takes them off, and fuck me, the bra is a piece of a matching set. Her pale skin, mixed with her dark hair, purple eyes and black underwear makes my mouth water.

Focus, Wolf. Focus.

I grab her hand, feel the temperature of the shower, and when I find it satisfactory step beneath the spray, pulling her after me. Goosebumps cover my body when the skin of her flat stomach comes in touch with my abs. She feels silky smooth, and I want to play her like one of my instruments. Exploring her body with the tips of my fingers, even if it's to do nothing besides to get familiar with her curves.

She reminds me of the body of my favorite violin, and if it wasn't completely true I'd cringe so hard at that thought. But it *is* true.

I'm so completely fucked when it comes to this girl.

I spin her around, pushing her back against my front and taking her in my hands. My calloused fingertips glide over her soft belly, scraping over the underside of her boob. She's breathing shallowly, her breath even stopping for a second when I press my lips against the shell of her ear.

"Now give me one of those famous concerts of yours."

She snickers. "Really? My singing is awful. It's your funeral."

"Gimme your worst, sing me your favorite song," I tell her. I have to hold myself back to not let my hands wander, to not taste every inch of her skin with my tongue. But I don't want to push her, and I feel like we've got all the time we need to take this slow. Does this mean there will be a lot more nights spent alone in my room, getting off to the feel of my right hand and the visual of one Miss E. Hart in mind? Yeah. Yeah, it probably will.

“My favorite song? It’s uh, well, not really made for my voice?”

“So what? I’m just curious what your favorite song is.”

“Can’t I just tell you?”

“That’s cheating.”

She snorts. I feel her inhale deeply, unsure what she’ll end up singing. But when she softly starts singing the first words to “Iris”, I swoon. I wish there was a more manly way to describe it, but I just fucking swoon.

Can she sing?

No.

Does she hit any of the notes?

Hell no.

But what she does do is grasp the essence of the song, conveying the lyrics to me and making me feel them. I wonder why this is her song, why this is the one that speaks to her. It’s not like she acts like the regular emo punk girl. To be honest, I would’ve figured her for someone who listens to pop music. But in everything that’s Evangaline, I’m wrong in this as well. The woman never ceases to amaze me at every opportunity she gets.

I chuckle when I feel her cringe when she sings a note particularly false. But she doesn’t stop.

My lips fall on the wet crook of her neck, drops trailing down, wetting my mouth. She stops singing when I kiss her beneath her ear, but then picks up the song again. The muscles in her belly are tightened, figuring it’s from anticipation. I’m sure she’d tell me to go to hell if she wanted me to stop. In any case, she wouldn’t keep singing.

I keep kissing her neck and the back of her shoulders while she finishes her song. In the back of my mind I wonder if she feels unseen by the world, and just wants to be seen, just like the lyrics say.

She feels like an open book, but it's one written in a language I don't understand. But by God, am I willing to learn.

When the last words have left her mouth, I spin her around. She lays her hands on my pecs, looking up at me from beneath her wet, dark eyelashes. There's fire and fragility battling for dominance in the way she looks at me.

"I'm... I'm a relationship kind of girl, Wolf. I don't do hookups. I don't know how to separate intimacy from love, and frankly, I don't think I ever want to learn."

I drop my head, leaning with my forehead against hers, our noses hovering in front of each other.

"I'm not asking you to," I tell her, my voice hoarse and croaky. There's a reason I'm better with my fingers than with my voice.

"We're going to be on this tour together for a while. And if you kiss me right now, and I see you with some groupie tomorrow, you're going to shatter my heart."

I stare at her, because the last thing on my mind right now is anyone but her. She's all I fucking want. Kinda forgot that there are other women out there as well. But contrary to her, I have no idea how to get emotions involved into my intimacy. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever truly been intimate with anybody. I've fucked. I've had fun. But really bare my soul and be intimate with someone? Not so much.

"I'm not going to lie," I say. "I'm not sure how to be anyone other than myself. But I do know that ever since you walked into that hotel lounge, you've been on my mind non stop."

She looks away. "Does that mean I'm going to lose your interest after you've had me?"

I scrunch my eyebrows, which I realize she can't see. Normally? I'd say yes. But for reasons I can't really grasp, things feel different with her.

"I don't think I could even if I tried," I admit softly.

Then I let her go and open the shower, grabbing both of us a towel. I got my song, she made herself clear, and I want to walk away now that I'm still able to. It might be one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life.

CHAPTER THIRTY



I'm hitting the shit out of my drums, and I'm fucking in it. For some reason we're going with a little harder set list today. The upside of not playing the same set list every concert is that we can play to what we're feeling, and we can read the audience.

Tonight we're on a festival. We're not the last act of the evening, but the second to last. I think the Red Hot Chili Peppers are the closing act, which was a fact that made Evan very happy. I forget that to most people, famous bands are unattainable things that don't seem real. For me? It's just a bunch of people making music.

I twirl my stick and play the last part of the song, practically bouncing on the notes, buzzing on the energy the audience is giving me. We've followed a small metal band that I'd never heard about, but the few songs I heard were pretty hardcore,

riling up the audience. So we're playing our harder songs as well.

When the song ends I take off my shirt, quickly taking off my cap before I put that back on my head and sticking my shirt in the back pocket of my jeans. I used to throw the thing in the audience, because chicks loved it, but when I saw it was being sold for over a fucking thousand bucks on Ebay I stopped doing it. No shirt is worth that much, and I don't like people making money off of me. It still happens, but this is one I can control. There was this one time that girl took everything she could find in my hotel room and left while I was taking a leak. She sold everything, but she was a fun fuck, so I let her get away with it. Don't worry about the small stuff, right?

"Alright, Loveland, are we having a good time?" Madden talks into the mic. "How about we change it up a little and honor the name of this festival? How about we sing about some love?"

The audience boos. They start yelling angrily, and there's no love to be found anywhere.

"I'll take that as a no," Madden says. In the meantime beer cups are thrown on stage. They're both full and empty ones, but I see Bryson getting showered. The audience is close to the podium at this festival, that's having its virgin run, and there have been some hiccups from what I picked up today. There's practically no security in front of the stage, and I can see movement in the wings where our own security seems to be on high alert.

"What do you think I should sing about if we're not doing love?"

Several things are being shouted from the people that are crowding the stage. It might just be my perception, but they seem stacked together very snugly. It feels like they're over capacity, and that always leads to trouble. Don't get me wrong, I love being *in* an overcrowded audience, starting shit, being in an aggressive mosh pit, but it's different when you're on stage and mob mentality breaks out.

The one thing that gets yelled a lot seems to be sex, so I go along with that. Using my own mic I yell “You’re all here for a little dirty? Let’s do “Freaks in Flesh”!”

I can hear Wolf sigh, because he hates the song, even if it has a gorgeous violin part. He dislikes the beat the song is played in, and stuff like that always makes me laugh. Wolf has peculiarities that can be fucking annoying, but are so distinguishably him that you can’t blame him.

I give a four count, and then we start the song. It’s a harder song, not some silly soft rock making love kinda song, no, this one was inspired by the head boards of Madden’s bed banging against the wall in the hotel. I can tell, it’s my song. Or at least, I came up with the idea. We all create together.

Bryson’s bass line is equally loud as my drumming, starting off with a fair beat, but as the song builds up, it’ll only get more intense, ending the thing with a bang.

Madden starts the lyrics, giving a performance worthy of an Oscar. Or he’s just really into the song. I don’t know. I’m just playing my part, having the time of my life – sweat dripping from my face onto my drumkit, little droplets bouncing up and off it.

“Trouble at the southend,” Kyle says through our ears. Which is alarming enough in itself. Sometimes the sound techies say something, sometimes management has something to say, but whenever Kyle says something I know it’s serious. Kyle has been with us since we really started to make it big, and he’s the only one we really trust with our safety. He’s there at every concert and he vouched for our safety when he’s off duty because apparently the guy needs personal time as well and doesn’t just live for his job.

My eyes go towards one section of the audience, which I suppose is the south end, because who the fuck coordinates in north, east, south and west nowadays, and I see a big crowd of black coming towards the stage. People flee the area. And when the black splotch comes nearer, I can see it’s a group of big biker men. Which could be great fun, but could mean big

trouble as well. Seeing as Kyle let us know trouble was ahead, I'm taking his word for it be the latter.

The changes in all the band members are slight, but they're there when you pay attention. I'm suddenly stuck to my seat again. Bryson is disappearing in his hoodie, Miles is staring at the podium instead of in the crowd and Madden has both his hands wrapped around the mic. Usually he'd be making obscene gestures whenever we perform this song. Wolf is the most obvious once you know, because he starts bouncing over the stage. I know it's his nerves making him pick the best spot so he can keep an eye on the unruly crowd.

He almost misses his cue to start playing his line, almost making me furious, but he starts at exactly the right time, calming the demon inside of me down again.

And then everything goes to shit.

A huge flame goes up in the section of the crowd where Kyle said the trouble was, and the audience starts screaming for totally different reasons than being happy to see us.

People start running away, fleeing, and simultaneously we all stop mid-song. Even this is something we're in sync about. Security forms a line in front of the stage, and from all directions bikers wearing cuts with a big V appear. Our own security appears from the wings, trying to get us off the stage, but it's like I'm glued to my seat, staring with open mouthed to what's going on.

Explosions go off in the crowd, and while my mind is convinced it's fireworks, some piece of me is aware it could be gunfire as well. Growing up where I did, we all knew what gunfire sounds like, and it isn't anything like in the movies.

Fuck.

My heart starts speeding up, and when someone's hand wraps around my shoulder I let myself get pulled off of stage. The moment I stare into the audience I see that the fences that were put there to barricade the stage from the crowd are being lifted in the air. That fence is having the best crowd surfing experience known to man. The hand keeps pulling my arm,

and I shake myself loose from the total anarchy that's going on in the crowd.

The port-o-potties are literally flying through the air, and I witness how someone gets stuck underneath one. I'm very grateful for all the noise the crowd is making, because I'm not interested in listening to the cry that person probably made.

Hell, music should bring people together, not tear them apart. We're at a festival called *Loveland* for fuck's sake.

The guy who's pulling me along behind him turns out to be one of Kyle's regulars. He takes me through the wings, following the rest of the guys and a shitload of security. I see Miles fighting his bodyguard to be able to get to Keshia and Pip, and I feel sorry for the guy who's trying to hold him back because the look on his face tells me he isn't going to stand down until he's with his wife and his kid – where he belongs.

Wolf is letting himself be led away, his violin held loosely by the neck. It's incredibly vulnerable with all these people running in all directions and my head can't help but imagine how the thing is going to snap. It's a musician's worst nightmare, losing your instrument. I'd gladly fight you for my drumkit, but in the end it's not worth more than my life. I guess Wolf feels the same.

Halfway down a narrow hall I come eye to eye with Madden, who looks scared as all hell. I quickly clasp his neck, pulling our foreheads together, before we proceed to get the hell away from here.

The noise keeps getting louder and louder, the smell of fire and ash strong in the air, even backstage. It's making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. That particular sensation is one I like when it comes to music, but now that I'm experiencing it while people are screaming in fear is one I enjoy less.

We finally reach the exit, and security leads us to the buses.

Miles, Keshia and Pip are the last ones behind me who get pushed onto the bus before it takes off. I'm out of breath from the distance we crossed in such a short time. Thankfully, the

parking area for artists is cut off from the main area, meaning we're getting a quick retreat. Our bus is the only one of our entourage of five that takes off. Guess the people who aren't in the band just have to fend for themselves. And I fucking hate that.

I taste blood when I bite my cheek in anger because people think that rich people's lives are worth more than that of someone who isn't rich. Why aren't we waiting until everyone is safe? Our techies were right in the middle of that crowd!

Did they get out alright?

"Is everyone okay?" Madden asks in a full lounge. All the members of the band are here, plus everyone who was guarding them. Keshia and Pip are here, as well as Evan. Vic and Jay are clinging to each other like they're two otters who hold hands when they drift asleep.

"Yeah," I mumble. Because I'll just speak for everyone, I don't give a fucking shit. We're all here, nobody is hurt, so I'm stating that we're all okay. Anyone who wants to see a shrink to talk about their feelings after today can do so on their own time. For now I'm calling the shots, and I'm saying all fine.

I just pray to fuck everyone in our entourage is as well.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



For some reason the National Anthem keeps playing through my head. The part about ‘for the land of the free’ is stuck on a loop. People are talking all around me, but it’s that fucking song that I keep hearing. When Jay snaps his fingers in front of my face, I finally seem to wake from my daze, finding myself leaning against one of the walls leading to the bedrooms.

It feels like I’m breathing through a straw.

“You with us?” the handsome assistant keeps asking me. Last I saw him he was holding hands with Vic, who is now comforting Keshia and Pip. I’d have expected Vic to go comfort his sister, but for some reason Keshia is talking to her brother-in-law and not her brother.

“Evan,” he says, snapping me back to the here and now.

“Yeah.”

The song keeps playing. And playing, and playing, and playing. I press the palms of my hands to my eyes, and for just a moment I’m back beneath that Joshua tree, the pretty blooms reminding me what a waste it is to be dying.

“...can’t reach her.”

Two calloused hands grab my face, and the next moment I really look into the present instead of being stuck in the past, I’m staring into two bright gray eyes. They almost seem illuminated.

“What’s wrong?”

I swallow thickly, not wanting to talk about how seeing all those Victorious members made me scared, not willing to speak about how mentally I’m back in that desert and dying.

“I’m too hot,” I whisper, even though I fully well know that’s not the answer.

“Okay,” he says, pulling me towards the kitchen sink with him. He starts running the water, feeling the temperature with his hands. “Hold your wrists under.”

I scrunch my face, because if anyone should be overheated, it’s him. He was the one performing in scorching spotlights, not me. But I’m still stuck in the past, the words of the song still going through my head.

“Better?” Madden asks with all the care in the world, and oh, how I want to tell him that everything is okay now, that I’m fine and no longer freaking the fuck out - but I can’t so I panickingly shake my head.

“What else is wrong?” His thumb grazes my cheek, making me look him in the eye again instead of staring at the way the water spatters off my hands.

“Star-spangled banner is stuck in my head,” I say so softly I’m convinced he doesn’t hear me.

One corner of his mouth goes up though, letting me know he did hear me. “You know what to do when a song is stuck in your head, right?”

I shake my head.

He smiles wider.

“Sing it so loudly it’ll no longer hold any power over you.”

And just like that he starts singing the song. His voice is as beautiful as ever, and even after the ravage that was Loveland the sound of it still soothes me. He starts off softly, even now giving his own take on the song, until Miles falls in, singing the second voice.

A deep voice that I don’t recognize reaches my ears, and when I look up in my haze, I see that it’s Jay. He’s got a beautiful one. Keshia falls in, Pip excitedly clapping while still stuck in a wrap on her mother’s back. And damn, the woman has got some pipes.

I accidentally lock eyes with Xem, who isn’t singing along and just rolls his eyes when he catches me glaring in his direction. I’m too far gone to care. The hollow sound of a violin starts supporting all the people in the bus, singing our national anthem, just to calm me down.

The next inhale fully reaches my lungs, and just like that I’m back, blinking rapidly to keep the light that is now reaching my eyes out.

And when they reach the crescendo about the land of the free, the song leaves my head, and I’m no longer having a panic attack. It’s weird how quickly that can go and what a hold the mind has over the body.

Madden’s thumb strokes my cheek again after finishing the song. “Better?” he repeats.

This time I nod.

“Good, that’s good, Evy,” he mumbles.

Everyone inside the bus seems to be watching us, making me feel very self aware. Am I the only one who freaked out like this? Seems like it. Then again: I’m the only one who’s been left for dead by the same motorcycle club who just party crashed a whole festival. Oh fucking hell, I hope to God that

Nathan wasn't there. That there wasn't anyone in that crowd who saw me, recognized me.

I'm better left for dead, buried beneath the sand of the Death Valley.

But that didn't happen, and I'm still here, and I didn't die today either. Because when I try to break it all down, it's being petrified of dying – again.

“Wanna get out of here?” Madden asks me.

“How?” I ask, confused. “We're on a bus.”

He chuckles.

“Let's just go sit in your room. It's crowded here, with everyone from security and the second bus in the lounge. It's made for five people, not fifteen.”

My cheeks heat when I realize he's right and before I know what I'm doing I'm nodding and we're off to my bedroom. I let myself drop on my bed without really thinking what I'm doing through, my back against the headboard. Madden takes the opposite end of the bed. And while I've held the guy after he fell asleep when he had an anxiety attack, I now realize he's *the* Madden St. James, the singer of 4A, world famous rock band, and he's sitting on my bed after he's calmed me down.

“You okay again?” he asks me, little lines surrounding his eyes giving away his concern.

I hum, shutting my eyes and letting my head fall back. Now that a whole bus full of people had to sing a song to calm me down I'm mortified. When the door to my room opens again I peek through my eyes to see Bryson and Wolf coming in.

“You okay love?” Wolf immediately asks, sitting himself down right next to me on my tiny one person bed.

“Okay. Mortified, but okay.”

“Mortified?” Madden asks. I see that he actually does not understand where my embarrassment stems from.

“Why the hell aren't you guys more freaked out? I all but had a panic attack after that.” For a moment I wonder if it was

as bad as it seemed, or if I overreacted because of the Victorious members I saw. Do I have some form of PTSD from almost dying in the desert? I can't fucking tell. The rational part of my brain knows I'm not overreacting. Stuff like that isn't supposed to happen at concerts or festivals.

Bryson, who has both his hands in the pocket of his hoodie, leans against the inside of the door, practically shutting everyone else out from coming in. "We've been trained to rely on security getting us out of there. They did their jobs. We're all safe."

"I'm willing to bet not all the people in that audience were safe."

"No, you're probably right about that," Bryson admits as if it's nothing. He's not one to pussyfoot about it. "But they're not our responsibility. Something went very, very wrong with the security of the festival itself. Something like this never should've happened."

"It was those bikers, right? That Victorious group the news keeps going on and on about?" Wolf asks, not aware what he does to me with just that simple question.

"From what I've heard they're growing quite a lot, they seem to be literally everywhere on the West Coast," Madden answers.

He keeps talking with Wolf, but I can no longer hear them, the blood coursing too loudly through my veins. My breathing speeds up and I can feel my anxiety setting in. My vision blurs and my skin tingles. The straw is back again as well. If Nathan finds me, I won't survive a second time. And I don't want to fucking die.

I'm not sure how much time has passed, but my chin gets lifted by two calloused fingers, and before I know it I'm staring Bryson in his whiskey colored eyes.

"Breathe," he commands.

So I listen.

He keeps staring me down until I'm somewhat calming down again.

“What the hell was that?” Wolf asks in confusion.

Every cell in my whole body screams that I don't want to answer him. I don't want to talk about it. And if there's anybody who understands the need to be silent, it's Bryson. He keeps staring at me, as if he can see more of my past than I've divulged thus far. He's the one I told most, and I didn't even tell him all that much, I just gave him some encrypted message about making it out alive and then let silence do its work. Silence just seems to be the language Bryson speaks the best.

“None of our damn business,” Bryson mumbles.

I'm not sure what exactly happens next because it goes so fluently I'm not aware that it's happening at all. Madden takes off my kicks and my socks before he pulls my feet in his lap, Wolf pulls me against him, his cheek on the side of my head, and Bryson sits down on the floor at the head of my bed, one hand slowly stroking the back of my hand.

When Madden starts rubbing my feet with his calloused hands I'm pretty sure I'm having some weird kind of dream or something like that.

I can feel Wolf's lips turn up before he asks me: “What's it like, having three guys in your bedroom touching you?”

My eyes almost bulge out of my eyes.

“That's not...” I stammer. “That's not what we're doing here.”

“No, I can't have relationships,” Madden says earnestly. “But you should totally have hot sex right here in front of me with Bryson and Wolf.”

It clicks.

Motherfuckers are joking. Making me feel more at ease. And I have to admit it's working. I'm not even willing to admit how wet that got me just now. My embarrassment dies down when I realize they're shitting me.

“You'd keep rubbing my feet during?” I ask him, acting more confident than I'm feeling.

“Sure,” he says cockily, “Whatever gets you going.”

I chuckle, because the very last thing I have is a foot fetish. I'm loving the foot rub though.

"You'd be better off to get Bry or me to get you a foot rub, our hands are way more calloused," Wolf teases me. "Madden is better with his mouth."

"Maybe I'd like your hands somewhere else then," I blurt before I think things through.

All three of them stop moving when the words leave my mouth, and I feel my ears heat. I'm not that forward, and I'm not that vocal, especially not with clients. But I guess being on tour with them makes them something more than just clients.

"Tell me more," Wolf growls in my ear, and not only are my ears warm, but my cheeks have heated as well.

"Well," I tease, "Maybe you should practice on Bryson, and then I can see what you have to offer, and I can make up my mind if I'm willing to go there." We're joking, I think. We're joking, right? Nothing serious. Then why is my mouth so dry?

"Hell no," Bryson says. "Wolf's been trying to make us switch sides forever, and it's just not my thing."

"Same," Madden says. "If anyone should turn to a man, it would be Xem, because he has a permanent stick up his ass."

I snort, because that's too true not to be funny.

"I'm telling you guys, touring would be far different if you would just start doing guys," Wolf says.

"Yeah, or more complicated. I'm not going anywhere near your dick, Wolf. The fact that you walk around naked in the mornings is enough."

"I haven't seen you walk around naked," I say, thinking about all the mornings where I woke up before him.

Laying his chin on my shoulder and staring at me with his mismatching eyes, he rumbles: "Well, that's because I've been considerate of you. Would you like me to start walking around naked again?"

"No," both Bryson and Madden say at the same time.

Wolf rolls his eyes. “Too much of a good thing, I guess.”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Madden says, accidentally getting his nails over the sole of my foot, making me giggle. And before I know it, all three are all over me, tickling me and making me laugh, until I cave and beg Madden to help me. We end up all tickling each other, laughing so hard that the anarchy of Loveland feels ages behind us.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



With a thump, the book falls on my nightstand. I've been staring at the same few pages for over half an hour, having read all the lines without remembering what they said.

It's not a bad book, far from it. During the Pandemic Dave Grohl wrote an autobiography, because he had a lot of time on his hands with suddenly not being able to perform and shit like that. Motherfucker is like the King Midas of the musical world, everything he touches turns into fucking gold. Not only did he write it, he also narrated the audio book himself, because he, like so many of the great ones out there, is a control freak that believes he can do it better than anyone else.

Fact is that he's probably right as well.

I've got moments when I'm convinced I'm better than anyone else out there as well. Which seems like a pretty

arrogant thing to think, but the thought lives rent free in my head anyway. It gets ten times worse when I'm high.

My eyes glide over my nightstand, inadvertently seeking out all the places I'd casually leave a baggie lying around in the past. Right behind a glass of water was my favorite. Nobody looks there. But the only thing on my night stand is my plugged in phone, a pen, a notepad and the discarded book.

My mouth runs dry with the intense craving to use something right then. Anything really.

The feeling comes on so sudden and out of nowhere I'm overwhelmed by it, not being able to defend myself against it. My temples hurt, so I massage them in the hopes of easing the pain. But it isn't physical, it's all in my head.

I get up off the bed and go to the shared bathroom, rumbling through the cabinets and not just my stuff, but all the guy's stuff. I'd just leave my stash behind the beardtrimmer that lays out in the open on the plank, because who in their right minds would think to look there? Me. It's me. Just the junkie with drugs on the mind would be so bold to leave everything out in the open. But there isn't anything there, because I'm being a good boy and I'm clean and sober.

I wanna smash my fist through the fucking mirror.

Ransacking the rest of the tiny bathroom, I find some of Bryson's hayfever medicine. Not drugs exactly, but they'd get me woozy if I'd pop two of 'em. They'd give me a nice high for a while, and then I'll be left wanting more, wanting the harder stuff – which would end up in me buying smack, probably OD'ing because my body isn't used to it anymore and I'd be so dumb to arrogantly think I could handle the same amount, and then the guys would get a call that I'm dead, just like Dave did after Kurt died. Fuck. I rattle the pill bottle, and then use everything I've got inside of me to put them back.

It doesn't magically fix my fucking mood though.

I want a beer.

But I'm not drinking either. I huff in frustration, leaning with both hands on the sink and staring at myself in the mirror.

I look good, and I don't mean that in a vain way, I mean I look alive, healthy. From the outside you wouldn't see the war that is waging on the inside of my head.

Addiction can be a fucking silent killer.

Then again, thinking about the times I've been raging out of my head, those were definitely not quiet.

Instead of getting a beer, I fill a glass with water and drain it before filling it up again. The fingers of my free hand are tapping on the counter, but the crawling itching feeling beneath my skin does not disappear. I start opening random cabinets, shifting stuff from side to side, my brain still searching for something, anything, to get a hit.

Halfway in downing the second glass of water the frustration get so much I kick one of the cabinets, making the contents of whatever the fuck is in there topple over. Sounds about right, the sound of my life coming crashing down.

"What's going on?" the one voice I don't want to hear says.

Evan is standing in the entryway to the living area, headphones around her neck and her phone in her hand. Guess she was chilling in her own room.

"I'm..." What the hell do I tell her? Having a nervous breakdown? Being weak? Kicking the kitchen instead of the habit? She calmly observes me while she crosses her arms in front of her chest. "I'm having a hard time," I answer quietly. Without knowing what I'm doing I'm scratching the backs of my arms, until there are red stripes on them.

"So you were going to do some remodeling to the kitchen?"

I get what she's doing, I'm not stupid. She's using humor to calm me down. But that nagging part of my brain does not want to be calmed down, it wants to be pumped full of chemicals and feel anything but fucking calm. I just know that *that* isn't going to happen, and that I should probably work through these feelings. Evan is just the right person to run into, because if there's anyone here to help me with this it's her. It's literally her job.

“There have been days that there would be drugs in one of those cabinets,” I admit reluctantly. “I was trying to find some.”

She tilts her head, as if she doesn't understand what I'm saying. So I breathe in deeply, and show her the coffee mugs. “Pour some GHB in one of those, nobody sees, and you can grab some while people are literally sitting around you and not know a damn fucking thing.”

She comes closer, and starts closing all the cabinets. “That sounds kinda unsafe,” she says, eyes on the mess I made of the kitchen in the short amount of time I was there.

I nod. “It's the reason Miles and Keshia moved to the second bus, not having a baby on a bus full of partying rock stars aside and all.”

A soft smile covers her face while she plays with the braid that hangs over her shoulder. There are some tiny braids woven into one big braid. She always has these intricate designs going on, but she makes it look effortless.

My fingers are itching for a smoke. Not just my body aching for the high of the nicotine, but my fingers need something to do. It's the way Xem always taps with his hand or feet, or how Wolf can stroke his pants as if there are strings there. I wonder if making tiny braids is a form of relaxation for Evan as well.

She opens one of the cabinets that I hadn't opened before, grabbing a jar of nutella, a notepad and a pen, before beckoning me to come outside. My brows furrow, and I follow her, grabbing my smokes and my lighter on the way out, because if we're going to go out I'm going to smoke as well. Can't make my mood any worse.

I catch myself staring at the roundness of Evan's ass while she walks in front of me. Instead of going to the side of the bus where we usually smoke, she goes into the second bus, leaving me behind in confusion when I see that fine ass disappear inside. What the hell are we going to do?

Before I can make up my mind whether I should follow her inside, she comes out again holding a box of breadsticks and walks back to the first bus.

Me? I just follow her like I'm some meek little sheep that doesn't have an opinion of his own.

We end up near the front of our bus again, and she shoves the things she has accumulated in my hands. "Hold 'em for me, throw 'em up when I get there, and don't tell Bryson."

Then, with swift steps, she starts climbing up on the bus. The involuntary lift of the corner of my mouth doesn't go unnoticed. Once she's up on the bus, she lays flat on her stomach and holds out her hands, waiting on me to throw her shit up. So one by one, I get our gear up onto the roof before I climb up after her.

She's smiling like the Cheshire cat when I get up there.

Sitting with her legs crossed, she opens the nutella and dips the breadstick in the chocolatey goodness before she eats them. She pats the place beside her, indicating for me to sit down, so I do and make myself comfortable.

We sit like that for a while. Her munching on breadsticks and Nutella, me lighting up smoke after smoke.

"What'd you normally do after you couldn't find drugs on the bus?" she asks, staring in the distance.

"Find someone to fix me something. Anything, really."

She nods, nothing but understanding showing on her face. "Those cravings hit you hard."

I nod, biting my bottom lip, because hell, I didn't see it coming.

"What set it off?"

Now it's my turn to stare in the distance. I want to give her a good answer, but I seriously don't know. What was it? Boredom? Rebellion? Just my brain having some kind of malfunction?

"Not sure," I end up answering.

“It happens,” she says. Her calmness is contagious and I realize that just sitting here, having a smoke, has brought me out of my funk and made my cravings disappear.

I can feel her eyes on me, observing me, studying me. It’s a heavy look, one that I can feel in my stomach. She possesses the ability to make you feel truly seen. It’s a gift, especially when you’re feeling like ten pounds of crap after almost dying and detoxing in a rehab facility. That she saw me, Madden, and not just Madden St. James, the rock star who almost died yesterday because he couldn’t control his drug use and had the audacity to become addicted, is rare.

It’s a little unsettling as well, because if she can really see me, how will I be able to hide that which I don’t want her to see.

“What are you staring at?”

“I’m trying to decide whether you’re a Pyramids or The Great Wall of China kinda guy.”

“For what purpose?”

“For what would be on your bucket list.”

I smile, smoke almost falling out of my mouth so wide. “Been there, done that. Great Wall of China was a shitshow. So many fans showed up that we ended up being taken away by security. You know all the prejudices that Chinese people are small? Well, when you have a humongous group of them, they’re still very big. We didn’t actually see much of the wall.”

I inhale deeply, trying to forget how hungover I was that day. I wasn’t even sad that we didn’t really get to see the wall.

“Pyramids were cool though. Sandy. Had an awesome tour guide. Wolf tried to seduce her into bringing an ancient artifact home. Almost worked too.”

She snort laughs, looking all kinds of cute while she does so.

“So what’s on top of your bucket list?” I ask her.

She stares at the empty notepad, picks the pen up and starts tapping it against her full bottom lip.

“I want to be in one of those swarms of butterflies someday, in the rainforest, you know?”

“That’s a good one,” I steal the pen from her fingers and write that down on the blank page. “What else?”

“I wanna try snowboarding.”

“You’ve never been?”

She shakes her head. “Haven’t been outside of Nevada and California until now. Not a lot of snow.”

“Okay, we’re so doing that.” I write it down on the line below, in neat little bullet points.

“What do you want to do?” she asks me.

Now it’s my turn to fall quiet and think things through. Most of the things that come to mind have nothing to do with traveling the world or things I want to see. It’s things I want to experience. Fall in love, really fall in love. See my brothers get married, have kids. Maybe make things up with my mom. Play at Glastonbury, because for some reason we’ve never played there. Produce an album without management telling us what to put on there and what not. And if we’re really aiming big, I want to be on the cover of Rolling Stone, but that one is a little vain I guess. Buy a house and really settle down there. Have a dog, or a cat. Or a quokka.

I flip the page and then decide to write them all down before I show her. Fuck insecurity, I’m telling her. Once she’s read my list she’s smiling, adding another thing to my bullet list.

“Quit smoking?”

She nods. “One year sober, we’re kicking that habit too.”

I scowl.

She gives me her best angry look, but that only manages to make me laugh.

“Fine, but then I’m adding something to your list as well.”

She shrugs.

“Something you’d normally won’t even consider.”

She shrugs again. “Just don’t make me sing.”

“Hey, it’s gotta be something you don’t really want to do, it shouldn’t be harming the rest of the world.”

She starts laughing while she punches my arm, and I use her distraction to steal the list and the pen back. I add another little bullet point to her list and write down ‘have a threesome’ before I show her. Her cheeks turn immensely pink, and I know I’ve found something she’s not all that comfortable in talking about.

“One year,” I remind her.

“It’s more like six months by now.”

I grin. “Someone’s eager.”

“Oh shut the hell up,” she says while deliberately looking away from me.

My afternoon might have started off shitty, but it turned out pretty fucking awesome.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



“You’ve been a very bad girl,” a deep burly voice growls into my ear when I’m standing bent over the sink, skinning an apple to put in my oatmeal breakfast.

“I’m sorry?” I stutter, while the hard panes of a body get pressed into mine. My shoulders tense, because I don’t know what the hell I did wrong, and I don’t think that Madden, the owner of the voice, means it in the sexual way my body makes it out to be.

Have they caught on that I’m on the run from Victorious after faking my not dying? Or, whatever the hell it is I’m doing?

“You didn’t tell us today is your birthday,” he says, his mouth close to my ear, the timber of his voice making me weak in the knees. His hands lock me in against the counter,

and I feel every piece of his body when I turn around. His face is just an inch from mine when I face him.

“I don’t like celebrating my birthday,” I say.

His eyes go to my mouth, and for a brief moment in time, I want him to lean in and kiss me. Would he do it if I said I’d like a kiss for my birthday? My heart rate picks up, my temperature rising. Why am I even thinking about him kissing me? I’m the one who’s sticking with the program to keep him sober. I’m the one going around kissing his band mates. And still I’d like him to lean his head forward, and bring that sinful mouth of his on mine.

“Why don’t you like celebrating?”

I look away, because I don’t want to tell him that Nathan hated me getting older, because he wanted me to stay young. Damn, looking back and seeing all the red flags I missed while I was being blinded by the relationship I was in is so bad. How did I not notice what was going on while I was smack in the middle of it?

So I take the cheap way out. “I just don’t think being born is a reason to celebrate. It’s just another day.”

“You’re so, so wrong,” Wolf says, stepping into the kitchen, having a tie knotted on his forehead. The sight of it makes me laugh.

“What the hell is that?” I ask, obviously meaning the thing on his head. Other than that he’s wearing ripped black skinny jeans with a belt that has a huge silver belt buckle, his torso naked as ever, showing off his chest.

“You didn’t give us proper notice to get you a gift, so I’m gifting you myself,” he says, walking over and pushing Madden aside, taking me in his arms. If I wasn’t already hot, this totally would do it. “So here I am.”

I snort. “Now that you’re mine, and I would like you to be a human sacrifice, you’d do it?”

“Tell me on which ritualistic slab I have to lie down and so you can have your wicked ways with me.”

“You’re far too eager.”

“I’m hoping there’s some kind of sex involved in this ritual.” He wags his eyebrows at me, and I can’t help but laugh.

“You think you’re so smooth, but you’re not,” Bryson says, who comes into the kitchen, shaking his head towards Wolf.

“Am very much so.”

Bryson has this knowing smirk, telling Wolf without any such words that he’s just wrong, and I can’t exactly disagree with Bryson. I’m not in need of a human sacrifice and I think gifting yourself to someone else is just a little weird.

Much like Wolf is.

So it’s fitting in a way. He starts going through the fridge and then moves to the cupboards, grabbing butter and flour and eggs and things I don’t immediately recognize.

“What are you doing?” I ask him.

But before he can answer, a very angry Xem comes storming inside from out of the bus after having had a smoke. He scowls at me, harder than normally, before he shakes his head, turning his cap from the back to the front, hiding his eyes for some reason.

“What’s his problem?”

“That’s his story to tell,” Wolf answers, looking more serious than I’ve seen him ever since I’ve met him. Apparently they always have each other’s backs, and that’s a good thing.

“I’m not here for him anyway,” I say softly, getting back to my breakfast.

Madden stares at me intently. “Maybe that’s exactly what he needs,” he whispers. “Somebody who picks him and is here for him.”

I scrunch my brows, because I don’t understand what he’s saying. I’m never going to get Xem’s story without getting in his corner, but I’m never getting in his corner without getting his story. Which is quite the conundrum.

Bottom line is I'm here to keep Madden on the straight and narrow. Flirting a little with his bandmates is fun and all, but not the main reason I'm here. If it would've been, I wouldn't have been here right now. I would have been sent home without taking a shower, reeking of the sins of the previous night.

"Xem hates birthdays. He can explain to you why that is himself. We're baking you a birthday cake. Keshia has promised Pip she can come decorate it."

"That's going to be sprinkles-galore," I say, making myself focus on the here and now, and the guys who are making me a cake instead of mister grumpy pants who's in his room all by himself.

"Do we even know how to bake cakes?" Madden asks without a hint of confidence in sight.

"Yeah," Bryson says, picking up the various ingredients.

"We do?"

"Mom had a sweet tooth. It's cheaper to bake stuff yourself than to buy store bought. So we baked a lot," Bryson explains.

"I usually just get baked," Wolf says, picking up the baking soda and reading the back of the thing.

"No more getting baked," Bryson says.

"You guys could still get baked, you know?" Madden says. "Just because I'm embracing sobriety doesn't mean you should too."

The bald man with the permanent hoodie on his head scruffs while he scours the kitchen cabinet for a weighing scale. "We probably should all start living healthier. We're getting old, we can't party like ten years ago. Now is just as good a time as any."

"Just as long as we don't get boring altogether," Wolf says.

"Can you really be boring and be a world famous rockstar at the same time?" I question.

“Improbable,” Miles says, stepping into the bus, Pip in his arms and Keshia right on his heels. The little toddler has her hair in two tiny pigtails that are sticking out to the sides.

“Happy birthday, Evan!” Keshia yells as soon as she sees me. There are black circles beneath her eyes, and if you put a gun to my head and ask me who the biggest rockstar on this tour is, I’d say it’s Keshia. Moms are superheroes, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

“Pip, pip, oo-ray!” Pip squeals, holding her chubby hands out towards me, demanding to be held. There’s laughter all around, because that kid seriously has more charm than this whole rock back formation together.

As a birthday present, she starts intertwining her little fingers with my hair and pulling. I kiss her little cheek, and her face lights up. She lays her cheek against my shoulder, and starts babbling in a language I don’t understand about God knows what.

Bryson starts barking orders about what everyone should be doing.

So that’s how we spend the morning of my twenty-seventh birthday. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

A few hours later, while everybody is busy doing their own thing, I take a slice of cake. It’s very green, because Pip got her hands on some green food coloring and the rest is history.

I knock on Xem’s door, not waiting for his answer before I walk in. I find him half naked, beneath his covers, laptop on the bed, and earbuds in his ears.

His face goes from curious and slightly pink, to red and angry when he sees me.

“What?” he yells, taking his earbuds out of his ears. “Have you never heard of knocking?”

“I knocked! I can’t help that you’ve got earbuds in.”

He grunts. “What do you want?”

“I came to bring you some cake. Not because it’s my birthday, but because there’s so much food coloring in it that it’s bound to make your shit turn green tomorrow, so I wanted to share that with you.”

In the back of my mind Madden’s remark about Xem just needing someone to pick him has stuck with me, and whatever reason he has not to like birthdays is a valid reason if you ask me.

I hold out the plate, and he takes it.

“What are you doing in bed during the day?” I ask him, naively thinking he might be feeling a little under the weather or something. But instead of some sad story about how he needs his sleep, his face turns into a wolfish grin. He turns his laptop around, disconnects his earbuds, and shows me the porn he’s watching, where a very round breasted woman is moaning at top capacity.

“Why would you show me that?” I scream exasperated, holding my hand in front of my eyes. I’ve seen shit during my time at Victorious. I’ve seen members going to town on club pussy like it was the most normal thing in the world. But two people having sex and walking in on someone playing with themselves are two different things in my opinion.

“You walked in,” he deadpans, folding an arm behind his head, elbow pointing to the ceiling. “I never invited you in.”

“I’d say something to try to make you be a better person if I would’ve thought it would make a difference, but I’m saving myself the trouble,” I say, turning around and leaving the room.

“Guess my next search term will be cream pie,” he yells after me when I’m in the hallway, and as much as I don’t want to laugh, I can’t help myself and burst out laughing.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



“Time,” Vic is telling me. I can see the way his mouth moves when he’s talking and I can make out the word time more than I can hear or understand him. Sweat glides over my torso while I’m killing it while playing some songs. We’ve already done sound check, but I felt the need to play some more. Today’s a good day for playing – it’s not like I got any other fucking way to commemorate my brother’s birthday. And the day he died as well. I choose to ignore that last part. I’d much rather celebrate his life, but I don’t get the chance to do so.

So I play.

Alone.

It’s the same each year.

It's my only hard limit, my equivalent of having a bowl of blue M&M's in the dressing room. I don't perform on this day. In all those years management has asked me to reconsider just once, and the havoc I wrecked after that made sure that was the last time as well.

I nod towards Vic, letting him know I've heard him, but I finish my song before I put my drumsticks in my back pocket and take out my ear buds. The soft fabric of a towel gets thrown in my face, and I thankfully use it to wipe my face and body down. The inside of my cap is wet, which is a feeling that used to gross me out but is now so familiar I've come to like the sensation.

"They gotta fix a light on the stage, so we can't be there right now," Vic explains without me having to question what's going on. He knows I don't like being interrupted, especially not today. He's smart enough to shut his trap after his explanation as well.

I storm through the hallways of the stadium, seeking out the nearest exit. I've already grabbed a smoke from my packet, putting it between my lips and leaving it dangling until I can get outside and light up.

When I reach the bus, the cherry has burned away half of my smoke and Vic leaves me and my mood be. He's usually okay with feeling my mood and making sure everything is alright. The upside of having people around for fucking ever is that they know of me and my ways.

Getting signed right out of high school has had some major plus points, mainly that I didn't have to start doing a job I didn't want to do to make tuition for a college I didn't want to attend. It also meant I could leave a home of neglect – because looking back upon it, that was what it was.

I swallow thickly, sucking in the last bit of my smoke before I put it out with the toe of my shoe, crunching the budding feeling inside of my chest. Hitting the shit out of my drums would be the perfect cure on this day for everything I'm feeling, but that's not an option.

The air breezes over my naked chest, and I have to admit it's chilly. Probs best to go back inside.

I turn around, placing my foot on the first step into the bus, crashing into something, someone.

"The fuck," I yell, looking up and finding a set of purple eyes staring down at me. She looks mad, which is rich, because she's the one who's running into me.

"Can't you watch where you're going?" she snaps.

Wrong time, wrong place, wrong person.

"Don't you have eyes yourself?"

"What the hell is your problem?" she screams while she steps outside.

"You're my problem!"

"Jesus, what the hell crawled up your ass today?"

Thomas. Thomas crawled up my ass today, but she's not getting anything from him. He's mine, and I won't share him. But feeling the grief that's still fucking there after all these years, feeling the emptiness of being left behind in a world where he isn't there and I'm not filling the void he's left.

"I have absolutely no reason at all to tell you what's on my mind!" I spit in her face. I'm pretty sure I look kind of frightening right now, but she isn't blinking. She's so fucking calm it infuriates me.

"Maybe if you tell me what's going on, I can help you." All the fight has left her body, and she even goes so far as to lay a hand on my forearm. And I lose it, getting right in her face.

"That's the thing, isn't it? You expect us to tell you everything. You think you deserve all the details of my life, but you have the right to nothing! You get Bryson wrapped around your little finger, he talks to you. Wolf would bare his fucking soul for you. And Madden is letting you know his deepest, darkest thoughts, as if you have a right to know. But what do we know about you? Not a single fucking thing. Every time you're asked a question, you give a vague answer. Well, screw that! You don't deserve my story, it's mine!" I'm

slamming my chest with those words. “And you,” I continue, pointing at her, my finger so close to her face I’m almost poking her eye out. “You are a fake ass bitch, who’s trying to fool a whole fucking band. But I see you Evan, you’re nothing but an empty promise, leading nowhere but to ruin and destruction.”

She’s staring at me, dumbfounded. Her face is red, her little fists trembling. The way her mouth forms a thin line and her eyebrows crease give away that she’s angry. Calm, but angry.

“I feel sorry for the woman who is going to end up with you. Because the way you’re acting right now, you’re poisoning everything and everyone you touch. Your anger is like a contagious virus, and it’s going to leave everyone in wrecks and ruins.”

Bile rises in my throat, because my head is screaming ‘she is right’ so loudly and that makes me want to act out and break shit. I don’t care who gets hurt in the process, least of all me.

And then she goes in for the kill.

“You’re fucking lucky you’re with a band who makes amazing music, because if you’d be with people who are just slightly less talented, you’d suck at making music as well. You just ride along on their success.”

She spins on her heels, and leaves in the direction of the second bus, but I no longer care. I never even cared to begin with. She can go to hell for all I care. I’d prefer that actually.

I storm up the short stairs into the bus, finding an empty kitchen, which is just fucking great, because if I have to believe Evan, *this* is my future. This is how I’m going to end up.

And while I want to be alone, I can’t *stand* being alone right now. I hate it, with every fiber of my miserable being. I scour the fridge and find a lonely beer bottle, uncap it, and start drinking it. Fuck being a cliché, sometimes you just have to have a beer. Nothing wrong with that.

Yet the past few months have left a bitter taste in my mouth, and it’s completely different from the usual hop taste.

Before I know it, I throw the bottle against one of the far walls, the glass shattering all over the place, beer dripping into a puddle off the wall onto the ground. A frustrated, pained cry leaves my mouth, and by the time I'm done screaming, I stand leaning forward with two hands on the kitchen counter, my head slumped between my shoulders, water threatening to leave my eyes.

I hear sound behind me, but I don't want to face anyone.

I don't need their pity.

The rustling of sound comes from behind me, and before I can find the courage to look back and see what's happening, a strong arm wraps around me, hoisting me up. Without any say in the matter I'm stuck in a hug from Wolf, who admittedly is a really good hugger, and he keeps me in place in a grip that is stronger than I expected from him. He doesn't speak, doesn't try to fix anything, he just holds me.

Because he knows.

Today sucks. Fucking sucks. And it's going to suck each and every year that's about to come.

Because he should have celebrated his birthday, but he'll never, *ever*, do that again.

When I finally look up I see that Madden is already drying up all the beer, while Bryson is sweeping all the wet shards together. Both of them don't even look in my direction. It's how it is in a band: everyone has got their place. Today, Wolf is holding me up, Bryson is on glass duty, and Madden is cleaning the beer up. Me? I'm in my rightful place.

A wreck with horrible social skills and anger issues.

And just like when I'm playing my drums, I kept hitting shit until everything started to feel better in the end.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



The front of my head is resting on my knees while I sit on my bed in the bus. My heart is hammering like crazy after that altercation with Xem. I'm pretty sure that me being here is the best thing for Madden, but I'm not so sure if it's working out the same way for the band. I have no problem with exerting authority when I need to, but Xem is nothing to me. He can do any girl he wants to and I won't hold him back, but I'm sure as shit not allowing those girls to bring drugs on the bus. And I just don't understand why he doesn't see the difference. He clearly cares about Madden.

The door opens, and I lift my head to see who's there. I see the back of Bryson's sleeveless hoodie when he turns his back to me to close the door again. The moment it's shut he turns around and his eyes find me. I don't want to think about how I look right then, like some fucking damsel in distress who got

her feelings hurt by some boy. But the fact is that Xem's words got to me.

I lift my chin, wordlessly asking him why he's here. I kind of understand it's to see how I'm doing, but I'm not sure what it is he exactly wants to do. It's not him who's making me feel like this, it's his bandmate, his brother.

He cocks his head, not saying a word, the silence that's so distinguishably him surrounding him.

All I can see is his eyes, surrounded by the dark gray of his hood. The static in the air changes when he slowly but deliberately walks towards me. It's only two steps before he reaches my bed. My heart starts thumping like crazy when he sits on the edge of the bed on his knees, never breaking our look.

I fully lift my head from my knees, my mouth suddenly dry when I see the intense stare he gives me. Goosebumps cover my skin, and I inhale deeply when a tension I didn't know was there seems to snap.

He walks forwards on his legs, his warm, calloused hands on my knees, ever so slowly pushing them apart. Somehow I've stopped breathing, but I can hear my blood go through my veins in my ears.

He ever so slowly leans forward, and before I can think through what I'm doing, I lean in. Our heads are about three inches away from each other, every time he exhales his breath touching my face.

Looking back, I'll never be able to figure out who instigated that first kiss, but suddenly our lips were touching, and all stress seemed to leave my body. I let go of my anger, I didn't think about the future anymore.

His lips are soft, which surprises me, and his kiss is gentle. I release a breath I don't know I'm holding. The way I'm sitting up and he's leaning forward makes it so that only our faces are touching, but suddenly it isn't enough anymore. I reach up, grab both sides of the cap of his hoodie, break the kiss, and look him in the eye, asking for permission.

He doesn't give it to me. Instead, he takes his hands off my knees and takes it off himself, finally showing me his head without the hood. He's bald, with a Maori tattoo going around his ear, and he's breathtaking. I stroke a finger over the tattoo, tracing the outlines from the top of his ear, around the back to the side of his neck. He visibly shivers, and I suck in my bottom lip. Then he leans forward to kiss me again.

I move my head back ever so slowly, his head following me, my lips stuck to his, until my back hits the pillow, and he brings his upper body against mine. My nipples peak and push against my bra, and my skin crawls with desire. I did not come here for anything resembling romance or lust, but now that I've got Bryson on top of me I can't see how this ever would've ended any differently.

He breaks the kiss again, looking me in the eye, asking for consent.

Not wanting to break the silence, I grab the hem of his hoodie and start pulling it over his head. He helps me take it off, before he attacks my mouth again. There's nothing soft about it this time. He explores my mouth, our tongues tangling. I can feel the movement throughout my whole body, shivering in need and heated by arousal.

He pushes forward, connecting us at the hips, where I can feel his hard length against my core. I shamelessly push up, lost in the moment.

My hands roam over his now naked torso, and he's cut. I can trace the sharp ridges of his muscles, his skin warm to the touch. He grabs my hips, sliding me down on the bed, hovering his large body over mine. Between him and the bed I get swallowed whole.

Breaking the kiss again, he brings his head back to look at me. His eyes are a mix between kindness and arousal. My lips and the skin around it feels chafed by the scrub of his beard already, and he tenderly strokes over my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb.

One corner of his mouth goes up, and it suits him. The only other time when I've seen him smile is when he's performing.

Does he smile at the other girls like this?

I can't finish the thought, because he brings his head down to my neck, kissing me in the hollow of my throat and making me gasp. His kisses trail down, going from my collarbone to my cleavage, and I keep his head in place by pushing down on it.

One of my legs is hitched over his hip, grinding against him. My hand glides over his equally muscled back to his ass – that beautifully filled out ass that is moving against me as if it was made to do it.

He slips a finger under the hem of my shirt, stroking over the skin of my belly, and I need more. Somehow we take my shirt off together, leaving me in my bra. His eyes roam over my body, lingering on the swell of my breasts before he resumes his exploration of kisses.

Warm hands disappear behind my back, and fumble with the opening of my bra, snapping it open as if he does so on a daily basis. It's a thought I don't linger on.

My own hands disappear down inside his pants, feeling the smooth skin of his naked ass. And it's like him exposing my breasts and me touching his ass puts everything in overdrive. We start undressing each other with an urgency that has nothing to do with sensuality or love, it's pure, unadulterated lust and the primal need to be with the other. Both of us end up naked except for my thong and his briefs.

When his warm mouth covers my breast and finds my nipple, a long sensuous moan leaves my mouth. He latches on to the bud, nipping at it and making it impossibly harder. His tongue twirls around, and I press his head down to keep him exactly there. He scrapes his teeth over the sensitive skin, coaxing another stifled moan from my mouth.

“Fuck,” I whisper.

“Patience,” he says, looking up with a mischievous grin. I didn't mean the sentiment literally, but apparently he did, and *I'm okay with that*. Having personal relations with the band might not be the wisest choice, but goddammit, I'm living my

only life as well and the alternative, namely fighting with the band members isn't sparking any joy.

Getting all over Bryson?

Fourth of July fireworks.

I arch my back, trying to get as much contact with the man on top of me as possible. He resumes his exploration of my body with his mouth, kissing a steady way down, mapping my body and trying out every piece of skin he can find. He spends extra time exploring the skin around my navel and the dips by my hips.

His fingers hook beneath the fabric of my thong, and he lifts his head to make sure what he's doing is okay. I lift my hips in answer, and he slides it down my legs, until the thong ends up somewhere on the floor between the pile of clothes.

He kisses the inside of my bended knee, the soft hair of his beard ticklish anyway. His teeth scrape over my thigh, making its way up until he starts exploring the skin all around my pussy.

We moan in perfect harmony.

Guess he's a fan as well.

I can feel my own arousal even without him adding any moisture from his mouth. He starts by kissing my outer lips, softly taking it in his mouth, biting down every now and then but never hurting me. I'm already halfway to grinding myself against his face, and he isn't even doing anything.

Until he points his tongue and flicks it against my clit that is.

I buck off of the bed, making him chuckle darkly. He wraps his arms around my legs, his hands on my belly, holding me down against the mattress. Just like with my body, he takes his time to explore me everywhere, opening my lips with his tongue, sucking and kissing the surrounding skin, sticking the tip of it inside of me, before gently circling the opening – and if this is what he can make me feel just by warming me up, I'm not sure whether I'll be able to survive then he really gets going.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not some blushing virgin. I've had sex, I've fucked, I've been downright dirty. But I've never been worshiped like this before. Foreplay has always been a means to get to sex as quickly as possible if you'd have asked my previous partners. But Bryson doesn't seem to mind taking his time.

I curse again when he finally settles on lapping on the bundle of nerves between my thighs, finding it without any directions, like he was born to be exactly where he is right now.

A small part of my brain says it's because he practices, a lot, but I shut that part up pretty quickly. It's neither the time nor the place for it, because what I should be focusing on is the different layers of heaven he's taking me to.

He changes his pace every now and then, never keeping a steady enough rhythm to get me to orgasm. I'm pretty sure he'd be able to if he gave me more than ten seconds to go for it though.

My whole body is tingling in ecstasy anyway.

And then, just like that, he moves back, sitting on his haunches between my spread legs, looking at me intently, lips still glistening with my arousal.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



God-fucking-dammit, she's exquisite. I'd happily spend all night between her legs, but something about her makes me lose my mind in a way that I just have to be inside her. Now.

I have a rule where I make sure the woman I'm with always gets to come first. I pride myself in it. I like to know I at least contributed to some form of pleasure when she's willingly giving her body to me.

But with Evangaline? My Lilly? I don't want to fucking wait.

I want to feel her wrapped around my dick when I'm buried deep inside her and bring her to climax so I can feel her pulsing down on me. I get that most women don't orgasm from intercourse in and of itself, but I know how to bring them to climax *while* having sex.

The hard part about all this is that I'm getting off on the quiet between us. Yeah, we spoke a few words, there's definite moaning and sounds of pleasure, but we're together in silence, and I like it to stay that way. So how am I going to get what I want without messing up the silence? Something's gotta give.

She looks at me with expectant eyes, and once again I'm taken aback by the unusual purple hue in them. She looks both annoyed and aroused, and I guess I'd be feeling the same way if I was about to come and my partner stopped. That's a pure form of torture for a reason.

"Trust me?" I say when I've decided that the silence will have to make way for getting inside of her and still making her come first.

She takes a second to think before she answers, and for some reason that really pleases me. We might be in the heat of the moment, but she's still making conscious decisions, thinking things through.

"Yeah."

Not wasting another second, I get off of the bed, take off my briefs, and bend down to grab my hoodie. I chuckle when I see the confused look on her face, that disappears the moment I grab a condom out of the pouch of my hoodie. She bites her plump bottom lip, making her look a whole new level of enticing.

Everything's fucking perfect about her if you ask me – from the color of her eyes, to her small yet full and perky breasts. They fit, *she fits*. She even tastes great. Normally I'm a simple guy; I notice if someone tastes clean or they don't, and that's where it ends, but the way her mouth, her skin, her arousal tastes is just on a whole fucking other level and making me go insane.

I came to her room to comfort her, see if I could do anything for her after her fight with Xem. Because it was an ugly fight, and he was way out of line, and she didn't deserve that. But instead of the talk we were supposed to have, now we were about to fuck.

What the hell kind of spell does this woman hold over me to make me feel this way?

I think this moment has been a long time coming, but for some reason I feel nerves inside my stomach when it comes to actually going through with it. I keep her stare while I rip the foil package and roll the condom along my shaft. I want to feel her so much I'm practically salivating.

I lift my chin in question, the silence that hangs between us only increasing the sexual tension.

She nods, and that's all the consent I need to go along with what I want to do.

I lift my body over hers and I can feel the way the little hairs on her body rise. My lips press kisses all over her jaw, while I line myself up with her opening. She shivers, and it's almost satisfying enough to make me be perfectly content in the moment. There's just a tiny fraction of me that will always want more from her, to give her more. I press the tip of my cock to her opening, and she shifts her hips just slightly, almost taking me in by the tiny movement.

The moan that leaves her lips is so sensual I want to record it and make it into a soundbite for one of our next songs.

My fingers seek out the sensitive spot at the top of her pussy, the exact same spot my tongue just got very familiar with. Adding slight pressure makes her whimper, and I don't know whether *that's* my favorite sound in the wide wide world, or the moan she just produced.

Her body is trembling, and for just a tiny moment I'm worried I'm doing something she doesn't want. I nudge her with my nose, making her open her eyes and really look at me. It's all the reassurance I need.

It isn't fear, or worry, it's tension, and anticipation, and wanting.

And just like that I thrust into her.

Her purple eyes widen before she closes them in clear pleasure. I hear her whisper a soft 'fuck' while I settle inside her. I give her some time to adjust to me – being gifted in the

physical department doesn't mean I want to hurt the women I'm with. Certainly not Evan.

After what feels like a lifetime but in reality is only a few heartbeats, she lifts her hips, giving me permission to go ahead. Shifting back, I almost leave her body all together, only to pound into her.

Her body lifts off of the bed, and the way she tightens around me transports me to paradise. I've been out of my fucking mind on all kinds of drugs, but *nothing* has ever felt quite as good as this has felt. Molly or a line of coke has nothing on this hormone induced slice of heaven.

My hips start moving, moving up in an angle that I personally like, but have learned that women appreciate as well. And if there's anything I want at the moment, it's to please her. My thrusts are long and slow, because I want to savor this moment, not rush through it towards the finish line. This whole encounter might be sudden, that doesn't mean the experience has to be as well.

Her hands keep gliding all over my skin, from the bald top of my head, to the planes of my ass. She switches between touching my front and my back, and the moment her thumb grazes my nipple and I shudder, she seems to take a preference to touching my chest and driving me crazy. I love how in tune she is with how I respond to her touch.

Fuck, this is going to be over too soon if I don't hold myself back some more.

Pulling out, reluctantly, I sit back on my haunches on her bed, taking her small hands in my big, rough ones and pulling her up. Our eyes lock again, and I don't need to use words to convey my meaning. She gets up, climbs over my legs and straddles me. Laying her hands on my shoulders, she balances herself above me, while I guide myself inside her. And then gravity does its thing as she sits down.

The new position changes the angle, making me take her impossibly deeper, and she releases a shuddered breath. Before I start moving I bend forward, capturing her lips between mine, kissing her until both of us are out of breath. And even

then I force myself to hold back in moving. I'm about to blow my load in a minute if I don't watch it, and I still want to see and feel her cream on my cock.

Taking her perky pink nipple in my mouth I give her a taste of her own medicine by teasing the bud full of nerve endings and playing with it.

Her moans becomes whimpers, and I have to agree with her that holding back any longer is simply torture. With a hand under her ass, I start guiding the way she glides up and down on my dick, and fucking hell, nobody has ever felt better.

My hand snakes between our bodies and with my thumb I start rubbing circles on her clit, putting pressure on her lower belly with my hand.

I stare at her in awe when she throws her head back on her neck, her long braided hair so far down it almost falls all the way to the bed, and it's like someone took her from my most perfect fantasies and put her right here in my lap.

Her breathing picks up, while her walls start clenching down on me. With the hand I have on her belly I can feel her muscles contracting and trembling, and with a desperate need I watch the way her eyelashes flutter as she comes undone in the most exquisite way.

I'm not even aware that I'm holding my breath all while she's coming on top of me, milking me without doing anything.

The moment she comes back to me and opens her eyes, there's a gleam of mischief in her eyes, that seem a darker shade of purple now. Before I can anticipate anything that's going on, she pushes me back, making me fall on my back, my legs folding from beneath me. With some sort of witchery she never breaks contact between us, keeping my dick buried deep inside her.

She bends forwards, her hands finding my nipples again and her mouth stuck solidly against my lips.

If I wasn't lost to passion I'd say we're making love to each other's bodies.

With one hand I hold her chin, keeping her exactly where I want her, right there to kiss, bite, suck. The fingers of my other hand dig into her ass, giving me some semblance of control over how she rides me, but if we're being honest I'm just lost. To her, to bliss, to sensation.

And I start to lose my fucking mind. My balls draw up, the first signs of my climax that has been lingering since the moment I entered her coming nearer.

She kisses a path up to my ear, taking the lobe between her teeth, and pushes me over the edge with the most perfect, sultry moan.

There's no holding back now, it's impossible.

I can feel the way she smiles against my cheek as she rides out all my waves of pleasure. We lay just like that, for God knows how long, while the only sounds that fill the room are both of our panting breaths. It's fucking perfect.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



I'm holding a guitar while I'm sitting on the couch in the living area. We're leaving Nebraska and going to South Dakota today, where they will have a concert tomorrow evening. The schedule they're on really is grueling, and these hours spent on the road are quality time for them.

For me too if I'm being honest.

I like just being with them, and getting to know them as the person behind the artist. From what I've gathered that's what they like too. All of them have this huge passion for music, and while they want to be recognized for the gift they have, they want to be acknowledged as people as well.

"I just don't hear the difference," I admit. Bryson is trying to teach me to play different chords, but I can't distinguish the different notes. It's like my brain can't process the way the sound reaches it the way all these guys can.

Bryson shrugs. “Keep going if you’re having fun. Music isn’t meant to be perfect, music is meant to make you happy. So if you just want to play around with it while fucking it up, go for it.”

“What are we fucking up?” Wolf says when he enters the living area. He’s topless, as usual, wearing black sweatpants. For some reason he has drawn a smiley with his kohl eyeliner on his stomach. Most of the time I have no idea what’s going on inside his head, but I’ve come to realize that I don’t care. His stunts don’t hurt anyone, and even if I can’t predict it, they’re not unpleasant surprises.

With Nathan, the unpredictable stuff he came up with always meant trouble. Which is a shame, because before Nathan, I loved spontaneity. It’s still there, deep down, because going paragliding on a whim is me to a T. It’s just when I start to think about it, it freaks me out.

“Music. We’re having fun,” Bryson answers Wolf.

“Ah, yeah. Fucking is fun, music is fun, hence fucking up music is double fun. It’s basic logic. I actually vote that this equation will be used in Maths class in the future. This will make sense to young minds.”

I snort, my fingers strumming over the snares while I do so, making a horrendous sound, which makes me laugh even harder in return. Wolf honors his name when he hears the sound, giving me a wolfish grin. He looks so young when he gets this look. He always manages to make me laugh, and it’s a gift I cherish.

Madden joins us in the living area, his hair messily sticking out to the side. He looks tired, but not in a bad way, just as if he’s been hard at work or something.

“What’s up, bro?” Wolf asks him when he lets himself fall down on the couch next to me, his knees wide, taking up a lot of unnecessary space and getting into mine. His body exudes heat, and I want to push myself against him and crawl in his lap. He makes me feel at ease and gives me comfort, which is completely contradictory to why I’m here, because I’m supposed to be looking out for him.

For the first time I wonder if Madden is unconsciously saving me just as much as I'm saving him. Me being his rehab nurse made our relationship feel uneven, but when you look at it as if he's saving me too, it becomes a symbiotic positive relationship.

"There's music stuck in my head, and it's not coming out like I want it to."

For a second I wonder if he has tried to pluck it straight out of his hair going by the way it's sticking out.

"Let it go for now, the song will catch up with you," Bryson says. I like hearing his voice. After we got together since my fight with Xem, he talks a lot more. Right after it happened I was afraid things were going to be weird between us, but that just never happened. He only seemed to open up to me more.

"I want to do something fun," Wolf declares.

"We're literally stuck in a bus, what the hell are we going to do?" I ask.

"Usually I'd say a drinking game, but that's less fun when it's shots of Sprite." He turns towards the kitchen and starts going through the cupboards. I've got no clue what he's trying to do.

"I'm fresh out of ideas," Madden says. "The muse has left me today."

Bryson snickers. "Drama queen."

"Hey, if the shoe fits," Madden says, laying down on the couch, putting his legs over my lap and pushing the guitar off. Bryson sees what happens and takes the guitar from me. His fingers start strumming on automatism, the tune light and happy, but relaxed and mellow at the same time. Whenever Bryson plays without thinking about what he's doing, his songs reflect his mood.

"Okay, I've got it," Wolf says, holding out a little jar. "We're going to ask each other questions, and when you don't want to answer, you eat one of these." Now that I know there's something inside the jar that makes it worth it, I take a closer look at the label. It's a jar full of peppers. They're probably

hot as all hell if they're considered punishment for not answering a question.

Why the hell is there a jar of peppers on the bus? These guys are catered most of the time. Some things make sense about life on the road. Others? No fucking clue. They don't make sense. There's a basketball net full of rubber duckies near the driver's seat, and nobody is allowed to touch it and nobody wants to tell me what it's about. It just doesn't make sense.

"That's not really a fair game. You guys live together most of the year and have been together for your whole adult lives. I don't think there's much you don't know about each other."

Wolf waves my question away. "Stop causing trouble, start playing games with me."

"You're too eager," Xem suddenly says, stepping into the living room. His cap keeps his unruly dirty blond hair out of his eyes. I've not seen his eyes since our fight, but he glances in my direction before he sits down on the ground opposite to the couch. His calmness is uncanny.

This is one of those things that don't make sense. Why would Xem seek us out, while all he has been doing is try to avoid me or fight me? He can be so Jekyll and Hyde sometimes, it's giving me whiplash.

"So, Bry, would you rather have to fuck the girl you lost your virginity to for the rest of your life, or just be able to have sex once for all eternity with the love of your life?" Wolf asks him, mindlessly playing with a big ring with a skull that's almost as big as his finger and has diamond eyes.

Bryson sinks down further in his hoodie, the only thing I can see is his whiskey colored eyes and the top of his dark beard. The song he plays turns into something calming, like he's playing the melody to his thought process.

"Love of my life, just once."

"Are you saying that because it's the politically correct answer to give, or because you actually believe it?" Madden questions him.

“Little bit of both. But I lost my virginity to Bethany Frankel, and while she’s probably still pretty to look at, she used to talk a lot. And if she’s the only person I can fuck, that means I have to be around her and hear her speak. If the love of my life is the perfect person for me, she’d understand that I need the quiet, and I’d rather have that and jack off until I die, than hear Bethany talk about her pedicure for all eternity.”

They all fall quiet for a moment, the only sound Bryson’s music that has turned into a medieval like tavern song.

“That’s deep man,” Wolf finally says. “Your turn now.”

The tune of the music changes again, but it’s so seamless that you have to pay attention to notice. I’m mesmerized by the way his fingers strum over the strings. He has these big, rugged hands, yet he can produce delicate and wonderful things with them.

“What does your future look like, Evan?”

We lock eyes for a second, my heartrate picking up when there appears to be electricity sparkling between us. The answer to his question makes me nervous, because I’m living by the day right now, and it’s a really personal one. I’m fine with Madden, Wolf and Bryson hearing it, but I’m not sure if I want to share with Xem. I’m sure he’ll find a way to use it against me in the future.

“Like, realistically, or what I’d like my perfect future to be like?” I ask, buying myself some more time.

“Both,” he says, retorting to his one word sentences.

I inhale deeply, trying to calm myself down. My hands go for Madden’s legs, mindlessly stroking them while I figure out the answer.

“I’m not sure. I like helping people, I’m a caregiver, it’s who I am and what I do. So I’d love to keep doing that. I like being on tour with all of you,” I say, deliberately not looking in Xem’s direction, because it applies less to him. “But realistically Madden is going to get better, and he isn’t going to need me anymore, and I’ll have to find a new job.”

Madden stares at me, and his eyes seem to be burning. His look is so intense I can literally feel it on me. Bryson has stopped playing his music, and Wolf looks downright angry, muttering something to himself that I can't hear, but makes Xem shake his head with an amused smile on his lips.

“So my turn. Why are you always mad, Xem?” I ask him, the smile immediately disappearing from his lips.

He stares me in the eye, his mouth opening a few times, then he reaches for the jar, takes a pepper out, sticks it in his mouth and starts chewing while never breaking eye contact. We all stare in silence while he swallows, his cheeks turning red and his eyes watering.

“Jesus, fuck, what kind of hell peppers are those?” he stutters, choking on his own words, his voice hoarse.

“Jay bought them for me when I said I needed a little more spice in my life,” Wolf explains.

“Holy fucking hell,” Xem answers, clutching his stomach and picking up the nearest glass of water. Then he grabs Bryson's drink, downing that as well, all the while coughing and rubbing his stomach.

“I do hope that hurts as much going in as it does going out,” Wolf deadpans.

“Just hope you don't get a question you don't want to answer,” Madden says.

“I'm not worried, I'm an open book and will answer anything.”

And it's like a pop up in my brain comes forward, saying it has a challenge for me, and I click accept without hesitation.

“Your turn,” Wolf reminds him.

Xem is still red in the face, looking as if he needs another glass of water. Must suck to be him. Should have just answered my question.

“Okay,” he says, his voice not back to what it used to be. “Weirdest place you had sex, Evan?” There is a little spark back in his eyes, telling me he doesn't think I'll answer the

question, but I'm not some fucking prude. Just because he thinks I act like Mother Theresa for being against drugs doesn't mean I don't have an adventurous side in me. I thought he'd learned that when I took them paragliding.

"Back of a motorbike," I say, four pairs of eyes turning my way. Those of Xem's are bigger than those of the rest, and it has nothing to do with the little peppers.

"At the lake at a local park," I continue, now widening their eyes even more.

"Beneath the dark sky, with nothing but the moon and stars lighting up the place, right next to a party, where anybody could walk in." I just look around smugly, not telling them that it was a Victorious party and Nathan took me out back because he was too horny after seeing his friends getting club pussy. So he took me out back around the lake, undressed me and had his way with me on a bike. I'm pretty sure half the club could hear, but didn't think anything of it. It's so completely opposite to what Bryson and I did yesterday that it's almost comical.

"Did not see that coming," Madden says, and when my eyes shift towards him I see a bulge in his pants that makes me feel both self aware and a little smug. I shouldn't be feeling good about giving a client a hard-on, but it does boost my ego. I'm only human after all.

Bryson just observes me from within the cap of his hoodie, something twinkling in his look. Wolf just rearranges his junk like we're not in a room full of people, and he laughs a warm laugh when I roll my eyes.

"So, Wolfie," I say, snapping his attention back to me. "Why are there rubber duckies in a basketball net in the bus?"

His face falls. "Crap."

See, I know that he's an open book, and he'll talk about anything and everything, but there are certain things he isn't allowed to say. This way, either I'm getting the ducky story, or he has to eat a pepper, and I'm fine with both outcomes.

“Please ask me a different question,” he begs, literally getting on his knees. There is a small part of my brain that kind of likes seeing him sitting in front of me this way. “I do not want to have to eat one of those peppers.”

“You could just answer the question,” I say.

“Unfortunately I can not.” He walks to the kitchen, grabs a carton of milk out of the fridge and fills three glasses. With the most reluctance I’ve ever seen in the world, he then opens the jar of peppers, picks one up, holds it up, and looks at it in disgust.

“Do I have to chew?”

Madden scoffs. “You gonna swallow that whole?”

“You think I can’t?”

Madden just raises his eyebrows.

“I,” Wolf says, walking around the kitchen counter, holding out the little pepper between thumb and index finger while pointing to Madden with his middle finger, “am a master swallower.”

We all start laughing, and by the time I’m finished, my sides hurt.

“Eat it,” Bryson finally says when Wolf looks a little relieved. I guess he hoped we’d forget about it.

He scowls at his bearded friend before he finally puts the pepper in his mouth. He tries to swallow it whole, but gags and starts swearing. Finally he chews a few times, little drops of sweat quickly coating his skin. He becomes just as red as Xem was just minutes ago. He works on the pepper for a few seconds, before he finally manages to get it down, quickly drinking his milk.

“What’s with the milk?” Bryson asks.

Wolf is in no state to answer, so I help him out, because I actually know this one. “Milk has a certain thing in it that counteracts the particles in the pepper that makes it hot.”

“What she said,” Wolf wheezes.

“Why’d you know that?” Madden says.

Shrugging, I say: “I like quirky facts. Although this one is not really quirky. It’s more science.”

Wolf seems to find himself again, but lets himself fall on the floor next to Xem, his head resting on the drummer’s shoulder. Xem smirks and puts an arm around him, patting him on the arm telling him everything will be alright.

“Evan,” he says, and before he asks his question I stop him.

“What is this? Interrogate Evan? You’re all asking me questions. Go ask someone else.”

I really do *not* want to eat one of those peppers, and if anyone can come up with a ridiculous enough question it’s probably Wolf.

“Won’t be bad, promise,” he says, giving me a half assed wink.

I sigh. “Okay, go ahead, shoot.”

“Perfect date?”

I take a moment to think about it. “Something new, something adventurous, something fun. Something I’ll remember.”

He just nods, seeming to be deep in thought, as if he’s filing away the knowledge for later.

“Madden,” I say, continuing the game, “Would you rather wake up each morning with Xem’s feet in your mouth, or Wolf’s naked junk right in front of your face but just not touching it?”

The guys laugh, and Madden thinks of an answer. We spend the rest of the afternoon like that, the long drive more bearable this way. No more peppers are eaten, and we start coming up with weirder and weirder questions, ending with Wolf asking Madden whether he’d want to be probed by aliens, or fondled by an octopus. After that, we called it an evening, but it was one of the best evenings I’ve ever had.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



For some reason my hands are clammy, and I keep rubbing them over my legs in order to get them dry again. One of Kyle's guys is driving us to the surprise date I planned for Evan. After she said what her perfect date was, it was quite easy coming up with a plan.

And with what I have in mind it was easy to arrange security wise. I've paid the place we're going to enough to close for regular people for the day. Then Kyle helped me set up some extra security seeing as he couldn't come himself and he knew someone that knew someone that was willing to help out.

So here we are, in the back of a car after soundcheck. The concert isn't until tomorrow, so tonight, we're sleeping in a hotel and have the evening off. It all works out perfectly if you ask me.

I felt like a teenager when I asked Evangaline if she wanted to go on a date with me.

Her eyes had lit up when she asked me where we were going, and I said it was a surprise.

Outside of work Evan doesn't take herself too seriously. She hasn't lost the kid inside of her, she likes to have fun. And that's exactly what we're going to be doing right now. Just her and me.

My heart is going a hundred miles a minute, and on top of the clammy hands my mouth is dry. And I'm wondering who this person is? Because I don't get nervous, especially not when it comes to girls.

The big difference is that usually I don't see them after a night of filthy and steamy fun, but that's not the case with Evan. Even if she wasn't on tour with us, I'd want to see her for more than an evening. She's worth all my time.

She's worth all of my evenings.

And that scares the shit out of me.

Especially since I know that she's into me, but she isn't just into me. She's into Bryson as well. And if I'm as good a people reader as I claim to be, she's into Madden too, but she isn't going there because of professionalism. My head is mixed up about this whole situation, because I'm actually okay with her not just wanting me. It's kind of part of the appeal. She's not just chasing my dick to get her fifteen minutes of fame, claiming she's my true love. She's true to herself, and I admire that.

"Tell me," she says with big puppy eyes.

"No, you'll see, we're almost there."

And just when I say it, the car pulls up to what looks like a container compound. There's big letters on front of the building giving away what it is, which I'm not okay with. Evangaline is hating the surprise aspect of this date, and I want to prolong it as long as I can.

“Turn around,” I tell her. She raises her eyebrow to me, questioning me. “Just do it, I promise it’ll be fine.”

She rolls her eyes at me, but then she turns around. Grabbing a silk scarf, I fold it so it’s smaller and tie it around her eyes. I can hear her gasp, and somehow that makes my cock spring to attention.

Damn it.

Once the scarf is tied, I take her hand and lead her out of the car, into the building. We walk through some deserted hallways, just like I need it to be. And then we enter the main hall.

“Blindfold, kinky,” a buff guy wearing security clothes with shaved sides of his head says.

Evan chuckles. “Anticipation is killing me.”

“No killing on our watch,” another security guy says. He’s tall, dark and broody, and equally stacked as his partner. They don’t seem like the regular jump hall security, but the establishment said they’d arrange proper security.

“Nobody is killing anybody today,” I say, untying the blindfold. Evan squeals when she takes in the hall, filled with trampolines and all kinds of stuff to climb on and jump off. Her eyes roam around, widening, her breath picking up in anticipation, and then she turns towards me. The excitement in her big purple eyes makes my heart rate pick up.

“This is going to be epic,” she says, her voice an octave higher than it normally is. She starts bouncing up and down like an excited puppy who’s been told it can go outside but still has to wait.

“I asked them to have the lights out and candles on and shit, but I guess that wasn’t possible,” I explain to her. I wanted this to be more special than it is right now, I wanted tonight to be everything. What if it’s not good enough? I rub the back of my neck with my hand, because goddammit, I’ve never been so damned nervous.

“Fire hazard,” the dark guard says.

“Isn’t security meant to be silent?” I ask him, scowling, because this is my moment, and he’s intruding. I’m sharing her enough as is already.

“Regular security might be, we just do whatever we fucking like to do, and Axe here likes 4A, so he wanted to take the job.”

Axe, who is the one with the shaven sides of his head, leans against the doorframe, one foot tucked in, his arms crossed. “Somehow I thought securing a member of 4A would be a little more high pressure than guarding an empty jumping hall.”

“Don’t listen to them, Wolfie, let’s go jump,” Evan says excitedly, pulling my arm. Then she leans forward, giving me a perfect view of her round ass as she starts untying her kicks. I swallow thickly, then gather my bearings and toeing off my own shoes. She grabs my hands, all the life in the world lighting up in her eyes, and grabs me before she starts running to the nearest trampolines. For a girl of her size, she bounces remarkably high.

I jump after her, going high up into the air, enjoying the feeling of being airborne and free. The sound of laughter filling the hall and echoing off the walls is making me so proud I want to puff up my chest, because I did that. I made that happen. We’re bouncing around, jumping from trampoline to trampoline, Evan making fun of herself when she tries to do a salto, but she lands on her back instead of her feet.

I’m not much better when I try to do one myself.

She’s chuckling uncontrollably, laying on the trampoline on her back, arm in front of her eyes, trying to hide herself from me. It only gets worse when I start jumping on her trampoline. She bounces up every time my feet hit the mat, and she starts laughing harder every time. It’s so contagious that I finally let myself fall down next to her, laughing just as hard, not wanting to change a single second of it.

We’re both trying to catch our breaths, the trampoline still showing the last small tremors of my last bounce.

“This is fun,” she says.

“You’re fun,” I answer.

She removes her arm from her face. “Back at you.”

Her feet are pointing in the far direction of the hall, while mine are pointing the other way, our faces just a few inches separated from each other. I unabashedly study the heart shaped cupid arrow of her upper lip, the plumpness of her bottom lip, and fight the overwhelming urge to kiss her. We’re here to have an adventure, to do something she’ll never forget. Surely making out with me isn’t going to do that, we need to have fun first, then I’ll kiss her so good she’ll never forget me.

The funny thing is that I find her blatantly staring back at me, her heated eyes taking in every part of my face. Not just my body, no, my face. You know how women say they feel objectified because they’re wanted for their bodies? Well, it’s not just women, it happens to men as well, especially if you’re famous all around the globe and are half naked most of the time. Sure, I have an amazing body that I’m proud of, and I’ve got a gift with music that people are rightfully jealous of, but sometimes I just want to be seen for me. For who I am.

And right there, laying on a trampoline, surrounded by concrete walls and silence, Evangaline sees me.

Maybe that’s the pull I feel.

It’s like she can read what goes on in my mind.

“I have no idea what I’m doing, Wolf. I’m here to keep Madden sober, but I can’t keep away from you and Bryson. Things... things happened.”

“I know,” I interrupt her before she goes on. “Bryson told us. He said that it probably shouldn’t have happened, but that he wasn’t regretting it.”

Her eyes flick from my mouth to my eyes, as if she’s unsure where to look. “You guys really talk about everything.”

“Yeah, that, and thin walls.”

She grimaces.

“Wanna hear a secret?” I whisper conspiratorially. She raises her eyebrows, urging me to tell her. “I have no idea what I’m doing either. But that’s half the fun, right?”

And before she can answer, she rolls on her side, giving me a horizontal Spiderman kiss. It starts out softly, but this woman does things to me that makes me want to deepen the kiss. The position is frustrating.

So I get up on all fours to the best of my ability, crawling over her, until her hips are between my knees and her head is between my hands. She reaches up, getting her fingers all in my hair, and pulls me towards her. Our lips meet again, and she opens up greedily when I push against the seam of her mouth with my tongue for entrance.

There’s all kinds of cliches about hearing violins play, but I hear them playing in my head most of the time.

It’s the perfect kiss, making my blood rush to all the fun places, and I wonder if this was what Evan meant by having a fun date.

She pulls her head back, breaking the kiss, her cheeks flushed and her breathing coming in quick shallow intakes.

“Let’s go jump off of something.”

I snort, sit up on my knees, and help her get up from beneath me.

We’ve jumped on everything and off of every surface we could find in the hall, only to end up at the exact same set of trampolines we started up on.

I squeal a little when someone jumps from one of the surfaces up high, right next to me. It’s one of those guards, I didn’t catch his name, the broody one. That mystery gets solved quickly when Axe yells: “West, don’t scare the clients!”

“You’re just afraid I’m going to ruin your little boyband crush.”

“Boyband?” I roar in outrage. Evan just seems to think this is hilarious, but here I am with two life sized versions of GI

Joe meets Vikings, and they think I play in a boyband. I mean, if Evan's type is raw and rough, these guys would definitely be it. She went for Bryson after all.

For a second I stop and wonder who this guy is, this insecure boy who's afraid that someone is going to steal his new and shiny toy before he even got a chance to play with it. Not that I think of Evan as someone to play with, although I wouldn't mind playing with her a little, but she's more than that... and that is the moment I hear my own train of thoughts and throw my hands up in exasperation. This is useless.

The guards, West and Axe, are bouncing around on the trampolines, chasing each other, and circling Evangaline, and this primal part of me takes over. "Would you mind not ruining my date?"

West cocks his brow. "Ruining your date?"

"You're being all big and buff and in Evangaline's face, and that's where I want to be."

"So many 'that's what she said' jokes to make," Axe says, doing a very impressive backflip.

"Ah, babe, that's so cute, he thinks I want to be in her face," West says.

"That's exactly where you were this morning," he answers, wagging eyebrows and all. Meanwhile, Evan is giggling like a schoolgirl, but I'm starting to catch on it's not because she likes them better. This whole situation is hopeless. I'm so unaware how to date a woman that I'm feeling threatened by two guys who seem to be in a relationship together.

"You can totally be in my face though," West says with a look that I can't quite make up.

"Mine," Evangaline growls, and it's both the cutest thing and the most ego boosting thing I've ever heard.

"Sure, pup," Axe says, downplaying the general flirting that is going on between all of us. I'm confused who seems to like whom right now, but I know for certain I like the girl with the dark hair, even if her braid is messy by now and there are little

hairs sticking to the sides of her head from wetness. “Now try the salto again,” the Viking lookalike security guy says.

She starts bouncing up and down, getting some momentum going, and then tries flipping in the air.

“Tuck your chin in, knees towards your breasts as well,” West says.

“Don’t talk about her breasts!” I shout before I’m aware what I’m doing.

“Easy, modern-day Bach, your boobs are more appealing to me than hers. Nothing personal, lady.”

“No offense taken,” she says with an understanding smile, trying the salto again, landing on her feet this time. She tries to celebrate her own win by punching both her fists in the air, but the bouncing of the trampoline makes her topple over, falling right in my arms. Now, I’m pretty sure that these two warmachines would’ve been able to keep her standing up, but clumsy old me, who can perform miracles while playing most of any given instrument, has the balance of a drunken elephant, making me fall backwards and taking her with me. Evangaline squeaks and laughs, clinging onto me like a damn spidermonkey.

“That’s our cue,” Axe says.

“Last one who reaches the top of the climbing wall owes the other blowies for a week,” West yells before taking off, taking a large head start on his... partner? Lover? Little bit of both?

“Not fair, asshole!” Axe yells before taking off at a supersoldier kind of speed.

When I figure I’m laying down with a gorgeous woman in my arms, but I’m staring at two guys chasing each other because I want to find out who will be giving whom blowjobs, I force myself to stop watching, only to find her studying me already.

“Hello,” she says, her voice a little husky.

“Hi,” I say, because not only does she make me question my general capability in acting like a normal human being, she

also makes me forget all the things I want to say. Which is a gargantuan task, because I always have a lot to say. She makes me turn into a big black hole, where all the words I have to tell disappear into.

And I find that I don't care.

Instead of blabbering about this or that, I lean forward, and lay my lips against hers. My heart skips a beat when I feel the corners of her mouth go up, and she answers me by kissing me back.

I'm not sure if it's me or her who deepens the kiss, but we do, and for the next however long we just lay there, kissing and caressing. Yeah, my body responds, because hell, I'd love to ravage her, but I don't feel the need to act upon it. It's an unfamiliar kind of contentment and excitement that tingles in my stomach. The perfect little sounds she makes while we explore each other's mouths are etched on my brain in sheer perfection, and I never, *ever*, want to let this woman go.

Which is exactly why that's what I do.

We're not in a hurry. She isn't going anywhere. I've got all the time I need to take this slow, to savor this, and to just get to know each other better before we go for this, whatever this is.

Damn, I might need Madden to put into words what's going on inside of me, because I feel like I'm speaking a foreign language.

Eventually we get up, both frazzled, both out of breath, and without having to talk anything through we get our stuff and go back to the car that will bring us to the tour life again. The goofy grin won't be disappearing from my face any time soon.

There's three things I've learned that evening. First of all, I'm a master dater. Secondly, I now know how to make a pretty decent salto. And lastly, I'm seriously, irrevocably in love with Evangaline Hart – and it's a place I'm pretty glad to be stuck in.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“She’s seriously messing with my vibe, Mack,” I half shout through the phone. I’m laying on my tiny bed in the bus after the concert we just gave. I didn’t even stay to sign autographs or pick up some groupie, because Evan was glaring at me. She was judging me without me even doing anything and I’m so fed up with little miss holier-than-thou.

“You still played well tonight, right?” Mack says. He almost sounds bored, and that infuriates me even further. He’s been there since day one, he’s our manager and he’s always treated us fair, but at the end of the day, he’s just a guy in an office that makes money from our creative process and hard work.

“Of course I played well, I always play well. That’s work. What comes after the work is the fun, but there’s no fun now. I want her gone. This whole tour feels like work, so now my life feels like work, and there’s got to be a balance, dude.”

“Kid, you’re talking to the guy who’s making a hundred hour workweeks, my life is work. Stop bitching. Go out and find some groupie you like if that’s what you need.”

“I don’t want to fuck a groupie! I want you to fire the bitch, and hire some other rehab nurse, a big burly dude, so nobody falls in love with him, and I at least have Wolf and Bryson back to their normal behavior, so life doesn’t suck so hard!” I’m aware that I’m shouting, but you know what? I’ve been quiet long enough, and I’m done with it.

“Nobody is getting fired. Madden trusts Evan. All the reports I’m getting are showing she’s doing a good job, your fans love your show, so maybe you just stop being a bitch yourself.”

I sigh, anger boiling within me. “You suck,” I bite, and then I disconnect the call. Mack doesn’t understand. She’s changing our whole dynamic, and I don’t need change. I certainly do not need anyone to judge me. And nobody, and I mean nobody, is taking my brothers away from me. *Not again*. Not while I’m here to do anything about it.

Somewhere near, a door slams, and hurried footsteps go to the front of the bus where the exit is. I just know it’s Evan, and I hope she’s left for good, even if I know that’s unlikely. She and her feelings can just go be somewhere else.

I’m pinching the bridge of my nose, trying to figure out how I’m going to get this feeling of unease to disappear. The need to do something courses through my veins, and I want to be anywhere but here in this too-little fucking bedroom by myself. My adrenaline is still high, so calming down and resting is out of the option. And besides, what self respecting rockstars goes to bed after having played a motherfucking awesome set in front of a full audience?

The door to my miniature room opens, and Madden comes in. He looks pissed, and I exhale loudly through my nose. This was not the direction I wanted to steer my night into.

“What?” I ask him.

He sits down at the foot end of my bed, his back against the wall, his legs wide and taking up all of my space.

“Thin walls,” he says, the corners of his mouth down, a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

“So?”

“Same reason why Evan just ran out of the bus.”

“So?” I repeat, because I want her out.

“Bryson is going after her. So if we’re doing this, if you want to divide us by making us pick between you and her, you’re currently holding the short end of the stick.”

My chest tightens after hearing those words, and I make it my business staring at the ceiling and not looking at my oldest friend. Silence settles between us, but the anger still rages within me. It’s like a tornado, wrecking destruction everywhere it goes.

Madden sighs, and there is so much in that sigh that I almost start feeling bad. He sounds exhausted and defeated, and I got that from just one long exhale.

“The night that I OD’d,” he starts, and I sit up at once, leaning on my elbows, making eye contact. His gray eyes are dark and cloudy, while I know they can be almost shining as well. “I was having a great night. The concert was awesome, even if I was already pumped by a bump of coke I did before the show. I had some left from the night before, where I banged a groupie who got me some, because she had contacts.”

I just sit and listen, too stunned to speak. He hasn’t talked about that night. None of us really have. And I don’t know how to talk about it to be honest, so I just listen.

“Right after the show, there was a guy during the signing we did. My high was rapidly dying, and he whispered he could get me something. We met behind the stadium after we were done signing, he sold me some smack, and I took it with me to the hotel room as if it was my treasure.”

My breath hitches, because that scenario isn't that unfamiliar to me. I just never took the step and started doing heroin. I was perfectly fine doing some coke every now and then. Some Molly, or GHB or LSD if I felt like it. But I never started injecting. I never even suspected Madden had as well.

In hindsight all the signs were there. Especially those of him not being happy, being depressed, and acting out of character.

"I almost ran towards the hotel. Got all my supplies out, cooked the smack, sat down, and injected it. And I felt fucking amazing. Every worry I could have disappeared. I no longer doubted myself, whether I was good enough. Everything just was, and I didn't care that it was all a lie, that it was just a chemical reaction in my brain. The fact that all my problems and insecurities were still there, but I just couldn't see them didn't matter anymore. It was glorious."

His eyes bore into mine.

"Until it wasn't."

The hairs on the backs of my arms stand up, giving me chills and goosebumps.

"The fact that I didn't lock my door saved me. I was that careless in my drug use that I didn't even lock my door while doing so. When I started losing control of my body, I rushed to the door and fell against it, opening it and ending up halfway into the hallway. From what I've heard I was foaming by then, and Kyle found me."

"You were foaming," I whisper. "I saw you later, seizing and foaming, right before you went completely still."

The sight of my best friend dying in front of me is one I'll never forget. I was going to my room with a cute girl, a redhead with a bunch of curls, she promised me a good time and I believed her. What I got instead was a team of EMTs doing chest compressions on my best friend, while they rushed him to an ambulance on a gurney. And then he went away for almost half a year.

Madden grimaces when he sees me reliving the memory. I guess we both didn't have that good of a time that evening.

“When I woke up at the hospital, I was confused. I didn’t know where I was, and I felt like absolute crap. My hands were shaking, but I was already halfway to ripping my IV out. I wanted to get out of there, score again, and feel good again. But Mack was there, and Vic and Jay, and they were telling me I was going to rehab.”

His eyes sadden.

“And something inside of me just broke. It was a turning point, a crossroads. I could either keep going in the self destructive way I was going, or I could accept help. But in that moment, I loathed myself. I hated the world, I couldn’t stand letting all the people who care for me down, I didn’t think I deserved people caring for me and I really, really didn’t want to be the reason that the band would flunk. In everything that I thought that sucked, the band was always something to be proud of, and the mere idea that I was the one who ruined that was unbearable.”

I want to reach out and hold him, but we’re not touchy feely kind of guys, we’re not big on PDA. Wolf is, Bryson has his moments. Me? I’m more of a friendly wrestling kind of guy. So I do the only thing I feel comfortable with then. I press my leg against him, and he presses back. It’ll have to do for now.

“I almost trashed the car when they brought me to rehab. I even considered jumping out of a moving car. Tried to figure out if that stuff is only done in movies, or if I could do it myself.”

He scoffs.

“Know what kept me in the car?”

I shake my head.

“I didn’t have any cash on me. So even if I got out, I wouldn’t be able to get anything.”

He bites his lip, rubbing his hand over his face, and I feel for him. I don’t tell him that he probably could’ve gotten something for free, just because he’s Madden St. James, but he doesn’t like using his name like that.

“By the time I got to the rehab facility, I was having slight withdrawal symptoms. Sure, I wasn’t using all the time – or at least I thought I wasn’t. I never used one substance all throughout the day. But I switched them up. Little speed to wake up in the morning? Sure. Some smack when I had the time. Molly if we didn’t have to be anywhere and could party. GHB to relax in the evening and come down. Sometimes a benzo, or another downer. But bottom line is that I was using a lot, and my body wasn’t handling being sober very well, especially not after just OD’ing and almost dying.”

His eyes find mine again, and whether it’s the lightning or not, they seem to be shining again.

“One minute and fifteen seconds.”

My heart almost stops after hearing him say that, the tone of his voice so earnest I can feel in every fiber of my being that this is important to him.

“I was dead for one minute and fifteen seconds. And I thought about drugs immediately after coming back. You’d think I’d have some great epiphany. Maybe saw my life flash in front of me. See a bright light. Run around in some fucking green garden of Eden, seeing all my loved ones and having a blast in Nirvana. But no. It was darkness, and it was black, and it was nothingness and a void. And the worst thing is that it didn’t even scare me.”

I can see his Adam’s apple bob and his eyes water.

“Inside that facility they helped me with the physical stuff. They ease the physical effects of withdrawals. They helped me fight the panic and anxiety that eventually came. But without the drugs, I became a void. Except for Evan.”

I furrow my brows. Listening to him telling his story had made me forget why he got in here in the first place.

“She was there, just sitting there when I needed silence. Listening to me when I needed to ramble. Holding back my fucking hair when I had to throw up, like I was some pathetic little kid. She was there to make sure I ate, and I combed my hair, and I attended fucking therapy. But she always treated me

as a person, not just some broken version of a boy pretending to be a man. She was a little sunshine in my void, letting the light back in and erasing some of the darkness.”

Every single thing about him looks exhausted, and I can feel his sorrow and despair oozing off of him.

“I know things are changing, and I know I’m the one who’s making all of it happen, probably more sudden and quickly than we all would’ve liked, but something like this was bound to happen, man.”

I breathe in deeply, letting the air go ever so slowly, the anger leaving me as if I’m doing some sort of meditation where I’m breathing it out. One of the techniques I learned in anger management by the way. Always thought it was bullshit.

But I hear what he’s saying.

He’s staring at the ceiling when he continues. “Please stop making her try to leave, because I’m fucking afraid that one of these times she’ll listen to you, and where does that leave me?”

I’m biting my lip, gnawing on his words. I still don’t like what she’s doing to us as a group, but I do kind of like having my best friend alive and well, and not foaming and seizing.

“I’ll try,” I say eventually.

He actually has the audacity to look surprised. Like I wouldn’t do everything in the world for this motherfucker, because I would. I just do everything in this world for me as well. Because at the end of the day, when I’m hopefully very old, and I’ll breathe my final breath, I’ll be the only one in my life. By that time everyone will have moved on, have a wife and kids, and I’ll just be crazy uncle Xem who is alone and drinks too much, scaring everyone in his life away. So I’d best make sure that I have a nice life, because I’m going to be the only one to do that. “Can’t say I won’t fuck up though.”

“We all fuck up, man.”

And ain’t that the truth.

CHAPTER FOURTY



After that conversation with Xem I feel empty and deflated. For some reason shame is forefront as well. I haven't told anyone about the evening I OD'd, because I know most people won't understand it. But Xem has been there with me every step of this glorious but slippery road to fame, and he likes using about just as much as I do. He knows what tricks your mind can play. He's just better at walking the line between recreational use and addiction.

The way he's acting would imply he's more addicted than we'd like to think, but I know his bitching is mostly a reaction to the status quo changing and him having no control over it. And he blames Evan, because lashing out is easier than looking within himself and figuring out why he feels this way.

I also know him well enough that forcing the issue will only backfire, so the best I could do at this moment is a ceasefire.

After I leave his room, I crave some nicotine because that's the only vice I've got. They tried to make me start journaling in rehab, but can you imagine? This big rock star writing down his feelings? Maybe it isn't even so farfetched when you think that's exactly what I do when I'm writing songs, but when making lyrics I can change the words to pretty ones so they sound all glamorous instead of 'today I felt like crap and I wanted to numb it with some magical pill'.

Second part of my reason to go out is to find Bryson and Evan. The look on her face when she stormed out of her room after having heard Xem's words was not pretty.

It's completely dark outside, we're in a field in the middle of nowhere in North Dakota. I wouldn't even be able to point to you on a map where we are because you lose all sense of time and direction when you're on a tour, and clouds hang in front of the moon, making the night even darker than usual.

I don't hear any voices, but I smell cigarette smoke and realize where they are. Climbing the bus is a little harder now that the door is open, but I manage to get on the roof anyway.

The whites of two pairs of eyes look at me when I finally manage to hoist myself up on the roof of the bus, trying desperately not to think about what the gooey substance on my hand is when I lay it on the top.

"Traitor," Bryson scolds Evan, bumping his shoulder against her. Both of them are sitting up, their sides connecting. Bryson is sitting with one knee pulled in, his elbow leaning on his leg, holding his smoke, while his other leg is stretched out. Evan has both knees pulled in, hugging them close to her chest.

"Sorry," she whispers to Bryson.

"I solemnly swear not to intrude into your holy space of birdshit," I say, making the scouts honor sign even if I've never been one. One of the corners of Bryson's mouth pulls up.

"We were very actively not thinking about the birdshit," Evan says.

“Well, let’s just catch the bull by the horns and call things like they are. Shit is shit.”

“Yeah, I know about shit,” she says, her face darkening even more. I take out my smokes, put one between my lips, and sit down in front of her, lighting up. I like that there isn’t even a second of judgment while I know that she doesn’t like me smoking.

“He’s acting out, it isn’t personal,” I say.

“Telling your manager to fire the bitch and hire another nurse feels pretty fucking personal,” she snaps, and she’s got a point.

“Don’t fight his battles for him, Madden. Let him fix this mess himself. It’s not your responsibility,” Bryson says, and I can feel his intense stare on me. Then he shifts his attention to Evan. “And you’re in the shits for showing my secret hiding place. Now he’s going to come up here and talk about everything.”

“I won’t!” I shout.

“See, he’s already being way too loud. I swear to god, Evan, if you showed Wolf this place I’m team Xem and I’ll have you fired.” His words make my stomach sink, but when I see the way he leans into her and smiles at her, I know he doesn’t mean it. I’ve seen what has been happening between them, but I didn’t realize it ran this deep. I wonder if Wolf knows.

And for some reason my heart breaks a little, because this means that I don’t stand any chance in pursuing her. By the time I’m allowed to date, she’ll have given her heart to someone else.

Bryson presses a kiss against the side of her head, and then gets up. “I’ll leave you two for a while. Don’t try to make this right in his name, Mad. What he said was fucked up, and we all know it.”

He climbs off of the bus, leaving us sitting there while I silently toke away on my smoke. The only sound between us is the crackling of the cherry on my cigarette, but for once, the silence is uncomfortable.

I'm trying to think of my therapy sessions and figure out what my needs are, but my head doesn't come up with any other answers than that I'd like a hug. I'm just not sure if Evan is up for it.

"Can I come sit with you?"

"You're already sitting with me."

"Smarty pants."

She gives me a coy smile. "If you're going to ask stupid questions, you're getting stupid answers."

"I always thought there was no such thing as a stupid question," I say while shifting my position and sitting down with her, the sides of our bodies touching.

"Well, apparently they do exist, because that was a stupid question."

This time when the silence comes back it isn't uncomfortable anymore. It just is. She's breathing deeply, while I'm inhaling nicotine and finally feel my body calm down again. I want to tell her that I've tried helping her with Xem's attitude, but Bryson's words are still fresh in my mind.

Little raindrops start falling down, cooling the backs of my arms and ruining whatever this was.

"It's starting to rain," I say, stating the obvious, implicating we should get off of the bus and head on inside.

"I know," she says, something in her voice that I can't quite place, "isn't it marvelous?"

"You like rain?"

She nods, her chin leaning on the nook between her knees. "When it's like this I like it. After the heat and drought. I like the smell of petrichor."

"Petrichor?"

"It's the word for the smell the earth produces when it's been warm and rain falls on it. That ozoney smell. I love it."

I can't fight the smile that takes over my face. "Never knew there's a word for it."

"Most people don't," she says. "I grew up in Nevada, so it doesn't really matter what time of year it is, every time it rains, you'll smell it. And even when I was a little girl, and all the kids would run home once it started to rain, I stayed out, just walking around, sniffing. My mother was worried I'd get sick, but she never could convince me to come inside until I'd have had my fill of the smell. And even then I'd just stand in the window looking outside, sniffing and smelling."

While we've been talking the slow trickle of drops has turned into a fairly decent downpour. My smoke has died, and I'm slowly getting soaked through, yet we still keep sitting in the exact spot we're sitting in.

"I did it while we were at school once, and my teacher taught me that the name for the smell is petrichor. And I loved the sound of that word. So it soon became my favorite word in the English language. Most of my favorite memories involve petrichor," she rambles on, staring in the distance. Her eyelashes are wet and glistening, her face wet with a thin sheen of the rain coating it. "I think it's because smell is such a strong memory." Her smile widens even more. "My new favorite memory is of a certain band performing during a thunderstorm, singing about kites, and smelling the petrichor."

I puff out my chest, because damn if that doesn't make me proud. I don't have anything to add to that, so the silence returns. I automatically reach for my back pocket to grab a smoke before I remember it'll just die again because of the rain. My fingers feel empty and itching without the cigarette to keep them occupied.

"You don't talk much about your youth."

She inhales deeply, nostrils flaring. "We've all got our demons," she says. There's a mixture of emotions flashing over her face. Fear, sorrow, regret.

"Maybe you should talk about your demons," I offer.

"No."

She's never been this curt with me, and for some reason it really angers me. My fists are balled, because I don't even have a fucking smoke to hold, and my pulse is racing.

"So I just have to tell you everything that's going on inside of me, but you don't have to share with the class?" I snap.

She physically backs away, looking at me as if I slapped her. "If you feel like I forced you to share your demons, I'm worse than what Xem is making me out to be."

"That's not what I'm saying!" I'm shouting by now, even if I don't know why I'm shouting. "It's just... I bare my soul to you. And you act like you're here, and in the now, but you never say anything about yourself!"

"It's not my job to talk about myself!"

And that's the thing that's making me so angry: I thought that I was more than a job to her, but it turns out I'm terribly wrong. I force myself to take three deep breaths before I say something I will regret, because nothing has changed in the last five minutes. Evan is exactly who she always said she was. Her behavior didn't change. Mine did. She never shared anything about her past and it didn't bother me, until now. And that's on me, not on her.

Fuck, I need a drink.

"I'm..." I begin, but I don't finish that sentence. "Just..." I throw my head back and groan. "Why is this so hard?"

Her tiny hand finds my knee, grabbing it through the wet, cold and more than skin tight skinny jeans I'm now wearing. They're going to be a bitch to take off now. Her hand is warm, and comforting – which in turn calms me down some.

"Let's take a page out of Bryson's book," she whispers, the sound of her voice barely audible over the sound of the rain falling on the roof of the bus. "Let's just sit in silence for a while."

We lock eyes for a moment and come to an unspoken understanding. We sit in the rain and get wet, no talking, just staring in the dark distance, even if we can't see shit. Her hand never leaves my knee, and without thinking about what I'm

doing, I wrap my arm around her shoulder after a while. My fingers play with her braid and for a brief instance, everything feels normal again.

Then she leans forward, and she sniffs.

Her head turns to me, those unlikely purple eyes connecting with my soul. Her beautiful heart shaped mouth turns into a smile, and then she whispers: “Do you smell that?”

I nod, and whisper back. “Petrichor.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



There's more and more in newspaper articles about Victorious every single day. Now that they're taking over most of the country, everyone is reporting on them, and they can't be missed anymore. Some things are downright bullshit, like the fact that they are involved in ritualistic serial killings, making human offerings that ensure their numbers grow, but others come close to the truth. How they're knee deep in the guntrade, and how they're now getting involved in the drugs business as well, having ties with Mexican cartels.

That last bit of information makes me believe that what they're reporting is true, because that was the idea that Nathan was dabbling with before I spoke out that I wanted out, because I wanted nothing to do with that.

I still can't explain to you why I drew the line at drugs. I knew they were bad business. Still, I was so in love I was

willing to look it over. They say that the human brain produces hormones that induce the feeling for being in love for about two years. After that it evolves into actual love, without your neurons going all haywire on the happy feelings it produces, or you fall out of love. The plan to start dealing drugs came about two years after I started falling in love with Nathan.

Perhaps it was just that: a simple biological malfunction that made me see the light.

Still, when I think about it, I should have kept my mouth shut, gone back with Nathan, kept my eyes closed to the drugs and found another way to get out. Maybe strike a deal with someone and get into WITSEC or something.

But if I would have done that, I wouldn't be where I am right now. In the middle of a tour of a world famous rock band. Happier than I've ever been. Or well, for as long as I can actively remember. What I've come to realize is that I don't want to think about my life before my time at Victorious. I just severed all ties with my family. My very flawed family, but one that loved me nonetheless.

So I can't blame both Madden and Xem for calling me out on my bullshit. I do expect them to bare their souls to me, but I'm not willing to do the same.

I'm just not ready yet.

I am ready for some kind of meaningful epiphany though, even if I'm not fully willing to share yet.

It's with these thoughts I walk into the living area of the bus, where the guys are jamming and chilling. Miles is missing as usual, because he gets to spend quality time with his family, and all of the guys are supportive of that. He took Keshia and Pip out to some kids museum that he rented for the day, so they wouldn't be bothered by paps and fans, and I think it's the sweetest thing ever that he would go to such lengths to make sure his kid gets educated in culture, even if it's an exhibit about Miffy.

Bryson lifts his eyes from beneath his hoodie when he sees me enter the general area, lifting one measly brow to indicate

he's seen me and he's wondering what I'm doing here right now. It's funny how just a few weeks ago I couldn't read him at all, and now I can read his wordless reactions better than the times he does talk. When you really think about it, the way he acts is a form of communication in itself, and the guy who's been dubbed as 'the mute' by the media is actually really expressive, you just have to speak his language.

Bryson's attention leads to Madden seeing me, and his whole face lights up when he sees me standing in the doorway. "You joining us?" he asks me, opening his arm and making space for me on the couch he's currently sprawled out over. It should be illegal how good he's able to sing while hanging upside down on a couch.

"I'm actually hoping you guys could join me instead," I say, sitting down right next to him anyway. He lays his head on my thigh as if it's the most normal thing to do in the whole wide world.

"Where are we going?" Wolf asks, already in, not even bothered by the fact that he has no idea what it is I want to do.

"It's not really going somewhere, but I've connected with a tattoo artist here. And he's coming over to give me some ink, and I thought maybe you'd like something as well."

The lines between Madden's eyebrows deepen, as if he hasn't even considered the option of getting more ink. All of them have plenty. Bryson's ink forms a pretty solid picture, Wolf is chalked full of random pictures, Xem has a very large back piece that is breathtaking, and Madden has a bit of a mix of both. If I'd have to put money on it, I'd say he probably has had some done when he was sober and thought them through, and others while he was on something, not thinking the consequences of what he got through. I know he's got a calf tattoo, stating 'cow nipples'. I have not the faintest idea what that could possibly mean, but I'm pretty sure it wasn't a sober idea.

"I'm down," Wolf says. The way he uses his body as a canvas indicates that he was always going to be the one that was most down with this idea.

“Is the artist any good?” Bryson asks.

“Best of the state,” I say confidently.

“Then how did you manage to book an appointment on such short notice?”

My cheeks heat, and even my ears feel red. “I might have said that I was part of the 4A tour to get him to make an opening.”

Xem scoffs, as if that’s a ridiculous thing to do, but Wolf looks like a father giving away his daughter on her wedding day, as if this is the culmination of all his pride, and he makes me chuckle. Bryson manages to give me a half smile.

“I’ll want to see his work before I decide if I want to add or not,” the bass player says, and frankly, I never expected anything less of him. He takes his ink seriously, and I admire that in him.

“I think I’m in,” Madden says, his eyes closed. “Celebrate this new phase in my life. Something like that. I know I’ve gotten a tattoo somewhere where I celebrated getting another beer, so celebrating a new life seems like a good enough reason to get some ink.”

“Right ass cheek,” Wolf says earnestly.

“What?” I ask in confusion.

“That’s where he got the tattoo to celebrate the new beer. I think it’s an alien spaceship. Somehow it made sense when he got it, but I’m not so sure now anymore to be honest.”

“Wasn’t this when we were close to Area 51 and we were convincing them to let us on the base?”

Wolf jumps up from his chair, pointing towards Bryson, who did remember the ridiculous reason to get a tattoo. “That was it! That was it exactly!”

I snort, but the bottom line is that they’re all down to at least come to the tattoo artist appointment with me, which is a relief, because it will make my claim of being with the band that much more believable.

“A Joshua tree,” I say, showing him the inside of my front arm. “In blossom.”

The tattoo artist squints his eyes at me. “That’s... Well, you know what, who am I to judge? But I’m guessing there’s a story behind it.”

I sigh, letting my head fall back against the portable tattoo chair. “There’s a story behind it, but I’m not ready to share it,” I say, repeating my earlier internal statement. This time, all the guys hear it.

Bryson has been on Insta non-stop since I dropped the name of the artist, and he seems to actually be interested in getting some extra ink from him. Which wasn’t something I expected. When I asked him about it, he mumbled something about the experience being just as meaningful as the ink itself, which I translated into this being some kind of bonding experience or something.

“Give me like fifteen minutes and I’ll come up with a design. Let me get this straight. Black and white, Joshua tree in bloom, no larger than the inside of your front arm, no text. Other than that I’ve got free rein?”

I nod, chewing my bottom lip. I’m not sure about any of this, but my experience with Nathan has taught me that I could have been dead by now and in that case it wouldn’t have mattered whether I’d have gotten a tattoo I came to hate with time anyway. So I’m guessing my mind is coming to grasps with the concept of YOLO?

Not these guys, these guys have been YOLO’ing their asses off all their lives.

Me? Not so much. I’m all for cool experiences, because well, I like the adrenaline side of it. But permanence might be my hard limit. I have no ink, although I did have a ring through my belly button when I was a teenager, but I grew out of that phase.

“Does it hurt?” I ask nobody in particular, because they all know what it feels like.

“Depending on the place, I’d say it’s not too bad or it hurts like a motherfucker,” Wolf says. He’s sitting on a chair, his feet up on the table, and his hands crossed behind his head, looking as if he’s chilling on the beach or something. Maybe the high from getting a tattoo wears off over time, perhaps he’s always this chill about it.

“Forearm?” I ask Bryson, who has two full sleeves and obviously knows what I’m talking about.

“Walk in the park compared to the head or the in- or outside of the elbow,” he soothes me. “But it’s still a tattoo, and it’s still needles puncturing the skin, and that hurts. Try to get your mind into a place where it embraces the hurt.”

“You sound like the fucking Yoda of tattoos, man,” Xem scoffs. I didn’t expect him to be here, but we’re all doing this together. For some reason, the asshole even seems excited about the prospect of getting a new tattoo.

“What are you getting?” I ask Bryson.

He studies me in that silent way of his, which would have made me nervous not too long ago, but now just lets me know he’s weighing the right words. “I’m thinking an ouroboros in the hollow of my throat.”

“Where exactly nobody will ever see it, because you’re always wearing that fucking hoodie,” Madden summarizes.

“Good thing I’m doing it for me, and not for anybody else.”

“Kind of like the space alien ship tattoo,” Wolf mutters.

“Oh plenty of people got to see that,” Madden answers, grinning.

“That’s not something to be proud of, you know,” I add to the discussion.

“What happened to you being a judge free zone? No slut shaming in this bus. You’re touring the country with four of the biggest mansluts there are.”

I usually don’t shame, especially not with Madden, but when I think about all the girls who got to share their beds and are still sharing some of their beds, I get this feeling of

nauseousness. I don't want to admit I'm jealous. I don't want to admit that I'm afraid that my little fun with Bryson was all that it's ever going to be, even if he never took other girls back to the bus after it happened. I'm in no position to have an opinion about this whatsoever, but I'm having one anyway, and it's showing.

Before I can get into an argument about how I am indeed a judge free zone, the tattoo artist walks back in, holding out a sketch. It is indeed a beautiful Joshua tree in bloom, and around it is a design full of curls and swirls, making the picture look vibrant and feminine. To put it simple: it's pretty. And I like it.

My face lights up, and my nerves make place for excitement.

“Happy?” the artists asks.

I nod.

“I'll probably make a few slight adjustments as we go, making sure all the swirls match the way your body flows. Don't worry. It's going to look good. This is my first Joshua tree, which doesn't happen that often. I feel like I've done everything nowadays. Take a seat.”

He starts tracing the sketch on a stencil, all the while talking about anything and everything, and how he has tattooed famous people before, but he's a big 4A fan and this is just fucking awesome. His chattering makes me less nervous, and I sit and listen to him with a smile on my face. He cleans my arm, shaves my arm even if I don't see any hairs whatsoever. He applies the stencil with the utmost care.

“Go look in a mirror how you like it, and I'll get things set up.”

I go to the nearest mirror, a full length one on the inside of my door in my bedroom, and have a look at what ink might look like on me. And I love what I see.

Madden is staring at me around the corner of the door when I look up. His face is calm, his eyes kind, and the corners of his lips point up.

“It makes you look happy, you should definitely get it.”

I nod, walking back out again.

“Are you getting something as well?” I ask him.

He rubs the back of his neck. “I’m now seriously considering covering that alien spaceship up. It wasn’t just a bad idea, it’s been done terribly as well.” He looks so disgusted now that he remembers he has it, what it stands for and who he no longer is. Drunk and using Madden might have thought it was funny, sober Madden doesn’t.

That’s how I know that getting this tattoo now will be a good idea. I’m at a good place in my life, and I’m getting something meaningful for me. Even if even the tattoo artist thinks it’s a weird thing to get tattooed on your body.

I sit down on the chair, which now has all kinds of tools and little cups with black ink set up around it.

He rambles all kinds of instructions, and finally he asks me if I’m ready, which I confirm after having taken a deep breath. The machine gun is activated and starts making a buzzing noise, and before I know it he’s making a thin little line on the inside of my arm.

And it motherfucking hurts.

“You said it wasn’t going to be too bad!” I exasperate at Bryson, my brows furrowed and my mouth tight. He has the audacity to give me a half smirk.

“Don’t worry,” the tattoo artist says. “He just told me what he wants to get, and that’s going to hurt way worse.”

I huff, sit back in the chair, and try my hardest to release the pain. How long can it take?

Turns out, tattooing takes a long time. First there’s the lines of hell, then there’s Hades shades, and I don’t know what the hell is wrong with the white ink, because that was a whole new level of the inner circles of hell altogether. The guys jam a little while I’m getting tortured, which makes the tattoo artist extremely happy, and me a little less in agony.

And once it's done, it's all been worth it and looks awesome.

The guys all got something small. Wolf gets a little lightning bolt on the inside of his bicep. I asked him if he was into Harry Potter or something like that, but his explanation was that he was feeling a little Bowie today. Madden gets his spaceship covered up with a mean looking black Maori design in the shape of a sea turtle. You have to really stare at it to see where the spaceship was. I asked him if getting another tattoo on a whim to cover up another tattoo he got on a whim really was the most smart thing to do, but he just shrugged. Said that no matter how sober he was, he would never be considered wise.

I beg to differ.

Xem surprised me by getting a line of notes on his clavicle, with the word 'Always' beneath it, and I asked him if *he* was referencing Harry Potter, but he rolled his eyes at me and Bryson said it meant something different.

Bryson got the ouroboros he said he was getting, and he smiled all while getting it. I'm considering telling Mack that he's got a potential psychopath in his band, because nobody should be smiling while getting stabbed with needles in a place that's supposed to hurt.

"I'm sorry," I say when we're all sitting in the living area, having dinner.

"Why?" Madden asks, dodging the green peas Wolf is firing at him.

"I wanted today to be fun and exciting. I think I should've come up with something better."

Bryson, who's sitting next to me on the floor, pulls me against him. "This was fun."

"I'm no longer trusting your opinion on what is fun and what is not, psycho."

He snickers and then goes back to eating his food.

“Seriously though,” Wolf says after rapidly firing three peas in Madden’s direction. “This was fun. And it’s a day we get to take with us everywhere. Until one of us fuckwits discovers laser removal. But before we’d get to that point we’d first have to figure out what regret is.”

“Stop throwing your peas at me!” Madden yells. “And I know regret. I’ve got aplenty.”

“Yeah, that’s why you now have a sea turtle on your butt instead of a spaceship. And just take my tiny green balls, you like ‘em, I hate ‘em.” He takes a second to think things through. “Take my green balls or I will feed you my balls!”

“Stop trying to make me switch teams!” Madden screams.

“Yeah, he’s not supposed to date in the first year, remember Wolfie?” Xem says with a sly grin. And I can’t help but laugh.

Bryson bumps his shoulder against mine and leans his hooded head towards me.

“See? Fun.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



There's not a single spotlight shining in my face when I stand on the stage in Minneapolis. Soundcheck was this afternoon for the concert tomorrow, and everything is fine. All the lights that are on are coming from the wings. On the other side of the field I can see faint green lights from the emergency exits, but that's about it.

I can hear my own heart thumping.

It's a steady rhythm. Nice and easy, nothing out of the ordinary. Doing just what a heart should be doing. I wonder if I did any permanent damage to it by OD'ing and years of abusing drugs. I probably did. It always marvels me that the heart always keeps beating without us being aware of it. It's this presence that's always there, one of life's certainties, right up until the point that it's gone.

One minute and fifteen seconds.

I'll never take it for granted again.

Yet there is a fear that one day I'll forget, and I will take it for granted again. Like a hand around my throat trying to throttle me I gasp for air. The emotions that surface are almost too heavy to deal with.

Which is exactly why I'm standing on a dark stage in an empty stadium, holding one of the acoustic guitars that can always be found somewhere backstage.

Before the label found Miles, I used to play a little guitar. I'm not that good - singing really is what I'm great at - but I know the basics and can carry a tune on a guitar. The moment I got the opportunity to no longer have to play my own pieces, I grabbed it with both hands and ran with it.

But now I strum the strings with my pick, placing my fingers in position to start playing the first chords to a song that is stuck in my head. I've been on the verge of having a starting panic attack and have been replaying one of our new songs through my head.

Wolf wrote the music, I helped him with the lyrics, Xem changed a few of the drum lines and all of it together formed a pretty fucking awesome song. It just doesn't have a name yet.

It's this nameless song that I start playing.

The guitar work isn't perfect, but it is what it is for playing it without sheet music after not having played guitar for so long. But it's like riding a bike, and muscle memory takes over, playing note after note. I don't hit them all, but fuck that.

I'm not here to perform a perfect song, I'm here to work through my feelings.

I haven't been perfect a single second of my life anyway.

The moment I open my mouth to sing the first line of lyrics, my voice cracks. But instead of breaking down, letting the sound out opens a can of raw power that I use to fuel my singing.

The guitar work is all over the place, being off more often than being in time or hitting the right note. The words that come out of my mouth seem to be growled and are still distinguishably clear, each and every one of them filled with everything my mouth refuses to say. All the pent up anger, and fear, and sadness leave my body in a steady stream of air when it comes out of my mouth.

And while the moment feels grave, I feel immensely light while singing.

Somewhere during the song I drop my pick, and I start strumming with my thumb. I no longer have the callouses that I had back in the day when I used to pluck strings daily, my nails too short to use them to play. But that little edge of pain only adds to the crazy perfection that is this moment.

Here, being surrounded by nobody but myself, and the music, the words, and the ocean of emotion that seems big enough to fill the whole stadium on its own, I just let go. I fucking break down, tears streaking down over my cheeks, held up in my three day scruff.

I finish the song despite the tears, because all of this, all the fuckedupness, makes sure I know I'm still alive.

After inhaling deeply, I lift my head, trying to figure out what the next song I want to play is. But when I lift my eyes, there's a tiny light in front of the stage. Evan. Holding up the light on her phone.

She's standing right in front of me, in front of the stage, staring at me with eyes that seem to be glittering in the reflection of the light of her phone.

And the sight of her, giving me wordless comfort just by being there, by listening, makes my hand shake uncontrollably. I try to shake the jitters away, but they don't leave.

I would've thought that I would be pissed to find her here – I didn't go to a stadium on my own for no reason after all – but I find that I'm actually pretty pleased to see her. All the shame I feel about the drugs is absent when it comes to my music.

Was that one of the rawest performances I ever gave? Probably. But it was just right despite all its imperfections.

I scrape my throat, finding my voice again, after I set in one of my all time favorite songs to just sing along to. My fingers try to play the first notes of “Summer of 69” by Brian Adams, but my fingers are still too wobbly. I like the song because it can be a real banger when we all play it together, but I like it just as much when it’s just an acoustic version.

The first words of the lyrics that leave my mouth are still as raw as the last song I just sang. And that’s the thing that almost makes me laugh, because I can sing this song without even thinking a second about it, but for some reason I’m still off, and that’s alright.

When I sing that Jodie got married, the sound of a violin reaches me. Spinning around while still singing about standing on your mama’s porch, I find Wolf coming out of the wings. He sits down with crossed legs on one of the crates that’s standing at the side of the stage, playing the melody like it’s the easiest thing he did all day, almost looking bored.

He nods once, acknowledging me, and then just stares at the opposite end of the stage, as if he’s lost in his own track of thought.

He’s here to back me up, but he’s not here to invade my moment.

So I sing – about endless summers, being reckless, needing to unwind – and just when the guitar solo is supposed to start and I try to pick up the music with my fumbling hands again, another guitar picks up the music, and I find Bryson standing at the opposite side of the stage.

He, just like Wolf, nods once, and then just plays his part. He does so ever so relaxed, as if he has no care in the world.

I’m so taken aback with warmth that I almost miss my cue to pick up the singing again, but I manage to start singing after all.

I finish the song, still singing to an audience of one, her eyes never leaving me. In all the years of performing for

stadiums filled with people, I've never felt more put in the spotlight than I have now.

"Do you take requests for your pity party for one?" Xem yells from somewhere behind me, making me snap out of my temporary stupor. "Or are you the only one who gets to set the setlist tonight?"

"What'd you have in mind?" I ask him, an involuntary smirk on my face.

"'Abel' from The National," he says, and it's exactly the last song I expect him to pick. Xem likes it hard, and chaotic. It's why he clashes with Wolf so much, because he believes Wolf brings too much melody into our songs. It's a lifelong argument that probably will never get settled, and we've all just accepted that.

Wolf rolls his eyes from his seat on the box, because it's kind of a hard song to play a violin part in, but he'll make it work anyway, he always does. Xem takes a seat behind his drums and gives us a four count before they set in the music.

And when it's time, I start singing that my mind is not right, repeating it over and over again, about not being able to calm down, and really bringing the message home that my mind's not right. I finally understand his choice.

Because deep down, all of us have our issues. Bryson has insecurity issues, Wolf's mind is so far from normal that I wouldn't even be able to start listing all his issues, Xem has got his anger issues, and me? Well, I've got substance abuse issues, and my mind hasn't been right for a very long while.

It is cathartic to sing about it though, in the safe space that is just the sanctity of our band, and the girl up front and center, that has my back no matter what. I may have given her a hard time on the roof of the bus the other day, but even if I know nothing about her, she's still here for me. I don't think she's pretending to be anybody but herself, she's just not sharing everything about her past. And that's her choice, not my right to know.

After the song has finished, I'm out of breath, because it's an intense song, and I'm a smoker and I'm pent up full of emotion.

"Any more requests?"

"Iris,"" Wolf answers immediately, and I don't understand his song choice, but when I turn towards the mic stand, I can feel Evan's stare on me even if I can't see her face very clearly in the darkness of the stadium. I have an inkling that this means something for both Wolf and Evan, something I'm not privy to. Which is okay. Some things are meant to stay between the people who do understand.

But when I get into the song I'm back to being all alone on that stage. Everybody else ceases to exist, and I sing the song just for me. It resonates with me, and the sound of John Rzeznik matches my tone for this evening.

Maybe I don't need the world to see me. Maybe it's enough that these people surrounding me now see me. Maybe I don't want the whole world to know, because I've shared enough of myself over the years, maybe I just want those nearest and dearest to me to know who I am.

And maybe, just maybe, I need to figure out who I am myself.

After I've sang the last note I'm completely drained. I can play a full two and a half hour set when I have to, but singing just four songs has left me empty. Music is such a strange thing. It can get you energized, or it can leave you feeling so much there isn't room for anything else.

Without me noticing because I've been too busy feeling my own feelings, Evan is trying to climb the stage, which is ambitious if you ask me, because the stage is pretty fucking high, and Evan is pretty fucking small. Wolf is there to help her though, lifting her up like she weighs nothing. Once she's up on the stage, she smacks him in the arm.

"You did that on purpose, asshole," she says, her voice thick.

“Just thought you needed to hear it from someone who can properly sing.”

She laugh snorts and gives him a one armed hug while he kisses the side of her head. Then she practically runs towards me, wrapping both her arms around my waist, hugging me so close that I feel like my air is getting caught off.

I don't think I've been hugged this hard since I was a kid and my mom actually wanted to. *And it feels divine.*

“What was that first song?” she asks me, her cheek pressed against my chest, and I'm in no rush to get her to let go.

“How long were you in the audience?”

“Pretty much since you left the bus.”

I scoff. “You coming to check on me?”

“Always,” she says, looking up at me through her thick lashes.

“It's a new song,” I answer vaguely.

“It was amazing,” she whispers. “I've got it on video, you can watch it if you want to. I can only imagine what it's going to sound like once you play it all together.”

“Wolf wrote it,” I deflect, glad that the dim lighting on the stage doesn't show the pinkening of my cheeks.

“It was a team effort,” Wolf says, looking in Xem's direction, because while they don't always get along, they still value each other's musical efforts. “Except for Miles and Bryson,” Wolf suddenly yells, pointing in the direction of the bass player, who holds his hands up in a surrendering gesture. “They just mooch off our talent.”

That just makes Bryson roll his eyes.

“What's the song called?” Evan asks before everything escalates any further. We all shrug, because fuck if I know.

“I might have the perfect title for it,” she says shyly, a tone of voice I'm not used to from her.

“Shoot,” Wolf says, trying to get her away from me, but she’s on me like a stage five clinger.

“”Designed in Darkness”,” she says. And if I hadn’t promised her I wasn’t dating anyone for the first year of being sober, I’d kiss her right there and then.

“That’s pretty perfect,” Xem says, and it’s the last thing I expected him to say. He can be petty when it comes to people, but he takes his music very seriously, so when something is right, he’ll let you know it’s right.

“Guess that saved us a discussion,” Bryson summons.

“Maybe Miles will veto it,” Wolf says.

“Veto my ass, I’ll wedgie him until he agrees,” I say, because I can, and I will, and I will not let him ruin something so perfect. I actually like the fact that Evan came up with it, because she’s the one who made sure we’re all here today.

I stare into the empty stadium once more, and I feel fuller leaving here than when I came here. Funny, how letting your emotions out can actually leave you feeling fuller than when you held them in.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



The concert tonight was great. The crowd was hyped, we ended up playing a crazy good set, everyone was on fleek and there wasn't a cloud in sight. I think we needed a night like this after Loveland. We've played since then, but some nights are better than others. This was one of the good ones.

My sleeveless hoodie is soaked. It always is after a concert, because the lights are hot and I'm the idiot that wears a hoodie year round, no matter how hot it is, but tonight I'm drenched. Madden hyped us all up, making us play just a little bit louder, making us jump just a little bit higher, dance a little bit harder.

It was intoxicating.

After-show drinks in the wings have changed into all of us downing a water bottle, even Xem, and then changing to go and sign autographs. I think we're all going out tonight.

But a quick shower and clean clothes are first on the agenda.

When I walk into the hallway where all our changing rooms are, I catch Evan closing the door on Wolf's door while I hear Wolf yelling from the other side that she should definitely come join him in the shower. She's laughing out loud, telling him to get lost and to hurry. She looks careless and fucking beautiful.

With my bottom lip between my teeth I admire her from afar in silence for a while. Hair in her telltale braid, skinny jeans, kicks and a t-shirt. Today it has a print about fictional book boyfriends being better than real boyfriends, and it's the only challenge I need to do what I do next.

From behind I wrap a still-sweaty arm around her waist and pull her with me to the door of my dressing room. She squeals, but the squeal soon changes into laughter and her pleading for me to let her go. I can't help but laugh along with her.

"I just had this fight with Wolf, Bryson. I'm not coming inside, you've got to get changed for your signing."

I shake my head, but realize she can't see. "Difference is that I already have you inside, so now all that's left for you to do is come," I say. I like that I never have to use a loud voice for her to hear me. She listens, and actually hears me. I never have to raise my voice.

As soon as she spins in my arm, I press her against the inside of the door, caging her in with my arms as soon as I let her go. When she looks up and our eyes connect, something changes in the air between us.

It's still a perfect night.

Everything still feels light and just about right.

But there is an extra electricity buzzing between us.

She lays her palms on my pecs over the drenched hoodie, before she reaches up to the hood and takes the cap off of my head. I let her. The tiny act makes her breath quicken.

"Get in the shower with me," I half ask, half demand.

She shakes her head. “No, then we’ll have to shower after.”

“But I’m dirty.”

She scoffs. “Fresh sweat is a fucking turnon, despite what all hygiene products commercials want you to think.”

I don’t answer, just staring at her, trying to figure out if she’s shitting me, or if she really doesn’t mind that I’m all gross and sweaty. She sees my confusion.

“Look at it this way,” she starts explaining, her hands gliding over my neck and back up my bald head again. “Have you ever been in bed with a girl, and both of you got real sweaty? And everything is slippery, but it does feel kind of nice?”

I grunt.

She pulls a face when I do so before she mutters to herself that this was her own fault. “Have you, when you were in that situation, ever taken a second to process whether that sweat smells?”

I press my nose against the temple of her head, making her head turn to the side and bring my mouth over her ear. “No.”

She inhales audibly. “That’s because it’s not dirty, it’s a turn-on.” Her voice is husky and her eyes have become hooded. Her hands and fingers are doing things on their own accord, but she’s definitely pulling me closer and not pushing me away.

I find the hem of her shirt, grab it with both hands, and pull it up until she willingly brings her arms over her head, allowing me to take it off, exposing her breasts in a perfect turquoise bra.

“So book boyfriends are better?” I growl.

“In my opinion, yeah. Boyfriends usually turn out to be assholes.” Her voice gets a little dark, and I’m not sure what’s behind what she just said, but there’s something there.

“Guess I’m just going to have to one-up these book boyfriends,” I say, before I lift her off the ground and press her flush against me. Before she can further her argument with me,

I bring my mouth to her lips and kiss the living shit out of her. She's ready for me, meeting me stroke for stroke, seeming just as desperate for this as I am. A throaty moan leaves her mouth, and then I'm a goner.

I lay her down on the couch at the far end of the changing room, letting her go for a second to peel my wet hoodie from my body and dropping it on the floor. Her hands are all over me before I can even lean forward to kiss her again. She breaks the kiss, her hands finding my belt buckle, and unfastening it to the best of her ability. Everything seems to be a little on the tight side at the moment though.

While she fumbles with my belt and pants, the fingers of my right hand find the hard peaks of her nipples in the cups of her bra while I keep myself up with my other. She kisses her way down, and by the time she reaches my dick, she's pulled both my pants and my briefs down halfway on my thighs.

Compared to mine, her hands are tiny, but the feeling it gives me when she wraps one of them around my dick is majestic.

"I didn't get to play with this last time around," she says, looking up once and locking eyes with me, "Now it's my turn." It's the last thing she says before filling her mouth with the head of my dick, her tongue twirling around it. The kiss she gives it is supposed to be chaste, but what it does to me is anything but.

She licks me from the base to the top, and I get full body shivers. All I can do is hold myself up and hang on for dear life, because fucking hell, she knows what she's doing. One of her hands holds the base of my dick, while the other goes around me and holds on to my ass, her fingers pressing in. I'm afraid I'm going too deep, but when I hit the back of her throat she moans instead of trying to pull back. With hollowed cheeks she sets in a rhythm that's driving me crazy fast. My balls draw up, and I pull back, because I *need* more than this.

I don't even have to tell her what I'm doing, because she's busy unbuttoning her own pants before I can do. I kick off my pants and my briefs, almost trip when I rush to the other side

of the room where I know there will be condoms. If you're in a rock band with four other guys who like to get their dicks wet, your assistants quickly learn to always have condoms readily available and to always keep them in the same space. The last time that didn't happen, Pip was created.

I grab a foil wrapper, tear it open using my teeth, and find Evan bare on the couch, except for her bra. Her eyes are practically begging me to hurry up, and I'm not even ashamed to say it won't take me any convincing at all. By the time I reach the couch, my dick is sheathed with the condom, and I'm ready to give both of us what we're craving.

She has other plans though.

Instead of leaning back on the couch so I can bring us together, she stands up.

"Sit down," she says.

And who am I to argue with her? She obviously knows what she wants, and it's not exactly like I'm complaining. As soon as I sit down, she straddles me, takes my head in both her hands, and kisses me deeply. It's the perfect crescendo to an already perfect night. My fingers glide through her folds, and she's soaked for me. And impatient. She slowly lowers herself onto me, and I use my hand to guide myself inside her.

I might be imagining things, but she feels even better than the first time we had sex. Last time was born out of a desperation for nearness. This time is a joint effort in lust.

When she's seated all the way down, we sit still for the tiniest instance in time. Our sweaty foreheads are pressed together, our breaths heavy. Then she lays her hands on the wall directly behind me and starts lifting herself off of me, almost letting my dick slip out, until she sits down again, taking me as deep as she can.

All I can do is groan.

She rides me, our bodies getting more slippery by the second. For the first time in forever I consider my own rule of making a woman come before I get to come myself. She's working me into such a craze that it takes effort not to

willingly give in to the bliss she's giving me. My hand finds her clitoris, putting pressure on it, and circling it in the same rhythm as the one she's riding me in.

Her breath hitches, and I can feel her insides tightening every now and then.

We're both so worked up this is going to take no time at all. Way to prove that I'm better than a book boyfriend, by busting a nut in the time it takes a teenager to get himself off.

"Fuck, don't stop," she groans, and I'm so fucking relieved that I'm not alone in my rush to get off. She hasn't even finished saying the words before the muscles in her belly tighten, her mouth falls open and she temporarily stops breathing.

I lift her body up and down, keeping the rhythm going in the way our bodies are joined while she rides out the throes of her orgasm.

As soon as she comes back to reality, I feel a tingling at my spine, ready to fall over the ledge myself. I don't even have to tell her, because when I open my eyes to make contact, she's already silently cheering me on, riding me into oblivion, until I don't remember my own name, what city I'm in and how to play a guitar anymore.

A cacophony of breaths fills the room, as we both slowly come down. I'm definitely going to be late to the signing.

I'm not even sorry.

Later that evening, after having gone to the signing table too late, having Evan walk into the room with one of my sleeveless hoodies on because I took her under the shower with me and I got her shirt wet, the guys gave me shit. Especially being late because of a girl. I'm not telling them that I hated her book boyfriend's shirt, and that I 'accidentally' got it wet on purpose, and that my dick is getting all kinds of thoughts about seeing her wearing my clothes. But I bet they can appreciate the armholes of my hoodie being too large for Evan, showing the sides of her turquoise bra.

Evan kept a quiet eye on Madden, but she had a pink blush on her cheeks all the while. I tried to focus on the people standing in front of me, but my eyes kept wandering to the girl that makes me want to recite poetry and sing songs, even if I'm not ready to admit that to either her or myself out loud. I'm wondering if the warmth of her cheeks is because of the memory of what we did just before, or if it's something as simple as beard rash.

I'm fine with both options.

We all went to the bus after that like usual. Evan and Madden walked together, and they held a hushed conversation that wasn't meant for anybody but them to hear, so I butted out, and just had fun with my friends and bandmates. Wolf going home solo seems to be the new theme to this tour, but Xem not trying to pick anybody up is new. I haven't heard him bitch about drugs or alcohol in a while either, and I wonder what it is that made him change his drastically.

I'm in the living room when Evan sneaks to her room after having gone to the bathroom with her showerbag. When she leaves I say goodbye to the guys and get into her room after her.

"What are you doing?" she asks when I enter the room. She's still in the sleeveless hoodie she stole from me, the light make up she normally wears cleared off her face.

"I'm sleeping in here," I state like a true caveman.

"Is that so?" she asks with a light smile on her face.

"Hmhm."

"And what makes you think that you're allowed to barge in here like this?"

"The shirt."

"The shirt? You mean the fact that I'm wearing your shirt or the shirt you 'accidentally' threw water over?"

"Yes."

Her smile widens.

“I’m totally being a better... boyfriendish kind of person,” I say with a grimace on her face.

“You’re my boyfriend now?”

“No,” I say way too quickly.

“It’s a good thing you like being silent, because you suck with words.”

I grunt and watch her as she steps into her tiny bed with my clothes still on. The hem of the shirt crawls up when she slides into bed, revealing her bare leg, and the primal part of my brain just wants to hump her.

For someone who never wanted to get attached to one girl, I’m suspiciously acting like some foolish boy in love. I have no idea what I’m doing, or what it actually is I want to do. I know she’s flirting with Wolf as well, I know Madden has feelings for her even if he doesn’t admit it with words. But I do know I’d rather sleep together in her tiny bed tonight, than sleep alone in my own.

And that should scare the living crap out of me.

Yet it doesn’t.

She’s observing me, and I don’t know how to proceed from here. Sure, I know how to seduce her, but that’s not what I’m here for. She just seems to understand though. So she holds back the covers for me while my heart starts racing and I quickly take off my pants and take off my hoodie before I crawl in beside her.

She effortlessly fits herself in beside me, her cheek on my pec, and I take her in my arms as if it’s the most normal thing we’ve ever done.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



“No,” Bryson says for the third time, his arms crossed in front of his chest, his face leaving no room for debate. There’s a very brave, tiny woman standing in front of him, trying to get him to take off his hoodie, but she’s getting nowhere. Inwardly, I’m chuckling.

The photographer is waiting, clicking on endless settings on his camera, waiting until everyone is finally finished for the go. 4A is shooting for a six page article in the newest Rock Music Magazine. I’m not entirely sure what angle they’re going for, but from what I’ve gathered the idea is to get all the guys as naked as possible against a white backdrop, and to spill food over them.

Wolf was half naked before the photographer had even fully pronounced the word, because hell, he already had his top off anyway, but Bryson is standing his ground. He isn’t taking his

hoodie off for anyone but those people he chooses to do so with, and no contract with any magazine is going to change that.

Madden was easily convinced, because his urge to please people was there and he has no problem being half naked whatsoever. Xem wasn't that hard either, he ends up with his shirt off behind the drums most of the concerts anyway. Besides Bryson, Miles was the one who was the hardest to convince. He's trying so hard to be a good role model for Pip and has a hard time being half naked and selling himself out for money. It took Keshia telling him how hot she thinks he is when he takes his shirt off, and the idea that the whole world could see that but she would be the only one to be allowed to touch and that it turned her on.

I've never seen a man take off his shirt more quickly than that.

"Do you have a white shirt? Because you're not fitting with the image in this black one," the photographer says.

"No," Bryson repeats.

There's a tiny muscle right next to his eye that starts twitching, and I know the photographer is getting on his nerves. I've come to know Bryson as a very easy going person, you can't push his buttons, but this lady seems to be doing it.

"What exactly is the photo you want to take?" I ask the lady, trying to intervene and maybe mediate a little. The magazine and all the people here have agreed that I'm to be left out of the shot at all costs. Management sold it as being in Madden's best interest, not having a rehab nurse present, but I just need to be out of the picture so Nathan doesn't figure out I'm not being beef jerky in the middle of Death Valley.

"I want them all to lie down on the ground, on this white backdrop, and hold their instruments, and then we're going to spill spaghetti over it."

My mouth opens, and I'm staring at her before I know what I'm doing. There's no intervening this, there's no mediating

this, because that is the worst plan I've ever heard. Wolf catches wind of this plan, and as much as he was down to get naked, he's not going to be spilling spaghetti on his violins. I guess it'll be a hard pass for all of them to be honest.

"Are you completely, utterly, bonkers, lady?" Wolf yells, storming from the far side of the room where he was sneaking a smoke near one of the open windows.

The photographer doesn't flinch, and I have to say she's got a humongous set of lady balls, because Wolf looks creepy as fuck right now. Makeup made his kohled eyes even blacker than usual, giving his eyes a darker look – add that to the look he is sporting on his face right now, and he's actually pretty frightening.

"It's an artsy article," she says as if she didn't just ask musicians to defile their babies.

"And what the hell has spaghetti got to do with rock?" Xem asks, backing Wolf up.

The smoke alarm starts beeping when the smoke from Wolf's cigarette reaches the detectors and a handful of people come into action to make the sound stop.

"It's a symbol of laying yourself bare and bleeding for your art," the photographer yells over the fucking annoying sound.

"We lay ourselves bare with the music, not with spaghetti," Madden states when he joins his band members. He casually leans with his elbow on Wolf's shoulder, and a knowing smirk forms around my lips when I realize it's both to reassure him and to hold him back if need be. Madden looks relaxed, but little signs tell me he's on high alert. The way his fingers keep twitching for instance, looking for a smoke that he isn't going to grab right now.

"The spaghetti symbolizes your bowels."

"Bowels..." Miles says, exasperating.

"It will all make sense once I'm done," she tries to sooth them.

“It most definitely will not, because Bryson is not taking off his shirt, and I’ll be damned before food touches my violin. I will gladly pay the fine for pulling back from this contract,” Wolf says, rushing off again towards the still open window while he lights up a second cigarette because he forgot that he still has the other lit one.

All the guys shrug and seem perfectly fine with this conclusion and it’s the first time I see the facade of the photographer crack, like she’s finally realizing she’s about to lose this deal. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish, no sound leaving it.

Xem and Bryson leave for the far side of the room, both picking up bottles of water while silently talking. Xem’s wild gesturing in the direction of the photographer lets me know exactly what’s going on there. Madden has joined Wolf at the window, taking over his second smoke. Wolf is leaning with his back against the window, looking into the big industrial hall we’re shooting in, Madden’s arm over his stomach, while the singer is looking out of the window. Both are having a quiet conversation, and while there are worry lines surrounding Wolf’s face at the beginning of the conversation, something that Madden says manages to make him laugh.

And Miles is standing a few feet away from me. He’s fussing with Pip, who is in a carrier bag, taking a nap against Keshia’s chest. The carrier she’s using this time is secured in her front with straps, instead of the knotted contraption on her back. And Pip is blissfully oblivious to it all. She’s just taking a happy nap, not even responding to the fire alarm that’s still blasting at full volume.

None of them are responding to the sound.

I guess that’s what you get when you’re used to all kinds of loud noises while on tour.

The photographer is looking lost, her camera in one hand, pointing toward the ground. Her mouth is tightened in one sharp line, and her other hand is quivering. What does it mean for her when this shoot gets canceled? Is her career going to get ruined over this? She was being pushy with Bryson, and

kind of whack if you ask me with the whole bleeding for your art thing, but that doesn't mean that she should lose her career.

I bump my shoulder against hers, making her startle. Watery blue eyes look at me, silently asking me why I did that.

“Shoot that,” I say, lifting my chin towards Wolf and Madden having a private conversation at the window.

The photographer squints at me, not understanding.

“They give up their privacy for their careers. Everything they do is in the spotlights. They can't go anywhere without security and people telling them what to do. At the end of the day, when the lights go out, this is what's left. A deep rooted friendship, words of encouragement. That's what you hear in their music, that's what you can be able to shoot right now that you won't be able to do in some sort of staged setting.”

Understanding starts to dawn on the photographer's face.

“Shoot Miles while he's telling soothing words to his kid, but make sure that Pip's face isn't recognizable, because if you think that Xem has anger issues, you should see Miles when he starts acting like protective papa bear.”

The photographer nods, lifting her camera and taking silent shots of the married couple that look completely at ease with each other.

“Just don't ask Keshia to take her shirt off,” I whisper, and that's the thing that makes the photographer laugh in the end. I knew there was a human behind the professional facade somewhere.

Once the clicking stops, I lift my chin towards Madden and Wolf again. Wolf is telling something with very passionate gestures, and Madden just smiles knowingly. It's probably going to take some time before the violin player is going to stop ranting about what a ridiculous idea it is to use spaghetti on their instruments.

She listens to me, and starts making shots. The daylight that comes inside through the high industrial windows actually looks extremely gorgeous, especially in contrast with the black

skinny jeans both men are wearing. When I glance over the photographer's shoulder to see what kind of shots she ends up with, I see perfect pictures that I don't think I could've taken. They'd fit nicely on the cover of a magazine.

My heart rate spikes when I feel hands around my waist, and I'm being pulled backwards. I shriek and start laughing when I realize that Bryson is pulling me away from the photographer.

"What are you doing?" I yell without any spice to my words.

"Making sure you don't instruct the lady to start taking shots of us," Xem says. He isn't touching me, but he's putting himself between me and the camera.

"I'm trying to salvage your shoot, *without spaghetti.*" It might actually be the last sentence I expected to come out of my mouth that day.

"Which is appreciated, but not your job," Bryson says, lifting me up and throwing me over his shoulder caveman style, his warm hand holding onto the back of my thighs.

He takes me to the far side of the room, to the table with the food and the drinks, and the soft sound of a camera clicking reaches my ears. By the time Bryson sets me down, Xem holds out a granola bar towards me – a gesture I find oddly endearing. We're nowhere close to being friends, but ever since we had that last fight and Madden talked to him, at least he's making an effort. It registers that he's at least noticed me snacking on anything any time I can, because touring with boys is like growing up with teenage brothers. It's every woman for herself.

"Thanks," I say, and he waves with his hand in front of his face as if it doesn't mean anything, but to me it's everything. I'm busy unwrapping my granola bar when Madden and Wolf reach the photographer. The latter has lost his fighting face, but the former doesn't look all too sure of what's going on.

"I've come to compromise," Wolf says, piquing all of our curiosities, except that of Madden, who obviously is already in

on the plan.

“Shoot,” the photographer answers, her face now more open and friendly than it was when she was trying to undress Bryson.

“We all put our clothes on, and you shoot us without instruments, because that actually feels like being naked,” Wolf says with a straight face.

“That’s just a regular picture of you guys,” she answers.

“With the right story, it could be art.”

“It’ll be a shitty photo.”

“So would us being naked and covered in spaghetti!”

“No,” she says, mindlessly browsing through the photos on her camera, “That would be art.”

Wolf’s face gets aggressive, and he leans forward while holding his arms back, all the while yelling: “Hold me back, Madden, this woman is infuriating.” We all laugh, because it’s obvious that his heart isn’t in it and he wouldn’t actually come for her.

The photographer, to my surprise, smiles, and says there’s no need to fight, because she already has all the shots she needs. I’m not sure which shots she got, or how she’s going to sell it, but it turns out she saw something she liked and she took photos of it.

“I hate these things,” Xem says when we all start gathering our stuff to leave again.

“You hate everything,” Wolf argues.

“That’s not true.”

“Is so.”

“Not.”

“Is so!”

“Boys, boys,” Bryson interrupts them, throwing an arm over both of their shoulders. “Let’s not fight over the little things.”

“Like taking your shirt off?” Miles asks, and I can’t help but snort. The look the bass player gives the lead guitarist could probably kill people.

“Nobody should have to undress against their will,” Bryson says earnestly.

“You’re just afraid we’ll see your old, wrinkly body,” Xem says.

“Nothing old and wrinkly about it,” Bryson says, running his knuckles over Xem’s head after pulling his cap off his head.

“Says the old wrinkly guy,” Madden intervenes.

The look on Bryson’s face turns slightly evil. “Just ask Evan if you don’t believe me.”

My cheeks turn red instantly, and I mumble something about a lady never kissing and telling when all the guys simultaneously start making kissing noises.

“Har, har,” I say, and as one, they start laughing.

It can be *really* tiring to be touring with such a tight knit group of people.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE



It's cold when I hide my face in a large jacket. I'm not usually allowed to go out on my own, but exceptions are made for this particular trip. I'm clad head to toe in black, so nobody will recognize me and I've been taken away through a back entrance of a back entrance at the venue, then I got on a motor of one of the crew – also one of the few times I'm allowed to drive a motorbike.

And now I'm here, in what's probably my least favorite part in the whole world, but I come here any time I get the chance anyway.

A dull gray gravestone stands proudly between other colorful stones. There's this whole section of the graveyard dedicated to children who passed away, and the monuments usually represent the age of the deceased. But not this one.

'Thomas Christopher Theodore Miller

August 13th 1992 - August 13th 2004

Loving son and brother

In God We Trust'

Well, I guess that's how it was for my parents. They trusted in God. Still do. Religious through and through. They don't care that their precious deity took away their son, they even believe shit like that the bastard up in the sky had his reasons to take Thomas away, but I don't have enough compassion to even think something like that. I fucking hate the asshole for taking Thomas away from me.

Like it's one big fucking cosmic joke, an experiment to see just how badly my life could get fucked up. Born on the wrong side of the tracks, to parents who loved their religion more than their sons, not a cent to spare for medical treatment, or basic necessities, like clothes, or shoes, or love for that matter. And then when there was a treatment, and by some divine intervention, church wanted to pay for it, I had the audacity to not be a match, so the procedure couldn't be done.

That's the moment my parent's lost both their kids.

Thomas to cancer, and me by choice.

I sit down on top of his grave, my legs crossed. "Hey asshole," I say.

He doesn't answer, because realistically there's nothing left but a pile of bones in some clothes that may or may not still be there. His fancy Sunday clothes. By the time he died, they were way too big for him because of all the weight he lost. But they buried him in them nonetheless. Had to make a good impression in front of those pearly gates.

My stomach roils, because I *hate* coming here. I hate everything that has happened since Thomas got sick, but never, not for one second, have I hated *him* for it. I've been angry at my parents, my family, God, most of my friends, the world and every shitty little thing that goes along with it. I've screamed, I've yelled, I've kicked and then I've kicked some more. It's what I still do, because being angry is better than being sad.

I'll never admit that out fucking loud though.

Bending down, I lay a battered beer cap of a beer bottle down on the base of his stone. I always leave one when I'm here, honoring that one night we secretly stole two beers from our neighbors' house – well, I stole them, because Thomas couldn't walk anymore by then – and we drank it while pulling faces, because he wanted to know what all the fuss was about before he died. We got caught because we were giggling and semi drunk, and we left the fucking beer caps on the counter where our mother found them. It was the last best night of my life.

Whenever I come back here, the previous cap I left is gone though.

They know who left the thing, I'm sure of it, they just stopped caring. My big brother might have been the one with the faulty body, I was the one that got blamed for not having the right kind of cells to be able to help him.

It never occurred to them that they weren't matches either.

I wipe my nose with the back of my sleeve, convincing myself that I have a runny nose because of the temperature, and that it has absolutely nothing to do with standing at the grave of my big bro. Time to go.

Taking huge strides I make my way to the exit of the graveyard, I grab the helmet and unlock the motor. My leg swings over the thing, and when I start the engine and feel that baby purring to life, I feel a whole other thrill rushing through me. Getting an adrenaline rush, whether it be from fighting or just a plain old rush doesn't make that much of a difference. Amped up on adrenaline, there's no room for tears, and that's exactly what I need.

I drive away, full throttle, and race through the streets of my home town. This side of the train tracks? It hasn't changed much. The mayor did some renovations to the uppity part of the city, but the low income houses that have been here forever are still surrounded by roads filled with potholes.

I drive by Bryson's childhood home, the windows hammered shut. Of course his family doesn't live there anymore. Bryson was the poorest out of all of us, with two teenage parents who really did their best, but just didn't have that much to offer. First thing he did when he got a big paycheck was buy them a nice home. Some other poor bastard moved into his childhood home, but it doesn't seem like they had much luck with the property as well.

In a moment of temporary insanity, I drive through familiar streets to my own childhood home. It doesn't look too well, could use a new coat of paint, but the leaves on the lawn have been raked, and the garden looks sought after. My mother always had a thing for flowers and working in the garden – the only job she was allowed to do, because in their world they still lived in the fifties where women weren't allowed to work.

I can see them through the open curtains of the living room window. I can see the back of the heads of both my mother and my father, sitting on the couch, watching some stupid game show on TV.

Against every ounce of common sense I have, I grab my phone, and dial my mother's number.

I can see her phone light up on a little side table next to the couch. She reaches her hand out, seems to look at the screen, and lays the phone back down without even having the decency to decline my call.

For some stupid reason my eyes water. My eyes water and tears are threatening to fall down. Which is unacceptable. I haven't cried for real since Thomas's funeral, and I'm not about to start now.

I want to drive that stupid motorcycle until the tank has run dry or I've wrapped it around a tree, just to get away from here, just to flee these feelings.

But when my eye falls on the old sedan in my parents driveway, the fucking very same they had when I finally left my house all those years ago, something snaps inside of me.

I'm here.

I'm right fucking here.

I've always been.

I've seen the flyers all over town, they know 4A is here. I've called them. And still they haven't found it in themselves to acknowledge me. Just the simple fact of remembering that I'm their son too, and that I'm still alive is too much.

And then I snap.

Hopping off of the motorcycle, I grab the rake that my father undoubtedly used to rake the leaves in the garden to a tidy pile. I twirl it around, holding the wooden end in my hands. With a few big steps I stand on top of the fucking awful red sedan and start smashing away on it.

Dent, after dent, after dent appears in the car as I smack the ever living shit out of it. The roof looks like it's been attacked, and then I jump on the hood of the car. The sound the shattering glass from the windshield makes is like music to my ears.

Then the hood gets hit, until it dents.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I register that my parents and the neighbors have come out after hearing all that noise. I just keep going. For all the hurt. For all the neglect. For all the suffering losing Thomas has caused. For all the pain being the healthy kid has created, while I've always known deep down that they'd rather seen me take his place.

I refuse to acknowledge that the wetness on my cheeks are tears. It's just sweat from beating the crap out of this car. The hood is dented all over, and now that I really seem to be on a roll, I smash in the remaining windows as well. There's glass everywhere, crunching beneath my boots, and I don't give a flying shit. The only thing that I care about is not cutting my hands, because cuts on my fingers and drumming stings like a bitch.

When the sound of nearing sirens reaches my ears, I don't slow down. I wonder which of them called the cops. Was it the neighbors, who probably don't recognize me, or was it my

own parents who undoubtedly know it's me, but don't know me at all? For all we care we could be strangers.

I kick the tire that's right in front of me, before I start hammering into the passenger side door with the back of the rake again.

When the sirens are close I take a good step back to admire my handiwork. I'm out of breath and my heart is racing – but I don't care. I've gone at it so hard that by the time police officers get out of their vehicle, I'm numb.

I take a step towards my parents, and apparently I'm posing a threat. "I wouldn't do that, son," one of the agents says. So I stop, because even I know when enough has been enough. I guess.

I wonder if this was what Britney was feeling when she attacked a car with an umbrella, and then I wonder if I'll go just as viral.

"Recognize me now, mom and dad?" I yell at them.

"This a son of yours?" one of the officers asks my parents, who are still standing in the doorway, my mother hiding behind my father. His hollowed eyes stare at me for a moment, before he diverts his attention back to the agent.

"My sons are dead, officer," he says with a straight face, pushing a knife in my already bleeding heart.

I scoff, shake my head, drop the rake, and hold my hands out for them to cuff me.

Fuck, what was I thinking? That it would be any different?

Guess the only fool for thinking things would suddenly be better is me.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX



I'm standing at the counter of the local police station, together with Vic and some guy I've never met, but who seems to be representing all the guys legally. I'm pretty sure I'm the very last person Xem wants to see right now, but it's me he's getting anyway. The guys can't just walk into a police station as if nothing's going on. They'll be recognized and there'll be a whole media frenzy. Hell, there already is a whole media frenzy, because apparently 'Drummer 4A losing his shit' is headline material

"Coming up," a friendly looking officer says. He probably can't help the situation, he's just doing his job. But still I'm pissed at him for arresting Xem. They told me in really, really short terms what happened, and I'm kinda pissed. Thankfully the lawyer of 4A is awesome and they reached a nice settlement and his parent's will drop the charges.

My head snaps up when Xem gets brought out. I was told he gets special permission to go out on his own whenever the tour comes to this part of the country, and I figured it has something to do with this being all their childhood homes. I know Bryson's parents will be there for the concert tonight, and I know that Madden doesn't have any contact with his mother anymore. Xem? I don't know what his situation is exactly. Only that it's complicated, I shouldn't ask too many questions and let him be. My naturally curious side has a different opinion on the matter.

I almost don't recognize him with the amount of dark clothes he's wearing. He's usually more naked, and his outfits tend to be on the lighter side. I would've thought that was weird for a rock star, but what I've learned so far is that they'll do whatever the fucking hell they want.

The biggest change is his posture. His shoulders are slumped and his eyes are down instead of defiantly looking up and daring me to say something.

When Xem reaches Jay, the assistant flicks him on the back of the head, before he pulls him in and hugs him. There is a brief flicker of anger behind his eyes when he gets hit, but his face shifts back to emotionless numbness right after.

"Can someone please explain what the hell is going on?" I ask.

"No," Xem says, pushing Jay away and walking straight outside the police station.

"Why were you arrested?"

"Because I smashed a car."

"Why did you smash a car?"

"Because I was angry."

"Why were you angry?"

"Because nobody loves me. And stop fucking repeating me."

I stop dead in my tracks. And then my mouth speaks before my head thinks it through. "Have you ever stopped and

wondered if nobody loved you because you're always so angry?"

Now he stops, spinning on his heels, facing me. I'm not sure which emotions exactly flick on his face, but there's at least hurt and anger before he gets in my face.

"You... don't know anything!" he roars.

"Because you don't tell me anything!"

He scoffs, turns around, puts his hands in his pockets and starts walking towards the parking lot, blatantly ignoring me. Jay and Kyle follow him as if this is the most normal thing in the world, like they've been here a million times before. So I flip them all a bird when they don't watch.

I'm fed up with this. I don't even know why the hell I'm here right now, because all he wants to do is fight with me and he seems fine with Kyle and Jay, who actually know what's going on.

Xem storms off into a car with tinted windows, and I want to call shotgun so I don't have to sit in the back with him. I'm willing to stoop to that level, just so I don't have to be with him. But Jay lays a hand on my arm before I can do anything else rash today, like call Xem out on his crappy behavior and that being the reason why he doesn't feel loved. The assistant's dark eyes lock with mine, and instead of the anger I expect after having to pick up his client from the police station, there's tenderness and fragility there.

"Just give him one more time being kind today," he says, his voice a low rumble.

And as much as the little rebel in me want to say fuck it and give up on him, the patient, caring side of me is always willing to give someone another try. Maybe that ended up being my downfall in staying with Nathan for so long.

That's how I end up in the back of the car, staring at Xem, who sits slumped down, staring outside with his head leaning on his hand. Kyle and Jay sit down, and the car takes off at a slow pace. The city we're driving through passes by, lit up by the street lights, showing nothing exciting whatsoever.

I have to take a few very deep breaths to engage with him.

“Tell me something about this town,” I finally end up saying.

I think he’s going to ignore me, but after what feels like forever he speaks up. “That’s Jenna Fuller’s house,” he finally says, pointing his chin to one of the houses we drive by. It’s small, and shodden, and reminds me of my own childhood home a little.

“Who’s that?”

“The girl Madden and I lost our virginity to,” he answers with a smirk, his eyes lost in a memory that he seems to be enjoying.

“At the same time?” I respond before I think through what I’m saying.

He laughs. A real laugh, one that comes from your belly. “No, not at the same time. But Jenna probably would’ve loved that.”

The silence that fills the void his laughter left is comfortable, and at a certain point I catch him staring at me. “How about you?” he asks me. I think it’s the first time he’s asked me a genuine question while he was the one instigating the conversation.

“I didn’t lose my virginity to Jenna,” I blurt, earning me my second round of laughter from Xem.

“Didn’t think you were suddenly into girls.”

And how I could rock his world right now by telling him the stuff I did do with some girls in my experimental phase. But this new, temporary peace between us is too fragile to go there. So what I do instead is wink, leaving things to his own imagination, because I’ve always learned that’s a better tool than the truth.

“So, did we pass Bryson’s house yet?” I’m scared to question about Xem’s parents, or even Madden’s mother, because I know their relationships are strained, but Bryson is still on speaking terms with his parents. From what I’ve

learned they all went to the same high school, and Xem and Madden found Bryson after putting up a flier to find new band members.

“His childhood home was near the precinct,” Xem says, staring outside again. “But his parents don’t live on this side of the train tracks anymore. Bryson bought them a nice home with the first paycheck he got.”

I nod, agreeing with how very Bryson that sounds.

“And they’ll be at the concert tonight?”

Xem nods, falling silent again. Just when I think this is the only answer I’m going to get from him, he adds: “Mom, dad, little brother and sister. You’d never know where they come from or that Bryson was part of their family if nobody told you.”

I squint, because I don’t know what he means with that statement, but I decide to ask Bryson himself instead of hearing it from Xem. Maybe I’ll even get to meet them tonight. Surely they have backstage passes?

Before I know it we’re back at the stadium, and Xem storms out of the car, heading towards the bus, passing the other guys who are standing outside of the bus smoking all together.

The next breath I take is deeper than the one before. I’m relieved he’s home safely, even if the concept of home is a huge bus on wheels and I still don’t understand what has happened today. We’ve got an hour until they go on, so let’s just make it through the evening, and then we’ll cross whatever bridge we have to when we get to it.

The concert that evening is uneventful. If you’d had told me weeks ago that I would become desensitized to the chaos that is a 4A concert, I would’ve laughed in your face. But once you see how things go from the wings, it really starts to lose their magic. The crowd in Missouri, where we are tonight, is the same as it was in Nevada.

The only thing that stands out that evening is the group of people backstage that I’ve never seen. A man in his mid forties and an equally old woman watch the concert from a distance.

Their clothes scream money, and they're so out of place they look uncomfortable. They have two children with them, a boy and a girl, around the age of ten if I'd have to guess. They're perfectly dressed as well.

"Those are Bryson's parents," Keshia whispers during half time. Pip is sleeping soundly on her back, safely secured by the magic wrap that Keshia uses every concert. I know nothing about babies and raising them, but I've never seen one of the biker ladies use a wrap like that to carry their children, they all used strollers.

"You think I can go say hi to them?" I ask, letting my eyes fall on them. I'm not exactly sure who I'm telling them I am exactly, because I can't say I'm the sort of fuck buddy possibly something more to their son and also the rehab nurse for Madden.

"I think they'll prefer it," Keshia whispers conspiratorially. "This isn't really their scene."

So I walk over, making sure I look non threatening and approachable, because all four of them look like fish out of water here.

"Hello," I say.

All eyes turn on me. Bryson is a mix between his parents. He's got the pretty whiskey colored eyes from his mother, who has long blond hair, perfect eyebrows and botoxed lips. The shape of Bryson's face? That's all his dad. He's handsome, having a full head of dark hair and pretty blue eyes. It's a killer combination.

"Good evening," his dad says.

"My name is Evan, I'm a friend of Bryson. It's nice to meet you."

The little girl gives me a once over. She's dressed immaculately in a frilly dress with a lace border and shined shoes.

And she does a fucking curtsy.

I don't know how to respond to that. I've lived with an MC for two years, I've been a nurse, who never treated anyone differently than I wanted to be treated myself. I don't know what to do with a little kid who curtsies to me. Do people even do that nowadays? Is she like some sort of princess?

So I use the tops of my fingers to wave at her.

"Bryson is doing amazing, right?" I ask the kids, and they both shrug. When I see that both of them have earplugs in, I realize they probably are here because they feel like they have to be, instead of actually being here to enjoy the music and seeing their brother thrive.

The little boy has some papers in his hands, his eyes going over the lines. "What are you reading?" I ask him, genuinely curious what could possibly be so interesting you're bringing it to a rock concert.

"Latin nominative cases," he says flatly, his eyes never leaving the papers. "I've got a test tomorrow, and Tommy Jacobson is trying to get valedictorian over me."

I have absolutely no idea how to respond to that, because I have no clue why someone around the age of ten would be running for valedictorian in the first place, and I decide there and then that these aren't my people, and that if I'm not forced to play along with them, I won't. I quickly rush back to Keshia and the still sleeping Pip when I get the chance.

They leave immediately after the concert is over, without even talking to Bryson. Which is something I don't understand. When I tell Bryson, he shrugs, takes me by the hand and leads me to the top of the bus where he lights up before he lies down.

"I don't know any other way," he says.

It doesn't match with what I saw in town that day. People who come from a place like that don't end up like Bryson's parents. It's like they're strangers. When I tell him so, he shrugs again.

"They were young when they had me. Fifteen and sixteen. Too young if you ask me. But they did everything themselves,

as best as they could. They went to school, they worked, and they took care of me, with as little help from my grandparents as possible.”

He takes a few drags from his smoke, the sound of the cherry crackling down the only thing I hear. I don’t break the silence – it’s a language between the both of us that I’ve come to understand, and where it used to make me uncomfortable, it now feels like a warm blanket.

“When I got my first big paycheck, I bought them a house. It was a nice house, and if you take into account where they came from, working in a diner and a garage, living paycheck to paycheck, it was an awesome house. And do you know what they did?”

I shake my head, waiting for the worst.

“They went to college. Both of them. They always wanted to, and they always had the brains to do it, they just never were in the right place at the right time.”

“That’s... the last answer I expected you to give me.”

He nods, staring into the clear Missouri sky.

“They both got their degrees, bought another house, an even bigger and better house, and had my brother and sister.”

The silence between us tells me everything I need to know. Somewhere along the way, they got their lives together, and they forgot all about Bryson.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN



“But you smell,” I try, grabbing Evangaline’s hand and pulling her towards me, trying to convince her to come into the shower with me.

“That’s the absolute worst pickup line to use on a girl, ever,” she counters, scrunching her nose.

“I’ve never had to resort to pickup lines,” I sulk. I’m used to women lining up for me and picking whoever the fuck I’m feeling. This crush I’m having is inconvenient and a lot of hard work. If this is what the average man has to go through to find love, I pity them.

“Telling women they smell probably isn’t the best way to go at it.” Her voice is stern, but her eyes are smiling.

“Hitting on your employees isn’t advisable with any kind of pickup line,” Angel says from behind me. I drop Evan’s hand

and turn towards our communications manager who is in our bus for some reason. She usually isn't. She's always in the third bus, making sure we don't have to deal with our own socials and stuff like that. She arranges the few interviews we give and she handles any kind of backlash from the stuff we do say that gets twisted by the press.

"You smell that?" I half whisper, leaning into Evangaline.

"Oh for fucks sake, didn't we just say that telling me I smell isn't going to get into my pants?"

I snort. "No, I meant trouble. Whenever Angel comes over, it means trouble. It smells like whiskey at five am."

"That's what you think that trouble smells like?" Angel asks, flicking the dark strands that come from her ponytail out of her face.

"That's what I usually smell when trouble starts."

Both women start to laugh, but it's the truth though.

"Well, you smelled correctly, maestro," Angel says. She holds out her phone to me, showing me the front page of a big website about celebrities. The headline is "*Goddammit, says 4A's Wolf in response to parent's claim that they made him what he is*".

"So?" I say. There's shit like this in the tabloids about us all the time, I fail to see why it's important enough for Angel to come over and see me herself.

"Did you give an interview I know nothing about?"

I shake my head. "There was an interviewer after the concert last night when Miles and I did autographs, all by ourselves, because Madden, Xem and Bryson always get special treatment when we're here, so you're welcome for pulling the cart by the way, but this lady showed me the interview my parents gave and asked me to comment, and I said 'Goddammit' and I think she quoted me."

Angel sighs, and Evangaline looks confused, and I have to say, I'm kind of team Evan right now.

"This is bad timing," the communication specialist says.

She's started to get me angry. I've said way worse stuff, even when I knew I was going to be quoted. In the grand scheme of things, this isn't even a biggie.

"Why? And why is this so bad? Are we going to tour churches after? Is it the swearing that's the problem?"

Angle shakes her head. "No, that's not the point. I was going to come see you guys anyway today, I just got word from HQ that Europe is a go."

I'd heard rumors that the label was trying to make a European tour happen straight after this cross country tour, but I didn't know it was serious. I like European tours. I like the country, I like the people, and I like the fact that it takes most of the equipment a longer amount of time to arrive at the next destination, giving us more time off between shows.

"Still failing to see the problem."

She gives me a scolding look. "You know your parents have contacts in Europe, and if they pull some strings, certain arenas won't work with us."

Now she's getting me pissed. "So skip those stadiums and pick other ones," I bite to her through my teeth.

"Come on Wolf, you know how the label is."

"The label can stick a cello up its ass."

"Can someone explain to me what's going on?" Evangaline asks, looking as if she's unsure whether she should be here or not and is allowed to ask questions.

Angel turns to her, shutting her eyes for a moment when she tries to explain the situation with my parents.

"Wolf's parents are diplomats. They've been all over Europe, and know all the proper people. People with power, people with influence. They raised Wolf to be the next big classical prodigy, but he chose rock. There was an article a few weeks back, where they claimed they're the reason he is the success he is now. Wolf's 'Goddammit' isn't going to go over well. If they want to, they can pull on some strings, make sure that certain concerts won't happen."

“Surely they wouldn’t do anything so petty?” It’s that statement that makes me fall in love with Evangaline a little harder. She works with people from all walks of life, and still she believes in the best of people. She just doesn’t believe that my parents would do such a thing, and I never want her to change being that way.

I grab her head with both hands and press a kiss to her forehead. “Yes, they would. And I want the records to show that you smell divine and don’t stink at all.”

She looks up at me through her thick eyelashes, and now I really wish I was able to talk her into getting in the shower with me again.

“So now what?” I ask Angel.

“Now we’re going to do some damage control.”

I do not like the sound of that. The way my stomach squeezes fully agrees on not liking those words and what they imply I should be doing.

“Meaning?”

“Call your parents, tell them you’ve been misquoted, something like that.”

“You mean lie?”

“Yes, lie your fucking ass off.”

“Do you really think his parents will even read this article?” Evangaline asks, staring at the site again. She has a point, because my parents will never be the kind of people who read tabloids. But knowing how the rest of the world works, I know for a fact the article will be copied and quoted elsewhere, and it will reach one of my parent’s friends, who will then show my parents and then we’ll really have a problem.

“Unfortunately,” I tell her, “They always find out. Rat bastards.” Then I turn to Angel, giving her my most innocent, pleading look. “Can’t we send them cookies? With a card? And flowers.”

“No.”

“How about a basket full of mini muffins?”

That at least earns me half a smile. “You know it works best when they hear from you directly,” Angel says.

“Ugh.”

Evangeline gives me this pitying look, and if it wasn't so damn cute I would've hated it. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“Yes, be my emotional support human for the call and then come have a shower with me.” Might as well make the best of a bad situation. She rolls her eyes, but doesn't say anything to go against me or walk away. So with as much reluctance I can muster up, I grab my phone, searching for the number of my father.

He picks up after the third ring, sadly.

“Wolfgang!” he says, way too chipper. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Father,” I say, forcing the word to come out of my mouth. “I've come to give you a heads up. Last night someone overheard me swearing, after I'd been asked a question about your lovely article. They misquoted me, and now there is an article where they make it sound like I responded to your kind words with the word ‘Goddammit’, and I wanted to let you and mother know they were wrong.” The words taste like ash in my mouth. I hate lying – I've made it my mission to always speak my mind and do what I believe is right. It's the whole reason I ended up breaking with my parents and playing in a rock band. I'm living my truth. But my mouth is speaking lies, and I feel like finding Dolores Umbridge to get that quill of her and write *‘I mustn't tell lies’* over and over again.

“That's very unfortunate, my boy.”

I pray to whatever the damned hell is out there that that's the only response I'm going to get. But it never works out that way. He can never leave it like it is. He always has to exert his power. Over me and my life, over my mother, over the people he works with and everybody that surrounds him. His love for

power enables him to make sure I'm not allowed to play certain stadiums if he just wishes so.

"Perhaps you can do a little solo classical recital, just to show your support to what we said in the magazine," he suggests, or makes it sound like a suggestion. He's using this knowledge to his advantage, and suddenly I understand why it's so important to make this phone call before the message about going to Europe goes out. If he'd known that and I called after, he'd have pressured me into doing it. Now all he can do is suggest.

Evan grabs my hand, stroking the back of it with the pad of her thumb, and it gives me the strength to inhale deeply and keep my calm. I should consider starting my mornings with yoga and meditation, because something tells me I'm going to be needing it. Certainly now our partying days seem to be left behind us.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to do that. We're crazy busy with the tour, and there are some things in the works that will not work with having a private classical recital. I'm very sorry. I just wanted to be the one to tell you, so there wouldn't be any misunderstanding between us."

My father hums.

"Did you know the New York Philharmonic will be looking for a first violin soon?"

"That sounds like a wonderful opportunity for someone," I manage to answer while keeping my calm. "I have to go now, father. Give my greetings to mother. Bye." And before he can answer me, I end the call.

My heart is beating like crazy, and I feel dirty. Like I just sold my soul. It's kind of rock if you think about it, but it doesn't feel good. I actually think I'm smelling myself. Of betrayal.

Oh, the things we do for art.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



“Nana,” Pip demands, pointing at the breakfast bar in the hotel we’re at. I’ve got the little kiddo on my arm, and I’m giving into her every whim. I’m just thankful she accepts me again. Right after I got back from rehab, she wanted to be held by me, but I didn’t believe that she actually remembered me. Now? I’m quickly becoming her favorite again. As it should be. Just don’t tell Xem, because those two have a bond nobody can tip.

I hand the kid a banana, and she starts bouncing in my arms, because she can’t open the thing herself. By the time I hand her the fruit without the peel, she gives me a big sloppy kiss.

My ego at being the best uncle this kid has is being stroked once again.

A tired looking Keshia joins me at the breakfast bar, holding her hands out to Pip, who quickly hides in the crook of my

neck. “Come here, you terror, your diaper needs changed.”

“No,” Pip squeaks, holding onto me as if that’ll save her. Which it kind of does.

“I’ll change her after breakfast,” I say, and I kind of think I’m being played, because Pip fervently nods at her mother with her big Bambi like eyes.

“It’s your funeral,” the woman says. Her hair is freshly done in nice, neat lines of cornrows. While we have people for hair and make up on staff, Keshia tends to go out to salons that specialize in black hair. And she always comes back looking stunning, so she must know what she’s doing.

She starts making a bowl with granola, fresh fruit and yogurt for breakfast. It’s easy to give into all the unhealthy choices, eating waffles and bacon every morning, but we’ve been doing this for too long to fall for that. Getting the weight off is harder than putting it on, even when you’re burning a ton of calories while performing on stage.

“How you doing, babe?” she asks me, adding some chocolate chips to her healthy breakfast.

I take Pip, her banana, my own breakfast and Keshia to a table at the other side of the room. We sit down before we get into the conversation.

“I’m fine,” I say, not looking her in the eye, but staring down at my plate filled with egg white omelets and spinach.

She lays her hand on top of mine, squeezing until I finally lift my eyes and look at her. She doesn’t just look at me, she sees me. Like, really *sees* me. I sigh, giving Pip the second half of her banana before I get into it and receiving another big sloppy kiss from the toddler for it.

“It’s... hard, sometimes. I’m okay, you know. I’m sober, and I’m enjoying life more and more. But there are times when I’m just ashamed of choices past Madden made. I’m most ashamed when I think about how you all saw me. How I was sure I was getting away with everything, while you probably saw more than I care to admit.”

She scrunches her face when she hears me say that. “We all knew something was going on, M, but we were all oblivious to how bad it really was as well. We were all busy, all focusing on our own lives.”

“You have a toddler to take care of,” I say in her defense, but she shuts me up by shaking her head.

“That’s no excuse, Madden.”

“I was really good at putting up a front,” I say, pushing the food around on my plate. Suddenly my appetite is disappearing. Keshia’s food goes untouched as well. We look at each other over the table, locking eyes.

“So, Evan...” Keshia says, the corner of her mouth tilting up.

“What about Evan?” I ask, ignoring the way my heartrate just picked up.

“She’s working out quite nicely for you?” she says, leaving room for interpretation on what it is she means exactly. I can’t bullshit Keshia though. She’s seen it all, she’s heard it all, she’s been here for most of it. She’s like my sister, and I couldn’t even lie to her if I wanted to.

“She’s... frustrating.” My brow is furrowed, and my heart melts when Pip gently lays her hand on my cheek, giving me comfort I didn’t even know I was looking for. “She’s everything I could possibly look for in a girl and everything I can’t have right now. Besides, she seems pretty preoccupied with Bryson. And Wolf.”

“Don’t underestimate the way she looks at you,” Keshia says, pointing her spoon towards my face.

“But isn’t that a problem in itself? That she looks at people other than me?”

Keshia scoffs. “Like you’re one to talk. You lost your virginity to the same girl as Xem. From what I’ve heard you’ve had sex with a girl while Miles was doing someone else on the other bed in the room. You don’t believe in regular monogamy. So why hold her to that standard when you don’t hold yourself to it?”

She's right.

She's absolutely right.

"I'm not allowed to date," I say, my voice smaller than it usually is.

"Pssh."

"Pssh," Pip repeats, even trying to mimic the hand gesture Keshia was making, waving my remark away. I chuckle, taking a bite of my breakfast.

"So what you're saying is, quit being a little bitch, and just go for it?"

"What I'm saying," she says as she gives me a stern look, "is mark your words whenever you're around my kid, get the girl, don't worry what anyone else is doing, and change Pip's diaper."

"Aye, aye, ma'am."

Evan comes out of her room, her signature jeans on, wearing a deep purple t-shirt with a picture of Jim Henson's The Dark Crystal on it. Her hair is still wet, but already fastened in one of her usual intricate braids. Her face lights up the moment she sees me, rushing over towards me and giving me a hug.

"Had a good sleep?" I ask.

"I was out cold. But I had this really vivid dream, where I had to walk up a mountain, and I was part Hobbit, and part Smeagol, and then when I was all the way up, up, up the windy stairs of the mountain, I fell into the lava. And I remember when I was falling down that I was thinking that it was just a dream, and I should wake up right now, but then I didn't, and I panicked, and then I suddenly was in a bathroom, because I needed to pee really badly. So I did. But after peeing, I still felt like I needed to pee, until finally I woke up with a really full bladder."

I snort, staring down at this tiny yet perfect girl. And I realize that I love the living shit out of her.

Actually, love her.

Which is freaking terrifying, because I don't do love, and I shouldn't do love right now, I should focus on my sobriety.

So I do the only reasonable thing.

"Come to Europe with us," I say.

"What?" she says, little lines of confusion between her eyes. "How is that an appropriate response to my Ludacris dream?"

It isn't. I know it isn't. Because she can't read my mind. So I shrug. "I don't think there's an appropriate response to your dream. Except maybe don't watch Lord of the Rings any time soon again?"

She smiles.

"When is Europe happening?"

"I think it's in about two months. We finish this tour off, have like three days of nothingness, and then we're going to England."

"Glastonbury?" she asks me hopefully.

"Nah, still on the bucket list, though."

She's quiet, which is kind of unusual after asking a question. "You're doing well," she finally says.

"That's not a proper response to my question," I say, mimicking her own words.

She winks. "How do you feel?"

And I know why she asks, I understand, I'm not stupid. What I'm failing to understand is why she is hesitant to just say yes. Getting paid to travel through Europe should be anybody's dream really, yet she seems to have to think it through. Is she getting too attached while she doesn't want to? Is it the multiple guys pining after her? Is Xem wanting to get rid of her finally doing her in?

Am I really just a job for her?

"I'm doing fine," I say. "The cravings are manageable, and when nobody is trying to shove drugs in my face the tours can

be done. It's exhausting though. I never noticed how exhausting touring is."

"That's because you were always getting chemical energy."

Now it's my turn to take some time to think things through. "I don't feel like I need to use any of that stuff when you're around."

She catches my eye, stares at me for a moment, and then looks away, staring at a wall at the far side of the corner, biting her lip every now and then.

"I don't have a passport," she says, and I'm wondering why she's looking so worried. We've taken care of her on every step of the way on this tour, and she's fought Vic and Jay and everyone else almost every step of the way, because she felt like she could do it all herself. Is this another one of those things?

"You can probably arrange that if you want to come along," I say, trying to rein in my hopefulness and to not sound too eager. The idea of flying across the world and touring every major city in Europe without her is making me sick to my stomach.

She sighs. "Did you talk about this with the other guys?"

I shake my head. "I kind of figured it was implied."

She rolls her eyes, because I can see how things like this might go wrong if they're not properly talked through. "Does management even want this? They pay my salary and shit."

This time I roll my eyes.

"I'll pay you myself if I have to, and they'd much rather have a sober lead vocalist who's performing than one who's back in rehab and not singing at all."

She nods. My heart is beating like crazy, because I feel like she's about to say she'll join us.

"If you can get everyone on board I'll go to Europe with you," she gives in. There are still traces of worry on her face, and we'll have to talk things through to see what they really

are about and work things out before leaving. For now, this is enough though.

“You didn’t sing when you were at the facility,” she states out of nowhere.

I shake my head.

“Why?”

I fall silent, because I don’t think there’s a short answer to it. For one, I didn’t feel like singing. I never liked singing on my own. I like the band, and the brotherhood, and creating something together. I’ll never be an artist who wants to go solo, because I don’t enjoy my own company. It’s the chemistry all of us have that makes what we do work. First, it was shared misery between Xem and me, and Bryson fit that pattern perfectly, coming from the same shitty neighborhood with the same shitty problems and the same need to get the hell out of there and make something of ourselves. Miles might not have known those problems, but his need to feel part of a group drove him to be great, and he just matched our vibe. And the moment I heard Wolf play in that subway station, I could practically taste his loneliness, his need to belong somewhere and to create.

That’s what I like about music. Not just listening to my own voice.

Yeah, I’ve come to learn to channel my emotions by singing it all out, and I don’t need all the guys to do that. But performing and making my music will always be something that is done in a group setting, and not on my own.

I don’t tell her all of this.

She’s observing me, with that knowing look on her face that she gets whenever she seems to be reading my mind. It’s a patient and curious look, like she can literally see what’s going on inside of me.

I just give her the short answer. As long as I feel like she’s keeping secrets from me, like the reason why she would be hesitant to go to Europe with us, I’m allowed to keep certain things to myself as well.

“Didn’t feel right, “ I finally say. “Going into rehab I was just Madden, who had the same problems as all the people that were there too. If I would’ve been singing all the time, I would’ve been Madden St. James. And for once I didn’t want to be.”

Slowly, she nods.

We’re at a crossroads. We both know the other is keeping things back, and we’re both pretending we’re okay with it without actually being okay with it. If we want to move forward from this, we’ll have to talk about it some time soon.

But not today.

Today is the day that she agreed to come to Europe with us, with me, and Keshia made me see that I might have feelings for Evan and I will be able to pursue them.

Some day.

But not today.

Today we pretend everything is normal, we go our usual way.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE



“Hey,” a female voice says from the opening of my doorway. A quick glance tells me it’s Evan’s warm voice. She’s dressed in jeans and a 4A shirt with a knot on her side. Seeing her in our merch makes me unbelievably happy. Her hair is in one of her signature braids, and her face looks naturally gorgeous as ever.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” I respond earnestly, getting up from the bed I was lying down on.

The way I can make a smile appear on that woman’s face is pure magic.

“You clean up nicely yourself,” she says. I’m in my tiny bedroom, trying to find the rosary beads I want to wear to tonight’s show. I’ve already put on a pair of black skinny jeans, deciding it was a look, and kept it at that. I might add some army boots, because I feel like wearing them. Nobody

ever told me that getting dressed was such an intuitive thing. The people who went to fashion school that try to help me while putting together outfits usually end up extremely frustrated with me. And I'm not even sorry.

"What can I help you with?" I ask her, my eyes roaming over her body while both my head and my cock start getting ideas of their own.

"I just got back with Vic, should be getting my passport soon."

"Ah, yes, Europe."

Her eyes light up, she seems excited. Is it the prospect of leaving the country? She's told us multiple times that before this tour she hadn't even seen that much of America, let alone the rest of the world. It's exciting to see the world again for the first time through her eyes. Touring and seeing everything has numbed me for the enjoyment of traveling.

"So you'll be stuck with me a little while longer," she says, her plump lip disappearing between her teeth.

"Sounds like heaven," I say before the filter between my mouth and my brain can be activated.

And before I can feel self aware about it, she throws herself in my arms. She stands on the tips of her toes while I bend down and she attacks my mouth.

I'm just a man. I can only be so strong.

So I give her everything that she wants.

Our lips seek each other out. What starts as a sensual kiss quickly evolves into something dirty and full of desire.

I didn't plan on this. For the first time in my whole miserable existence I wanted to woo the woman. I wanted to do good by her. But this pull? This connection between us? I can't fucking fight it. It's stronger than my willpower. And after all, I'm just a man.

I'm unsure if Evangaline is just a woman, because right now she feels like a goddess, using her power on me, binding me to her, heart, body and soul.

If she wants me to stop, I will, but if by any chance she wants this as much as I do, then there's no holding me back.

Fuck, we've been on tour for weeks, and I haven't touched a girl at all. Does she realize how fucking rare that is? I like playing with women. Women like playing with me. We're bound to have a good time, have fun, it's a sure thing. But I've not had any interest in it, because this tiny woman with those rare purple eyes holds a spell over me that leaves me longing for her like a man wanting water in the middle of the desert.

Her hands roam over my abs, her look heated.

I'm not sure what changed, why she's giving in now, but I know it's everything I ever wanted. I move my hands, letting them roam over her bare shoulders, feeling out her collarbones, until I finally lift her chin, tilt her head, and lock eyes with her. Her teeth graze that plump bottom lip of her heart shaped mouth, and I dive deep and take it between my own lips. I'm feeling a little feral, wanting to mark her as mine, keep her to myself – even if I know that's not what is happening right now.

She's with Bryson as much as she is with me, and I'm not even sure that's something she's committed to or if she's just having a good time. It's like I'm addicted to her, and I'm willing to crawl over the floorboards on my bare knees to find the scraps that I might've dropped, just getting my hands on anything I can. And for a moment we seem to be on the same page. She wants me as much as I want her.

A soft moan leaves her lips, and my already half hard cock stirs alive.

I want to make her see fucking starbursts and rainbows. I want to make her feel so good she forgets her own name and will need rehabilitation to learn it again. I want to earn the right to know all her secrets.

My hands roam over her body, not bothering to stick to all the proper places, because I want to feel it all. She's touching me like she wants to merge our bodies as well. Our tongues mingle as if they've never done anything else in the world, like we were born to do this, and a kiss has never done this to

me. A kiss has always been a shortcut to getting a girl into bed, but I could spend a lifetime doing just this and be perfectly fine. The way her body responds to my touch makes her my favorite instrument, and that's quite the compliment.

"Fuck this shit," she half whispers, half moans when our kiss breaks, her hands finding the button of my pants, fumbling with them, because these pants are tight. When I try to help her, she slaps my hand away. Her look becomes feral, giving me shivers.

Once she manages to get the button undone, my dick springs free and bobs against my belly as she struggles with getting my pants down. Her eyes fall on my hardened cock, and the way her eyes seem to be lighting up makes me share the fierceness I just saw in her eyes.

"Why do you have to wear fucking skinny jeans?"

"Unwritten rules for rock stars," I answer, hesitantly helping her and relieved that she lets me. At least my boxers won't cause any trouble since they're not here.

"Well, I think you should start wearing pants that are easier to remove."

"But these make my ass look great," I joke, but she quickly shoots a look at my ass.

"They look great without pants, why don't you just go naked from now on?"

"You convince the rest of the guys," I say, pressing quick open mouthed kisses against her neck. "I've been trying to go nude for years, but somehow they never seem as excited as you do."

She laughs, pecks my mouth, and then grabs my ass with both hands. Her mouth finds a path down, from the sensitive spot beneath my ear, to the side of my neck, the hollow of my throat. She kisses, nips, licks and bites from my collarbone to my nipple, looking up through her thick eyelashes as she does so, almost making me go completely ballistic, and furthers her descent. She licks my happy trail down and goosebumps appear all over my skin.

Damn Evangaline to hell, she's going to be my undoing. We all knew it the moment she walked in. For everyone besides Madden she was going to mean trouble. And damn if it isn't true.

By now she's on her knees, pressing quick pecks all around the back of my dick that jumps happily with the attention it's hoping to be getting soon. Its prayers are heard, because she licks me from base to tip with a flat tongue, circling my crown.

A slur of curses falls out of my mouth when she takes me in her mouth and the wet, hot perfectness nearly blinds all my senses other than pure bliss. Her hand grabs me firmly, the other still holding onto my ass as if she's trying to steady herself with it.

I need one of my hands to steady myself against the wall, because I'm about to topple over from the lack of oxygen being pumped to my head. My other hand finds her head, pushes in her hair, and holds on. It's more of a caress, a need to be close to her, than it's to get me off. But the way she moans when I do so tells me she wouldn't mind me taking over.

Usually that would've been enough incentive for me to go for it, but I don't want to fuck things up with this woman. I want to do right by her, and the fact that she's sitting on her damn knees in front of me is a service I didn't think I'd ever really deserve.

"Want it rough, love?" I say, but the way it leaves my mouth sounds more like a grunt.

She moans again, the vibrations sending pleasure straight up my spine, my balls drawing up. I'm not sure what she's expecting of me in terms of stamina, but these months of flirting and not getting any will likely mean that this isn't going to last.

I grab her hair by the roots though, harder than before, but still not anywhere near hurting her. Instead of backing up, she seems to be even more in it.

She starts bobbing my dick, setting a rhythm I follow with my hand, and I wonder what she's made of, because it's a mix between pure fucking magic and sinfilled fires from hell, bound to make me blow my load like a damned teenager.

And there's so much I want to do to her before this end.

But in some cataclysmic cosmic joke, someone knocks on my door. "Wolf, gotta be backstage in five," Jay calls, and I want to strangle him. How much do they really need a violin player? I can just sit this one out right? I mean, Madden went away for five months, surely they can manage without me for a night?

I know this isn't my rational brain thinking. This is the brain that's currently hitting the back of Evan's throat thinking.

She lets me go with a plop though, giving me a wink when she calls out: "He'll be there in five, he's coming."

I roll my eyes before I slam myself back in her mouth again, and she chuckles with my dick in her mouth and starts sucking again. Picking up the pace, I make her head go up faster and faster, feeling the telltale signs of an oncoming orgasm. There's a tingling at the base of my spine, my balls drawing up, and before I can put into words that I'm going to come, I grunt and moan, and start shooting my load. Damn, that's bad form, but fuck if I give a shit right now, I'm too busy being in heaven.

She lets me go with a plop, and I spill the last of my cum on her face, before she takes me back in, sucking my sensitive tip clean.

I have no idea what I did right in my life to end up in this situation, but here we are anyway – my knees weak, my balls empty, my dick deflating, my head in shambles and my heart full.

The moment I come back to my senses, I almost decide to say fuck it all to the concert when I see her purple eyes look up at me with a hunger I'm willing to satisfy and my cum still on her face. I wipe the drop off with the pad of my tongue, which she quickly sucks dry. I just can't with this woman.

She gets up from her knees, and I take her head in both my hands, kissing her hard on the lips. The corners of her mouth turn up while her hands button my pants again.

“Thanks, love...” I start, but it isn’t even close to what I want to say.

She’s pushing me out the door before I can finish saying my piece of mind. “Go on, get to the stadium. I need to clean up, I’ll be there in a bit.”

She’s making sense, even if every cell in my body is telling me at the top of their lungs to stay, *stay*, STAY. I shake the thought off, blow her a kiss, turn around and rush to the stadium.

Good thing this is only the beginning of our masterpiece.

CHAPTER FIFTY



Wolf leaves the room, and the door closes with a bang. A smile covers my face, and I don't think it will be disappearing anytime soon. I'm leading a life right now I never could've imagined, being on the road with a rock band, about to go to Europe with them. I actually get to see something of the world.

But the thing that actually makes me the most happy are the people that are filling my life.

After falling in love with Nathan, he made me break all contact with my family and friends. And after having been away for two years, and presumably being dead, I never got back in contact with them.

Too ashamed.

But I don't want to put them in danger as well. I was already out of their lives, so it was just easier to keep it that

way. There are days where I don't understand how in the hell it got so far that I stopped talking to them. The rational part of my brain says that Nathan had something to do with that.

Because what I've come to realize on this tour, being surrounded by people twenty four-seven, is that I'm a people person. I thrive on being with others. Having a real human connection with them, brightening up each other's lives. It's probably the reason why I drowned myself in work after surviving Victorious.

While I didn't feel safe enough to go out and make friends, I could be meaningful to the people that needed me in that rehab center. It's what I'm still doing now. Yes, I'm here to keep Madden on the straight and narrow, but it's become more than that. I've made myself a new family, with new friends. Which is something I never counted on happening again.

Making me the luckiest girl ever.

Wolf and I being interrupted in a situation that would definitely have led to something more doesn't even make me any less lucky. Am I left with a set of lady blue balls? Absolutely. Doesn't mean we can't finish what we started another time though.

My belly flutters when the prospect of what could potentially happen between us registers. I'm *really* curious to what that man and his devious mind can come up with.

Inhaling deeply I let go of all my crazy sexual urges and decide to grab my phone and head to the stadium. Madden will expect me in the wings for when the show starts, and even if he didn't want me to be there, I would want to be there myself. Seeing them perform has become one of my favorite pastimes, although I have to admit I enjoy the private concerts more than the ones I have to share with literally thousands of people at a time.

I'll take all the time I can get though.

I rush into my room, thinking about where I left my kicks so I can put them on when I see something, making my heart stop. There's a note on my bed, and I don't know how the hell

it got there. I pick it up, only to see some words quickly scribbled down. "*Kitten, run. D.*"

Fuck.

When I look outside I see a row of motorbikes standing near the stadium. I don't know how Dominic got here, I don't know how he managed to leave me a note, but I do know that I need to get out of here, as fast as possible. The thing is that I'm paralyzed by fear, except for the shaking of my hands. The note trembles, my vision blurry.

And then it's like my mind makes a decision to fucking fight and flee.

Crumbling the note, I put it in my back pocket. I need to gather my things. There isn't that much stuff, just my clothes and stuff like that. All my real belongings are back in storage in Los Angeles and I doubt I'll ever go back to gather them. They belong to a different life, to a different me. And now I'm on the precipice of a new life again.

Quickly grabbing my duffel bag from one of the drawers beneath the bed, I start pushing all my stuff in. It's mostly clothes. A few little trinkets. My bag of shower supplies. Some make up.

It's quite a hollow and boring life when you see it come together like this.

With the taste of Wolf still in my mouth, I take three panicked seconds to look around at my now empty tiny bedroom. Swallowing hard, I say goodbye to a part of my life that I never could have predicted to have existed.

I give myself a minute to be sentimental. A minute to process all of this. A minute to say goodbye, before leaving and never looking back, no matter how bad it's going to hurt.

I glance inside Xem's room, finding a pigsty, baseball caps lying all over the place, his bed unmade. No, I'm not going to miss the arguments, I'm not going to miss having to defend myself being here every five seconds. But I felt like we were getting somewhere after picking him up from the police station. And I mourn for the friendship that never even got a

chance to be. Even if he's still one of the biggest assholes I know.

Bryson's room is completely different. It's neat, and tidy. Everything is in order, has its place. There's a guitar standing in the corner of his room, a handful of picks on his nightstand. Big headphones right next to it. The way his hands roamed over my body and touched me when we were together is something I'll take with me, even if it takes the rest of my life to forget about it. Silence will never be the same after Bryson, it'll always be something more. It will never feel hollow again.

My breath starts to hitch, because it's almost getting too difficult to go away.

I don't even have to walk into Wolf's room to find his mess. There's a shirt and pants lying in his doorway, his smell still covering me, his taste still in my mouth, the warmth of his body still on my skin. And the idea that I'll never get to see where this chemistry between us is going makes me feel empty. It might have really been something. I wonder if I'm ever going to smile for someone the way he managed to make me smile – I highly doubt it.

My hand lingers on the doorknob to Madden's room. I can't make myself do it. I refuse to literally open that door and acknowledge everything that I'm leaving behind once I run away from here. I'm going to break his heart, leaving without any explanation, right after I told him I would join him in Europe. I might have started out as his caregiver, but somewhere along the road, he became the one that started giving me more than I gave him. Something I'll never get to thank him for.

Tears fill my eyes, lost in memory and frustration of being forced into this position.

Outside something bangs, taking me back to the here and now, and the hurt in my heart changes back into panic.

Nathan is coming, and I need to get out of here.

I might not be taking a lot of stuff as luggage, but I'm taking a crapload of emotional damage with me when I rush

towards the exit of the bus. I can't look back, I've got to run now. My pulse is racing, and when I see movement in the second bus, I run. I don't want to see whether it's Miles with Keshia and Pip, or Jay or Vic who are doing something in there. I run, and I don't look back.

I run and I keep going.

Earlier that day, when we went out to get my passport, I saw a bus station. So I run, and I keep on running until I get there. I run, so I can keep on running.

I run so I can live, even if I leave my life behind on the tour bus of a rock band.



EPILOGUE
Dominic

There's complete chaos when we get to the concert. Ever since Spikes saw Evan at Loveland and word got to Nathan that she's still alive, he's been on a mission. I've been raised in an MC, I've been through stuff, I've seen shit. But I've never seen the way Nathan is acting right now, and he's scaring me.

You'd think I'd be scared for my own life, because I helped Evan get away and that bit of information is bound to get out now that he knows Evan is alive. But I'm not afraid for myself, I'm afraid for her. Being in an MC shortens your life expectancy. That's not where she belongs though, she's always been meant for bigger and better things. She never should have been involved with Nathan.

"We need in," Nathan says, pressing a gun against the head of an unexpected guard at the back entrance of the concert. The man starts shaking, a wet spot appearing in his pants. Damn. He's a trained security guard and this is how he

responds to a threat? I'm willing to bet he hasn't been in a high risk situation before today.

"Now," Nathan says, pressing the gun even harder onto the side of the guard's head. With shaking hands he retrieves his keys from his undoubtedly warm and wet pants. Nathan takes the keys and opens the door, pushing the guard inside in front of him. I'm right behind my brother, staring at the large V on his cut. We're here with one reason, and he doesn't care if people know. There's nothing stealthy about this. He's here for Evan's life, and won't stop until he has what he wants. He's always been a man on a mission, stubborn to a fault. I'm not so sure about his motives though. It started with wanting to keep club secrets secret, but Evan evidently hasn't told any of those secrets. No, right now, I just think his pride is hurt because he failed in killing her and he wants to rectify that feeling.

I'm so fucking dead if he knows I left her a note, letting her know we're coming. I just pray to fucking God that she found it.

The concert hasn't started yet, everyone is so busy backstage that they don't even notice a group of bikers barging in. The only one who's aware of us is the guard. Nathan seems to be on the warpath, walking around and looking for her.

But with each passing second that we don't find her, my hope rises that she got my note in time.

"Where is Evan?" the man I recognize as the lead singer asks when we get near.

"She's getting ready," a man holding a violin says. "She's running a little late, she'll be here."

A wolfish smile appears on Nathan's face, who has obviously heard the conversation as well. Grabbing the guard by his shirt on the back of his neck, he makes him turn around, walking straight back to where we came from. Prayers keep going through my head, for her to have gotten the note, for her to have gotten away. Damn, she was never supposed to be in this situation.

“Where do they stay?” Nathan asks once we’re outside, gun pressed under the guards chin.

“B... b.. buses,” he whimpers, tears pooling in his eyes, his lip trembling. I’d be scared shitless too if Nathan would be in my face like this.

“Point me in the right direction,” my brother breathes through his teeth.

The guard lifts a trembling finger and points somewhere in the distance. He’s afraid Nathan will kill him, hell *I’m* scared Nathan will kill him. Nathan brings his face in front of that of the guards, their noses practically touching.

“You’re going to forget we were here. And you’re not going to tell anybody about what a fucking lousy guard you are. Fuck, if you’d have been my prospect I’d have sent you away on day one. So let’s not tell anyone about what a fucktard you are, and we’re going to go away. No harm, no foul. Understood?”

The guard nods frantically, looking like a twenty year old boy suddenly. I’m wondering if he emptied his bladder again, or if he’s all pissed out. My brother roughly pats the guard on his shoulder, squeezing it, his face lighting up like he’s nothing but a harmless piece of sunshine. This is the Nathan that Evan fell for. Hell, this is the Nathan that could be on the cover of a magazine.

But when turns around, his eyes finding the buses in the distance, his face changes, and the demons that reside in him come to the surface.

He strides off, all of the bikers following him.

The buses aren’t secured. Well. You know, the door is locked. But that’s not really a problem for all of us. Bull breaks into the bus, and then all bets are off. Nathan storms inside, hoping to find the woman he once claimed he loved. While I’m putting up a front by following him and acting like I’m trying to find her, I hope she’s long gone, and we’ll never be able to find her.

And it must be karma, because the bus is empty, and she's nowhere.

"Damn it, Evan. Where the hell are you?" Nathan roars when he has figured out he isn't going to find her.

I just pray we won't ever pick up another trail again.

Because I want her to live, and I'm not sure she'll be able to if Nathan ever gets his hands on her.

Authors Note

Yeah, so we're in trouble. I pinky promise it wasn't my intention. This book started with the vision of a girl who liked to have fun. But then there were people who also had to play a part in her story, and they turned out to be all complicated, with backstories and issues and stuff like that.

I did not intend to make this story so angsty. It was supposed to be fun. Well, it is fun, I guess. But there's a bunch of stuff going on as well. And frankly? They turned out to be my favorite parts. Me writing about a rock band? Maybe not the best idea. I know nothing about music. I had to Google terms that most of you probably know by heart. And you know what would be an awesome idea, Kris? Add an electrical violin. Because you *definitely* know everything there's to know about the things. Great idea. Really.

This book has a lot of characters who are easily likable. But it's the ones who aren't that likable that have soon stolen my heart. There's just a lot more trouble coming.

And honestly? I liked writing the asshole. That really brightened up my whole day. So new achievement unlocked? Expect some more assholiness.

This series is going to be a rapid release. The next book, *Breaking Bridges*, will be released April 26th and the third and final book, *Elided Endings*, will be released May 31st.

You can preorder both.

And yes. I like alliteration. Sue me.

I'd love it if you would follow me on any of my socials. I figured out how TikTok works ([krisvancauthor](#)), you can stalk me on Insta ([Krisvancauthor](#)) or you can join my Facebook group ([Kris Vanc Chaos Corner](#)). Want to support Indie authors? Come say hi. Somewhere, anywhere. Leave reviews. Even just a 'This book rocks' would be awesome (and the pun would be greatly appreciated).

Oh, and I borrowed West and Axe from my friend, N. Boeijer. She's busy writing amazing MM novels. Keep an eye out for her and these two lovely dorks.

Anyway,

See you soon.

X,

Kris

Acknowledgement

Somewhere around January 2023, somehow, people started picking up my books like crazy. And it's leaving me flabbergasted. That thing I've been dreaming of doing since as long as I can remember? I'm doing that. Well, I didn't think I was going to be writing about polyamorous relationships and I certainly didn't think I was going to break my brain over which hand goes where and *wait how does that work?!* But I was dreaming of putting words to paper, and people reading them.

So that's where I want to start this acknowledgement. You blow my mind. There have been days when total strangers were recommending my book, and I was bouncing through the room trying to show my husband, and he said to stand still, because "*I can't fucking read it that way.*" Anyway, kid in a candy shop, the feeling of the night before my birthday, Christmas morning - all of that.

There's a few people I like to thank. I'll start with the not so familiar, because hey, let's change it up a little. To Victoria, to Kelly, to Ines, to Tamla and to Bernadette. You were those strangers that took a chance on me and didn't let me go, and I'm eternally grateful for that.

To C., who I did not expect or see coming. Who walks alongside me on this path around the world, no matter how long that might or might not be, how many people might join us along the way, and makes me stick to my writing goals.

To R., who's dead wrong about what the best Foo Fighters song is, but I'm glad to call a friend, even if we don't know each other for that long.

Then the usual suspects:

To Bart. I would be lost without you. Frankly, I'm always a little lost. But at least you manage to navigate me through this mess called life. And because you'll never ever read this: Formula One is stupid, I only understand about a third of what you say about rockets and science fiction is just dumb. On the off chance you do read this: I love you, more than words can

ever express, and you know I've got a lot of words. Most of them are rubbish, but they're words anyway.

To Eva, because Babe, I understand, you understand. The future is a scary and uncertain thing, but I'll be there as long as you have me. Which will probably be somewhere until the time we need those phones with huge dial numbers because: we old. I don't know what the friendship equivalent of epic and awesome, of pine cones and candy cane, and *friendmatepackpack* is, but that's what it is. Maybe it's grilled feta in the sunshine.

To Nien, because I think they switched up the left side of my brain with the left side of yours at birth or something like that. You'll probably know better than I do, because I don't know the difference between left and right.

To Robert, because you make my days more bearable on more occasions than you know. Even when No-vember turned out to be a fail.

To my Sparkling Vampire Bitches, because ladies, you're my tribe.

Thank you!