

A man with short brown hair, wearing black sunglasses, a black leather jacket, and a white shirt with a black polka-dot pattern, is holding a red electric guitar. He is looking down and to the left. The background is dark with some bokeh light effects.

DRIVE *me*
WILD

A KINGMAKER ROCKSTAR ROMANCE

DARBY FOX

DRIVE ME WILD

DARBY FOX



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INDIA

“**W**hat do you mean you’re not coming?” My stomach gives a queasy roll and I swallow hard.

I’m waiting for my car, craning my neck around the large man in the plaid shirt in front of me. I don’t see it, but I do catch the man lift his arms and deliberately sniff his pits. I quickly avert my eyes, fixing my gaze on the Ground Transportation sign, breathing in the scents of too many people, hot cement and exhaust from a bus pulling away from the curb. The back of my neck prickles from sweat. I grip the handle of my suitcase tighter, hoping to distract myself from the quell of nausea washing over me, and turn away from the two teenage girls who are eyeing me curiously.

I should be used to it. My entire life has been spent in the spotlight. First my parents’ reality show, then their streaming videos, then my own disastrous foray into the next generation of reality shows. Which is where I met Cody, the most loved video prankster in America, and when we started dating, I became the most hated girl in America. But I was determined to turn that whole mess around. We were determined to turn the whole mess around. Cody and I were moving on to a new phase in our lives, together. Weren’t we?

I tilt the phone up to my lips. “Cody, where are you? I’ve been waiting here for three hours and the flight you were supposed to be on just got in and you weren’t on it.”

There’s a pause on the other end and I hear murmured voices. “Is someone there with you?” A dull throb builds

behind my eyelids and my skin suddenly feels too tight. It's like my body knows what's coming before I hear the words.

"India. I kind of wish I didn't have to do this."

"Do what? I'm in Nashville. I'm about to head to the house you convinced me to buy for the flip project." I wanted to get something in Los Angeles, not that there's much affordable there, but at least I know the city.

"Yeah. I don't know if I can do that whole thing in Nashville anymore."

I blow out a smooth stream of air between my teeth. My shoulders are up around my ears, and I instinctively hear my mother's voice in my head. *Angel wings, down, darling. You don't want to look like a troll.* I hunch forward even more around the phone. "What the fuck are you talking about," I hiss, trying to slow the panic seeping through my body. "I spent all my money on that house. It's my last chance."

"Stop being so dramatic, India."

My teeth grind against each other so hard I'm surprised they don't shatter. "I'm not being dramatic. I'm in a city where I don't know anyone, waiting to grab a car to the house I bought with my boyfriend, sight unseen, and we have six weeks to renovate it. All of my money is tied up in this idea." My whole future is tied up in this idea. I need to turn my reputation around and my plan is to leave reality show drama behind me. No more bad girl. I'll finally get to use my brain instead of my boobs.

I feel someone tap my shoulder and I jerk around. It's the teenage girls I spotted earlier.

"It *is* her! Kaylee!" The girl waves frantically to the other one, as she glances between her phone and my face. "India Rook!!" Her voice rises into a squeal at the end and several heads turn in my direction.

Shit, shit, shit.

The other one, Kaylee, I suppose, runs over, checking her phone too. Her head swivels back and forth. "Is Cody here?" She peers around me like I might be hiding a six-foot-two guy

with dreamy hair and a panty-melting smile behind my back. I frown. These girls look all of fifteen, there better not be any panty-melting happening there.

Of course, at fifteen, I was dating some wannabe star who opened for my dad. I thought I was so grown-up. Bragging to my so-called friends about a real man picking me. I snort inwardly. I wish someone had warned me ten years ago that a 'real' man wouldn't be interested in a little girl. Ugh.

I attempt a smile. Kaylee's eyes widen and I sure as hell hope the stretch of my lips resembles a smile more than the teeth-baring grimace I suspect it is. "He is not here." I wave my phone and the girls giggle excitedly when they see his name on the screen. "But he's on his way." I give them a little wiggle of my fingers and move away, turning the phone off speaker and pressing a pod into my ear.

"Right?" I hiss. "You're on your way?"

"India..."

I hear a commotion and then a female voice rings in my ear. "No, India he's not on his way. In fact, he won't be there at all."

I nearly drop my phone. "Madison?"

"That's right, bitch. I took back my boyfriend, so you can just go ahead and lose his number.

My therapist once told me I should look at my partner's previous relationships as a measuring stick and the sinking feeling in my stomach makes me wish I'd listened to her. I didn't, because it seemed counterintuitive to consider how he would treat me on his way out the door, but right now, I'm pretty sure that door is about to slam in my face.

I have nothing against Madison. She and Cody have the most toxic relationship I'd ever seen in my life, and that's saying something considering who my parents are, but I honestly thought they were done, despite their rabid fanbase telling me otherwise.

"Babe, give me the phone." Cody's voice is soft.

“Babe?” My voice goes dangerously high just as I catch sight of my ride. I stride to the car, yanking on my bag as a wheel gets caught in a gap. “What is going on Cody?” I smile my thanks to the driver who takes my suitcase, and slide into the backseat, ignoring Kaylee and her friend who are holding their phones up in my direction.

“I didn’t want you to have to find out this way.”

My head falls back against the seat. “Find out what?”

“Madison and I are back together.”

I swallow hard. “*We* are together. We have a plan, remember?”

“India. Please. It’s much better for me to be with Madison. She understands how to be in a relationship.”

The comment stings like a whip. I catch my driver’s eye in the rear-view mirror, and quickly look away. Having strangers witness my life isn’t new, but it’s never been entirely comfortable.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, come on, India. I don’t want to get into this.”

“No, Cody, tell me. How is Madison better for you than me?”

A deep sigh echoes through the phone. “How are you feeling right now?”

“Mad as fucking hell, for a start.” I reach back, lift my hair off my sticky neck and twist it into a thick coil, pulling it over my shoulder. The driver turns the air conditioning up, the sharp, cold air hitting my legs from the vents in back.

“Exactly. You’re probably already texting Whitney about your next move. You might be mad, but you’re not devastated about the end of us.”

“You want me to be devastated, Cody? Am I supposed to beg you not to leave me? Seeing as how I’m in Nashville and was waiting at the airport for three goddamn hours for a plane

you never got on, I think the time has passed for me to convince you to do anything.”

“You never loved me. Not the way Madison does. You’re cold. Unemotional. Always looking for the next party, the next best angle to show off your assets. The next guy to prove everyone wants you. Madison is passionate about *us*.”

I bite my tongue, wincing at the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I don’t want to point out the one-sided-ness of his comment or remind Cody about the time Madison’s ‘passion’ put them both in hospital because she drove their car off a road while they were fighting.

“What about the house? I used my savings to buy it.”

“Stop pretending like you can’t go back to mommy and daddy and not have to worry about money.” His voice takes a hard edge. “Keep it. Sell it. I don’t care. This whole idea of yours is too off-brand anyway. Just tell your parents you changed your mind again and they’ll roll their eyes and set you up on some yacht in the Maldives to lick your wounds.”

And there it is. Being with Cody is like having the most delicious looking piece fruit in front of you. It seems picture perfect, but when you take a bite, it’s the farthest thing from perfect. The bitterness almost makes you gag. It’s the one thing that always stood between us. Cody claims I’m a golden girl pretending my life is so hard. I don’t know how many times I told him not to believe everything he sees. But I guess he never really saw me. Or at least the real me. His comment about me not knowing how to have a real relationship burns because it hit so close to home. Maybe I don’t know.

Maybe I’ll never know.

If cold and unemotional is what he expects, that’s exactly what he’ll get. I swallow the lump in my throat. “Fine. Where are the keys? You were supposed meet me here with all the stuff.” I’m an idiot. It’s my name on the deed, my money to pay for it, and somehow, the key was sent to Cody.

“I have a key here. And I guess there’s a spare under a mat or something at the house.”

“Jesus Christ, Cody.” I let out a shaky breath. “You had no intention of ever meeting me here, did you?”

“Madison and I, we belong together. It just took me some time to find my way back to her. It’s nothing against you.”

I nearly gag at the cooing noises coming through the phone. It’s nothing against me? I listened while he talked about how awful she was, how controlling, demanding and jealous she was. How different it was with me. Calm. Well, the joke’s on him because I’m not feeling very calm at the moment. My palms are sweating, and I have this sick feeling in my stomach thinking about the money I put down on a house I’d never seen, for a dream that seems to be slipping through my fingers.

For most of my life I never thought about money or considered how much anything cost. It was just there, or at least the little black card was. But for the last six months I’ve had to rely solely on the funds from my last reality show gig. It’s been a pretty huge wake-up call to realize you took everything in life for granted but at least I’m free.

I can hear Madison telling him to ask me something. My heart thuds. “What does she want?” I tried to summon some anger for her, jealousy, anything, but all I really feel right now is panic. More whispering. “Cody, I’m still here,” I grind out between clenched teeth.

The driver glances back in the rear-view mirror, his eyebrows raised. I muster a sad smile. I get it. It’s tough being a witness to drama you never wanted to be around.

Story of my life.

“India. You don’t have to answer right now, but Madison’s agent thought it would be great for our new show if you could appear on a few episodes.”

It takes me a minute to realize I’m counting the thuds of my heart in my ears. “I’m sorry. What show?”

“You know what? We can talk about this later.”

My throat tightens. “What show, Cody?” I croak.

“Madison and I are doing a new show about getting back together.” He coughs. “It’s, uh, about relationship therapy and stuff.”

“What about our project?” The one I spent all my money on? The one that would drag me up from the depths of reality show purgatory and give me a real chance to do something I love?

“Well, obviously we can’t do the house flip thing together now. And we start filming the relationship show in a few weeks.”

“Is this about getting a better offer? Are you really so pissed off about me having more name recognition than you if it isn’t a show about practical jokes or influencers?”

“It’s not really your name they recognize, is it, India? It’s your parents’ names.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, picturing his smug smirk at the comment. “Why would you want me on your new show?”

“The producer thought it would be fire to work in a few scenes where you try to get me back.”

I nearly choke. “Are you fucking kidding me? You want me to show up as the bad girl who tries to break the two of you up again?” Cody knows how much the last public flogging I got from their rabid fan base impacted me. It was a huge point of contention between us because I wanted Cody to correct the misinformation about me being the one to break them up, and he felt we shouldn’t have to justify our relationship to anyone. Failing to support me publicly should have been the biggest red flag of all and I blindly shoved it out of my way. Instead, I focused on this project, stupidly thinking if we lay low in Nashville the whole thing would blow over.

“I won’t do it.” Anger bubbles up inside me. “And in fact, I’m going to have my lawyer contact your agent to prevent my name from being used on the show.”

“You can’t do that. We were publicly a couple.”

“You can’t just back out of the contract we have for the house project, and yet, here we are apparently.” I jab my finger

into my screen, chipping my nail as I end the call. *I am strong. I will overcome this.* My mother's mantras race through my brain as the driver exits the highway and weaves through unfamiliar streets. Nashville isn't a city I'm very familiar with.

I was here with my father a few times when I was younger, but it's the largest city close to Cody's hometown. He found this stupid property for us, in fact. My hand clenches around my phone. I resist for all of ten seconds before I snatch it back up and open my Instagram, heading to Cody's profile. Sure enough, there's a picture of him and Madison, standing on a balcony, holding hands in front of the sunset. The caption reads: *Sunset with my love. Sometimes we all make mistakes, but true love forgives.* The driver makes a turn and I nearly throw up. There are already thousands of comments. I flick my thumb up, watching the photos blur. He hasn't even taken down the pictures of us together yet. What a farce.

The driver slows, turning onto a street filled with trees and front-yard gardens. This isn't too bad. Finally, he stops, and I blink. Nestled among the beautiful, well-kept traditional homes, like a worm sticking out of an apple, is a large split ranch that has clearly seen better days. I sit for a minute, breathing deeply while I resist the urge to throw my phone out the window. The driver clears his throat and I quickly tap my ride app for tip and review, grateful for the driver's silence as he pulls my suitcase out of the trunk.

I get out of the car on shaky legs, looking around the street. The faint scent of barbecue tickles my nose, reminding me how hungry I am. The homes look cheerful with beautiful lawns, fancy front-porches and old-fashioned streetlights. I couldn't have imagined a more perfect neighbourhood for this project.

And then there is the house directly in front of me. Cody's agent said it was a fixer-upper, all the better to show off our transformation, but this place looks depressed. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to pull this off.

"Will you be all right, ma'am?" the driver asks mildly, his smile tentative. He glances down at my hand, and I realize my

fists are clenched like I'm about to punch something. Cody is lucky he isn't anywhere near me right now.

I roll my shoulders and nod. "I'll be just fine, thank you."

India. We're not always going to be around to catch you when you fall.

What are you talking about? I hit the ground so many times because neither of you were ever around!

The last fight I had with my parents echoes in my head.

I can only rely on myself.

The driver looks like he's about to say something else, but thinks better of it, and turns away, getting in the car and driving off. My fingers hover my phone, ready to call the car back, head to the airport and head home with my tail tucked between my legs. It's fine, right? You can't expect to be happy all the time and in the grand scheme of all the things a person can face in life, my life is pretty privileged compared to most. I can be back in L.A. by tonight, crash at Whitney's and be taking selfies in front of a champagne fountain at some party before the sun rises. Document living my best life so Cody and Madison can't paint a picture of me to suit their new story.

It's what I should do. But how long do I have to wait to live my own story? I bite my lip, shifting from one foot to another, while the sound of children's laughter floats on the air from one of the nearby houses and that barbecue smell I noticed when I stepped out of the car makes my stomach growl. I hold my phone up, tilting my face to catch the light and shake back my hair, the motions as familiar as a boxer falling into fighting stance.

Should I stay or should I go?

NOAH

“**Y**ou don’t need to get married. You need to get laid.” Blaine announces as soon as I tap answer on my phone.

I roll my shoulders and look down at the island where I’ve threaded what feels like a hundred cherry tomatoes, red onion, peppers and chunks of chicken and steak onto skewers for Nana’s book club. I dip the silicone brush into the marinade and dab at the picture-perfect rows. “I’m on speaker.”

“Yeah, and Nana Stella probably agrees with me.”

My band mate is not wrong. As happy as she is to have me visiting in Nashville, my grandmother has been shaking her head over this latest suggestion from the label. To be fair, the label didn’t actually suggest I marry anyone, but after the latest round of incidents highlighting our private lives instead of our music and the upcoming tour, The Suits spoke to Laird, our manager, about one of us having some positive publicity with women for once. I’m the one who actually has had a relationship for longer than five minutes, so Laird hit me up first. It’s not like I honestly mind. I’d much rather be with one woman than have a harem like Blaine, but if I’m going to do it, I’m doing it right.

“I made a list,” I say.

Blaine expels a whoosh of air. “Oh fuck. You’re really thinking about this?”

“Of course I am.” I glance around the kitchen, but I don’t see my grandmother. “Shit’s been fucked ever since we did

that documentary. Slade and Easton Black, Ajax in Chicago and now Tanner and my sister.”

“That looks to be going well.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. The point is, Laird and Vera want some good news story before we leave for Europe.”

“Okay, well what are you even doing in Nashville? I know you’re visiting Nana Stella, but what else? Tell me about this list.”

Heat creeps up the back of my neck. I got the idea from my sister, Sterling, whose sunshine disposition seems to think there isn’t anything that can’t be overcome with a list. She challenged me to do a list of pros and cons whenever I had to make a decision, and when Laird and Vera approached me with this scheme, I tried it. My list ended up showing me what I’d want in a wife. I close my eyes. I don’t even know if I’m ready for that step, but anyone I drag into this fairy-tale romance spin the label wants has to be someone I’d actually consider marrying.

“It’s pretty simple. She’s got to be perfect.”

Blaine snorts. “Of course, Ms. Perfect for Mr. Perfect. Are you tracking measurements, hair color, IQ to make sure your future children are impossibly perfect as well?”

“It’s not really about looks, but attractiveness, which is personal to everyone.”

“Right, ‘cause Lexxie Crux is nobody’s idea of drop-dead sexy.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Lexxie’s all yours, man. If you can keep up.” I’m not a kiss and tell kind of guy, but I did hook up with her in Chicago and it was one of the worst experiences of my life. She’s awesome, but lately she’s into some stuff I couldn’t get behind.

Blaine hums. “This is a first. Mr. Perfect admitting he can’t get it up.”

“I never said I couldn’t get it up, asshole. Anyway, Lexx and I were only ever friends.”

“Okay, so this list. Tell me about Ms. Perfect.”

“I just want someone different. Not a groupie, but I don’t want someone really famous either.” Everyone in L.A. is either looking for fame, or if they’re already in the business, trying to keep it. “Someone without a reputation. Or at least a bad reputation. If she builds schools in Africa or runs an animal rescue or something, that’s okay.”

“Okay, someone who loves kids.”

“I guess.”

“And someone who is kind and compassionate.”

“Yes.”

“And someone who can cook.”

“I can cook. But I would like someone who isn’t always looking for the next party, someone who might enjoy staying in with me.” We roasted Ajax recently for texting us about some history show Natalie turned him on to, but honestly, sharing a pizza and some cheesy show sounds kind of nice.

“Someone who is patient with your schedule?”

“Well, someone who understands it, at least.”

“Okay, loves kids, kind, patient, and low-key. Oh, and is a good girl.”

“Pretty much.” There were other things on the list, including that all important spark. I want to be smacked over the head every time I look at her. I want to feel a burn in my chest when she’s not resting her head there. But I can’t tell Blaine any of that stuff because I’ll never hear the end of it.

“You want a kindergarten teacher.”

“What?”

“Listen, I get it. It’s so hot. Those little cardigans, hair in a ponytail. Gentle discipline when you step out of line. A kindergarten teacher is where it’s at.”

“You are fucked up, Blaine.”

Blaine starts singing a classic I remember hearing whenever Dad was working in the yard. Hot for Teacher.

“Jesus. Shut up. Blaine.”

“You know, we’ve been hitting clubs and parties, but maybe you’re on to something. I should be checking out school field-trips.”

“You’ll get arrested. You can’t be you around little kids, it’s indecent. And seriously, we don’t need an arrest on top of everything else before we leave for Europe.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I guess. Hey, speaking of leaving, Tanner says he thinks you’re getting out of L.A.”

I set aside the chicken skewers and pick up another basting brush for the steak. “Thinking about it.”

“Because of Rachel?”

Rachel is my ex-girlfriend. Or at least I think she’s my ex-girlfriend. The last time we spoke, she told me we’re just on a break, which is confusing as hell. All I know is I could fly back to L.A., pick up where I left off with Rachel, and the label would be happy. Laird keeps telling me Rachel is the perfect woman for what the label wants and between Rachel and Laird I’m kind of tired of everyone thinking they know what’s good for me.

But as perfect as Rachel is on paper, she’s not perfect for me. I want the spark that we sing about in our music. The all-consuming passion. The feeling of drowning, dying, flying. I want all of it. I’ll do what the label says and find a girl with no baggage or bad press, someone perfect, and sweep her off her feet with a fairy tale romance, but I need that spark.

“Bro?”

“Yeah, no. It’s not because of Rachel.” I gather the utensils and dump them in the sink, wiping my hands on a brightly colored towel.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Blaine asks.

I hesitate. I’m close to Blade, meaning Blaine and his twin brother, Slade, but it feels kind of embarrassing to admit I’ve

been afraid to stay in my house since the incident. I wince. I can't even talk about it to myself.

"Or not talk about it," he says, picking up on my silence. "Maybe I should come to Nashville for a bit. The girls are hot in Nashville."

"The girls are hot everywhere, man. Besides aren't you guys at your dad's ranch?" I met the twins at school, same place I met Tanner. Blade's parents had split up and their mother moved them out east. They stayed in touch with their dad though and had to spend some summers home in Texas, which sucked for us when we were building the band. Their dad is cool though and invited Tanner and I to come for a summer when we were in high school. Mom and Dad took care of our plane tickets in return for us doing chores around the house and helping Nana Stella with her baking when she visited. We had a blast. And I know for sure the girls in Texas are downright gorgeous because that was an eye-opening summer for all of us, so it can't be that.

"I am, and I'm bored as fuck. Slade's keeping rancher hours here and Tristan's off god-knows-where with his Seal team. Austin's with the circuit and Connor and Luke are too busy helping Dad with the ranch and keeping Slade out of trouble. I swear, he's bound and determined to get trampled by a bull. Bella's in school and keeps bringing her friends here to pounce on us. I know you guys think I'm a dog but trust me when I say I'm not interested in little girls. I don't care if they all look and act like they're twenty-five, I know the difference, and it's not cool."

"What about Lauren?" Blaine's other sister is a little older than Bella and I remember her and her pretty friends from my last visit. "Is she home with you guys?"

"Lauren is not here right now. She's in Houston on some internship with NASA, but she has a very strict rule that I'm not allowed near any of her friends."

"I can't really blame her."

"Hey, it's not my fault that I took Marilyn to prom and she cried for weeks when I went back to L.A. But it does makes

me think I've exhausted all the resources in Texas.”

“I'm not sure it's possible to sleep with every female in your state.” Although if we're talking about Blaine, I'm sure he's given it the old college try. He's got a one-and-done rule, that puts Ajax, our other bandmate to shame. I think Blaine feels like it's his responsibility to ante up the rock star swagger ever since Ajax fell head over heels over Natalie. It happened so fast. One minute Ajax was pulling himself back from a downward spiral, focusing on a solo project, and the next, he was risking his life for a woman he'd taken one look at and lost his mind. Or heart, or whatever. All I know is Ajax didn't just find a spark, he found a goddamn nuclear explosion, and now he's the happiest we've ever seen him.

But that leaves Blaine at loose ends, and I sometimes get the impression he's terrified the same thing is going to happen to him. Blaine is one of those guys who's always in motion. Like he's afraid if he stops moving, he'll grow roots, trapping him there.

“Maybe not, but it is possible that I've had anyone worth having in the great State of Texas. Definitely out here in cowboy central for sure. I might come track you down anyway. You've got to be dying of boredom without me. Not to mention that Nana Stella's baking puts Jeb's to shame.”

“It'd serve you right if he ever found out you said that.” I pull out one of the chairs by the island and sit, pushing the trays away.

“Listen, Jeb can barbecue the shit out of anything. He could put rocks on that grill and make it taste good. But your Nana stole my heart with her lemon meringue.”

“I don't care if you want to come hang out, but you know Nana's not going to go for you, um, entertaining at her place.”

Blaine huffs. “I can't believe you think I'm such a cretin. If I come down there, I'll be staying at The Joseph.”

I give a low whistle. “Fancy. Did Laird recommend it?” The luxury hotel seems right up our manager's alley.

“That guy’s family probably secretly owns it. And what good is all our money if I can’t throw it around? Besides, it impresses the ladies.”

“I guess your ugly mug needs some sort of draw to convince them to sleep with you.”

“Nah, I’m the good-looking twin.” He pauses. “And after that comment maybe I won’t let you join the party in my suite.”

“Oh, come on. It’s been a while since I dried the tears of the girls who thought they were special to Blaine Adams.”

“Yeah, yeah. I can’t help being so lovable. But all joking aside, are you really looking to leave L.A.? What about recording?”

I tap my leg, uncertainty threading through my body. “I’ll still be there if I need to be there.” I’d talked about this with Laird, and he doesn’t see anything wrong with me flying in whenever I’m needed and staying with the guys, or in a hotel. We also have places in New York, but New York is close to home, and we tend to end up there when we’re not working. I could just live there, but lately I feel like a snake needing to shed its skin. A tight, itchy feeling where I need to be somewhere new.

Maybe I need to be someone new.

Blaine’s right though. We record in L.A. Our scene is in L.A. I should *be* in L.A. I’m not usually the kind of person who rocks the boat.

Standing up, I try to shake off the anxious energy thrumming through me. I pick up my phone and head to the large sliding doors that lead to Nana’s sunroom and garden. “Heading out to get the barbecue ready, it’s book club night for Nana.”

“Awesome. Are you donning a costume again?”

“I regret ever telling you that story.” I step into the late afternoon sunshine.

“Oh, come on, I thought for sure you were suggesting it because you secretly want to strut the stage in a pirate get-up. Mind you, if I was getting your Nana’s pie at the end of the night, I’d dress up in whatever she wanted to serve her friends.”

“I seriously hope you’re not using pie as a euphemism.” I pause, a movement in my periphery raising the hairs on the back of my neck. Turning my head, I notice a dark shape in the yard next door.

The vacant place next door.

My heart beats faster as prickles of sweat send a chill over my skin. “Hey, I gotta go.” I end my call with Blaine without waiting for a reply and shake off the ominous feeling at seeing a shadow next door. It’s not like I have some spidey-sense shit going on. I mean, a crazy motherfucker was walking the goddamn halls of my house while I slept and I didn’t notice a thing then, so I shouldn’t pretend to be on high-alert now. A strange rumbling sound has me inching closer to see what’s happening.

A woman walks into the yard, dragging a suitcase behind her, its wheels scraping the stone pavers. Her hair is long and dark, the sun picking out highlights of mahogany and cinnamon as she swipes it over her shoulder, peering around like someone is going to jump out at her. I shift behind one of the pillars of the deck and watch as she bends to lift some of the flagstones. What is she looking for?

Suddenly, she lets out a little shriek, jumping back and knocking into her giant suitcase. Somehow, she catches herself and my lips twitch at the muttering that floats across the fence. She places her hands on generous hips, drawing my attention to the round curve of her ass and long legs highlighted by her bright blue yoga pants. She sets off again across the yard, disappearing from view. I head over to light the barbecue and when I turn back, glancing over the fence, I’m just in time to see that magnificent ass highlighted as the woman bends, checking out the back door frame. I duck back to my vantage point, feeling like the worst kind of voyeur, but somehow

unable to convince myself to head back inside and grab the food.

The woman drags some sort of box over under a window and kicks off her shoes, before climbing up. I cross my arms waiting to see what happens next, jaw dropping as she forces a window open and tries to wiggle inside.

INDIA

I step onto the driveway, noting the crumbling asphalt. The deal was that I would be the up-front investor and Cody would use his money for the bulk of the re-design and construction for the flip. I scan the front porch for an obvious hiding place for a key, but, just like the rest of my day, luck seems to have deserted me. I head to the back yard, trying not to look at the dead grass and cracked flagstone patio. I let go of my suitcase and try to lift the edge of some of the stones, hoping to find a key underneath, but all that gets me is another cracked nail and a near heart attack when a giant spider crawls out of the opening. I jump back, knocking over my suitcase, arms flailing while I try to regain my balance. I manage without falling on my ass, and I suck in a huge lungful of warm air, scented with summer flowers. Somewhere little birds are chirping, and I can't help but think it sounds like they're laughing at me. The feeling of someone watching me, laughing, judging crawls over me like a rash and I squeeze my eyes shut. *Pick a character. Any character.*

Who am I in this moment? The backstabbing maneater who finally released Cody from her grip or the intrepid heroine who picks herself up and figures out what to do next? As much as I want to wallow in my current misery, I know I need damage control and quickly, and the best way to do that is to proceed with the project solo. If I can make this project work, I can move in a new direction and hopefully leave all the reality show drama behind.

Hands on hips, I look around, hoping for anything to suggest I can pull this off. Some sort of sign. What I should do is find a hotel and spend the night re-grouping, but my resources are thin at the moment and despite Cody's assurance that I can call my parents and fall back into the lap of luxury, I know I can't. I'm not even sure they'd take my call at the moment.

I walk the perimeter of the house, checking the doors in the hope that, by some miracle, one of them is unlocked, but no such luck. It's summer and the evening air is hot and humid. I lift my hair from where it's stuck to my neck and swish it to get some relief. I need to get inside this house. Bending, I feel around the doorframe, tamping down my fear when my fingers encounter the soft stickiness of spiderwebs and repeating my mother's mantras in my head. *I am stronger than my fear.* Frustration wells up inside my chest. There's no key. Either the construction guy Cody said he'd hired has it, or Cody has the only key and he's back in California grovelling at the moment.

I sigh, kicking a stone as I step back, eyes scanning the back of the house. The house is a high-ranch and the back windows don't look like they're in really bad shape. I step up onto the sagging back stairs but it's too far for me to reach to see in the windows. I look around, spotting a couple of overturned milkcrates near what might have been a firepit at one time. I grab them and position one under the window. I quickly step out of my sandals and onto the crate, grasping the sill. The window is dirty, and I can't really see anything inside, but my heart leaps as my fingers slide into a small gap. I can't believe my luck. This window is open.

It's just a crack, but maybe I can get in this way. I push my fingers forward, trying to wiggle the top part to widen the gap but it barely moves. I back down off the crate and grab a second one, stacking them and get back on, the extra height allowing me to push the window open a little more. Arms straining, I wedge it up, eyeing the gap.

I should be able to fit through that.

I stick my head and shoulders in, tilting forward, happy not to encounter any more spiderwebs. Wiggling a little more, I manage to get my chest in over the ledge, and I give a little jump, feeling the milk crates fall away beneath me as I gain a few more precious inches into the window opening. I'm now halfway through. My boobs are over the ledge, thank god, because trying to move my chest over that hump hurt like a bitch, but now my stomach is resting on the hard plastic and I wince in pain as I try to slide a little further inside. I'm going to land on my head or something and black out and someone will find me months from now, dead inside this abandoned house. People will take pictures and Cody and Madison's rabid fans will have online parties toasting my demise.

I'll be more sad smut to the Hollywood gossip mill, another celebrity child gone astray.

Panic rushes through me as the blood rushes to my head from my position. Suddenly I feel a sharp smack as the window slides back down, hitting me in the back. My butt and legs are still outside. Jesus. I try to reach back and up to push the window open, but my arms aren't long enough. I give a tentative shimmy, trying to push it up with my back, but it doesn't work.

I am stuck.

Tears burn my eyes. Why can't I win at something? Anything. Why does everything have to be a fight?

My shoulders sag and my arms hang limply. There isn't even anything under the window inside for me to grab onto to try and push myself back out.

I hear a rustling noise and my head snaps up. Blowing my hair out of my eyes I frantically try to peer into the gloom. Ohmygod, ohmygod. Rats are going to eat my face off while I hang here like a buffet. I start to squirm, but my ass is well and truly stuck. You'd think the weight would simply give in to gravity and I'd slide back out the window, but my efforts don't seem to be doing anything other than making me sweat.

I hear the rustling again and then over the pounding of my heart I hear a voice.

“Hello?”

It’s a male voice. Maybe it’s the contractor! “Hi!” I twist as far as I can, but I can still only see the wall. “Um, can you help me?”

“Well, it depends. Are you breaking in or breaking out?”

I frown. “What? I’m not breaking anywhere. I own this place.”

“Really? Most people use the large window called a door to get in and out of their place.”

My back teeth grind together, and I wince as the sill abrades my stomach where my shirt has bunched up. “I don’t have the key.”

“Most owners have a key.”

“Well, not this owner. Are you going to help me or not?”

“I’m going to have to touch you in order to help you.”

My head sags back down and the rush of blood makes me dizzy. Suddenly, I realize that there’s a guy standing behind me while my ass and legs hang out the window. At least I’m wearing pants so my bare ass isn’t reflecting the sun. Pants might be stretching it a bit, because they’re yoga pants. I can only imagine how flattering they look with my thighs all smooshed. Fuck it. I need to get unstuck. Briefly I wonder if I should just burn the stupid house down and collect the insurance. Shit. Do I even have insurance?

“I don’t care,” I bite out. “Please help me.”

“Okay, I’m going to try to push the window up.”

I feel a body come up behind me, pressing into my hips as he jiggles the window. His elbow brushes the top of my butt. “Okay, it’s moving. Can you slide back a little?”

I place my hands flat on the wall under the window and try to shimmy backwards, but I don’t have enough momentum.

“Hang on,” the man says, and I feel a slight breeze as he steps away from me. Seconds later he’s back. “I’m wedging a stick in the frame so I can lift you out.”

“Oh, just put the crates back under my feet.” But just as I finish my sentence, an arm slides under my chest, causing me to suck in a deep breath as I’m gently lifted back out through the window, setting me on my feet, one arm braced around my shoulders. It takes me a minute to regain my equilibrium and I blink while the man brushes my hair out of my face. A pair of muscular forearms come into view, tanned and sinewy and strong and I focus on the ink snaking up the inside of one arm, the design settling into a pattern I recognize. Before I can think, I trail my fingers over the tattooed guitar chords, raising my eyes to meet a dark blue gaze.

“Hi,” he says. “You okay?” He brushes a lock of golden-brown hair out of his eyes, a sexy smile shifting his beautiful face into something almost painful to look at. He looks like a choirboy or an angel, until he flashes that smile, and all angelic thoughts leave my head. This guy has “trouble” written all over him. My instinct is to lean in and purr something flirtatious, but Cody voice echoes in my head. *Always looking for the next party.*

I step back immediately, dropping my hands and linking them behind my back to resist the urge to follow his ink all the way under his t-shirt. “I’m fine. Thank you.” I slip my feet back into my shoes and turn away, heading to my overturned suitcase to lift the handle out of the dry grass. The skin of my stomach is sore, but I can’t bear to lift my shirt and look at the damage.

“No problem.” The guy follows me as I trudge around the side of the house, trying to avoid breaking my ankle by getting my heel caught in one of the cracks. “Are you really the owner?”

“I am.” I stop and eye him warily. “Where did you come from anyway? Are you the contractor?” His muscular build is solid, but his white cotton shirt is spotless, and his grey shorts don’t really scream manual labor. He looks kind of familiar to me and I tilt my head trying to remember how I know him. Did Cody show me a picture of the contractor?

He laughs, a low chuckle that does crazy things to my insides and I remind myself I had a boyfriend just a few hours

ago. The last thing I need is to bolster my bad reputation by throwing myself at the first hot guy I meet in Nashville. I need to take a break from guys for awhile. Channel my mom when she's going through a reinvention phase.

"I'm not a contractor." He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. "I came from over there. Imagine my surprise when I came out to turn on the barbecue and I saw this amazing ass framed by the window."

I blush even though I know it's stupid. "Yes, well, it's a long story."

"I've got the time, baby."

My head snaps up and that smile catches me off guard again. Oh, I know too many guys like this. Too hot for their own good. Too flirty. Too familiar with being handed everything they look at. Too much like Cody. The feeling leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I know I know him from somewhere, but I've never been to Nashville. "You live next door?" I peek over the fence at the beautiful yellow house.

"My grandmother does. I'm visiting her for a few weeks."

I eye him again. He's got to be in his late twenties and he's smoking hot. Are Nashville guys that different from California guys? Visiting his grandma? Maybe she's sick or something. "That's, um, really nice of you."

"What can I say, I'm a really nice guy." A charming shrug nearly catches me off guard.

He might be nice to his grandma but that doesn't mean he isn't a player. He knows how hot he is for sure and that flirty charm? It's the first thing that drew me to Cody too. Kind of an L.A. swagger, but where Cody worked damn hard to come off as cool, this guy seems a bit more natural. "You know, you look really familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?"

He tilts his head, looking me over with a cocky smile. "Maybe I just have one of those faces?" He holds out his hand. "Nice to meet you...?"

I pause. It's not like I want to hide who I am, but as soon as someone hears my name there's a change in their demeanor.

Practically everyone has heard of my father, and they quickly make the connection between my unusual name and his last name, likely having seen me on a show, or in a magazine or something as my parents seem completely incapable of keeping any part of their life out of the limelight. I smile brightly and grasp his hand. “Thanks again for helping me. What did you say your name was?”

Mr. Perfect arches an eyebrow. “I didn’t. And you didn’t either.” He glances down at our hands. “You seem reluctant to give me your name. Maybe you were breaking into Mr. Myer’s house after all.”

I pull my hand from his. “Mr. Myers?”

“My nana’s neighbor. He moved into a condo a year ago and the place really went downhill.”

“What are you, the neighborhood watch, or something?”

“This is a good neighborhood, and I wouldn’t be much of a grandson if I didn’t keep an eye out for thieves right in her backyard.”

“I’m not a thief!”

He lazily looks me over, his gaze fixing on my shiny, blue leggings. “Cat burglar, then.” He crosses his arms. “Maybe I should give you a pat down just in case.”

My jaw drops. Of all the arrogant, infuriating— “I’m not a cat burglar, you crazy person. Would a cat burglar make off with their loot in a Louis Vuitton suitcase?” I shake the handle of my suitcase for emphasis. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I bought this house a couple of weeks ago and my boyfriend was supposed to meet me here.”

He straightens, the sexy smile slipping away. “You have a boyfriend?”

I nod, then shake my head. “I did. Until I got off the plane and realized he was still in California, with his ex-girlfriend and the key to this place. I guess I’m the ex-girlfriend now, but still, keyless.” I hold up my hands, palms out, tears burning the backs of my eyes. I’m tired, homeless and I feel like an idiot. I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“I’m sorry.” He looks contrite. “I didn’t mean to make your day worse.”

I exhale heavily. “You didn’t. It would have been a lot worse to be stuck halfway through the window all night.” I give a watery chuckle.

“Noah! Have you got the barbecue ready for my skewers?”

I look up to see a small woman peering over the fence. She’s got her grey hair done up in an elegant bun and her bronze skin is smooth. “Sorry to interrupt, but my book club is coming over this evening and my grandson promised to make his dad’s famous skewers.” She smiles. “Are you my new neighbor?”

“I am, although I’m afraid it might be a few days before I can move in.”

Mr. Perfect – Noah – turns to his grandmother. “She doesn’t have a key.”

The woman narrows her eyes. “What happened to your key, dear? Poor Melvin. He’d be distraught if he saw the state of his house.” She shakes her head.

“It’s a long story.”

“Her ex-boyfriend abandoned her and didn’t even give her the key.”

I roll my eyes at Noah as his grandmother gasps. “Your ex-boyfriend sounds like real asshole, dear.”

It’s my turn to gasp and I catch Noah’s grin again.

“Nana Stella can be a little salty.” He leans back and puts his hand up to his mouth in an exaggerated stage-whisper. “A lot salty.”

“What are you telling that poor girl about me, young man?” Nana Stella waves it off. “It doesn’t matter. I can save the day!”

The grey bun disappears, and I shift from one leg to another, eyeing Noah’s broad back in the soft, white t-shirt. His grandmother definitely isn’t sick, at least from what I can

see, and they obviously have an easy relationship. I don't really remember my grandparents. My mother is an only child who left home at sixteen and I think we visited them once on a farm in Vermont when I was six. My father's parents passed away when he was young and while I was always surrounded by various 'uncles', I honestly couldn't tell you who was a blood relation and who wasn't.

"I'm back!" Nana Stella's voice rings out over the fence. "Hold on while I come around."

I see her tidy, grey bun bobbing along the fence and then I hear a gate open and close. Nana Stella walks over the cracked flagstones, tsking at their condition. She's wearing a bright pink wrap dress over her round figure. She looks like a glamorous grandma in her silver sandals. She holds up her arm, waving a key like a victory banner. "Melvin gave me this spare key years ago, just in case." She passes it over to me. "Here you go, dear."

I press the key to my chest, wanting to hug this woman. For the first time, a little bloom of hope fills my chest. "Thank you, so, so much."

"Think nothing of it dear. I'm just happy to see someone finally move in and clean up the place."

Um. I don't really want to tell this nice woman who just saved me a boatload of trouble about my plan to flip the house for a show, giving me a shot at getting out from my family history and a mentorship to pursue a passion I'm almost too afraid to tell anyone about. I nod and smile weakly instead.

"When does your furniture arrive?"

I think about the dwindling amount in my bank account. With Cody out of the picture, I'll have to rethink my plans for the house and the project. I never thought about furniture because Cody said he'd planned for us to rent a place nearby while we made the place over. I never should have relied on him for such key aspects of this deal. I was so excited to jump into the hands-on part of the project, I left the rest up to him. I recall Cody laughing indulgently while I pinned boards and took as many courses as I could to learn my SketchUp

software program. He told me I was the heart of the project, and he would be the brains.

That was definitely my downfall – thinking Cody could be the brains behind anything that didn't involve video games, planning the perfect prank, and drama. I am such an idiot. I fell in love with the concept of this new show and the opportunities it could provide to me, and I convinced him this new market would let him branch out to new audiences like that whole Snoop Dog-Martha Stewart partnership a few years back. Of course, Cody had no idea who I was talking about, but he was game to play along because one of the judges for the show included the wife of a huge music star and Cody was desperate to make that particular connection. His dream is to transition to music stardom, which, looking back on it, makes think about why he pursued me so hard in the first place. He saw me as an easy rung on a ladder to my father.

Tears prick my eyes and I notice Noah watching me closely. The last thing I want to do is cry in front of strangers. I'm done having my emotions laid bare to an audience. I sniff, pulling myself together. "I'll need to go shopping for furniture. The plan was to see the place in person so I could figure out what we... I mean, I need."

Nana Stella's expression softens. "Did your ex-boyfriend screw you over deliberately, dear?"

I blink, thinking about it. "Honestly, I think he just saw a better opportunity come along and he took it." I don't think Cody thought about hurting me. In fact, I don't think Cody thought about much. He definitely didn't think about the predicament he'd be leaving me in. I bite my lip. Still, I kind of thought we were team.

She pats me on the arm. "Where are you staying?"

God, I'm pathetic and I definitely don't want to show exactly how naïve I've been to this gorgeous, eerily familiar man who looks way better in a pair of grey gym shorts than anyone should. I motion to the house behind me. "I thought I'd stay here, get a feel for the place."

Noah cocks his head, skepticism written all over his handsome face, but his grandmother clucks sympathetically.

“Oh, dear. I know you must be excited to spend the first night in your house, but you don’t even have any furniture and it’s been a pretty eventful day for you, from what I’ve been able to piece together. Why don’t you take a look around, take stock of the situation and get cleaned up and then come over for something to eat.”

I shake my head. “Thank you, but I couldn’t impose. I heard you’re having company.” I really just want to be alone to wallow in my misery for fifteen minutes until I come up with a plan, but Nana Stella waves off my protest.

“Don’t be shy, please. You can’t turn down southern hospitality and I won’t be able to sleep tonight thinking of you in that house by yourself, hungry and sad.” Her big, brown eyes blink innocently at me, but I know a formidable woman when I see one. I swallow back my sigh, nodding.

“Okay, thank you.” I grab the handle of my suitcase and turn to head towards the door.

“Noah! Go with her, please.”

At that I whirl. Haven’t I endured enough humiliation without this guy witnessing some more? But Nana Stella must have misinterpreted the expression on my face.

“You’re perfectly safe with my grandson, I promise. But you’re smart to be wary. If you’re not comfortable with him, I can come with you.”

I am not having this stylishly dressed woman, who is expecting company, traipsing around in dust and grime and god-only-knows what else. “No, it’s fine. I don’t really need anyone to come with me.”

“At least to the door, then. So I know the key works.”

I hesitate, but there’s steel behind her smile. “Sure. Okay.”

Noah reaches out and takes the handle of my bag, gesturing towards the door. “Lead on, neighbor.”

“I thought you were just visiting?” I ask as we climb the stairs.

“I am but I have some downtime so I’m here for a bit. At least until late August.”

I really want to ask what he does, but then he might ask me and what do I say then? Reality show star? Professional homewrecker? Instagram girl? Edward Rook’s daughter?

I settle for a nod and lift the key. It’s on a Florida keychain, the shape of the state with a little orange at the end. I wonder briefly if the keychain was Melvin’s before inserting the key and hearing a little click. Anticipation floods me as I push the door open, stepping inside. I see a panel on the wall, and I flick the switch, relief bringing a smile to my face when the lights turn on overhead. My smile is short-lived however, as I gaze around, my heels clicking on the terracotta tiles of the entryway. There’s *stuff* everywhere. Bags, an overturned chair and what looks like a broken plate are scattered through this room. There was nothing in the room I was hanging in earlier, so I gently nudge a bag out of my way, wrinkling my nose at the stale smell in the air and head towards the back.

“I thought you said Melvin moved out a year ago?”

Noah follows me through the house, flicking on lights as he goes. “My grandmother said he did. But Melvin always struck me as a bit of a neat-freak. I can’t imagine him leaving the place like this.”

I near the kitchen, the aroma going from stale to downright disgusting. There isn’t any garbage on the floor in here, but there are dishes in the sink, and stains on the floor, I don’t want to examine too closely. The stove top is filthy, and I lean over the sink to open a window.

Behind me, Noah opens the fridge, slamming it quickly. “Jesus. There’s food in here.”

The sickly, sweet smell of spoiled milk hits my nose and I gag. “If he moved out a year ago, this isn’t from him.”

“What do you know about the sale?” Noah asks.

“I know I have the deed to the house. I know I paid for the house and signed all the paperwork.” I pull my phone out, scrolling to my lawyer’s contact information. I call her, but it goes to voicemail, even though it’s not that late in California. I leave a message and shove my phone back into my purse. “I saw pictures and it was in pristine condition. I mean, it needs some work, but the kitchen definitely didn’t look like this in the photos.” I turn in a slow circle. “Who has been staying here?” A prickle of unease crawls up my back. Someone has been here, and fairly recently. Are they coming back?

Could this be one of Cody’s famous pranks? No, I quickly push the thought away. He wouldn’t do that to me. But niggling anxiety wraps its arms around me, squeezing the air out of my lungs. I’m used to being around people, even if I don’t love them, at least they’re around. In a house for a show, on a set, in a hotel, there are always people around – crew and actors. Even at my parents, we have the household staff, friends of my dad, there’s always someone.

I can’t stay here.

“You can’t stay here.” Noah’s voice echoes my thoughts, immediately causing my spine to straighten.

“Of course I can.” I’m proud of the way my voice comes out strong and not as a question. I don’t even know this guy. He doesn’t get to tell me what to do. I push aside my unease, surveying the mess again. Whoever was here is gone. It just needs a good clean-up.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Doubt tinges his voice, and he does a slow circle around the kitchen before heading down the hall to the bedroom area.

The bedrooms! I never thought about the other rooms. What if someone is still here? Heart pounding, I debate running outside, calling 911, or following Noah down the hallway with a frying pan. I look on the stove and grimace. Said frying pan is there, but the remains of whatever was cooked in it is stuck in a blackened layer to the inside. I don’t want to touch it. I grab an oven mitt from the counter trying not to think about who might have used it last and stick my

hand in gingerly, before lifting the pan, holding it like a bat over my shoulder.

I walk down the hall, wishing Noah had hit the switches on his way down. I think about turning on the lights, but I don't want to alert anyone to my presence in the hallway. Sweat trickles down between my shoulder blades. I hear a squeak and I tighten my grip on the handle. The door to my right moves and I yell, swinging my frying pan like I'm in the Wimbledon final. Noah steps into the hallway, ducking away from my weapon and moving behind me to stop my fall as my momentum topples me forward.

“Whoa! What in the world are you doing?” he asks.

“Me? You disappeared down a dark hallway and couldn't call out to say all clear?”

I realize his arms are still around me and I drop the frying pan to my side. His body is big and warm, and he smells like spice and sunscreen. I have no business noticing anything about this man. I just met him, for crying out loud. He doesn't even know my name, let alone who I am. He's staying with his grandma for a few weeks. His tattoos might say 'bad boy', but his look is all prep-school valedictorian and I don't go for good guys. Case in point – my current predicament. Cody Phillips has that bad boy edge down to a science. His fanbase is huge and he's got an ego to match it. His pranks and videos might seem like he's above checking his view rankings, but I've seen him obsess over finding the best lighting for a quick video of him taking off a hoodie. He's as thirsty as everyone else I know. I step away from Noah, reminding myself of my vow on the way here to be independent. I need to make myself over and to do that, I need to be man-free. I've always had a boyfriend, although I'd use the word loosely, since I was fourteen years old. Usually, he was someone else's boyfriend first, which is how I got this damn reputation in the first place. It only takes once or twice to be defined by something and even if it's not true anymore, the term “man-eater” follows me around like a cloud of perfume.

“You're right, I'm sorry. I should have called out.” Noah says from behind me. “I'm lucky I didn't get that pan right in

the face.”

I shift the pan. “That would be a poor way to thank you and your grandmother for all the help you’ve been so far.” I sag against the door frame, nudging the door open with my foot. More mess, dirty carpet, and is that orange paint? I close my eyes, feeling the pressure building in my temples. “I don’t understand. Everything looked to be in good condition when I bought it.”

“I’ll ask Nana about it. I remember her complaining about Melvin’s nephew being here. Maybe he was staying here for a bit.” He runs a hand through his disheveled hair. “Nana was at my parents’ place for a few weeks before we came back here, so it’s possible someone squatted here while she was away.” He crosses his arms. “I don’t really like the idea of you staying here alone. I don’t want to scare you, but someone out there could have a key.”

I inhale deeply. “You’re right. I’ll have to find a hotel for the night.”

He reaches out, taking the pan and sliding the oven mitt off my hand. In the dim light of the hallway, his blue eyes look dark and mysterious. “Tomorrow we can find someone to change the locks for you.”

I push off the frame. “We?”

“Well, I helped you break out of this place, then my grandmother helped you break in, and I nearly got up close and personal with your weapon of choice there. I kind of feel responsible for you at this point.” He smiles and reluctantly, I smile back. “But the first step would be you telling me your name.”

It’s possible he has no idea who I am. Maybe he only watches sports. My gaze strays to those muscular forearms and the intriguing dark ink highlighting the contours. Maybe he only watches motorcycle repair shows. I brush my sweaty palm against my leg before extending it. “I’m India.”

He grips my hand, staring me in the eye. “Pretty name, India. Nice to meet you.”

That familiarity washes over me again. Where do I know him from? “Nice to meet you, again, Noah. Where do you live when you’re not visiting your grandmother?”

Something flickers in his gaze. “L.A. mostly.”

It’s possible I do know him. I turn my head a little, trying to picture him in something other than gym clothes. I glance down at our hands, still joined, and my eyes track the guitar chords extending up the inside of his arm. Noah... Noah – oh, shit.

He smiles ruefully at my gasp, letting go of my hand.

“You’re Noah Whitlock,” I say. Of course, he is. Normally, that dark blonde hair is waved back from his face and instead of a t-shirt, he usually wears something that reminds me of a Wall Street billionaire who decided to get comfortable by loosening his tie or rolling up his shirt sleeves. Sweater vests that should look ridiculous, but instead make women want to moan “oh, daddy” while steaming up his dark framed glasses. “You’re not wearing your glasses.”

He blinks. “This is my disguise. Like Clark Kent in reverse.”

“Well then, shouldn’t you be in tights?” I bite my tongue as he laughs. That sounded completely flirty and exactly the opposite of how I should be speaking. It’s like I just can’t help myself. I might have only recently sworn off men altogether, but I had sworn off rock stars long ago. When your father is Edward Rook, one of the swaggiest frontmen in rock history, it gives you an up-close-and-personal look at that whole lifestyle, and coming from a kid who witnessed all the bad shit surrounding it? Not for me. Not in a million years.

NOAH

“**G**ood suggestion. Maybe I’ll add some tights to my wardrobe.” I wink and I expect to see her lush mouth curve in a smile, but instead she looks slightly horrified. It’s not the reaction I usually get when a woman recognizes who I am. India, she of the unusual name, curves that should come with a ‘danger ahead’ sign and an intriguing lack of interest in me – at least once she recognized who I am. I shouldn’t be intrigued. After my last breakup and the craziness of the last few weeks, I’m in Nashville to look for a house and to lay low as much as possible. The distance helps with not attempting to kill my best friend and bandmate too. I love Tanner. I’d take a bullet for that guy, and he repays me by fucking around with my baby sister? And I get it, Sterling is a grown-ass woman, but she was really sick as a kid and I’m over-protective. Tanner’s messed up in his own way and I don’t need him fucking around with Sterling when she should only be worrying about herself. And now they’re playing house up in Ontario’s cottage country while I’m at Nana’s trying to not to think about them, or the fact my other bandmate, Ajax, is with some woman who’s on the run from the Chicago mafia. I focus on the woman in front of me, who could be a wonderful distraction.

No. I’m not going there anymore. Sterling says I’m a serial monogamist. I need to focus less on the idea of a relationship and more on the person, whatever that means. I like women and I don’t like one-night stands, so maybe I’ve had more girlfriends than the guys. It doesn’t make me a bad guy.

But I can't exactly leave India here in this mess.

"Why don't you come over to Nana's and shower and change there? You can figure out what to do next with a clear head."

She frowns, toying with the ends of her glossy, brown hair. "I'm sure your grandmother was just being polite."

"Nana Stella isn't polite."

India raises her eyebrows and I hasten to continue. "I mean, she is, but she doesn't make an offer like that unless she means it. Plus, she probably wants to get to know her new neighbor."

India nods slowly. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt for me to get freshened up."

I turn, poking my head into the other bedrooms, just to be on the safe side. This place is huge. It's not like some of the mansions in LA, of course, but big all the same. I eye India as she follows my lead, looking into each of the rooms as we make our way through the house. She said she was supposed to live here with her boyfriend, but as he is now decidedly an 'ex', I wonder what she's going to do with all this space? Did she have plans to start a family here? Put up a swing set in the backyard? I feel a pang in my chest. That's what I want. Eventually. It's all I've ever wanted. Don't get me wrong, I love the ladies. But the idea of being with someone new every night sounds exhausting. I've done the one-night stand thing – I'm the lead guitarist for Kingmaker, I've been groped and propositioned by almost every single chick who gets backstage, or who I meet at a party or hell, recognizes me at the grocery store. But it leaves me feeling empty. There's a reason I like my coffee a certain way and prefer chocolate cake. Trying something new is exciting sometimes, but will I always take my coffee black and choose chocolate cake every time it's on the menu? I sure will. Would I be happy with only chocolate cake for the rest of my life? Damn straight I would. If you find something that works, why look elsewhere?

I see India's suitcase in the hall, and I grab the handle, opening the door. I wave her out in front of me, and she

reaches for her bag. Her hand covers mine and the warmth of her soft skin transfers to mine. Our eyes meet and I smile, waiting for the squeeze of my fingers, or for her to wet those lush lips and thank me again, something that tells me she recognizes that shock of attraction from her hand meeting mine, but instead she lets go and leaves me with the bag while she tosses her long, brown hair over her shoulder and sails on ahead of me.

Huh.

I follow her down the steps and across the driveway to my grandmother's, where she slows, bending to get a better look at the beautiful front garden Nana's designed and created with her own two hands. I pause beside her, my eyes trained on the brightly colored lilies instead of on her round ass. There's something about me she doesn't like. No need to compound it by acting like the creepy neighbor who checks her out.

"Well, how was it?" Nana steps out onto the front porch, a tall glass of lemonade in her hand. "This is for you," she says holding the glass up towards India. India smiles and steps up to the front porch.

"Thank you," India says taking the glass.

"Let me know if you need to add some vodka to it," Nana says turning to head inside.

India swings her head towards me, eyebrows raised, and I grin back, jogging up the steps.

"Wait until you experience Nana's bartending skills," I say, loving the tone of her low laughter as I follow her into the house.

Nana directs her to a guest room with its own washroom and the look of relief on India's face makes me realize what a trying day she's had. I take a deep breath and head to the kitchen to grab a platter of kebabs for the grill, trying not to imagine India's full breasts as she gets undressed for her shower. God, maybe I am a creep. I should probably take Blaine's advice and hit up the Nashville scene if I'm acting like a horny teenager around the hot new neighbor.

I lift the lid of the grill, heat blasting out at me, and I recall the heat of her hand touching mine. You'd think I'd never touched a woman before, the way I responded to that tingle of awareness.

The skewers go on the grill, and I turn the heat down, just as my phone goes off, vibrating on the granite countertop. I pull it out of my pocket and see Rachel's name. My shoulders sag. Not again. I school my expression into something I hope resembles a neutral expression and reluctantly tap the screen.

"Hi babe!" She's chipper and all smiles which means she's in a good mood for once. At least for now.

Rachel and I dated, breaking up just before my family's Fourth of July party. At least I think we broke up. Sometimes, like now, I'm pretty confused about what happened. Rachel tells me she's giving me space to think things through, but I'm not really certain what I'm supposed to be thinking about. Tanner says I'm supposed to be thinking about the biggest diamond ring in the world but if that's what Rachel's holding out for, she shouldn't be holding her breath.

"Hi." I tread lightly. "What's up?" I like Rachel, I wanted to love Rachel, but something just isn't clicking. What is wrong with me? She checks all the boxes – model, philanthropist, hasn't slept with any other members of the band. Okay, that's a pretty small list, but when we met at a charity event, we hit it off. Two days later she was still at my place, and I took it as a sign. Love at first sight and all that. We'd sat around in bathrobes, watched movies and ordered in Chinese. She talked about her love of poetry, and we dissected song lyrics. She ignored her phone until one morning, she reached over me, grabbed it and snapped a picture of us lying in bed together.

Labelled it *#relationshipgoals*

That was it. And it seemed perfect on paper except I didn't really feel it. Maybe I'm looking for something that doesn't exist. But I'm not sure. There was something that drove Ajax to do a stagedive when he saw Natalie was in trouble. There was something that caused Tanner to look me in the eye, risk

our friendship, and tell me my sister is a grown woman who can make her own choices.

And it has to be more than pussy-blindness, which is Blaine's explanation for spending more than twenty-four hours with the same woman.

“Just wondering what you're up to.”

Rachel is never just wondering what I'm up to. “I'm making dinner.”

“When are you coming home from Nashville?”

I don't know that I am, but I don't feel like telling Rachel anything at the moment. I swallow down my impatience. “Why do you want to know, Rachel? We're not together anymore, remember?”

Her smile widens artificially. I recognize her professional face and it doesn't bode well for this conversation. “I'm just wondering what's going on? My friends have been asking ever since the Chicago show. Is Ajax in rehab? What's up with Tanner and your sister, of all people?”

My spine straightens. “What do you mean, of all people?”

“I didn't mean anything by it.” She laughs nervously. “It's just kind of weird, right? I always thought he was into freaky shit. He can be so dark.”

“He's not into freaky shit,” I say, the quiet warning in my voice unmistakable.

Rachel waves her hand around. “Oh, I know. I was just surprised. He never seemed interested in any of my friends.”

She rambles on for a bit and I tune her out, until I see her waiting expectedly for something. I'm carefully taking the skewers off the grill. “What?”

“You're not even listening to me.”

“I'm sorry, I'm just in the middle of something, here.”

“Well, I want to know if I can move back into the house.”

I blink. “I'm sorry?”

She purses her lips. “I think it’s time we straightened things out. I don’t like you being in Nashville and with your tour coming up, you should be home. With me.”

Am I living in an alternate universe here? “We’re not together, Rachel, you broke up with me.”

“We’re on a break. A thoughtful separation.”

“Is that the same as a conscious uncoupling, because it sounds very LA.”

“We live in LA.”

“No, Rachel. You live in LA. I have a place in LA, but there is no ‘we’”.

“Are you trying to hurt me deliberately?”

I sigh, handing the platter off to my grandmother, who is shaking her head at hearing Rachel’s voice. I head to the back of the garden, stretching out on one of the loungers. “I’m not trying to hurt you. You broke up with me.” I repeat the words slowly.

“So, this is your revenge?” She tosses her hair over her shoulder and points her finger at me through the screen. “You’re the one who got weird, you’re the one who doesn’t like my friends and you’re the one who strung me along for almost two years. I deserve better.”

Tension floods my body. Our conversations always go in this direction, with accusations and anger. I really don’t know what she wants, but I also don’t want to hurt her. She’s right, we were together for almost two years, but I swear I thought we were on the same page, which didn’t include planning a wedding. Would that spark I keep looking for have flared if we simply stayed together? Would I look over at her one day and realize she’s the other half of me?

I doubt it.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, and you deserve to be with someone who makes you happy, Rachel. I’m clearly not that person. As for getting weird, a stalker broke into my house and tried to kidnap Gordon. Maybe LA isn’t for me.”

“That wasn’t a big deal,” she rolls her eyes and I remember how much she loved the publicity that surrounded that whole ordeal.

“It felt like a big deal to me.” I sigh. “What do you want, Rachel?”

She stares through the screen for a minute before tossing her hair. “I want you, Noah. You can make me happy if you try.”

A bloodcurdling scream cuts across the garden and I shoot out of the lounge.

“What was that?” Rachel asks.

“I have to go.”

“But—”

I tap the screen and take off at a run to the house. Some of Nana’s friends have arrived and they’re crowding down the hallway to the guest room. Nana waves me down the hall and I fling open the door, not thinking about anything but the way India screamed.

“What’s wrong?” My head swings back and forth, but the room is empty. I cautiously approach the adjoining ensuite washroom and push the door open. A wall of steam billows out and my jaw drops. India is standing on the teak bath seat, her long brown hair falling in wet ribbons around the most magnificent tits I’ve ever had the privilege to see. Water runs over her soft belly, sparkling drops highlight the flare of her hips, and I really wish she wasn’t holding a towel in front of her. Well, not really holding it. Instead, she’s brandishing it like a matador’s cape.

“Don’t move,” she hisses.

I freeze, my eyes darting around. Is there a snake? I once heard about a snake coming up through the pipes and my heart squeezes. What if this happened while Nana was here alone?

“What is it?” I whisper, trying to pinpoint the danger and ignore the way her pink nipples are pebbling in the damp air.

“A monster,” she wheezes.

What. The. Fuck. I straighten. Is this woman crazy?

“There.” Her voice ends on a squeak, her shaking finger pointing towards the shower.

A small, khaki-colored lizard is sitting on the towel in front of the shower, his tongue darting out. Small is relative, I suppose as Gordon is kind of on the chunky side. Fluffy, as my sister says. Mom says he’s been bereft since Sterling left him to go to Chicago, so I made a quick trip home to collect him and bring him to Nana’s. He’s my bearded dragon, but Sterling launched his social media career and he kind of adopted her after the whole attempted kidnapping incident in LA. I could take him with me on tour, but he’s a homebody and doesn’t like flying a whole lot. Once in a while is fine, but with our schedule, between the tour bus and various flights, it became clear it stressed him out.

I crouch down, extend my fingers and flicking them lightly to get his attention. Gordon swivels his head in my direction, then slowly back up at the crazy woman on the bench, sticking his tongue out.

“What are you doing?” India asks.

“I’m going to formally make introductions in a minute.” I extend my hand and tap on the hard tile. “Gordon! Come here, handsome.” I hear India suck in a breath as Gordon turns himself around and quickly waddles across the floor to me, his toes slipping on the tile.

“Good boy,” I say, scooping him up. “I know the lady scared you, but I promise she’s not trying to kill you.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” India mutters.

“I promise,” I say a little louder. Gordon can be very sensitive. “And she’s Nana’s new neighbor.”

Gordon settles into the curve of my arm and India pulls the towel up, covering those magnificent tits. “Gordon?” she says, incredulously.

I nod. “I’m going to get this guy a treat. Why don’t you get dressed and I’ll introduce you then?”

I let my eyes linger for just a couple of extra seconds, taking in her flushed cheeks and the way her dark brown hair streams down her curvy body. Fuck me. Please.

She purses her lips and points at the door. “Leave and take the lizard with you, please.”

“Bearded Dragon.” I grin and turn, closing the door behind me. I head back down the hallway and out into the kitchen, where Nana and her friend Millie are putting the finishing touches on a platter full of dips, veggies, cheese and crackers. I swoop in with Gordon and give Millie a kiss on the cheek. “Hello, gorgeous. Have you finally decided to give in and marry me?”

Millie reaches up and pats my cheek. “If only I was twenty years younger, you’d be in trouble because I would take you up on that.”

I laugh. I almost wish it could be as easy with the women I date as it is with the women I consider my friends, and Nana’s friends certainly fit the bill. I have other female friends I’ve never slept with who I didn’t meet through my grandmother, and it’s easy with them too. A knot of frustration builds in my chest. I’m young, I don’t need to worry about this, but a part of me yearns to be settled. I have a career I’m passionate about, it’s thriving, but I feel like a part of me is missing, somehow.

I turn to Nana. “This guy somehow found his way into the guest room.” I stroke Gordon gently on the neck and he preens, his wide eyes blinking.

Nana gives a little smile. “I might have forgotten how much Gordon loves sitting on the window seat to look into the garden.”

“You almost gave your new neighbor a heart attack.”

Nana’s hand flies to her chest. “I honestly forgot to mention she might encounter Gordon.” She bends and bumps her nose against Gordon’s. “Poor little thing.”

“What new neighbor?” Millie asks.

“Oh, the guest I mentioned moved into Melvin’s place.”

“Finally!” Millie says and Nana nods.

“Yes, it will be nice to have someone new in the neighborhood. But the poor woman had a bit of a shock today. She was supposed to move in with her boyfriend and he left her high and dry at the airport.” Nana shakes her head.

Millie gasps. “Who does that?”

Nana frowns. “I don’t know. Not a real man for sure. Didn’t even give her a key to the house.”

“Nana,” I warn. “Maybe she doesn’t want everyone knowing her business.”

Nana looks over the rim of her glasses. “Then this neighborhood isn’t the right place for her.” She turns back to Millie. “I had to give her the spare key Melvin left with me years ago, in case of emergency. It’s our duty to welcome her.”

Millie nods. “Absolutely. I had no idea anyone was moving in right now. My sister’s cousin-by-marriage, her next-door neighbor is a real estate agent, and I thought the place was going stay vacant until the fall.” Millie takes a cracker from the tray, topping it with cheese. “While you were away, Stella, I saw some people there, and assumed it was maybe a new owner, but no one answered the door the couple of times I tried to check in and introduce myself.”

“The place is a mess inside.” I offer. “Maybe someone broke in.” Sweat prickles between my shoulder blades. The thought of my grandmother dealing with a break-in leaves me cold and clammy. After the incident in LA, I have no interest in going back to my place, which is part of the reason I’m here. I figured Nashville might not have as many issues, but who knows.

Nana frowns. “This is a safe street. I can’t imagine anyone daring to break in to one of these houses.”

“Maybe you should get a dog, Stella.” Millie offers.

“I have a security system.” Nana pats me on the hand. “A very good, state of the art security system. There’s nothing for me to worry about. I’m sure there’s an explanation for what happened at Melvin’s.”

My grandmother is steely. I take a deep breath. I've been here a few days and never noticed anyone next door. Tomorrow, I'll help India get the locks changed so I can breathe easier.

Nana picks up the platter, moving around the island. "And there's our guest now," she announces.

I turn to see India pause at the entrance to the kitchen, her eyes on Gordon. I twitch my shoulder, jiggle my arm a little, and Gordon gets the hint, climbing up to rest between my shoulder and neck. India's eyes widen.

"What is that thing?"

"Gordon is a bearded dragon. And he's perfectly friendly." I crook a finger at her. "Come meet him."

She approaches cautiously. Nana moves beside me and holds the platter out to India. "Take one of the small strawberries and break off a piece. Gordon loves strawberries."

India smiles, taking a strawberry from the platter. "I do, too." She breaks off a piece, the red juice staining her finger and she looks to me. "How do I feed it to him?"

I crouch, moving Gordon down to the floor and demonstrate for her, holding my palm flat against the cool tile while Gordon tilts his head up and around curiously. I shake the berry a little on my palm and Gordon bobs his head, waddling over and striking it with his tongue.

She holds out her hand, but quickly withdraws it. "Will he bite me?"

I shake my head. "No. Sometimes they nibble fingers, but you're safe, I promise."

Her eyes meet mine and she steps closer, holding out the fruit. Gordon's tongue stretches out, taking the berry and India smiles widely. "Oh, he took it!" She looks to me again. "Can I pet him?"

Nodding, I show her how to gently pet him on the head and under his chin. Gordon's eyes close at my touch and he

stretches his head up while I move my finger on his neck. “Ready to try?”

Tentatively, she strokes his head with a finger. “Now that I’m not naked and afraid, he’s actually pretty cute.”

I didn’t need the reminder of her being naked. Heat floods my body and my eyes trail over her curves outlined in the pretty, floral sundress. She’s wrapped her long hair up in some kind of twist thing and my fingers twitch to take it down. I shouldn’t even be looking. She is my grandmother’s neighbor and I’m supposed to be in Nashville looking for a house, not a hook-up. Well, if I listen to Blaine, I should be looking for many hook-ups. A different one every night. He says it’s the fastest way to get my head out of the search for the perfect woman. No woman is perfect, but all of them together just might be the perfect distraction. My phone buzzes and I check the text that’s just come in.

Tanner: Writing again.

I shove it back in my pocket. I hate being mad at my best friend. He’s more than that; he’s my brother. He knows what family means to me and yet, he’s got my sister mixed up in his messed-up shit. I drag a hand through my hair as my phone buzzes again. India raises her eyes to mine and I send her an apologetic grin as I put Gordon down on a chair so India can continue to pet him. She crouches in front of him, the skirt of her dress fanning out around her and croons something I can’t hear. Gordon’s big eyes blink and he stretches his head out to her hand. Suddenly, I’m jealous of my lizard. The phone buzzes again. Shit. I don’t want to speak to him right now, but I pull it out anyway. It’s not from Tanner.

Rachel: What happened? I miss you. My phone buzzes again and her message is followed by a picture of her stretched out on a lounge in a tiny, white bikini. Yeah, she’s fucking hot, but these games are a huge turn-off. I put my phone away and let my eyes linger on the curve of India’s spine.

“She’s quite pretty, isn’t she?” Nana says, coming up next to me.

“Who?” I feign disinterest and reach for a handful of cherry tomatoes, ignoring the skeptical look from my grandmother. The last thing I need is her matchmaking. She’s not even upset about Sterling and Tanner.

“My new neighbor, of course. Brenda says she’s from some reality show. Very popular. Oh. And she’s Edward Rook’s daughter.”

I blink. “Edward Rook.”

“Yes. I’ve been to his shows once or twice.”

I turn and look down at my tiny grandmother, trying to picture her in the crowd at an Edward Rook concert. He’s one of the wildest rock legends still living. I grew up listening to his music, growing my hair out so I’d look more like a musician. I know he did those old MTV reality shows and everything, but I wasn’t interested in anything but his music. Dad often talked about Edward Rook as a cautionary tale of success not bringing happiness. That guy has been in and out of rehab more times than I can count, at least according to the magazines in the grocery stores when I was growing up.

“Didn’t he marry a chicken?” I’m trying to remember all the crazy stuff I’ve heard about him.

Nana nods. “He’s married to a former supermodel, the one who was kidnapped by a Hungarian prince. Well, they’ve married and divorced a few times, but yes, there was this weird thing with a chicken.”

India looks so normal. The last time I saw Edward Rook, he was wearing skintight, bright green snakeskin pants and a shirt that read ‘I might be your dad’ and he was so drunk, security had to escort him out of the VIP area after he broke a table demonstrating how many women he could satisfy at the same time.

Nana claps her hands. “Okay, I think everyone is here.” Six women turn to my grandmother. “Let’s take this out to the deck. India, we’d be happy if you joined us.”

India stands, giving Gordon one final stroke under his chin and I adjust my shorts. “Oh, but I probably haven’t read the

book.”

“That’s okay, Charlene never reads the book,” Millie calls out.

“Mind yourself, Millie. I read parts of this one.” Charlene holds up her kindle, the bright pink cover matching the cocktail in her other hand.

“Oh, I think I know which parts she’s talking about.” Brenda laughs.

“Let’s not scare our new neighbor away just yet, ladies,” Nana says, linking her arm with India’s and passing her another glass of lemonade as she leads the way outside. “Noah, sweetheart, keep those drinks coming.”

I might be a rock star, but to my grandmother and her friends, I’m the kid who can mix a mean Long Island Iced Tea.

I glance up, watching India’s curvy hips sway as she walks arm-in-arm with my grandmother. So, if I’m the neighborhood errand boy, does that make India Rook the girl next door?

INDIA

I settle in on the plush cushions of an oversized chair and breathe in the sweet, evening air. I'm still angry about Cody and the way he ditched this whole plan with little thought to the impact it would have on me. I blink, pressing my tongue to the roof of my mouth hard to stop the flood of tears burning the back of my eyes. I might give off a roll-with-it vibe that suggests I don't really care about anything, but I really cared about this. I look over Stella's beautiful garden. From up here on the deck, I can see my new house, looking sad with its parched grass and dull stucco. But it's still standing. And so am I. I can figure this out.

A scraping sound startles me out of my thoughts, and I turn to see one of the ladies pulling a chair over to mine.

"Hello, I'm Brenda, I'm just three doors down and across the street."

"Nice to meet you, Brenda." I hold out my hand, and she takes it, smiling. "I'm India."

"Yes, I know. I watched *The It Factor* and *Hot House*. My grandkids love the reality shows. I do too. I watched *Check Mate* for years. I love your father's music." Her eyes dance with excitement. I give an inward sigh at the recitation of shows. There's no escaping it. So many people assume I'm the person they saw on those shows. The too-cute kid, the rebellious teenager, the maneater. I nod politely, never knowing if I should thank people who tell me they love my dad, or his music, or something about my mom. Growing up in

the spotlight of the story they wished to tell at any given moment turned me into a character and sometimes I have no idea what my next line is.

A shadow falls over me and I look up to see Noah, a frilly blue and pink apron around his waist, holding a tray of miniature cupcakes. He should look ridiculous, but the feminine apron only highlights his flat, masculine stomach and the narrowness of his hips. His forearms are tanned and corded, defined from years of playing the guitar. The cupcakes look delicious, little creamy whirls of pale-yellow buttercream and my stomach grumbles, reminding me that I haven't eaten a thing since early this morning. For a second, I remember Cody's mean smirk when I had a piece of birthday cake – my birthday cake, I might add. He asked if I was trying to get in on the body positivity movement by packing on some pounds and suggested I talk to my mother about maintaining my figure. A hot flush spreads across my neck at the memory and I hesitate. I slide my hands under my thighs as Brenda takes two and then reaches for another, licking her lips.

“They're Gordon's favorite,” Noah says, moving the tray in a circle so the breeze carries the faintest scent of lemon and coconuts to my nose.

“Really?” My eyes met his, those ridiculously long eyelashes making him look more boyish than rock star sexy.

He grins. “Not really. I'm sure they would be, if he could eat them, but Gordon's treats are limited to fruit and extra crickets.” He snags a cupcake, keeping his eyes on mine as he licks the icing off the top. “But they are definitely my favorite.”

I shift in my seat, too aware of the way his throat moves as he swallows. I just got dumped today. Shouldn't I be miserable, drowning my sorrows in a pint of ice cream? Instead, I'm eye-fucking a rock star who is entertaining his grandmother's book club and tempting me to embrace the bad girl everyone thinks I am anyway.

Fuck it. Cody didn't go back to Madison because I gained ten pounds. Okay, maybe twenty pounds. And if he did, then

he's the douchebag. I'm not turning myself upside down again to fit someone else's narrative of who I am. That's why this opportunity is so important to me. I get to be me.

And the me I want to be eats cupcakes. I take two and bite into the soft, sugary, sweetness, closing my eyes at the delicate blend of lemon, cream and coconut. So. Fucking. Good. I hum my approval and open my eyes when Brenda pats my arm. "Amazing, aren't they? Almost better than sex," she says.

I swallow hard, my eyes tearing at the choked sound Noah makes. Brenda huffs, rolling her eyes. "Noah, you should be used to the Fifty Shades by now."

"Excuse me?" I say, alarmed. "Are you reading Fifty Shades of Grey for bookclub?"

"Oh, no, honey." Brenda waves a hand. "We're well past that. It's the name of our book club." She flips her salt and pepper braid over her shoulder. "We're Fifty Shades of Grey. Literally. Right ladies?" she calls.

Heads turn in our direction as the ladies all gesture to their – yup, varying shades of silver hair. Goddamn, I want to be like these chicks when I grow up.

"That's fantastic," I say.

"You should join us," Stella says, waving Noah over and relieving him of the remaining cupcakes.

If I was actually planning on staying, I might consider it. This neighborhood is so different from the one I grew up in, where everyone lives behind high walls and security gates. Instead of running into residents, the people on the streets are mainly dogwalkers, personal assistants, and the occasional tourist.

Noah perches on the arm of my chair. "So, Melvin's house is a disaster. Anyone know anything?"

I close my eyes. I don't need anyone coming to my rescue, even if he is gorgeous. I have to remember he's not just the cute neighbor-next-door, but a world-class rock star known for his killer smile and a revolving door of girlfriends. And I don't follow them, but I feel like there was just some stuff about the

band that made the news. The last thing I want is another relationship in the spotlight. Or any kind of relationship that resembles my parents' marriage. I give myself an inward shake. What a ridiculous train of thought. I'm certain he sleeps with anything that breathes.

Brenda taps her chin. "Now that you mention it, that shifty nephew of his was around. I was walking Coco," she turns to me, placing a hand on my arm, "that's my cocker spaniel. Anyway, she was barking her little heart out and I stopped to see what was going on. He said he was helping pack up the rest of the place for his uncle."

Stella snorts. "Melvin had that place spotless when he moved out. That good-for-nothing nephew was supposed to keep up with mowing the lawn for him and some basic gardening, but he was useless."

"When did you see the nephew last?" Noah asks.

I tilt my head up towards him. "You don't have to worry about this."

"I do if it's something that can impact my grandmother and her property," he shoots back.

"India, dear, why don't you stay over here tonight," Stella says. "Things will look better in the morning, and I won't have to worry about you in that place all by yourself."

A pang settles in my chest. I could call both my parents now and tell them the whole mess and I'd get my mother's platitudes about my life choices. My dad may or may not understand a word I'm telling him. Regardless, I can't assume either one of them would actually answer, let alone try to actually help, and here is this woman I've just met who solved two of my problems – a key and a shower – without even blinking. I look down at the remaining cupcake in my hand. Oh, she also fed me and invited me into her circle without wondering if I could increase her popularity or secure her a connection to someone or something they assume I have simply because of my last name.

I shake my head. “Thank you for the extremely kind offer, but I couldn’t. I’ll be fine at a hotel.”

“You don’t have a reservation anywhere yet?” Brenda asks.

“No, my ex was supposed to handle that part of it. Maybe he thought we’d be able to stay at the house? It’s okay though.”

Millie leans forward. “Oh, don’t go truckin’ all over to find a hotel tonight. My she-shed is empty, and I would be honored if you’d accept the hospitality. That way you’re close by and can assess everything you need to do in the morning.”

I think about my dwindling bank account and calculate the time it’s going to take me to tackle this project on my own. It would be amazing to stay in the neighborhood so I don’t lose commuting time, not to mention being able to keep a close eye on the house. Most people assume I’m a princess whose idea of roughing it is staying at a four-star instead of a five-star hotel, but I’m actually made of sterner stuff. You have to be when you’re left alone for weeks on end. One time my mother went on a last-minute shoot and my dad was on tour, so mom gave most of the staff time off. I woke up in the morning to a quiet house not knowing where anyone was. I was eight. I figured out the grocery delivery pretty quick, having seen our housekeeper call the order in previously, but no one noticed I was home alone until one of the gardening staff came inside to monitor the plants as part of the weekly upkeep. He called Diana, our housekeeper, who rushed back from her vacation to stay with me.

Anyway. A she-shed sounds perfect to me. I’m not going to be spending much time there if I can help it. In order to get this project off the ground, I need to roll up my sleeves and figure things out.

“India, can I get a photo for my granddaughter? She never misses an episode of Hot House.”

“Denise!” Stella’s voice carries a warning. “We don’t impose on our guests.”

“I’m not imposing! India makes her living letting everyone see what she’s doing on her shows and online.” Denise says, turning towards me. “Will we get to be on your TikTok?”

I freeze. I don’t know why I thought I’d be anonymous here. I feel Noah’s blue eyes burning into me. Maybe because I never took these ladies for the usual audience who knows me, and maybe because the guy serving cupcakes in a frilly apron for his grandma is a Grammy-award winning star.

I clear my throat. “I’m taking a break from that right now.”

Denise looks at her phone and then back at me. “Cody says you’re working on something that didn’t include him and you iced him out.” She turns to the woman next to her. “I think this is how he ended up back with Madison,” she says, nodding.

My molars grind together, and I focus on the tray of remaining cupcakes, the creamy whorls blending together while I count the sprinkles. All eyes are on me, which is a familiar feeling. I hate it. Here I was just supposed to be me, whatever that means, but I feel caught in the spotlight without even a direction sheet telling me what might happen next. If this was an episode of *Hot House*, I could be counted on to retaliate with some kind of drama, but right now I’m too exhausted to even attempt some sort of witty comeback or flouncing exit. And kind of sad to realize I’m so far behind Cody and Madison in the spin of our break-up. Hell, I was behind the game already, not even realizing I had a break-up to spin until a few hours ago.

“Cody sounds like a loser.”

Noah’s voice cuts through my muddled thoughts. I lift my head to see him scrolling through his own phone. “Look at these ridiculous pictures. What kind of man needs his followers to tell him what to wear each day?”

Millie nods. “You can’t believe what you see online, Denise. None of that stuff is even true. Why, look at what poor Sterling is dealing with.”

Stella loudly clears her throat. “Enough about my granddaughter. Sterling is doing just fine at the moment. It’s

time we start discussing the book. Noah, why don't you help India figure out what she'll need to stay at Millie's before it gets too dark."

I stand, brushing the cupcake crumbs from my shirt. "I don't need anything."

"Nonsense." Millie pulls a set of keys out of her bag and lobs them over to Noah, who catches them with ease. "The gate key is the one with the purple nail polish."

Noah palms the keys. "Got it." He looks over at me. "Unless you want to stay for..." he eyes the book on the side table, "Dark Savage Prince."

"She can always catch up later," Stella says, waving us away.

Everyone is looking at me. I square my shoulders wishing I didn't feel so out of my element. I nod at Noah and follow him down a couple of steps off the patio. I pause by Stella lay a hand on her arm. "Thank you so much."

She pats the back of my hand, giving me a kind smile. "You are in good hands."

I eye Noah's broad, muscular back, his strong forearms and big hands telling me all I need to know about how he can work magic on a guitar and bite my lip. The last thing I need to be thinking about is how good those hands probably are. We trek through the house and Noah retrieves my suitcase, pulling it down the hall.

"Where's Gordon?" I ask.

"He has a tank and he's all settled in for the night."

We head out onto the street, and I'm struck again by the normalcy of the neighborhood. It looks like something out of movie where in the script there'd be setting note for 'perfect neighborhood'. A mom is pushing a stroller down the sidewalk, a leash wrapped around her wrist while a small dog trots happily next to her. Spotting us, it gives a friendly bark, jumping around a little while the woman lightly tugs it down. She flashes an apologetic smile, but Noah sets my suitcase to

one side and crouches, his hand extended, letting the dog sniff and rub against him.

“What a good girl,” he croons, as the dog cuddles in under his arm.

My treacherous body reacts to his gravelly voice, and I look to the dog’s owner to see if she’s suddenly overcome by the fact that this gorgeous rock star is kneeling on the sidewalk spewing praise kink but she’s busy fixing the baby’s pacifier seemingly unmoved by the shameless way her dog is trying to knock Noah over so she can crawl all over him.

I feel you, doggy sister.

I shake it off as Noah stands again, the dog whining to be picked up and the woman is all apologies as she smiles again and continues her walk.

“Animal lover?” I ask when I once again have enough moisture in my mouth to make my tongue work.

Noah grins. “Yeah. I’d love a dog, but with my schedule.” He shrugs. “I thought Gordon would be lower maintenance, but then ...” he trails off. “Anyway, I’m glad I get to see him while we’re on a break right now.”

I don’t know very much about their tour schedule, but I remember scrolling through some gossip sites while I was waiting at the airport and there were some older posts about drama involving the band on one of their last tour stops. It’s none of my business though and these guys aren’t really in my circle.

I gesture behind me to the lady with the dog. “I feel like I’ve tripped and landed in a television show about the perfect neighborhood.” Songbirds are trilling in nearby trees and the scent of flowers, barbecue and warm summer air fills my lungs. A trio of boys on bikes ride past us, their helmets an array of superhero colors.

“It is a nice place, but we’re a little outside the city here.” Noah switches hands on the suitcase as we walk down the street. “Still, though, I’m sorry about your house. It’s disturbing to know someone has been inside it like that.”

I glance up at the dark tone in his voice, noting the way his jaw tightens. “Well, at least I wasn’t there.” I can’t really feel an affinity for the place. Cody bought it sight-unseen, and as cute as the neighborhood is, it’s just a project for me to get done and out of the way so I can get back to my life.

Correction: so I can get started on my new life.

Noah grimaces. “Even if you weren’t there, it’s a terrible violation.” He’s striding down the sidewalk now and my legs can’t keep up. He notices and slows down. “Sorry. It just makes me mad to think about it.”

He points at the next house, a pretty, red brick bungalow with ivy climbing a trellis in between the black front door and the large bay window. “This is it.” He turns into the driveway. There’s a hedge along this side of the property, creating a pleasant, woodsy scent as I follow Noah to the decorative iron gate and wait while he pulls out the keys, searching for the purple one. “After you,” he says, pulling my suitcase to the side and waving me through. I head into the back, following the flagstone path, totally charmed by the small, white shed with bright turquoise French doors surrounded by various sized planters spilling over with colorful flowers. Black coach lights frame the entrance and when I step inside, a skylight provides natural light over a corner reading nook with an overstuffed chair, pink blankets, a knitting basket and a small bookcase. On the other side is a daybed, dressed in frilly white sheets and pink pillows.

“It’s gorgeous,” I breathe, my gaze darting to the series of striking watercolor florals hanging on the back wall. There’s a cozy and elegant vibe to the little shed nestled among the big trees in the garden. A large wooden beam bisects the ceiling and I notice a large black hook embedded in the wood. It’s too big for a chandelier. I point up, “what do you think that’s for?”

Noah walks to the corner behind one of the open doors to a narrow bookshelf I didn’t notice upon entering and pulls out something that looks like a mass of black yoga straps. A peculiar look crosses his face, and he glances up at the hook and back down at the straps in his hand. His shoulders quiver as he shakes out the bundle and I see some sort of shiny black

fabric connected to the straps. I tilt my head, trying to figure out what I'm looking at. My mother uses a lot of yoga straps, but these are all linked together with silver rings. It almost looks like a harness.

“Do you know what this is?” Noah asks, holding it out, a mischievous smirk on his face.

I shrug. “Some sort of yoga thing, I imagine. It must be pretty serene here in the garden.”

Noah brushes past me, pulls the small ottoman away from the chair and steps up, hanging the strappy thing from the hook. The black fabric settles, and I see... some sort of swing? It takes a minute for me to process what I'm seeing, and my mouth falls open.

Noah jumps down, chuckling. “So serene, right?” He turns to me, hands on hips. “What do you think? Want to try it out?”

I'm no prude, but I admit I've never actually seen a sex swing in person before. Or I guess this close-up. There is a club in L.A. where the dancers use them, but they're part of the background. “That's not ours.” Heat creeps into my cheeks. “Yours. It's not yours.” I know the second it hits him because his head jerks back a little as if I'd just smacked him in the face.

“You don't think it's...” He looks up at the swing, then at the house, then back to me as he scrubs a hand down over his face.

His discomfort is cute. “What did you say they were reading for book club?”

“But Millie is a widow.”

“So? Just because her husband died doesn't mean she should throw herself onto the pyre as well.”

“Pyre?” He arches one of those too-perfect eyebrows.

“You know? A funeral pyre? Historically, in some cultures, women were expected to throw themselves onto their husband's burning pyre and head off into the afterlife with him.”

“I know what a pyre is, it just seems like a strange reference for a ...” he waves a hand in my general direction.

“For a what?” I prop my hands on my hips. “Someone who does reality shows? Edward Rook’s daughter?”

He rubs the back of his neck, looking down at the floor and I know I’ve got him. He knows exactly who I am.

“You put the pieces together pretty quickly.”

His gaze snaps back to mine. “It was my grandmother, actually.”

I sigh, waiting for the list of questions, but he stays silent. Finally, he turns and lifts the swing off the hook, stashing it back where he found it.

“Well, aren’t you going to ask me anything?”

“Like what?”

“What was it like having the amazing Edward Rook for a father? Whether you’ll get a chance to meet him? Or maybe a comment about how I don’t look anything like my mother?” I bite my lip, wishing I hadn’t said anything at all.

“Do people really say that shit to you?” he asks.

I shrug, fixing my attention on a brightly painted bird feeder swaying slightly just outside the window.

“I get asked weird shit all the time too. Like, can I have your baby? Or, do you really play guitar on stage?” His mouth twists in a grin. “Sometimes I even get asked ‘would you like it if my friend joined us?’”

I roll my eyes, jabbing my thumb at my chest. “Edward Rook’s daughter, remember? Trust me, I’ve probably heard all that and more.”

“Did you really go on tour with your father?”

I nod. “Yeah, sometimes.” I wait, wondering if that was the soft entry into his questions about my dad but he just shakes his head.

“That couldn’t have been easy.”

I pick at a nail I must have chipped during my struggle with the window. “Really? You’re not going to say how cool it was, or ask how many parties I snuck into?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love what I do, and I feel damn lucky to be able to do it. But being on tour is tough. It gets tiring being in a bus, no matter how luxurious it is. Flying isn’t always better either because you’re jetlagged, dealing with rehearsals, interviews, fans and then we might get to blow off some steam at night, but that isn’t much of a life for a kid.”

A little flutter in my stomach is the warning I need. Cody came off as understanding and sympathetic at first too. Like he was different. Someone I could rely on. I shake it off, lifting a shoulder. “Made me who I am today.” I might not be sure who I’m supposed to be, exactly, but Noah doesn’t need to know that.

Noah holds my gaze and I stare back unblinking. Then he nods, “Well, I guess I should let you get settled in.”

“Thanks for walking me down the street.”

His broad shoulders fill the doorway. “Let me know if you need anything else.” He pulls out his phone. “Give me your number.”

“Why?”

One side of his mouth twitches up in a smirk. “So I can booty call you, obviously.”

“You’re staying with your grandmother!”

His smirk turns into a full-blown grin. “Down for it, then?” He arches an eyebrow. “I’ll give you my number, if that’s the case.”

God, yes. “God, no! Don’t you have enough women beating down your door desperate for the Guitar God?”

He shakes his phone in my direction. “Currently single and I’m just trying to be neighborly.”

“Rock stars are never single, but okay. And offering your number out to random women? I could sell that online.”

He stares at me, the smile slipping off his face. “And then I’d get another phone.” He slides it back in his pocket. “Look, if I know my Nana and her friends, they are going to be all up in your business to help you get settled in.”

“I don’t need anyone’s help.” I know that sounds grumpy and I’m probably biting off my nose to spite my face, but the last thing I want right now is ‘my business’ getting spread around before I have a chance to figure things out. *Control the narrative.* As Cody’s publicist once told me.

Maybe that’s my issue. I’m not in control of anything. Well, that’s going to change right now. I’m doing this on my own, my way.

NOAH

The steam from the coffee tickles my nose and I take a sip. God, is there anything better than having that first hit of caffeine on your tongue first thing in the morning? Well, I guess I can think of a few things more pleasurable on my tongue, but considering I'm at Nana's, on a break, and last night I was in bed by eleven-thirty, right now my pleasures are pretty simple.

And I'm fucking going crazy. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy to be here and this break from L.A. is exactly what I need, but I'm supposed to be looking for a house and fucking my way through Nashville, at least according to Blaine. If you ask Laird, I should be anywhere else, finding a wife, or at least the promise of one. Laird's pretty certain the label threw that out there to make a point, but no one has a gun to my head to put a ring on it. So far, I've seen exactly one house and it didn't appeal to me. As for fucking my way through Nashville, so far, the only woman who's caught my interest is my Nana's new neighbor and she doesn't seem to be a fan. As for the label's suggestion, again, the only woman I've thought about more than twice doesn't exactly fit my list. I should be looking at listings but instead I'm scrolling through India's socials and listening to the occasional thud next door.

I can't figure it out. Her feed is filled with L.A.'s top influencers, parties, vacations, scenes from the set of whatever reality show is hot at the moment. It's not my circle, but she seems to straddle the line between the whole weird pseudo-celebrity influencer thing and the clear A-List. Not that I care

about shit like that. Vera, our publicist, would be able to fit her into some hierarchy I imagine, and I'd bet my sister knows exactly who India is and what she eats for breakfast, but as I scroll, I can't find a single shot that reminds me of the rumped girl I pulled out of the window, her long, dark brown hair tangled across her face, her round cheeks flushed. That girl looked real. The girl in these photos and videos looks kind of like the girl I met, but between the filters and lighting and makeup, if I didn't know it was India Rook, I wouldn't know.

I tap on a picture of India lounging poolside, her curvy body highlighted by a deep blue bikini, her full, round breasts and soft-looking thighs reminding me I haven't actually been with anyone since Rachel and I broke up. Don't get me wrong. I'm not exactly hung up about the breakup and it's not like there aren't plenty of opportunities. I feel like a bit of a dud to be honest. My life isn't anything to complain about and god knows I'm a lucky man to be in Kingmaker with my best friends. But lately, it's just been too much. Too much attention, too many people, too much shit that doesn't have anything to do with our music. As for women, it's never been an issue, but just like the last few months, it's all been a bit too much. And between the crazy person who broke into my place, the crazy person threatening Ajax, and the crazy person who claimed she was pregnant with Tanner's baby, it's been too much crazy. Maybe I'm a little gun-shy. That has to be the reason I haven't had much interest in pulling the trigger.

I tried. It's not like I'm a monk or something. That role belongs to Tanner. Or at least it did. Fuck. Back in Chicago, I tried to roll with everything and not overthink shit. It seemed like everything was cool. Ash opened for us, and their guitarist, Lexxie Crux is hot-as-fuck. We go way back, and I figured, with her it'd be more of the same. Whenever I'm single and we get a chance to hang out, we hit it, but last time it got weird, and it wasn't for me.

I shudder as I remember what happened back in Chicago. Ash was on a crossover tour and the label arranged for them to open for those two shows. I asked Lexxie to come with me to the after party to see Jax's solo debut. Her hands were all over me and I was really into her, even wondering if this would be

the time we decide to make a go of it together. In the VIP, tequila was flowing, Blaine and Slade acting like fools and Ajax was all over Natalie, so Lex and I had a dark corner to ourselves. She murmured in my ear about picking out a couple of the girls who were partying with the rest of the boys to come and play with us. I was a little surprised, but I have no issues with anyone who is into that. That night, however, I was thinking about how much we were hitting it off and I really wanted to focus on Lexxie. It was too easy to convince her to head back to the hotel, our tongues tangling in the backseat, my hands all over her hard nipples, her hand, rough from string calluses like my own, down my pants. Somehow, we made it back to the room where she slowly dragged my zipper down with my teeth, her warm breath on my cock feeling like Christmas morning, my birthday and Kingmaker's first big show all in one.

I gently push her back on the bed, wanting to get my mouth on her skin first, but she wriggles away from me, folding her tall body into a kneeling position on the floor, her pink hair a stark contrast to her head-to-toe black shirt and slacks.

“Come back here,” I say with a crook of my finger.

Shaking her head, she pouted up at me. “Take your pants off.”

“I will, but you first.” I flick open the buttons on my shirt. “Let me hear you scream when I put my mouth on you.”

Leaning back, her small breasts thrust out against her shirt, she runs a hand down her body. “I want your cock in my mouth.”

I'm nothing but a gentleman, so if that's what the lady wants, I'm happy to give it to her. I push my pants down and reach to lift her back to the bed. She ignores my hand. “No, stand up.”

I hesitate for a second before getting to my feet. She's different tonight. “You don't have to stay on your knees.”

A flash of irritation crosses her face. “I know what gets me off, Noah. Now come stand here and drive your dick down my throat.” She grabs my hips, her short nails digging into my skin, and pulls me to her. “So big,” she moans licking me from root to tip, her teeth lightly dragging over the tip, making my cock jump.

I ease past her lips, and she pulls me even closer, her throat working, nails scraping my skin. “Easy,” I murmur, trying to slow down. Her grip intensifies and I wince at the burn from her nails. I slide my hands into the silkiness of her hair and focus on the pleasure but there’s an edge to it. I glance down and her makeup is smudged, the heavy black eyeliner staining her cheeks as they hollow out around my cock and she rams her mouth down to the base, tears springing from her eyes. Alarmed, I hold her head and start to withdraw but she shakes her head, slapping my ass with the flat of her palm. I step back, hissing as her teeth and tongue swirl over my now too-sensitive dick.

She bites her lip, reddening it even more, and looks up beneath her long, dark lashes. I swallow hard at the tear tracks through her makeup. “Lex, I’m sorry...” I start.

“Don’t be sorry, daddy. I’ve been a bad girl,” she says, her voice raspy.

“Daddy?” I look around wildly. I’m definitely not drunk enough for this. What happened to the cool chick who was talking about the fine points of Thurston Moore’s experimental playing and whether it could have influenced Dimebag Darrell later in Pantera? I’m not one to yuck on someone else’s yum, but tonight I just want to lose myself in this hot girl. I strain my memory, but I don’t think Daddy Kink was her thing a few years ago.

Lexxie plumps her small breasts in her hands, squeezing the tips roughly through her shirt. It looks like it hurts. My hands brush the sides of my ass, and I can feel the indents from her nails on my skin. Her nipples peak and my cock twitches reminding me how good her mouth felt at first.

“What’s wrong, daddy?”

Fuck it, I can play along with this. “Uh, daddy likes it gentle.” I feel like a twat.

She frowns, crawling towards me. “Baby likes it rough.”

I back up until my knees hit the bed and I sit, bouncing on the mattress while she comes up in between my legs, the silk of her hair tickling my thighs.

I push my misgivings aside. If this is hot for her, I’ll try it. “Tell daddy what you need.”

She beams, the smile incongruous with her streaked makeup. “Just lie back, daddy, and let baby do all the work.” Her tongue snakes out, touching my tip and I relax, leaning back on my elbows. She covers me, working my cock with all the passion I’ve seen her throw down on stage. I’m just getting into it when she rises up on her knees, swallowing me down to the root, which is no mean feat. I feel her throat struggling, her loud moans vibrating against my dick and the muscles in my legs tighten as sensation rushes up my thighs. Her hand comes between my legs, encircling my balls, tugging lightly. Just as I’m about to cum, she pulls away and stares at me.

“Get undressed,” I say.

She continues to stare at me.

“Get undressed for daddy?” I say, desperate to get things back on familiar footing. I can’t figure out what’s happening here, but it’s not my usual deal. I like pleasing women. My pleasure comes from seeing my partner fall apart from passion and not in tears from choking on my dick. This night has taken a weird-as-fuck turn.

She climbs up my body, the roughness of her clothing a weird sensation against my naked skin. Settling over my crotch, she bounces up and down. “Baby will be cold.”

“I’ll warm you up.” I curl my hands over her hips and pull her towards me for a kiss. She nips at my mouth hard. “Fuck,” I exclaim, tasting blood. She darts down towards me again, licking my rapidly swelling lip.

“Punish me, daddy,” she says, rubbing herself all over me.

I swat her butt a couple of times and she squirms. “Harder, daddy.”

I squeeze her ass and try to slide her zipper down with my free hand. I reach inside needing to feel her warm, wet flesh under my fingers, but she wiggles away from me and sits up.

“This isn’t working for me,” she says, her voice back to normal.

I roll my eyes, going up on my elbows. Thank fuck, because it’s not working for me either. Tentatively, I touch my tongue to my lip, wincing. “Just tell me what you need,” I say, hoping to salvage the night.

She sits back on her feet, almost prim, studying me. “I need you to be forceful.”

I nod. “I can do that.”

“I need to suck your cock,” she says, licking her lips, reaching out to massage me with the flat of her hand.

“I can definitely do that.” I smile, placing my hand over hers, gliding it up and down until I’m stiff and aching again.

She bends over me, swirling her tongue around the head, before looking back up my body. “I need you to punch me in the face when you cum.”

I jerk out of her grasp, rolling to out from under her. “What the fuck, Lex?”

She tilts her head. “What?”

“I’m not going to hit you.”

“I’ll make it good for you, daddy.”

I surge to my feet. “We’re done here.”

She unfolds herself. “I should have gone with Blaine. He loves the freaky shit. Or Tanner. Tanner looks like he can dole out some punishment.” She shakes her head. “You don’t always have to be so perfect.”

“I’m not perfect!” I grab a shirt from the floor, pulling it over my head. “Do you really want some guy to hit you in the

face?”

“Don’t be such a pussy.” She folds her arms across her chest. “You’d be surprised how good it’ll make you feel.”

“Me? You think hurting *you* will feel good to *me*?” I gape at her. “How many times do you do this?”

“Don’t slut-shame me, Mr. Perfect.” She gets off the bed, heading to the door.

“I’m not! But you could get hurt!”

She turns with a hand at the door. “Is that what gets you off then? Playing Prince Charming?”

“I don’t play at anything! We fuck, and you scream because I make you feel good, not because I break your jaw.”

Another eye roll and then I’m staring at the back of the door. Well, at least I don’t have a pesky hard-on anymore.

My phone buzzes just as I hear a crash, bringing me back to my Nana’s backyard. Sun warms my back and I stretch, reaching for my phone. *Rachel*. Goddamn it. I’m not interested in speaking with her this morning. Especially after remembering that awful night in Chicago. I wouldn’t have been in that position to begin with if Rachel hadn’t pulled her passive-aggressive ‘we need some distance’ bullshit.

Next door, I hear the hinges of the screen door groan and India stumbles out onto the porch, carrying a heavy-looking bucket, her hands encased in bright yellow rubber gloves. I leave the phone on the side table and wander over to the fence, stepping up onto Nana’s deck for a better view. India drops the bucket with a bang and swipes her face with the back of her arm.

“I saw that movie once,” I say.

Her head shoots up and swivels until she catches sight of me leaning over the fence like the creepy neighbor I’ve clearly become. Her eyes narrow in a scowl. “What movie?”

“The one about those women who are cleaners for a mafia hit team.”

She stares at me.

“You know, they get called in to deal with the mess the killers leave behind?”

India blinks twice, rolls her eyes, and goes back into the house. I don't know if it's boredom, procrastination, or downright avoidance but I hop down off the deck, open the gate and circle around to the backyard next door. I've never met a woman who hasn't been openly interested in me. Despite what my sister says, I'm not exactly a troll, and even if I was, my status as Guitar God in Kingmaker pretty much guarantees me all the company I could want.

Except for India. Over the last few days, she's kept a low profile. She did stop by with a lovely thank you card and a small gift for Nana in appreciation for 'saving' her the other night. Nana exclaimed over the book journal and invited her in for tea, but India declined, saying she had to find a hardware store. Before I could even say hello, she'd hopped back into the rental car she'd picked up and taken off.

I can't figure her out. From her socials, she clearly loves the good things in life. Designer shoes, spa outings, expensive restaurants, and a fancy sports car my mother would love. As Edward Rook's daughter, she is rock royalty. He even owns a castle in France, for crying out loud. And Nana's neighborhood, while nice and upscale, isn't in the same realm as the places India posts in her photos. I stare at the house again, wondering why India Rook hasn't taken to whatever social platform is hottest right now to put a stop to some of the bullshit I've seen that Cody loser posting, like he's some kind of victim who fell under India's spell.

Why didn't she throw her hands up in the air and walk away when he screwed her over?

I push open the screen door and walk inside. Down the hall I can hear some current pop break-up song, so I head in that direction. The music is coming from one of the bathrooms and when I push open the door, I see India on all fours, her round ass straining the fabric of a pair of denim cut-offs as she's reaching into the lower bathroom cabinets with a cloth.

I lean against the door jamb and admire the view for a few seconds. Her hips move back and forth as she scrubs, and I can't help but wonder how she moves in bed. Jesus, I need to get laid, and soon. Problem is, my body sits up and begs whenever I'm around India and she seems to have zero interest in me.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

She rears back, smacking her head against the top of the cabinet. “Fucking Christ!”

I wince. I have no game around this girl. “Are you okay?”

She turns, throwing down her cloth and peeling off her glove to rub the back of her head. “I'm fine, save for the fact that you broke in and scared me.” She feels around the top of the counter until she finds her phone, pressing the screen until the music stops.

“I didn't break in. The door was open.” But I feel bad. With the music blaring, maybe she didn't hear me walk in. I remember the state of the house when she'd first arrived, and a sick feeling settles in my stomach. What if a stalker targeted her the way they had me? What if they'd tried to do more than creep around the house and plot to hold her pet ransom?

Glaring at me, she gets to her feet. “Were you invited?”

“Some might say an open door is an invitation.” Guilt pricks me hard. She definitely didn't hear me come down the hallway. “I'm sorry for scaring you.”

She slaps down the other glove and folds her arms under her chest. “Did you want something?”

The front of her white t-shirt is damp, and the movement molds the cotton to her spectacular breasts. Her shirt is so sheer, I can tell she's wearing a lace bra, the plump swells rising just over the fabric. I swallow hard, reminding myself I'm not looking for a distraction. India is not my type. I'm not into the reality show drama and based on the hot mess I'm seeing on the socials right now, the last thing I need is to get involved with someone the internet calls “The Maneater.” Her

deep pink mouth is set in a hard line, and I can tell she's gritting her teeth.

"I just wanted to see how you're doing." I glance around the bathroom. It's immaculate. "You've certainly made progress here." I'm curious and I hold her gaze, hoping she'll give something up. She taps her foot and I smile, something about her impatience drawing me like a magnet.

Finally, she blows out an exasperated breath. "What do you mean, here?"

"With this house." I hold up a hand, giving it a little whirl. "In Nashville. Your loser ex was supposed to meet you here because you'd bought this house, but now he's not coming, so what is your plan?"

"Maybe I'm just looking for a change. Just because he ditched me doesn't mean I can't finish this on my own."

"Finish what, though? I don't get it. Why are you here on your hands and knees, instead of at Ice Club celebrating your newly single status?"

"What did you just say?" she asks, her voice dangerously low.

"I..." I'm not sure what I said to make her eyes go dark.

"Ice Club is brand new in L.A. and I did a whole TikTok series on the opening because the owner is a friend." She narrows her eyes. "Are you googling me, Noah Whitlock?"

I open my mouth and close it again. It sounds kind of stalker-ish to admit I've been googling the hell out of her.

She throws up her hands, grips her long ponytail and drags the tie down and off, shaking out her hair. She gathers the long, dark brown length and rakes it back up, wrapping the tie so tight, I wince.

"Everyone wants to know where I am, don't they? India Rook, hiding out because she can't face seeing Cody and his one true love back together. India Rook, shoved into some dark hole where she belongs for trying to keep Cody and

Madison apart. India Rook, so pathetic because she can't get her own man, she has to steal someone else's."

I debate slowly backing out of the room because her eyes are wild, and I shouldn't get involved in whatever is going on in this woman's life. I'm determined to be the sane one in the band and do what the label wants. And right now, the label wants us to be golden boys. Ajax and Tanner are fucking that up, but what the label wants has always been good for me. I've got my orders: make no waves, keep the boys out of trouble, get Tanner writing again. That last one is harder to pull off right now, but I'll figure it out, as soon as I stop wanting to punch him in the throat.

India presses her fists to her eyes. "I'm so sick of this." She blinks, her eyes shifting off to the side and I see how glassy they are. She's a tall woman, with soft-looking thighs and an ass that won't quit. Her ponytail is hanging down her back and her make-up free face makes her look so much younger than the glamorous sexpot in her photos.

"What are you sick of?" I assume this is where she tells me she's throwing in the towel on cleaning up this mess and hightailing it back to L.A. where she's obviously more comfortable.

"I'm sick of everyone thinking they know me, discussing my business, my life." She glares at me. "Like you. Admit it, you assumed my only interest is hanging out at hot new clubs and posting about it. The more attention the better, right?" The glare fades and she bites her lip. "I'm sick of the comments about how Cody dumped me because I've gained weight and how disappointed my mother must be in her only child not being able to follow in her footsteps."

"You're upset about some asshole's comments?" My eyes travel over her lush curves. She looks pretty good to me. Better than good. L.A. is full of women who all want to make it in the industry – modelling, acting, music. They all think they need to fit into a certain mold, and for the industry, they usually do. But I watched Rachel struggle with every bite she put in her mouth. Perpetually hungry and too scared to eat an

entire bowl of spaghetti. The thought of the woman in front of me feeling bad about her gorgeous curves make me rage.

“No, I’m not upset.” She frowns up at me. “I take after my dad and he’s not a small guy. But my mother has a certain look, and my weight has been scrutinized since I was a child. When I’m super skinny it’s because I’m sick. But every extra pound, ripple, fold, and pooch gets gleefully commented upon as a negative thing and that’s what I’m sick of.”

“I thought body positivity was a whole thing on Instagram right now.”

She squints up at me. “How would you know that? It looks like your label cultivates your feed. Or do you have a secret account?”

“You looked me up?” A spark of pleasure hits me.

Waving it off, she folds her arms across her chest. “Body positivity is a thing, yes. But so is tearing down the people you love to hate.”

“But people love you too.” I know because I ended up on one of her fan sites.

She shrugs and makes air quotes. “Yeah, but because I’m the ‘bad girl’. They want me to be outrageous and dangerous and wild.”

“What do you want?”

Biting her lip, she turns away. “I want to get this house cleaned up.”

“Why? Are you really planning on moving in and staying here?”

Her arms fall and she slaps her hips as if brushing off my question. “Well, this place isn’t going to clean itself.” She touches her phone, and a new song fills the bathroom, grabs her rubber gloves and a cloth, spraying something that smells like vinegar on the mirror.

I’ve clearly been dismissed. My brain shouts for me to let it go. To go back to Nana’s, text Rachel, and get on with it. Maybe I’ll feel different this time. Maybe not everyone needs

a spark. Maybe I used up my allotment of luck on Kingmaker's success. But I can't forget the electricity that hit me when my eyes met India's for the first time. It's got to be because I'm bored and edgy and need a distraction. Still though, my pulse quickens as I watch her hips shimmy from side to side as she reaches over the sink. All the more reason to walk away.

I turn to leave and spot a broom. I reach for it, holding it the way I've seen Tanner caress an old-fashioned mic stand, then I flip it across my thighs and air-guitar the hell out of it to the song blaring from her speaker. I totally get into it, my hair falling into my eyes, my muscles straining for the feel of my real instrument, and I freewheel some over-the-top moves. When I look up again, India has her back against the counter watching me, a little smile on her lips.

"What?" I say, switching the broom to one hand and raking my hair back from my face.

"That was some show." Her lips twitch again.

"What can I say, I play a little."

She raises an eyebrow. "Ever think about doing it professionally?"

I shrug. "Eh, it's just a hobby." I smile and her lips twitch again in a reluctant smile.

"You're so charming."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

She sighs. "Noah..."

My pulse quickens again at the breathy sound escaping her lips. I must be a sucker for punishment but all I know is that I really want to see that sexy smile again. I hold up the broom, like a knight saluting his lady. "Let me help."

Her eyebrows scrunch together. "With what?"

"With whatever you're doing here."

"It's called cleaning. Something you've probably never had to do."

“I resent that. Mom made me clean my room before guitar practice all the time.” That wasn’t entirely true. I made sure my room was spotless so Mom wouldn’t have to ask or worry about whether I could take care of myself. With my sister in and out of the hospital, my parents had enough stress to deal with, so I always made sure stuff was done, at least as much as I was capable.

She raises a skeptical brow. “A woman you couldn’t charm into doing your bidding? Your mother must be special indeed.”

“She is. And who are you to talk? You’re trying to tell me you didn’t grow up with a full household staff paid to wait on their little princess?” I move past her, sweeping up the debris she’s wiped out of the cabinets.

India snorts. A full-on sound of disbelief that has me turning with a grin until I catch sight of her cloudy expression.

“No one waited on me. I was practically invisible. Except to our main housekeeper, Diane. She’s the one who taught me how to clean, cook and take care of myself.”

I think about my parents, their love for each other, and for me and Sterling. Yeah, we had stuff going on but no matter what was happening, I would never describe myself as invisible.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She squirts the spray bottle at another section of the mirror and reaches up to wipe vigorously, her shirt riding up to reveal soft-looking skin. “I was just as happy to be left alone and Diane is... was... amazing to me. When I wasn’t travelling with my parents, she made sure I ate, helped me with homework and tucked me in. Sometimes there were cameras all over the place, and producers for the show, not to mention the crew.” She shrugs. “Diane made sure I didn’t get lost in the chaos.”

She drops her arm and I meet her gaze in the mirror. “Were you lonely?”

“Nope. I was working.”

“You were a kid.”

She shrugs a shoulder. “So? Lots of kid actors were in similar circumstances.” India turns to me. “Don’t feel sorry for me, Noah. I’ve been famous since I was born. Isn’t that what everyone wants? Fame? Fortune?” She points the rag at me. “Isn’t that why you wanted to be a rock star?”

All I wanted was to play guitar, but she’s right. I had stars in my eyes from the very first time I got onstage at school and heard the applause. Performing is powerful. Being the object of admiration is powerful. And I learned pretty quick that I was really good at cultivating admiration. I’m not like Tanner, who’s happiest being on his own. I’m not like Blaine, who loves the ladies, but it’s like a fucking sprint for him to finish with one and start on another. And Ajax and Slade, they lead with their hearts. Those guys don’t really give a shit what people think.

I do.

“You’re right. Fame and fortune is the ultimate win.” I hesitate a beat, continuing to sweep. “But you already have both, so why haven’t you hired an army to come down on this place and make it Instagram-worthy for you?”

“That’s...” She stops, fussing with the spray bottle. “Maybe I just want to do it myself.”

“Were you and Cody supposed to tackle this together?” I can’t imagine that pretty-boy joker getting his hands dirty on something like this.

“Yes. He’s from here originally, and he said he had connections in town to help make it over.” She heaves another sigh, her shoulders sinking. “It’s for a show.”

Leaning back against the counter, she tugs the end of her ponytail, chewing her lip.

I stop sweeping, giving her my full attention. The last thing I want is a production crew descending on this place while I’m here. Laird wants us to be low-key right now. Well, except for Tanner and my sister who are supposed to be getting caught all kissy-face and spinning some kind of

whirlwind romance out on social media. It makes me angry to even think about it.

This is supposed to be my vacation, some down-time to figure out whether I want to be back in L.A. or just sell the place and stay on the east coast. On top of it all, I'm trying to think about how I can give the label what it wants to take some heat off of us, before our European tour.

My back teeth grind together. "What kind of show?"

"Well, it's not really a show *per se*, but it's for a show." She shakes her head, picking up her phone and scrolling.

Irritation spreads a tightness across my shoulders. "Now's not the time to be checking out your feed, India. Is this neighborhood about to become a zoo?" Weren't there permits and notice and stuff that needed to be approved?

She casts me a black glare and passes me her phone. Looking down, I see an email from someone named Emily, outlining the details of a competition. *A home design competition?*

"What is this?" I ask.

"You can't say anything."

I slide my eyes left and right as if checking for interlopers and make an 'x' over my heart. "Cross my heart."

"I'm serious, Noah. Even your Nana's friends recognized me. I don't want anyone to know about this."

"If production trucks and a camera crew show up, everyone is going to know about this, India."

"They're not. It's not like that." She gestures to the phone. "This is for an opportunity."

I scan the email. "Are you an interior designer?"

"Well, no, not formally, but I've studied on my own. Everyone who applies has to have a recent project to showcase. I need to prove I have the basic skills and an inherent sense of style. They choose people based on their projects and the winners get a mentorship with a top

architectural and interior design firm and the chance to have their own show with the HomeLove channel.”

“You want a design show?” I don’t know much about these shows, but if she plans on wearing cut-offs and crawling around, I’d watch it.

“I don’t really want the show.” She chews her lip. “I want the mentorship.”

“Why would you want a mentorship?”

Her shoulders hunch. “You think I won’t get it?”

“I have no idea whether you will or not, but why would you want it?”

“You know what? Never mind. I’m sorry I even told you about it.” She strides forward and grips the broom handle, trying to tug it out of my hands, but I tug it back.

“Hey, I’m not being negative, I’m just wondering. It seems so different from what you normally do.”

She lets go of the broom. “It *is* different from what I normally do.” She holds up her hand. “That’s the point.”

I continue sweeping. “If you don’t like what you’re doing, why not just stop?”

“It’s not that easy.” India watches me for a minute. “I kind of talked Cody into the project, selling it as a way to branch into lifestyle influence, but what I really want is that mentorship.” She gathers up her rag and spray bottle, carrying them over to a little plastic basket. “I’ve always been interested in that kind of thing. Making people feel comfortable in their space, giving them a feeling of home.”

A tendril of hair has fallen loose around her face, and she sweeps it back. She’s a beautiful woman, with high cheekbones, and a full mouth that makes me think about tasting it. Today she’s wearing cut-offs and a thin, white t-shirt molded to her curves. I don’t understand why I’m drawn to her, but that doesn’t mean I should act on it. I need a normal woman, one who fits my list, and this rock star princess who grew up in the spotlight, living out her drama-filled life on

those reality shows and social media is the complete opposite of what I'm looking for. She's the definition of 'for a good time, call' so I should just get over being so intrigued about seeing her here, glamour-free, scrubbing the bathroom, in the house next door to my Nana's.

"But you're India Rook – can't you simply tell someone that's what you want to do?"

She sends me a withering stare. "And you're Noah Whitlock. What do you think your management team would say if you suddenly wanted to do something completely different? I mean something with a vastly different audience, where success isn't really guaranteed." She snaps a piece of paper towel from a roll and polishes the faucet. "Plus, me being India Rook is a bit of a liability too. Everyone thinks I'm some kind of flighty, wild child." She balls up the paper towel and pitches it into a small green bin. "I need to prove I didn't get something because my dad pulled a few favors, or that this is some sort of hobby I'll get bored with after two weeks."

Everyone might think she's a flighty, wild child, but honestly, that's how she comes across. At least on television. I don't want to admit that I've watched a few minutes of one of her shows. One of the ones with Cody. Okay, maybe more than a few minutes. The camera loves this woman, or at least one of the camera crew clearly did, because it was like watching one of those nature shows about tigers. Beautiful to look at, desirable to have around – and then deadly when they do get too close. Cody plays the sympathetic character who wanders too close to her lair, for sure. But at the same time, she softened in moments, seemed more like the woman in front of me, and it makes me wonder who the real India is.

Her phone rings and her eyes dart to the screen. She makes no move to answer it.

"I can leave if you want," I offer, heading for the door.

Biting her lip, she shakes her head. "You don't have to. I'm not answering it."

The phone stops ringing and then starts again. India picks it up and taps the screen, silencing the call, before putting it

down where the screen immediately lights up with numerous text messages.

“It looks like someone is trying to get ahold of you.”

“It’s my friend. I already know what she’s going to tell me. Cody and Madison are painting a rather unflattering picture of me in an attempt to play up their new show.”

“Why would they do that? Shouldn’t they be focused on themselves?”

Her mouth twists in a wry grin. “One would think, but no. They want me to make a couple of appearances on the show, you know, to add the drama of me attempting to get Cody back and ultimately have true love win the day.”

My brows draw together. “I don’t get it. Are you and Cody getting back together?”

“Never, ever, ever, as the song goes. The true love is between him and Madison. I’m just there for filler. Remember, the ‘reality’ part of reality shows is a bit of exaggeration.” She picks up her basket of cleaning stuff and leaves the bathroom.

I quickly finish sweeping my little pile and notice she’s left the dustpan, so I clean it up and head back down the hall to the kitchen. She’s standing in front of the large window, and I give a low whistle. “Wow, you work fast.” The kitchen is practically spotless, which is a massive change from how it appeared when we first went through the house that first night.

“It’s just cleaning,” she says with a shrug.

“Hey, to be honest, I’m not sure I would have known where to start.” It’s the truth. For so long, I’ve just had to make a single phone call and someone else takes care of whatever I need or want. I would have expected someone like India to live the same way, but she’s stuck it out and tackled this mess on her own. From seeing her on different shows, there’s no way anyone would believe India Rook scrubbed floors on her hands and knees.

She gives me a half smile. “Cody was supposed to hire people to clean and do some basic construction, but I’ll have to figure that out on my own.”

“I’m sure my Nana will have some leads for you. I’ll ask her to make a list,” I offer.

“Thanks.” She tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and pulls her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Is anything wrong?” I feel like a dick. Clearly, a lot is wrong, or she wouldn’t be here, scrubbing this place by herself. I can’t help wanting to know more about her, like a puzzle where I can see the picture, but the pieces don’t quite seem to fit. “Are you upset about Cody?”

“No.” She meets my eyes, and one shoulder hitches up in a little shrug. “Well, I guess not really.”

“Weren’t you guys together for a while?”

“For a few months.” She shakes her head. “There’s no point in dwelling on it now.”

“Did you love him?” I ask, without thinking.

Her eyes swing to mine, and I wish I could take back the question. It’s too personal and I’m an idiot for asking her. I hold up a hand. “I’m sorry, you don’t have to answer that.”

“No, it’s okay. I feel kind of weird about it. Doing the show, we were together a lot and I guess I thought he was my friend. I know he wasn’t thrilled about my project, but he seemed all in, and suggested we buy a house here in Nashville to do it. I never thought he’d leave me in a lurch like this though, especially when he knows...”

I wait but she doesn’t continue. I’m wildly curious about this entire situation and oddly happy to hear that she doesn’t seem too hung up on him. “When he knows, what?”

“How important this was for me.” She turns away. “I can’t invest a lot into this project. I really am doing it on my own, and I don’t have the resources.”

“I can help you.” I have no idea where that came from. Maybe I’m avoiding shit. Maybe I’m bored. Maybe I just want the opportunity to watch her crawl around in those tight-ass shorts again.

“What?” Her eyes fly to mine. “Why?”

“Why not?” I hold up an arm, flexing my muscle. I may not be built like Blaine and Slade, but few are. No one has ever complained about my physique and I can definitely do some basic tasks. Dad used to make me and Tanner do all kinds of chores around the house. Still does, when we get home for a visit.

India laughs. “I’m not sure it has to do with strength, but skill.”

I jerk my head back. “I’ll have you know I don’t get too many complaints about my skills.”

“I’m sure,” she says her eyes trailing over my flexed arms, all the way down to my toes.

I feel a deep heat in my body, and I know she feels it too, because it matches the heat in her gaze as she drinks me in. I step towards her, inhaling the scent of lemon cleaner and her own sweet, spicy perfume that makes me think about burying my face in her neck to see if she tastes as good as she smells.

Electricity shimmers between us until she steps back, folding her arms across her chest. “However, I don’t need your rock god skills and I’m not going to sleep with you, so your talents are wasted here.”

Despite her words, heat continues to swirl between us, and I remind myself this is a distraction I don’t really need, but I’m enjoying it anyway. “Ouch.” I clap a hand over my heart. “Straight shooter, aren’t you?”

She meets my gaze again, the smile slipping from her face. “I try to be.” She claps her hands together and waves me towards the door. “Thanks for dropping in to scare me to death and sweep, but I have a lot to do and not much time to do it, so I’ll see you around.”

“That’s it? I give you my best sweep and you show me the door?”

“If that’s your best sweep, then you’ve proven my point that your talents are wasted here.”

“Hey, I can’t help it if you’ve already cleaned up most of the stuff.” I eye the stuffed garbage bags lined up by the door.

“Let me bring those out to the curb for you.”

“You don’t have to.” She puts her hands on her hips. “I managed to get them this far.”

“I’m leaving anyway, right? Might as well take out the trash while I’m at it.” I turn and head towards the bags, making a big show of hiking up my shorts while I squat to lift them. I glance over my shoulder. “Now don’t be checking out my ass while I do this.”

She huffs, half exasperation, half laughter. “I wasn’t checking out your ass.”

“Why not? It’s a great ass. You might just think my skills are worth checking out after all.”

Her laughter floats across the room and I incorporate a little wiggle as I open the door. I try not to think about how light my chest feels as the door swings shut behind me.

INDIA

“Have you seen it?” Whitney’s face fills the screen. In the background, I see fairy lights, palm trees and the sounds of a crazy-ass party fading as the screen bounces along with Whitney’s fast pace. As the daughter of my dad’s agent, we pretty much grew up together, and she’s my best friend, even if screen time is the only way we’ve seen each other in the last year. A few years ago, her online make-up channel blew up and now she’s running a multi-million-dollar corporation.

I groan, lifting my arm to see it’s only five thirty in the morning. “Whit. Just tell me.”

“Wait, have you not been checking your socials? When I saw you hadn’t posted anything since before you left for Nashville, I needed proof of life.”

“I texted you when I got here.”

“Yes, but that could have been anybody who dumped your body and stole your phone.”

“You need to stop listening to those true crime podcasts.”

“Maybe. But they’re so good.” She waves to a couple she passes, and I hear the strong click of her heels hitting stone pavers.

“Where are you? It’s not even the ass-crack of dawn here.”

“You are missing a major party.”

“I don’t know if I’m missing it exactly.”

“What has happened to you? Before, it wasn’t a party until you showed up. Cody damaged your party mojo, girl.”

“Don’t you get tired of it, Whit? Half the people at those parties don’t really know us and the other half is just hoping something scandalous is going to happen so they can catch it on their phones and sell it to TMZ.”

“That’s pretty jaded, baby girl. Plus, I’m okay with people not knowing my entire life history. The new wave means I get to be Whitney and not field questions and raised eyebrows from Tyler Fuckface and his ilk who can’t get past the fact that we pissed on a tree together in the before-times. It’s like he keeps waiting for me to take off my dress and bump chests with him.”

I chuckle. “If you took off your dress in front of Tyler to bump chests, I guarantee he wouldn’t be thinking of the before-times.”

Whitney pulls the phone down to her incredible cleavage. “I know, right? Perfection.” But there’s a twinge in her voice that has me sitting up in bed.

“You okay, Whit?”

“Yes. I am. Just missing you. I told you doing that show with Cody was a bad idea.”

“Well, now I’m in Nashville and trying to pull the whole thing off by myself. I’m trying to stay off the socials while I reinvent what I’m doing. I want to be taken seriously.”

“In this business, what you should be worrying about is staying relevant. But, listen. I’m your best friend and I love you which is why I’m calling you. Cody and bitch-tits are running trailers for their new show, and it looks like you’re in it.”

“I am not in their new show.”

“Well, they’re getting footage from somewhere. I don’t want you to hit up his page because it’s a vomitorium over there of love and destiny,” Whitney makes a gagging sound, “but maybe you need to do some damage control.”

“Is that what people are saying? That I’m heartbroken?” Humiliated, angry, frustrated, yes. But I’m pretty sure I’d actually have to have one of those fairytale hearts for that organ to do something other than pump my blood around. Which it’s been doing an admirable job of, if the way my heart races around Noah is any indication. “Hey, Whit, do you know any of the guys in Kingmaker?”

“The band? They’re like super A-list. My dad might know some people at their label, but I’ve never been around them. Your dad would though, probably. I don’t know how he keeps doing it, but his star just keeps shooting no matter what he does.” She shakes her head. “I’m sorry, babe. Have you talked to him?”

“No. And I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oookay.” Whitney pauses. “Why are you asking about those guys? I know they’re as hot as a pair of strapped back balls, but that’s about all I know. I wouldn’t mind bumping anything with any one of those guys.”

I pause. I trust Whit, but Noah hanging out at his Nana’s seems so wholesome. I don’t want to bring a shitstorm down on his head if he’s here with family. The last thing this street needs is a bunch of women risking public indecency to get Noah’s attention. He’s not the only one internet snooping around here. I found a thread that exclusively follows the band while they’re touring and while there’s nothing too wild and crazy, at least from my experience, the guys certainly like their ladies. Typical musicians. I’ve seen the worst of it and the last thing I want is a flood of fans showing up in wet t-shirts which is apparently a trend that started after Noah and Ajax got soaked by a malfunctioning sprinkler at an outdoor show. Once the panic of accidental electrocution had passed, they asked the audience if they wanted in on the action and the result made rock history as Tanner Steele and Noah Whitlock somehow turned that old honky-tonk song by the Bellamy Brothers, which is almost as old as my dad, into some kind of dark, sexy magic. Tanner’s voice is all danger and smoke and watching the video of Noah backing him up on guitar, his dark blond hair dripping wet, a white t-shirt plastered to his

sculpted chest and black denim riding low on his hips did funny things to my insides.

My eyes drift to the corner where the sex swing sits in a basket like someone's abandoned knitting.

"India? Yoo hoo?"

Whitney voice is too loud in the cozy, little shed, and I wince, pulling the pillow over my ear. "Shh, it's only like five-thirty in the morning here."

"Well, it's not like you have company." Whitney pulls the phone up to her eye like she can see something other than the fluffy, white bedding I'm cocooned in. "Right?"

"Of course not."

"Oh, come on, India. This is me. I'm surprised you haven't one-upped Cody by now."

"I'm swearing off relationships."

"Relationships? Is that what you're calling the line-up of trophies you've collected over the years?"

"Very funny." I roll my eyes, but her comment stings a little. Whitney's my best friend and even she buys into the image of me as some kind of femme fatale.

"Are you telling me you're actually upset about Cody?" Whitney's eyebrows shoot up into her bangs.

I roll over, watching the sky lighten as the sun spreads its rays across the sky. "I don't know. I guess not. I thought he was my friend, so I'm kind of surprised I didn't find out about our breakup before they rolled out their back-together photos. And I suppose everyone is eating it up?"

Whitney tsks. "India, don't you know that's his superpower? That's why people watch him. He comes off as everyone's charming, goofy best friend. But it's just his typecast."

I brush my hand over the smooth cotton. "I don't want to be one of those women who look stupid because they were the last to find out." I told Whit I'm staying off socials so I can

reinvent myself, but honestly, I'm embarrassed. I feel like a fool because I never saw it coming. And this feeling gives me a funny ache in my stomach because I think about all the people I may have made to feel this way over the years.

"No one would ever call you stupid, but I do think you need to counter his publicity with some of your own."

I'm unconvinced. "Maybe this is my opportunity to really try something new and leave that whole scene behind me."

"What are you talking about? Go find a party and cause a real scene. Hell, throw a party yourself and become the queen of Nashville. Line up some southern boys and knock 'em all down. If you are having a good time, no one will think you're so desperate to get him back."

"Wait. Why would anyone think I'm desperate to get him back?"

Whit purses her lips. "You won't like it."

"I already know I won't like it. What is he saying?"

"He's not really saying it. You are."

I sit straight up in bed. "What?"

"Yeah, it's a clip from a video message. You're in some smoking hot lingerie, turquoise lace and your boobs are, like, up to your chin, but it looks amazing—"

"Whit! Forget about what I'm wearing and just tell me!" My mind is racing.

"Okay! You're in the lingerie and you tell him you miss him."

"That's it?"

"Well, yeah. But it's a pretty sexy clip."

"I didn't beg him to come back to me. I just found out about all this for crying out loud. I've been here, working my ass off, getting the house ready."

"So where did the video come from?" She gasps. "Oh! You know, I've seen stuff about these digital clones, and it

looks totally real but it's not, and it's actually really scary."

"While I wouldn't put it past Cody to start using digital cloning, it seems like a lot of work." I close my eyes, wracking my brain for an explanation. "Oh. *Oh*. It is me." A sick feeling rolls through my belly. "Whitney, I sent him a video clip a few months ago when it was his birthday, and he couldn't get home because there was a delay filming a stunt. When I asked him what he wanted, he said he wanted something hot to keep him warm because the desert was cold as ice, and he wasn't prepared for all the shit that went wrong during filming." I didn't think too much about it at the time. Cody bought me the lingerie, his go-to gift, which always kind of said to me '*It looks like I'm thinking about you, but really, I'm thinking about me*' and it's not like stripping down to a bikini or a bra and panties on camera is anything new for me.

"Do you think he was planning something that whole time?"

"No." I try to think back to when things might have started to get a little distant with us, but it wasn't until a few weeks ago. "I actually don't think he and Madison could have been back together for very long." But maybe they were, and I just didn't notice.

"She strikes me as someone who is very insecure. I bet she caught him watching clips of you and freaked out."

"I doubt it. Cody keeps every video clip from everything in case he can use something in the future. No footage is ever really wasted footage. I just never thought it applied to private stuff."

"Well, you know what my father says – 'the internet is forever'." Her doomsday voice makes me laugh.

"And you know what my father says – 'fuck 'em, where's my drink?'"

She snorts. "It's not a bad motto."

"It is when you've sobered up and can't remember all the dumb shit you did, and it becomes your goal in life to punish

your child in an attempt to make sure they're not screwing up their life like you did.”

Whitney blinks and I shift my gaze out the window.

“Are you sure you don't want to—”

“Positive. Go back to the party, Whit. I don't care what Cody and Madison are up to.” But that sour feeling in my stomach increases. Of course I care. Sure, I want out of the reality show drama, but I want out on my own terms. My father will see that I control my own life.

“Do you need help, Indy?”

“What? No. You wouldn't last two seconds after chipping one of your nails on a paint can.”

“Oh, god, no. I don't mean that kind of help.” She shakes her head. “I mean with expenses and stuff.”

Heat climbs into my cheeks. “I would never take money from you, Whit.”

“Listen, you were there for me when no one else was. You accepted the true me.”

“The true you is the person you always were. I love you and I'm grateful I could be there to see your butterfly transformation.” Whitney sniffs, and starts to say something, but I cut her off. “I really don't want you to feel like you need to repay me for being your friend.”

“It's not like that. You helped me when I needed it, and now I can help you. It can't be easy being cut off like that, especially since I'm pretty sure you never heard the word budget in your life.”

“I have money.”

“Do you? Aren't you sleeping in a tool shed? I know you're putting everything into this project, but Cody kind of wiped you out.”

“Blowing up Ferraris isn't cheap,” I say drily, “but Whit, I'm okay. I'm not sleeping in a tool shed either. It's a gorgeous little oasis that is Insta-perfect. I swear it's very *hashtag*

blessed if I was one of those girls. As for everything else, I'll have to be creative with the project but that's a good thing."

"Okay, but if something changes, don't do anything drastic. Let me be your safety net."

My throat tightens. I'm not close to very many people. Whitney reminds me I don't need to be loved by everyone, but sometimes it's nice to know I'm loved by someone.

"Thank you. I know and I will."

"Oh, I gotta go. Someone is organizing cars to head to Del Rey for a sunrise cruise."

"Whose boat?"

"I don't know. Some influencer from Singapore and her sugar daddy from what I can tell, but it should be fun!"

A chorus of voices call for Whitney to hurry. "Go, have fun and take lots of pictures. I'll check them out from my burner." Whitney kisses the screen and I tap it off. Tucking my phone under my chin I roll over and watch the sun filter through the leaves.

Another gorgeous day, and I'll be spending it trying to figure out flooring at the hardware store. With the house stripped down and cleaned, it's time for more of the fun stuff. Luckily, the place has good bones. An electrician checked everything out and I used some of the budget to upgrade a few of the outlets for USB charging and switch some stuff around to permit the kitchen island I have planned. I pulled up the carpet in the family room area and although my poor body is protesting, what a fantastic workout that was. The before and after videos I'm prepping for my submission look amazing. I can paint and decorate like no one's business, but I'm dreading the flooring. I thought I'd be able to bring someone in to do the floor, but the quotes I got on the kitchen and the primary bedroom ensuite are steep and that's not work I can do myself. The other big showstopper work is opening up the back of the house to the garden with a pool and outdoor kitchen and that's hitting the last of my budget hard.

Fluttery tendrils of anxiety fill my stomach. If this project doesn't get selected, I might have to think about picking up another show or two until I figure something out. I won't slink home with my tail between my legs and admit I'm a failure.

With a groan, I roll out of bed and stretch out the kinks. I don't miss L.A. at all. Some of the shows I did were set in mansions, but I was bumping into people from the minute I woke up to the time I went to sleep. And there is barely any personal space during filming. A party house just doesn't work that way. People crash in whatever bedroom they want, someone is always in the kitchen, and it's loud. All the time, like what I imagine a frat house is like.

I grew up in luxury, but tour buses and hotel rooms, no matter how many high-end amenities there are, get old fast. My parents' house is huge and looks like something out of a magazine, but I wouldn't call it homey. Here, there may not be a lot of space, but it's peaceful. With a final glance outside, I head to what I previously thought was a storage closet but is actually a cleverly designed half-bathroom. I asked Millie about the design, and she said she wanted something that could be a little guest house when her children visited. That way, if the house was full, she had a little escape from all the hustle and bustle of a visit, while also giving their families some privacy. I push a headband over my hair and think about how I can repay her for the kindness she's shown me.

Smothering a yawn, I switch on the tap, shivering a little in the cooler, morning air. An early start on the day will be good. Today I'm tackling the paint in the main bedroom. While we had contractors every time mom wanted a new look, I remember wanting to change the paint in my bedroom from the ballerina pink my mom picked, to a deep, dark purple. I was probably around twelve years old and home sick from school. I don't know what sparked it. Probably tired of staring at the walls and feeling well enough to be bored and cranky. That time of the year, my mom would have been in Paris prepping for fashion week and who knows where dad was.

It was just me and Diane in the big house. When she'd had enough of hearing me complain, she took me to a hardware

store where I couldn't collect enough paint swatches. Maybe that was what ignited my love for room makeovers. I still remember finding the deepest, dreamiest purple, and while I'm certain Diane could have moved me to one of the other rooms, and hired someone to repaint, she commandeered some of the staff to move my furniture and taught me how to prep the walls and paint like a pro. Her ex-husband had been a student painter in college, and she would help on his crew sometimes for extra money. I fell in love with process. It satisfied me on a number of levels. Seeing my vision come to life with a little bit of time and effort paid off. I changed my room around four more times and redesigned some of the guest rooms as well. Not that my parents really noticed. Mom decided to re-do the guest wing on a whim one year, hiring a designer to make the whole thing feel like a spa experience, and then re-did it again when Jimmy Izzard overdosed and died after staying in one of the guest rooms. That was the year my parents decided to send me away to boarding school, only calling me back for special appearances on the latest season of their show.

I splash water on my face, wishing I could wash away everything I don't want to deal with, and grab a fluffy, white towel to dry off. I tie my hair up, apply some sunscreen, and I'm done. It feels strange to take five minutes to get ready in the morning, instead of the convoluted shaping and shading of make-up application designed to look like I'm wearing nothing at all, even though no one wakes up looking like that. I walk back into the main part of my little nest and flick on the coffee machine.

Knock knock.

I turn, expecting to see Millie's smiling face. She usually dons running gear in the morning and heads out for a leisurely half-marathon or something crazy. That woman has more energy in her pinkie finger than I have in my whole body. My smile slips when I see broad shoulders, dark golden blond hair and a jaw so chiseled I could probably toss my contractor's square and measure by the angles of his perfect face instead.

He's holding a white box in his large hands when I open the door. "What are you doing here?"

“Good morning, to you too, sunshine.” He holds up the box. “I come bearing gifts.”

I wave him in. “It’s barely morning. Don’t you sleep all day and party all night?” Certainly, my dad enjoyed that routine more times than not.

“I think that’s vampires. Same immortal good looks, but I play guitar and prefer whiskey over the blood of virgins.”

“Is that a prerequisite? I thought vampires got it where they could. Finding virgin blood would make it hard in this day and age.” I shrug. “Either way, I’m safe. Immortal good looks are wasted on me, and if someone’s looking for a virgin, they’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Noah laughs and the gravelly sound teases at the edges of me, like a soft blanket that’s slipped off my shoulders. “What’s on the agenda today?”

“Why? You’re bored and need a distraction?”

A furrow of his brow and a twist of those sinful lips lets me know I’ve hit a sore spot. It’s gone in an instant, his easy smile back in place.

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “I was kind of hoping you could help me.”

“With what?” I head to the slim console table where my precious coffee sits steaming. I lift the cup to my lips, the rich, dark roast driving away the last of the morning fog. Noah’s eyes meet mine over the rim and warmth spreads in my body that has nothing to do with the coffee. “Want some?” My voice is husky and I clear my throat.

His gaze drops down my body and heat swirls between us. What is it about this man that is testing all of my newfound resolve? Maybe I am man-crazy. I squeeze my thighs together. “Coffee. I’m offering you a cup of coffee.” I hold up my cup, reminding myself I have sworn off men.

But he’s not just a man. He’s the Guitar God. And the way my thighs are tingling, my body is asking to be blessed.

Noah's lips quirk like he can hear my brain arguing with my body and he steps closer, crowding me, inhaling the steam from my cup. My nipples tighten painfully and my whole body goes on alert.

"I'd love some. Smells delicious." He steps back, holding up the box. "Nana made these muffins before bed last night and sent me over with some for you and Millie." He opens the box with a flourish. "I've already dropped off Millie's, so these are all yours."

Nestled in the box are the most beautiful blueberry muffins I've ever seen. Large juicy berries glisten against the pale tops sprinkled with sugar. "These are gorgeous." I say, reaching for the box. "I feel a little like Alice in Wonderland, dropped into this perfect neighborhood." I pull the brightly colored flower wrapper down, catching the crumbs on my tongue, and take a bite. Sweetness explodes on my tongue and my eyes roll back in my head. "Omigod." I swallow. "Is your Nana a professional baker because these are better than anything I've had in L.A."

I swipe at the sugar coating my lips and notice Noah watching me, his eyes dark, those full lips compressed in a hard line. His body is rigid, almost like he's angry, but I can't imagine why.

"What? You said the muffins were all mine. Am I supposed to share?"

NOAH

I'm momentarily dumbstruck at the sight of her tongue, darting out to catch the crumbs. Then it's like a hammer hits me when she rolls her eyes in ecstasy, her joy in the muffin evident as sugar sprinkles rain down to catch on her impressive chest. She's in pajamas, of course, some tiny little tank top thing that reads *namaste in bed all day* and cotton shorts with a ruffle around the legs. She looks like dessert and I'm a hungry man. Sunlight catches on the sugar dusting her skin and I clench my fists to stop myself from leaning in and licking it off.

I don't know what the hell I'd been thinking coming over here first thing in the morning. I've watched her do her thing on the house next door for the last few days, feeling like the biggest stalker in the world. Her ass in those shorts, curvy and plush, as she manhandles tools, pulling shit out of that house like a fucking boss, is driving me crazy. I've been sitting idle too long.

This whole break was Laird's idea to take the heat off everybody. The guys and I have been together for twenty-four seven for months and tensions are running high. Especially after Tanner took off with my sister. I changed my mind at the last minute and came here because I don't want to go back to Los Angeles.

Laird suggested I patch things up with Rachel, but I don't want Rachel. I don't know what I want. Laird and the label fucking loved Rachel. We were California cool – the rock star and the model – perfect on paper. And that's what I should

want, right? Mr. Perfect. Superman. Go with the flow. The label wants a fairytale ending, but I can't give it to them. I don't want to marry Rachel because we'll end up divorced and that's not my end goal. I want a relationship like my parents have.

Nashville is turning out to be a bust. My real estate agent keeps sending me houses but none of them are doing it for me. The last thing I want is another mansion with too many rooms to track who is in my goddamn house. Being here at Nana's reminds me of my childhood, hearing the sounds of someone in the kitchen, the scent of freshly baked muffins, strumming out tracks on my guitar. Back in L.A. there could be twenty-five people in the house, and I wouldn't hear them from my suite. Which seemed cool at the time, until the police told me there was evidence my stalker had been in my house possibly for days at a time, before his attempt to take Gordon. Photos of the rooms, the food in my cupboards, even the stuff in my garbage, were found on his phone. The guy even jerked off in my fucking shower and took a video of it.

I push the memory away. No one was hurt. Gordon is fine. But I still wake up, cold sweat coating my body, feeling like a little boy who is scared of the dark.

Maybe it's this shit with Tanner. I miss my best friend, goddamn it. It's not that I think he'll hurt my sister intentionally. But I can see him hurting himself in an attempt not to hurt her, and Sterling's heart is so big she thinks love conquers all. I'm afraid she'll follow him into the dark where he thinks he should permanently live, and my sister's like a flower. She needs light and sunshine and not to have to worry about anyone but herself for a while.

The sound of snapping fingers makes me blink. India's in front of me, eyebrows raised, waving the last of her muffin around. She snaps her fingers again. "Oh, good. You're back."

"I didn't go anywhere," I say, running my fingers through my hair.

She pops the rest of the muffin in her mouth and finishes chewing before answering. "Sure looked like you did to me."

She brushes her hands together. “That was delicious.” She fixes her big, brown eyes on mine. “Anyway, you came over with muffins to bribe me into helping you?”

“What?” I’m still fixated on the sugar sparkling on her amazing chest.

“You said you were hoping I could help you.” She hugs the box of muffins. “What do you need?” Her eyes narrow. “I’m not helping you with sex.”

I hold up my hands in surrender. “I didn’t say anything about sex.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “You didn’t have to. You just need to stand there all sexy and ruffled with that smile, and those muscles. You’re like a walking invitation for sex.”

A slow grin creeps across my face. “Wow. Thanks.”

She rolls her eyes. “As if you don’t know it. And I’m immune to rock stars, so you don’t need to waste your energy on me.”

But I see the blush staining her cheeks and it makes me think she’s not so immune to me after all.

“What I need is to find a house,” I say, stepping around her to the coffee machine and pouring myself a cup.

“A house? Where?”

I stare out the window, watching a little bird flit from one branch to another. “Here in Nashville.”

“I’m not a real estate agent,” she says. “I didn’t even find the house next to your grandmother’s.”

“I know and I have an agent but nothing he’s sending me looks interesting.” Another little bird has joined the first on the branch. They look like they’re singing to each other. I take a gulp of coffee from my cup. Maybe I shouldn’t be here, but I can’t resist the temptation of spending more time with India. “Something you said the other day really resonated with me.”

She tilts her head. “What was that?”

“You said that you were interested in all this house stuff because you like helping people feel comfortable in their space, making it feel like a home,” I say, meeting her eyes.

Her nose wrinkles a little and I think it’s adorable. She nods, slowly. “Yeah, I do, but that’s about design, not necessarily finding something perfect to buy.”

“I get that, but I’ve seen you tackle the mess at the other house, and you just seem so organized. My agent keeps sending me houses that scream ‘fame and fortune’ and I don’t want something that is so recognizable as belonging to someone famous.”

A thoughtful look crosses her face as she pulls her ponytail over her shoulder, twirling the end around her finger. “Lots of famous people live in Nashville. I’m sure you can find something you like, just tell your agent what you want.”

I sigh. “That’s the problem. I don’t know exactly what I want. I’ll just know it when I see it.” I shrug. “Don’t worry about it, I just thought maybe you’d have some ideas for me.”

I turn to leave, but India catches my hand. We both look down and she lets go, but not before the warmth of her skin seeped into my palm.

“Wait.” She bites her lip. “I’m busy with this project, but it certainly can’t hurt for me to look up some stuff on the market. I can see what’s selling and what design trends are hot in this part of the country.” She holds up a hand. “Hang on.”

India looks like the definition of temptation as she flicks her ponytail back and bends over in those tiny, ruffled shorts to pick up a book and a pen before turning and sinking down onto the bed, one leg tucked up under her. She waves at me to sit in the chair, and I do, even though I’d much rather push her back into those pure white sheets and lick the remaining sugar off her chest. I wouldn’t stop there either. I’d drag my tongue down into the shadow between her gorgeous breasts and –

“What makes you feel good?” she asks, as she opens the book to a fresh page.

I pause, needing some of the blood to return to my brain. *Don't say sex, don't say sex.* "Sex."

She closes the book with a snap, heaving a sigh. "I thought you wanted my help?"

I hold my hand out, palm up. "Sorry, but you did ask."

Pursing her lips, she levels me with a glare. "Fine. But in the future, the answer is never sex. At least not with me."

"Okay, okay. Totally platonic, I'm a troll to you, got it."

That earns me another eyeroll, but she re-opens the book. "What do you like to do?"

"Play guitar."

"Okay, do you need a music room?"

"Yeah, that would be nice. Something with space for a little studio too, maybe."

She makes a note and then puts the pen down. "Do you really want to work while you're at home?"

"Music is not work."

"No but having a music room is different than having a studio, where presumably you could record. It seems like a convenience, but do you really want to be worrying about production when you're at home, relaxing?" She flicks her thumb over the edge of the paper. "My father has a huge studio on our property and was always working. Between that and the reality show, our place never felt like somewhere you could just unwind, you know?"

I think about my dad's home office. As an attorney, he worked a lot, but the door to his office was always open, and he had more than enough time for his family. I can only imagine the craziness of growing up with Edward Rook, his entourage, and a camera crew on top of it. As a little girl, was she able to just wander into the living room and eat dry cereal out of a box while watching cartoons, or was everything staged, including family time?

I just assume, as a musician, I'm supposed to have something like that in my place, but do I really want it? I have a studio in my house in L.A. but we're so close to the commercial studio we mainly go there. Music relaxes me, but it can be frustrating too, when we're fighting to get certain songs down. The question makes me realize I want something just for me. "I think I want something small, where I can lay down a few tracks if I want to."

"Okay, sounds good." Another note. "What about guests?"

I give an inward shudder. I want room for the guys, or for my family, but I don't want something where everyone in Nashville can crash after a party. I need to know who is in my house. "Close friends and family only. And a good-sized kitchen."

"For a chef?" She taps her lips with the pen.

"Not a full-time chef." I lean back in the chair. "I like to cook, but I don't get a lot of time to do it."

India scribbles in the notebook. "What kind of cooking?"

"I don't know. I like to catch some stuff on YouTube or TikTok and try it out." Growing up, with Dad at work and Mom taking care of Sterling, I learned to cook a few dishes from Nana to help out. There's something meditative about moving around the kitchen, prepping the food, that feeling of making something, tasting it, perfecting it, and sharing it with the people I love. It's a different energy than what I get on stage, more peaceful, but I realize that if I am looking for a house, that's an important feature for me.

Unlike when I bought the L.A. house, and my criteria was basically 'make it look like a rock star lives here', which is now the exact opposite of what I want.

"Do you have a signature dish?" she asks.

I think about it a minute, trying not to be distracted by the way she nibbles on the end of the pen while she waits for me to answer. "I make a pretty mean gnocchi and chicken meatball dish."

Her mouth drops open. "Gnocchi from scratch?"

I lift my shoulder in a half-shrug, feeling smug for finally impressing her. “What, like it’s hard?” I grin. “I’d be happy to make it for you.”

“Gnocchi is one of my favorites,” she says.

“Well, then. Find me a house, and I’ll cook you a meal to remember.”

She blinks. “Okay.” She puts the notebook down and leans forward, giving me a glimpse of heaven as the action plumps up her tits in that tiny top she’s wearing. I shift in the chair, trying not to let her see how affected I am by her. But Jesus Christ, her body is something else.

“Look, Noah.” Hunching her shoulders, she rocks back on the bed. “I really do have to work on this project. It’s important to me to finish something I started, and you might not get it, but I need to know I can do this, and I can’t just spend days looking at houses with you.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” I lean forward. “What if I help you during the day?”

Her eyebrows pop up. “Help me?”

“Yeah. I can paint and some other stuff too. My dad always had me and Tanner helping out with some of that stuff at our lake house in the summers.” I point at the notebook. “Let’s make a list of what needs to be done and we can tackle it together. That way, you can hopefully get more done, and we can check out some places while the paint dries.”

“You want to do manual labor instead of relaxing on your vacation?”

If I get to do it with her, yes. But I don’t want to examine that thought too closely at this point. “I’m not getting anywhere with finding a place here, and I’ve seen you work your butt off, day in and day out. You’re focused, organized and I believe you’ll get what you want. Let me help you.”

She hesitates, uncertainty written all over her face.

“Okay, so you might be asking what’s in it for you.” I hold up my fist, raising my pointer finger. “One, you get someone

you can boss around on tasks.” I lift another finger. “Two, I can do lots of heavy lifting. Three, you get to look at all kinds of house porn on my behalf.” Her mouth crooks up in a little half-smile and I smile in response. “I’m not done yet. Four, I won’t make you wait, and I’ll feed you gnocchi if you say ‘yes’.”

That gets a full laugh out of her, and I realize it’ll be no hardship to spend time with this woman. “What do you say, will you take me and my hammer?” I wiggle my eyebrows.

She shakes her head, but the smile remains on her face. “No, but I will take the gnocchi. I have my own hammer, thank you very much.”

I have no idea if we’re still talking construction tools, but I have a sharp desire to press my lips to her beautiful smile. I push to my feet and walk back to the coffee console to put some distance between us. “So where do we start?”

“Today I need to go to the store and check on my flooring order and I’m finishing the paint in the kitchen, so it’ll be ready when the guys come in to install the cabinets and counters.”

I nod. “Well, no time like the present to jump right in. Just let me know when you want to leave.”

She reaches over to grab her phone, checking the time. “It’s still pretty early. I’ll get dressed and walk down to the house.” Her eyes meet mine. “Thanks for bringing the muffins, and please thank Stella for me.” She pauses. “Or, wait. Did your grandmother really bake these muffins or are they the result of your secret hobby?”

Her suspicious glare pulls a laugh from me. “Nana is the baking champ in our family. I can’t even come close.” I lean a hip against the console and fold my arms across my chest. “But I promise my gnocchi and meatballs will make you sit up and beg.” I nearly swallow my tongue when I realize what I’ve said. Immediately, an image of India Rook on her knees, those big, brown eyes wide with longing while she begs me to touch her, fills my mind and quickens my pulse.

“It takes a lot to impress me, Mr. Whitlock,” she says. “Now, let me get dressed.” She rises from the bed, unfolding those long, thick legs I’m desperate to have wrapped around my head, and grabs something from the little table servicing as a nightstand.

“Here.” She holds out the keychain on her palm and I walk the couple of steps to meet her. “Throw on some old clothes and let yourself in.”

I reach for the key, letting my fingers graze her hand, just to watch the heat flare in her eyes again. Sure enough, her breathing quickens, and I force myself to walk to the door. I step out into the warm sunshine with a smile on my face, trying not to think about her shimmying out of those tiny shorts somewhere behind me.

INDIA

I might be in over my head. I tilt the nail gun in my hands, trying to figure out how I'm supposed to do this. I've spent the last two hours taping the prep paper over the plywood and now that I've got the gun in my hand, I'm nervous. It's heavy and my hands are sweating inside the protective gloves I'm wearing. Across the room, Noah is bare-chested, a pair of navy-blue jogging shorts riding low on his hips. So low, I can see a strip of lighter skin where his back meets the sculpted perfection of his butt. I give my head a shake. I've been around attractive men my entire life, but Noah Whitlock is in an entirely different league. I shouldn't be ogling him, given that rock stars are completely in my 'do not look, do not touch, do not fall down the rabbit hole', but I can't help it. His body is chiseled, every muscle working in coordination as he pushes the long-handled paint roller up the wall. I'm both frustrated and impressed with the evidence that Noah Whitlock appears he can tackle anything and be successful. He's thrown himself into helping me and the project has flown by, with me being able to tick off all kinds of things on my list. Paint, tiling, hanging shelves. Noah was even able to install the new faucet and hardware in the bathrooms. That task required Youtubing the installation, but we got it done and I had the plumber check it when he was here, and apparently, we did a good job. I got so excited I practically threw myself into Noah's arms with a tackle-hug that nearly knocked him down. He caught me, of course. The man has women throwing themselves at him on a regular basis as a hazard of the job. I can't deny the little buzz that went through my body when his strong arms flexed

around me, the warm scent of his skin tempting me to nuzzle into his neck and lick his golden skin. Luckily, I came to my senses when the plumber referred to Noah as my boyfriend, which had the same effect as throwing ice water at my back.

What is wrong with me that I literally throw myself at the wrong guys all the time? My father asked me that very question before I left for Nashville. Well, that's not quite true. What he really asked was when was I going to stop punishing him with my terrible life choices?

Right now, Nashville doesn't feel like a terrible choice. This house is coming together, and I love seeing the vision in my head coming to life bit by bit. As it turns out, Noah and I make a good team. Although maybe that's something else he's just good at. He's easy to be around. Funny, smart and kind to his grandmother. He's just so good and for a bad girl like me, it's pure catnip. Six months ago, I wouldn't have thought twice about adding a notch to my bedpost, and with the way he moves, Noah Whitlock might justify hacking off the whole post. The whole thing denial bit is making me itchy. I've never been around anyone with less of an ego and considering his stage presence, I keep waiting for some giant ego to make an appearance, but so far it hasn't. Instead, I've heard stories about his bandmates, guys he considers his brothers and best friends. That's not new for me. My father had a core group of people who were always with him, and he was more faithful to them than he ever was to my mother. I keep waiting for a crack in the armor, something to show he's just like every other guy I've ever met, but so far, I've got nothing. No digs about my many past relationships or commentary over the empty wasteland of reality television. He hasn't asked me for money, but he doesn't line up with that whole category of hanger-on guys anyway. He hasn't asked if my dad can come hear his band either, but I guess Kingmaker gives my father's fame a run for its money.

I wish I could say I was only interested in scratching my itch, but something insidious happened somewhere between the blueberry muffins and listening to Noah talk about music, bearded dragons, cooking and his friends and family.

I started to like him.

I shudder and focus on his first-class ass. Let's take it back to a level I'm comfortable with. He's just a guy, and a famous one at that. Eventually, the touching stories about his sister and his outrageous stories about being on tour will stop when he realizes that his charm isn't working on me.

Unfortunately, his charm *is* working. I just can't let him know it. And despite being a complete flirt with no shame about the fact that he's hotter than sin and knows it, he's been completely respectful of me. He flirts with smiles and words only. No dick pics, no crowding me, no groping with the assertion that I'm not the type of girl to play hard to get and I should just give it up already.

I might be in over my head and not just with tackling this floor. Carefully, I lower the nail gun before my distraction leads to something supremely stupid, like a spike to the chest.

With a sigh, I pull off my gloves and give in to watching the mesmerizing motion of his long, muscular back, smooth and golden, save for the intricate flick of ink that sweeps around from his front tattoo; a kraken wrapped, not around a ship, but a guitar. My eyes have lingered on that gorgeous artwork too many times since he started helping me. I would blame the artist, but I know it's not just the design, but the way the ink and shadows highlight his incredible body. A year ago, I wouldn't have thought twice about acting on my attraction. Adding Noah Whitlock to my collection of conquests would have been like buying another pair of shoes simply because I thought they were pretty. But something changed in the last year for me. A creeping sense of disappointment, of feeling adrift at parties where I used to revel in the cacophony of loud music, directing the press of people hanging off my every word, posing for the perfect shot that would tell me how much fun I must have had when I checked the next day. I still posted, I still partied but something felt off. When I got together with Cody, I thought maybe I'd turned a page, but then the rabid fan base known as MadCo came after me.

Hell hath no fury like a fandom denied the storyline they think they deserve.

I was the bad girl, soap-opera style villain who tempted their prince into the dark woods. I was evil incarnate. I'm pretty sure I even saw an entire 'Gram devoted to casting spells to help break the curse of my relationship with Cody.

It's pretty hard to feel secure in your relationship when you have an image of someone gluing chicken feathers to a photo of yours truly and then lighting it on fire while chanting about banishing the witch.

Madison ate it up. I just ate, taking comfort where I could. I was the dark witch whose boobs could hypnotize any man. She became blonder, thinner, like she was in the running for the role of tragic fairy princess in some blockbuster fantasy about rings and hobbits. Cody thought the attention was good publicity and would not call off the fans, even when someone threw a dead chicken onto the red carpet at an event and I got a comment on a photo that in my case, I should consider anorexia as my next diet.

I shiver at the memory. I never want to get involved with someone famous again.

"Hey, do you know what would be great right now?" Noah's voice echoes in the empty room.

I glance up to see him standing like a god with a spear, all golden skin, dark ink and power. Only the spear is a paint roller, and his power appears to be ruining panties with a single glance.

"What?" I croak, wondering if it would be a step too far to buy him one of the tool belts I saw the other day.

"Ice cream." He disconnects the roller and heads to the sink to rinse. I'm replacing the sink, so we have it set up for cleaning now that the laundry room has been revamped.

"I don't know that I can order in ice cream. Won't it melt on the way here?"

Noah cocks his head. "We're going out for ice cream."

I hold up my hands. "Oh, no we're not. Right now, I'm going for 'mysteriously disappeared' and there's no way I can stay that way if we go out in public."

He scrubs a hand down his chest. “I’m not talking about calling out the paps to let them know where we are. It’s not like this is L.A.”

“No, but there are enough music celebrities in Nashville to keep people on high alert. You’re not exactly the kind of guy people don’t notice.”

A cocky, half-grin lights up his face. “So, you think I’m hot?”

My stomach clenches. It would be so easy to flirt back. “I think we’ve already established that but remember I’m oblivious.” Noah makes a face at me. “Hey, don’t get your panties in a twist, I’m sure there are plenty of other people who would get hot and bothered by you, just not me.” *Liar, liar, he lights your panties on fire.*

Noah finishes washing up and aims a pout in my direction. “Come on, boss. The painting is done, it’s hot and we deserve some ice cream.”

“Thank you for painting, and you’re free to go, but I need some more time here.”

He nods at the nail gun on the floor. “Unless you’re a Jedi and you plan on using The Force to install those boards, staring at it isn’t going to work. You need a break.”

My shoulders sag. I know I shouldn’t be intimidated by the nail gun, but I just can’t make myself get started. The beautiful, blanched wood planks taunt me from their position by the far wall. I’m afraid I’m going to split a board or nail my hand to one.

Maybe I should look over the budget again to see if I can get a flooring guy in here, but I’m not going to admit that to Noah. He’s already offered to tackle the flooring, but this is my project and I need to know I can do this without the hot rock star next door.

He saunters over to me, placing his hands on my shoulders. I glance up, meeting his dark blue, serious gaze.

“Ice cream. Then we’ll watch that video together again and I’ll grab some of that leftover wood from the kitchen guys and

you can practice with the nail gun. You'll feel a lot more confident once you're used to the feel of it in your hands."

I start to shake my head, but he cuts me off. "Say it after me. Ice cream."

"You're like a five-year-old."

"Ice cream," he repeats, never taking his eyes off me.

"You're not going to give up, are you?"

"Ice cream."

I tip my head back to the ceiling, trying not to notice the heat of his big hands on my shoulders or the glorious expanse of Noah Whitlock's chest within licking distance. Forget the ice cream, I just want to swirl my tongue all over the blackberry-colored ink decorating his skin.

I sigh. "Fine. Ice cream." I need something to cool me off, anyway. "But how do you think we're going to get away with not being recognized?"

"It's not that hard. Ajax and Tanner are the most recognizable and even Ajax can morph into a complete stranger when he wants to, and that's no mean feat with Serge around."

"Serge?"

"Serge heads up our security and he's Ajax's brother."

"You don't need security?" I ask, realizing I haven't seen anyone around. My father always has his entourage with him, and at least two of them are bodyguards.

"We do, usually when we're on tour, although I always have them in L.A. now too."

"What do you mean, now too?"

Noah steps away from me. "What about you, how recognizable are you? Even Nana's friends knew who you were."

I think about the girls at the airport. Although frazzled after my flight, I wasn't exactly trying to go incognito at that

point. “I guess if I really try, I might be able to fly under the radar.”

“Okay then. Go get ready and meet me out front in twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes? I’m a sweaty mess!”

Noah winks. “What do you care? It’s not like you’re trying to impress a date, right?”

Right. “Right,” I say firmly, unplugging the nail gun and heading for the bathroom. “Meet you out front in twenty.”

In the bathroom, I look at myself in the mirror while I towel off after my five-minute shower. I don’t know why I’m worried about being recognized. I’ve been back and forth to the hardware store, and no one has said a thing, even when I handed over my credit card with my name visible. With no make-up or cleavage-baring styles, I’m not exactly drawing much attention.

Most ‘celeb sightings’ aren’t random anyway. They’re set-up by PR people or even the celebrity themselves if they’re playing an angle. Paps don’t regularly hang out at grocery stores just hoping for a glimpse of someone, but a quick phone call to let them know so-and-so is out shopping or is back to the gym or whatever results in those ‘totally candid’ shots of celebs trying to act normal. Let’s be clear, my mother and father have never once gone grocery shopping for real, even though there are a number of ‘random’ photos of my mom looking naturally beautiful as she buys bananas and ice cream.

I can’t remember ever seeing my mother actually eat the ice cream, but there are photos of her stocking it in her cart. I reach for the nearest clean clothes and pull them on without thinking.

There’s an art to the candid shot. Some inexperienced people go for full hair and make-up and look like they’re hitting up a red carpet at the local Whole Foods. Too thirsty. Instead, you want to look good, but ‘normal’. Generally, you wear something you want to promote – a fresh pair of sneakers or a new bag – but the key is to not look like you’re promoting

it. No one knows your manager set up the outfit the day before. Even the shots where someone appears to be low-key, with a baseball cap or a hoodie, the person manages to stand in good lighting or something so everyone knows it's them. Basic visibility is important, but so is creating a story leading up to some other news. Cody did this when he and Madison broke up, heading out with his guys, going to the gym by himself, even though the house we were in had a fully equipped gym and a trainer who showed up four days a week. It generated interest because they had been inseparable for so long, and it was kind of a soft announcement rather than the 'statement' route from the couple looking for privacy.

I pull my hair out of its ponytail and shake it out. I put it back up, turning my face in the mirror and sucking in my cheeks. Nope. I run my fingers through it again and quickly French braid each side, loosening it at my temples when I'm done. I'm wearing an old faded blue t-shirt of Millie's with the arms cut off, advertising some local automotive garage. My usual look typically includes heels, tight dresses, or lately, something that shows off my legs and boobs to distract from the extra weight I'm carrying everywhere else, but it doesn't make any sense to wear that stuff while renovating a house, so I'm mostly in cut-offs, jogging shorts and oversized t-shirts. With the braids and the outfit combined with a lack of spray-tan and makeup, I definitely don't look like India Rook, Bad-Girl Barbie.

I jam my hands in my pockets, pushing my shorts down a little and tuck in one corner of my t-shirt, eyeing myself critically in the mirror. Still frumpy. I sigh. Oh well. I'm not trying to impress anyone anyway.

I'm not. I stick my tongue out at myself in the mirror. Noah Whitlock is ten times more famous than Cody, and the last thing I need is to be linked with another rock star. I'm trying to downplay my reputation and lay low while I figure things out. This morning I made the mistake of checking out Cody's socials and let's just say that seeing hundreds of comments about how happy their fans are that he's finally away from my evil clutches have a way of bringing a person down.

Although that's much better than all the comments telling me the world would be a better place if I just killed myself when Cody and I first went public.

And people say I'm the bitch.

The doorbell rings and I frown before grabbing my bag on the way out. I open the door to see Noah standing there in an extremely loud Hawaiian-print shirt, khaki cargo shorts and purple crocs that match his now purple hair.

"What did you do to your hair?" I gasp, resisting the urge to reach up and touch it. His dark blond hair is now completely lavender, with some darker purple at the tips. The style is different too, turning him from gorgeous guitar god to ... still pretty gorgeous surfer punk, despite the crocs. I roll my eyes. This is definitely not flying under the radar.

"It's hair chalk. Well, a combination of chalk and spray. It's temporary."

"Did your grandmother see you looking like this?"

"Who do you think bought me the shirt?" He lifts his arms wide, doing a little runway spin and I notice the big bandage covering his forearm and wrist.

Stomach clenching, I can't stop myself from reaching for his hand. Did he do something to his wrist while helping me with the house? Noah Whitlock is probably insured for millions what if he tore a ligament or something in one of his hands and can't play guitar anymore? "What happened?" I gently hold his hand in mine, running my fingers over the thick bandage, my heart beating fast. I tell myself it's concern over the possibility of an injury, but I can't deny the tension that flares between us when I touch him, or the awareness of his breath and the warmth of his skin seeping through the bandage.

He tugs one of my braids with his free hand and I lift my gaze to his, willing to get lost in the deep blue depths.

"It covers my tattoos," he says softly.

"Oh!" I push his hand away, feeling stupid but he quickly captures my hand in his again.

“Did you think you had lost your construction assistant?” he asks, playfully, but the carefully banked fire in his eyes tells me he felt the same connection I did in the moment.

I’m grateful for the out he’s given me. I’m only a sarcastic quip away from setting us firmly back in the look-but-don’t-touch zone. I bite my lip, heat running down my spine at the way his gaze drops to my mouth.

“I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you,” I say.

His hand tightens around mine. “That’s—”

A deep ominous instrumental sound fills the air around us. It’s familiar but I can’t quite place it. “What is that?” I ask, as the dark notes grow in intensity.

“The theme from *Jaws*,” Noah says, stepping back and pulling his phone out of his pocket. He glances at the screen before silencing it, a muscle jumping in his chiseled jaw.

“That super-old shark movie?”

He side-eyes me. “You mean *the* shark movie.” He shoves his phone in his back pocket. For a second, I think he’s going to take my hand again, but the call clearly broke any moment, real or imagined, between us. He points at the door. “I’m driving.”

“What if I want to drive?” A sudden petulance rises within me that has nothing to do with wanting to drive. As a rule, I don’t drive, and I’ve been white-knuckling the steering wheel of my rental back and forth to the hardware store.

“Nope.” He holds up a fob. “This is all me.” A grin plays over his lips. “Maybe I have a surprise.”

I narrow my eyes and brush past him, through the door. I look around not really seeing anything out of the ordinary until I spot a huge, black pick-up truck parked in front of his grandmother’s house. “What is that?” I ask.

His hand falls to the small of my back, warmth bleeding through the thin cotton. “That, my L.A. friend, is a truck.”

I giggle despite myself. “I know what a truck is, Noah. What is it doing here?”

“It’s mine. I had it delivered today. I thought it might help with your hardware store runs.”

He bends down close to my ear. “As long as you let me drive, you can tell me what you need and when you need it, and I’ll deliver.”

A shiver runs through my body at his words. I know he’s probably talking about paint and other construction stuff, but my mind goes somewhere completely different, and my body is only too happy to place an order.

My vow to swear off rock stars seemed so easy until I met Noah Whitlock.

NOAH

“I can’t believe we weren’t recognized!”

I smile as India reaches forward, playing with the radio of the truck. “I can’t believe you got vanilla ice cream,” I say, keeping my hands on the steering wheel even though the one closest to India is itching to slide over the console and caress the bare, golden skin of her thigh. Her cut-off shorts are driving me crazy. Earlier, at the ice cream shop, she was laughing about something, and a dollop of ice cream dropped on her leg. Without thinking, I leaned over and wiped it with a napkin, the side of my hand brushing her warm skin and I’ve been thinking about getting my hands on her ever since.

I feel guilty about not taking the call from Laird earlier. I wouldn’t usually ignore our manager but lately he’s been on my case about this list and my getting back together with Rachel and it’s driving me crazy. I haven’t thought about my list or the label since I started helping India with her project. I’ve always been happiest when I’m with the guys but being with India is fun. Watching her wield a power tool, her long hair caught up in one of those drive-me-wild ponytails, a pair of safety goggles that somehow seems to emphasize the plushness of her mouth far more than any lipstick, and cheering with her when we finish something has given me a sense of satisfaction I wouldn’t have said was lacking a few weeks ago.

I can’t figure out who this woman is. I’ve watched a variety of the shows she’s on, each time playing someone completely different than the woman I’ve gotten to know.

There are tiny glimpses in her smile that I recognize, and her drive and direction are there too, but shown in different ways. Such as when she's plotting to get something she wants.

She's beautiful.

Toxic.

A spoiled princess who charms everyone around her.

People love her and hate her with equal passion. It's alarming to read the comments on her socials, but it's not like Kingmaker doesn't get its fair share of whackos.

India Rook gets called a lot of things, but I would describe her as nice, which is surprising.

Fuck nice. If I really drill down into it, I'd describe her as amazing.

But she doesn't want to hear any of that from me. Still tonight, as we laughed in the ice cream shop and browsed through house listings on her phone, I can say I had a great time. I wasn't a rock star needing to make his label happy and she certainly wasn't the girl I shouldn't be interested in.

I look over to watch her bobbing her head to some pop song on the radio as she looks out the window. She can't get over the "normalness" of the neighborhood as she puts it and loves to walk around, checking out the gardens and glimpses of the homes she can see from the sidewalk.

We pull up and I shut the truck off, silencing the music. She turns to me in the dark and blinks. "What's wrong with vanilla? It's delicious. When you think about it, it's kind of the perfect flavor. It's sweet but not too sweet. Rich, creamy and you can add it to just about any dessert to make it better. Vanilla ice cream is perfection."

A sudden image appears in my head, of licking vanilla ice cream off her soft belly as it melts and I'm instantly hard as a rock. I'll be spending the night jerking off to that image after watching another episode of one of her shows where some asshole who isn't me gets to kiss that plush mouth.

I've never pegged myself as a jealous guy, but the burn in my chest every time someone touches her can't be described as anything else.

I clear my throat, trying to shake off the image, because if I don't, I'm going to reach over the console and drag her curvy body to mine. But she doesn't need that. What she needs is a friend and if that's all I get, it'll be worth it to hear her real laugh instead of that fake, sultry one she uses on tv.

A cool hand touches my arm. "I had a good time tonight." India's eyes sparkle in the dim light.

"See, I told you I was a master of disguise."

"It's true. No one would ever think the Guitar God would wear a pair of purple crocs."

Her fingers trace over the bandage on my arm and I close my eyes. Does she have any idea what she's doing to me?

Of course, she does. India Rook is no stranger to flirting.

I open my eyes to catch a movement over India's shoulder, just as a sharp knock hits her window. She gives a little shriek, sending my heart racing at the large, dark shadow outside. Anger builds in my chest. Is this the squatter from before? An intruder who could hurt India? A deep sense of protectiveness flows over me, and I reach for her, pulling her towards me.

A familiar face appears at the window, hands cupped around his eyes as he peers inside. My heartrate ratchets down, leaving me breathing hard. I reluctantly release India but I keep my hand clasped around hers.

I hit the button, sliding the glass down. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Blaine's smile widens as he takes in my look. "I almost thought I had the wrong guy for a second, but Nana said this was your new truck." He shifts his attention to India, opening the door, and offering his hand. "I'm sorry to interrupt your evening." He flashes a smile that usually has two distinct reactions: tears and potential fainting or promises of "anything you want."

A prickle skates down my spine as India releases my hand to take his, and step down from the truck.

“Blaine Adams, at your service.”

Whatever else he says said is lost to me as I slam my door and march around to where they’re standing.

India’s low laughter reaches my ears and I see Blaine is still holding her hand.

Watching Blaine flirt and charm any woman in a ten-mile radius is a scene I’ve witnessed many times and usually, it never fails to amuse me, but tonight, that jealous burn is back in my chest. I shouldn’t care. India and I are friends and nothing more. She’s made it clear she wants nothing to do with someone in the industry.

I hear her laugh again and Blaine dips his head towards her, too close for my liking. The glow of the streetlight makes her long, dark hair shine and my fingers itch to wrap themselves around that ponytail. In her cut-offs and t-shirt she looks cute, like somebody’s curve-filled wet dream of the girl-next-door.

“Is Slade with you?” I ask, too loudly and they both turn to me. India looks surprised but Blaine just looks smug. He cocks an eyebrow and glances down at India, a knowing smirk crossing his face.

“Nope, just me. Slade’s going to stay at the ranch until the we leave for the tour.”

“I thought you were too?” I hear the challenge in my voice and that only drives Blaine’s amusement higher.

He holds out his hands, palms up. “Seems like Nashville is the place to be right now. Apparently, Garrett Colt invited Jax to play at his club while we’re on break, so he and Natalie are coming down this week too.”

“I thought they were going to stay in New York for now?” Fuck, I’m out of the loop. Maybe that’s why Laird was calling me earlier. I’ve never ignored a call from our manager before, at least not intentionally, but I didn’t want to talk to him about Rachel, or how perfect it’d be if we got back together. I get it,

the label is on our ass and wants some cool story to launch the tour, and I'll pull it together. Golden boy gets his fairytale. The only problem is that there's no princess in the picture, no matter how much Laird tries to remind me that Rachel is just waiting in the wings.

"Everything seems to be settled there now, so maybe they're looking for a little vacation too." He tilts his head. "How's yours going?"

I love the guy but I'm going to kill him. Ignoring the asshole's too-bright smile, I practically elbow him out of the way. "Let me walk you down to Millie's."

"It's fine. Go hang out with your friend."

Blaine steps around me. "Why don't you join us? We're meeting some friends at a party."

"I'm not really dressed for a party, but thanks," she says.

"Aww, come with us. I think you look incredible, but you'll have time to change if you want to."

His hand roughs up my hair. "Pretty boy here needs to wash this shit out of his hair before we head out."

India shakes her head. "No thanks."

I glare at Blaine. "I'm not up for going out tonight."

He holds up one hand. "Hey, be cool, Superman. I didn't mean to interrupt your date."

"It's not a date," India's voice is firm.

"Really?" Blaine swivels his head between us.

I take in India's frown and know there's only one way to play this. "It's not a date," I grind out between clenched teeth. "We're just friends."

"Men and women can't be friends," Blaine says. "But if that's what you're telling yourselves." He rolls his eyes and then shimmies over to India. "I definitely don't want to be your friend. Are you sure you don't want to come party with me?"

I expect a scathing retort, but instead India laughs again and I'm reminded of her shows. "Maybe some other time."

Red dots appear at the edge of my vision. Blaine Adams' charm is like an exuberant golden retriever: playful and irresistible until you find yourself covered in drool. Did India really say she might go out with Blaine some other time? I need to get him away from her and fast. The quickest way to do that is to ensure he has plenty to distract him while he's here in Nashville.

"All right, man. You're here, we should go out."

Blaine pumps a fist in the air. "See, I knew you couldn't resist me. I'll just hang out with this lovely lady while you get ready."

Not a chance was I leaving her with Blaine. "Why don't you go see if Nana has any pie left?"

He must have gotten the hint because he turns on his heel with a wave, "I can't resist Nana's pie."

India starts down the sidewalk. "You don't have to walk me, it's just a couple of doors down."

I jog a couple of steps, easily catching up with her. "Sorry about that. I didn't know he was going to show up."

"It's not a big deal."

We walk in silence, the easy conversation from earlier that night gone. Finally, we get to Millie's and she steps into the driveway. "Thanks for the ice cream."

"What time do you need me tomorrow?"

"I don't. We finished the paint in the kitchen today so you're good. Go have a good time."

She's not looking at me and I don't like it. I'm not used to women shooing me away. "What about the floor?"

She shrugs. "I've got it."

"I can help."

“Don’t worry about it, Noah. You’re not a handyman. Go back to being a rock star.” She unlocks the gate to the backyard and tosses a little wave over her shoulder.

Something snaps in my head. I’ve never felt this way before. I love women and I’ve been lucky enough to have them love me back, whenever I want. I’ve turned my feelings for this woman over in my head so many times over the last few days trying to figure out what the attraction is. Sure, she’s hot as hell, but she’s the exact opposite of what I should be chasing right now. I should turn around and head out to the clubs with Blaine and slip back into that whole scene while I figure out how to deliver a fairytale to the label.

Instead, I push through the gate.

India is nearly at the shed, her ponytail twisting as she looks over at me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m just Noah,” I say, distracted by the way she looks in the glow of the fairy lights, like the girl-next-door in some rom-com my sister would force me to watch.

Her eyebrows draw together. “What?”

I cross the garden to stand in front of her. “I don’t have to go back to being a rock star. I don’t have to be your part-time handyman. I’m not Mr. Perfect or Superman or the Guitar God. I’m just Noah.”

“It doesn’t work like that. You can’t separate all of those things out. My father is Edward Rook, and he’s many, many things, but above all else, he’s a rock star with all that entails, and so are you, Noah.”

“Yeah, and so is Blaine, but you reacted differently to him.”

Her eyes widen and she gives a little huff of surprise. “Jealous, much?”

“Maybe I am. When we met, there was this spark.” Jesus. It’s just hitting me now. That sensation of the spark when I first laid eyes on her. I push it away. “And then as soon as you realized who I was, you threw up your line about not being interested in rock stars.”

“I’m not interested in rock stars.” She crosses her arms.

“But you were flirting with Blaine.”

Her head falls back, and she groans. “Habit. I’m not attracted to him like I am...” She bites her lip, cutting herself off.

“Like you are with me.” Triumph surges through me. “You did feel it, didn’t you? Something different when we met.”

India points her finger, poking me in the chest with emphasis. “It doesn’t matter, *Guitar God*. I’ve been there and done that many times, as the whole world knows. I’m not interested in another article that talks about how I should be a talent scout because of my taste in men.”

I place my hand over hers, trapping it against me. Her small fingers curl into my shirt but she doesn’t pull away. I take a step closer, holding her gaze. “You’re a lot more than your taste in guys.”

“Don’t, Noah. I’m the bad girl, remember? I don’t need saving.” She blinks and goddamn it if the shimmer of tears in her eyes doesn’t hit me like a punch to the chest.

“No, you don’t.” I shift my grip to her wrist, pulling her closer. Her lips part on a tiny gasp and she looks so delicious, I can’t help myself, leaning in to touch my mouth to hers, just a gentle press, giving her plenty of room to move away. When she doesn’t, I can’t resist licking the lingering sweetness of vanilla on her lips, hungry for more of her as she opens for me, her moan causing my cock to strain against my shorts. She pulls my hips against hers, her hands stroking up to grip my shoulders. The kiss is fire. The spiral of heat rising through my body as she slides her tongue into my mouth is completely addictive.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and India stills, her chest rising rapidly. Her lashes flutter open and I reach out to brush the wisps of hair back from her face. I don’t want this night to end. I don’t want to walk away from her, but I don’t want to push either.

Her breath cools my lips as she sighs. “You should go.”

“You should come with me.”

Her hands slip down my back. “I can’t.”

“Why not? It’s a party and they’re kind of your specialty, right?” I keep my voice light, hating the way she stiffens in my arms.

“Which is exactly why I shouldn’t go,” she mumbles, pulling away from me completely. “This shouldn’t have happened either.” She makes a waving motion between us.

“I’m not going to apologize for kissing you.”

She smirks. “Well, that’s unexpected. Aren’t you the perfect gentleman?”

I hate the twist of her lips, the bored, practiced look that falls over her features as she crosses her arms. “Knock it off, India. I felt your response. You’re here, hiding for some reason, trying to reinvent yourself or whatever, but from what I can see you don’t need to change anything, except maybe the people you hang out with.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know enough. I know you didn’t run away when Cody didn’t show up and you didn’t throw up your hands when you saw the disaster of a house he left you with either. A spoiled, pampered princess doesn’t pull on rubber gloves and dive in, hauling garbage and scrubbing bathrooms.”

She frowns. “I want that mentorship.”

“Yeah, I know. But there’s probably a dozen ways for you to break into that side of things without you getting your hands dirty. Instead, you’ve stuck it out and you’re doing a damn good job too.”

“With your help.”

I hear the tremor in her voice and shake my head. “No, India. I might be able to lift heavy things and swipe a roller across the walls, but you’re the director. This project is yours and it’s amazing to see your vision come to life.”

She blinks a few times and her eyes glisten. Maybe it's just a trick of the light.

"I admire you, India." It's true. From the minute I laid eyes on that world-class ass and felt her curves under my hand, I wanted her. Days later, I still want her, but seeing her determination and talent first-hand has me admiring the hell out of her too.

Her lush mouth falls open and I want to step in and taste her again, but I stop myself. She might be denying her attraction to me, and God knows that kiss just about started an inferno between us, but none of that matters if she tells me 'no'.

"I'll see you tomorrow to help with the floor," I say, lifting my hand in a wave. I walk back across the garden and pull the gate closed behind me, pausing to check the self-locking latch.

"India Rook, buddy?" Blaine's voice drifts down from the sidewalk, followed by a low whistle.

I jog over to him, scowling when I see his shit-eating grin. "Shut the fuck up. She'll hear you."

"I didn't recognize her at first." He cranes his neck as if trying to see over the fence. "She's my favorite bad girl. No wonder you're so happy here in Nashville."

I resist the urge to plant my fist in his face. He's one of my best friends and he loves to talk, even if he sometimes sounds like an ass. He can't help the fact that girls started throwing themselves at him practically since kindergarten. I grab his shirt and tug him down the sidewalk, away from Millie's.

"What is she doing here in Nana's neighborhood?" he asks. "I mean besides you."

I give him a rough shake, pushing him off the sidewalk. "Don't talk about her like that. It's not like that."

Blaine sobers, rubbing his chest. "Hey, hey. What's wrong? You do realize who she is right?"

"I know who she is and whatever character she plays in those trashy shows is not who she really is."

Blaine's side-eye speaks volumes. "It's called 'reality tv' for a reason."

Rolling my eyes, I let out an exasperated sigh. "Yes, I know, but you and I both know that 'reality'," I offer up some air quotes, "all depends on the spin. And besides, that stuff is often scripted. If there was no drama, who would watch it?"

"Okay, so you and India Rook?" Blaine crosses his fingers. "While that's a match in rock heaven, Laird will literally have kittens when he hears about it."

"There is no me and India Rook." I conveniently leave out the part about the hottest kiss I can remember. "We happen to be in the same neighborhood and we're helping each other out."

"By help, you mean...?" Blaine jumps out of arm's reach. "I'm just asking! You guys looked pretty cozy in that sweet truck back there."

"I'm helping her with a new project and she's helping me find a house here."

"We'll unpack that bit about you finding a house here in a minute." Blaine sticks his hands in his pockets as we reach Nana's front porch. "Since when do you do reality shows?"

"It's not really that kind of project. It's sort of reality show based I guess, but nothing like what she normally does." I don't feel comfortable explaining the details without India's permission. This is her thing and although I can trust Blaine not to say anything, I don't really want to share her project. It's... well it's something she and I share. I shrug. "Plus, she's just coming off a break-up and has made it clear she doesn't want to get involved with anybody." Especially me.

"India Rook is always involved with somebody. That's her thing."

"Maybe it's not her thing anymore."

Blaine leans against a post and gives me a searching look. "You like her."

I look away, shrugging. "She's cool."

“She’s not a fairytale princess, dude. She doesn’t do long-term. She’s always looking. She’s like the female version of me. You don’t want to get involved with me.”

I grin. “Yeah, I can’t stand back hair.”

“I don’t have back hair, you tool,” he says laughing. Then he points a finger at me. “Seriously, though, Noah. She’s the exact opposite of your list. And while I’m sure you guys would generate a ton of interest, I don’t think the label wants us dabbling in reality tv waters.” He shudders. “Can you imagine?”

“She’s not interested in me.”

Blaine mimes his head exploding. “Excuse me? Mr. Perfect struck out?”

I rub the back of my head. “It does happen, you know.”

“Not to me, it doesn’t.” Blaine holds up his hands. “Hey, I don’t mind short-term and toxic, and the label certainly isn’t expecting me to pick up any slack. Maybe India Rook is exactly perfect for me.”

It will be a cold, cold, day in hell before I tell Blaine to move in on India.

“She is not perfect for you,” I grind out.

“So, you are imagining happily ever after with her.” Blaine sighs. “Noah, normally I would tell you to just fuck her and get it out of your system, but that never works with you. You dip it and it’s like some chick has tattooed ‘property of’ on your dick.”

I sink down into one of Nana’s white, whicker porch chairs. “There’s nothing wrong with being committed.”

Blaine springs off the post like he’s been burned. “Shit! Is it too late? Have you already fucked her?”

“No – and keep your voice down. This is my grandmother’s house, you cretin.”

“But you’re thinking about doing the horizontal mambo with that very comely woman.” Blaine swivels his hips like

he's on stage.

"Are you high?" I ask.

"Not yet, but only because I came to see you first and you need to wash that purple shit out of your hair before we go out," he says. "Why? You need something?"

"No, I don't need anything, but what are you talking about with the mambo and the ... what did you call her?"

"Comely. India is very comely. It means she's a hot piece of ass in gentleman-speak, and I thought the horizontal mambo was appropriate for a neighborhood of seniors. I could have said making the beast with two backs or that you dream of being quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon, but I figured you wouldn't get either of those references."

"So, help me, God, Blaine, if you start trying to impress India with your filthy Shakespearean quotes I will kill you, slowly and painfully."

"Ah, the gloomy shade of death..." Blaine laughs.

Not for the first time I wonder about the fact that Blaine is some sort of genius. His mother is practically revered in the academic world for her critical theory application and literary prowess. Or at least that's what I read from an article Slade sent us once. Blaine was winning awards for poetry at age twelve and reciting Shakespeare from a much earlier age. To his mother's disappointment, he gave up a full scholarship to university to head to L.A. with us to pursue Kingmaker. I see him scribbling every now and then and sometimes he'll read his poetry to us, but he doesn't want to write our music, no matter how much we encourage him. Every now and then, he'll brainstorm with Tanner, or throw out a line so magical, Tanner writes an entire song around it, but that's it. He prefers to use his talent to impress girls who probably have no idea who Shakespeare is.

But I'm not going to let him impress India. "Take your talents elsewhere, Blaine, I'm serious."

"I think you have relationship withdrawal," he says. "You've got ten minutes to shower and dress and then I'm

going to remind you how fun it is to be single.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I roll my eyes, but I stand up. I have nothing better to do and if I stay here, I’m only going to lay awake and jerk off to the memory of India’s body pressed to mine, her tongue in my mouth and that breathy little noise she made when she felt me against her. Fuck. I definitely need a shower, preferably a cold one.

INDIA

I think I'm going to throw up. Sweat pours down my face, my legs feel shaky, and I can't get enough oxygen. Up ahead, Millie turns back to me, jogging in place. Her cute pixie hair cut is slicked back out of her face for the run and her bright pink sports bra doesn't look like the minimizer, strap-'em-down, engineering marvel I'm currently sweating buckets into. Millie has been trying to get me out on her morning jogs ever since I moved into her shed and after tossing and turning over the kiss I shared with Noah last night, I decided I needed to try and outrun the feelings I definitely didn't want to have over the sexy rock star.

I wouldn't say I'm out of shape, but damn, I'm clearly not on Millie's level. That woman has got to be in her sixties and she's prancing along, making conversation while my body is protesting the torture I'm putting it through. Yoga and spin clearly use different muscles. I mentally count back to the last spin class I took and realize I've probably missed a few too many.

I slow to a walk, finally and mentally say a little prayer when I reach Millie's lawn. She's stretching in the driveway as I collapse, gasping, onto her lawn. The coolness of the morning grass is a balm to my sweaty back and I close my eyes.

"Sweetheart. I think you overdid it," Millie's disembodied voice floats to me from a few feet over.

I fold my arm across my eyes and nod. "Maybe."

There's a rustling sound as Millie settles herself next to me on the grass, stretching her legs out in front of her, while she raises her hands overhead and lowers herself, touching her forehead to her knees. She is flexible. My mind flashes to the sex swing in the shed. Millie is a goddess.

"How's the work coming on the house?" she asks.

I drag in a lungful of air, grateful that my heartrate seems to have dropped out of heart attack range. "Pretty good. The last thing I really have to tackle before I get to the fun stuff is the hardwood floor and that's on the agenda for today."

"Stella tells me that Noah's been helping you out. He's a good one." Millie's voice is mild.

I lift my arm and slide my eyes to where she's sitting butterfly style, bouncing her thighs open. "He's been very helpful."

"And so handsome," she says.

"I haven't noticed."

Millie snorts. "Are you dead?"

I roll over to my side, propping my head up on my hand. "No, but I've sworn off guys for a bit. I'm trying to focus on me."

Millie gives a little hum. "That's important for sure, but sometimes you can focus too hard in one direction and miss opportunities that might be wonderful."

"I've been heading in a certain direction my whole life and I don't know that's it's led me anywhere good, or that the people going the same way are what I need in my life."

Millie plucks a strand of grass and stares off into the distance. "Sweetheart, I don't know you very well. I haven't watched a single show of yours and I only have a Facebook account so I can see pictures of my grandkids. But I do know Noah. Stella and I have been friends for years and he's been coming down here to visit since he was a scrawny little boy whose glasses kept sliding down his nose." She twirls the blade of grass. "I don't say too much, especially since there

are plenty of others out there who do – even if they don't know what they're talking about. But you would know all about that right? People talking about stuff they have no knowledge of. People might think they know you, or your father, or Noah, based on loving or hating what they see on television, or hear on the radio, or read in a magazine but other people don't define who you are unless you let them."

"I'm trying Millie. I'm not that person on television. I didn't steal anyone's boyfriend, ever." I shrug. "Maybe I didn't always ask the right questions and maybe I definitely ignored some pretty big red flags, but I'd never intentionally hurt someone."

Millie reaches out and pats my arm. "You're young, India. Young, and in an industry where boredom is the death knell. Drama and scandal and personality is rewarded. We all make mistakes. It's how we learn. The point, however, is to learn where to go next."

"I'm not proud of everything I've done, or how I've acted, but I've never even dated some of the guys I've been linked with. People don't care if it's not true."

"You can't do anything about those people. And no matter what you do, you won't be able to change the minds of some people. Let's say you became a nun. Some people would say it's a publicity stunt."

Nodding, I sit up. "I know. But what I'm doing here is different. I want something different. I don't want to be that character anymore and because I want to be different, I think I should do things differently."

"It's fine to want to do things differently, but don't lose sight of who you really are."

"That's just it, Millie. Maybe I don't know who I am."

"I said not to base who you are on other people's opinions, but I'm going to walk that back a bit. The people who love you, they sometimes see things you might be blind to, and you should listen to them. Sometimes they can show you who you are."

I tip my head back, looking up at the soft blue sky. Not a cloud in sight. Maybe I should take the beautiful day as a sign.

But a sign of what? I'd spent most of last night switching between social media feeds and gossip sites searching for any mention of Noah in Nashville. When I couldn't find anything, I started looking for stuff about Blaine as he doesn't really seem to be the kind of guy to keep a low profile anywhere. My fingers shook with every click in fear I would see a picture of Noah with his hands all over some other girl. I don't get it. In my world there are always other girls, pictures taken out of context, or often, pictures that tell the truth. Why should I care if he's hanging out with someone else? He's Noah Whitlock for crying out loud. There is always going to be someone hanging off him.

And I have no claim on him whatsoever. Not that I want one.

Even if his kiss last night felt like Christmas and the Fourth of July all rolled into one.

Of course he's an amazing kisser. I'm certain he has tons of practice. Just like me. I sigh.

Next to me, Millie rises to her feet, brushing off her legs. "That's a mighty big sigh for so early in the day."

"I know." I sigh again. "Sorry."

"No apologies necessary. Do you want a cup of coffee? It might help clear the cobwebs."

"I thought the run was supposed to do that."

"Well, running works for me, but I know it might not work for everyone."

I hear a car turn down the street and my head snaps up. Is that Noah, just getting home now? I squint, noticing the small, grey hatchback slowing down in front of my house, but it doesn't stop. Instead, it continues down the street towards us. Millie turns her head, but before the car passes us, it turns into a driveway, reverses and heads back up in the direction it came.

Millie shrugs. "Must be lost."

I'd lost interest in the car as soon as I realized it wasn't carrying Noah home from a night out with one of the biggest womanizers in the rock scene. Noah might be a perfect gentleman compared with the other guys in Kingmaker, but Blaine holds the title for being a huge player. Apparently, one of his 'girlfriends' found out they were no longer a couple when he showed up at an event solo and when questioned about her, was quoted by the reporter as responding with "why would anyone bring a sandwich to an all-you-can-eat buffet?"

And reading that little nugget at three in the morning reminded me why it would be a terrible idea to get involved with another rock star, no matter how he makes me feel.

It'll be good for a few weeks. Then, something will happen and next thing you know we'll be fighting, or worse, we just won't care anymore. Then there'll be a story, usually unflattering towards me, I'll hook up with someone else to distract from the first story and the whole thing starts again.

It's exhausting.

I stand, stretching my arms up over my head. "I'm going to grab a shower."

"Okay, are you sure you don't want a coffee?" Millie asks as she heads up to her door.

"Thanks, but I'll grab one after my shower. Thanks for inviting me on your run." I walk around the side, pushing in the gate to the backyard. I take a few steps and halt when I see Noah sitting in one of the tiny bistro chairs in front of the shed.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Why was the gate open?"

He's dressed casually in grey sweatpants and a white t-shirt and his hair looks like he just hopped out of the shower. I push aside the mental image of water sluicing down the chiseled planes of his chest and cross my arms.

“I went for a run with Millie, and I didn’t want to take the keys. Millie said it was fine.”

“Anyone could get back here.”

“Un-huh. Anyone could,” I say pointedly.

He stands, and I dig my nails into my palms to keep my eyes fixed above his neck. I’ve seen the way these sweatpants hang on his lean hips and I’m sure he’s noticed me checking him out too. Ugh. He looks pretty good for someone who was out all night and here I am in sweaty workout clothes, my ponytail sagging against my neck.

“I wanted to bring you these.” He holds out a cardboard box.

I feel like I have déjà vu. My stomach rumbles and my gaze drops to the white cardboard box, which means I’m also in prime viewing position for the fit of those grey sweatpants. My stomach rumbles and my nipples peak under my too-tight sports bra. I’m hungry, aroused and annoyed at myself for both.

An irresistible grin appears on his face, his early morning scruff not quite hiding his choir-boy dimple. “You’re up early,” I say, snagging the box as I brush past him. “Thanks for these.”

“So are you. Did you really go for a run this morning?”

I feel the heat of his body behind me as I step through the door, his sunshine citrus scent competing with the smell of blueberries and sugar from the box in my hands. I’m tired and jittery all at the same time. I want to ask him about his night, but at the same time, I don’t want to hear a thing about it.

“Where’s Blaine?” I ask, turning.

Noah shrugs. “At his hotel, I suppose.”

“I figured you’d crash there too, after such a late night?” I bite my lip. That sounded like I was fishing, jealous or both. I hit the button to warm up the coffee machine. “I mean, that’s what I always do. Makes waking up with a hangover so much easier when you only have to worry about room service.”

“And inconvenient guests?”

I lift a shoulder in an attempt to convey how casual I am about this. “Well, you know as well as I do, it’s as easy as saying, ‘thanks, babe, but I have an early meeting and need a shower. See you around.’” I grab a mug and slide it under the spout. “I guess it’s easier for you though, don’t you have security who ensures they leave if they overstay their welcome?”

Noah’s gaze narrows. “Have you ever had anyone *overstay* their welcome?”

Another shrug and I turn to make the coffee. “Haven’t we all?”

I freeze when the heat of his body warms my back. He reaches around me to pick up a mug but doesn’t back away. “Are you suggesting I’m overstaying my welcome?” His voice grumbles in my ear and I shiver.

“You brought muffins. It’s kind of like room service.”

“I didn’t stay out last night.” He cages me in with his body, and I practically melt when his hips brush my ass.

My head drops to my chest, and I curl my fingers into my hands to stop myself reaching for temptation. “Cool, but I don’t need to know your whereabouts.”

“I came home because I couldn’t stop thinking about you. The way you taste. The way you move.” He sweeps my ponytail forward and I hear him inhale deeply. “The way you smell.”

I draw in a shaky breath. “That’s just the muffins.”

Heat fires through me when he clamps his hands on my waist and turns me so I’m facing him.

“It’s not just the muffins. It’s not just the fact that I haven’t been with anyone for a while. It’s not just the way you look in those cut-off jean shorts.” He smiles and I want to lick the dimple that flashes in his cheek. “Well, it might be the jean shorts.”

“Noah.” I don’t know what I want to say. I want him but I can’t have another relationship in the spotlight. I don’t want to change the dynamic we have together either. I look forward to working with him each day, laughing at his silly antics and swooning over the way he looks, shirtless, like some kind of handyman fantasy come to life.

He lifts his hands away from my hips, holding them up in surrender. “I get it, India. You don’t want to get involved with me.” He runs his hands through his hair. “But I’m not going to lie, that kiss last night threw me into a tailspin.” He takes a couple of steps back. “Tell me you didn’t feel anything, and I’ll forget about it.”

I open my mouth to say the lie, but I meet his eyes instead. “You came home last night because of me?” I feel like a desperate teenager, needing validation, but I need to hear it.

He nods slowly. “There I was, in the VIP room of some party. You know the scene, cocaine on the table, tequila by the bottle and Blaine urging me to take some girl up on her offer to blow me.”

My stomach squeezes. I can imagine the scene all too clearly. For fuck’s sake, I’ve been in that VIP, watching in boredom while some girl is giving out lap dances and blow jobs like that will get her anywhere. It’s never bothered me before, but the thought of some woman putting her mouth on Noah, tracing his ink with her tongue, like I so desperately want to do, makes me a little sick.

But I just shrug. “Sounds like you could have had a good time.”

“I could have. Maybe I should have.” He raises his eyebrows. “But even after several shots of tequila, I knew that no one would feel like you do in my arms. No one’s mouth is as plush as yours and so I did what I’ve been doing for several nights now. I came home, watched a half-assed episode of one of your shows, imagined myself driving up to that stupid house and pushing Cody out of the way.” He stops, takes a step forward and then catches himself, stepping back.

“And what did you imagine then?” I whisper.

“I imagined you smiling at me. A real smile, like when we finish something at the house, instead of those fake smiles you give on the show. And when you smile, I reach out and wrap your ponytail around my hand, taking your mouth with mine and kissing you until you moan.”

I’m nearly moaning now. The image of Noah taking charge makes my thighs tingle, so I squeeze them together to stem the ache growing there. I know he notices because his jaw tightens, and those grey sweatpants are hiding nothing.

“After last night, I know how you taste when I kiss you, the way you moan, and it’s burned into my brain like the most perfect guitar chord. I imagined your sound, the way you smell, the way your perfect curves feel under my fingers, and I’ve never been harder.”

“Show me.” My voice is hoarse.

The blue in Noah’s eyes darken. “Show you what?”

I clear my throat, crossing my arms with a casualness that is nowhere close to the turmoil building in my body. I’m electrified, with enough energy strumming through me to fuel a marathon.

“Show me what you did after you imagined all that.”

He cups himself through his pants, massaging the outline of his cock, before slipping his hand inside. His head falls back as he strokes himself and the sharpness of my nails cutting into my palms reminds me I’m not actually dreaming this. I’m so wet, I’m afraid he’ll see the damp spot between my legs if I move and I don’t really want to break this spell he’s woven with his words.

His breath catches and he stops, looking me straight in the eye. “Is this a game, India? Are you going to tell me to forget this after I’ve stood here and bared myself to you?”

I bite my lip, shaking my head. “No. I don’t want you to forget.”

His body jerks like I’ve hit him and before I can take a breath, he’s there, wrapping his hand in my ponytail and pulling my head back for his kiss. How did I ever think he was

a gentleman, as he plunders my mouth, stealing every thought from my head while his hips grind against mine.

“No one can know,” I gasp.

“About what?” he murmurs, kissing my neck.

“This, between us.” I push against his chest a little. “Okay? I’m trying to keep a low-profile and you’re anything but.”

He pauses, lifting his head to meet my gaze. “I don’t brag about my conquests.”

“That’s not what I mean.” I can’t think straight with his hands on me, my skin tingling where his lips were. “I want this. I want you. I just don’t want anyone to find out.”

“I’m your dirty, little secret?” His lips quirk.

“I prefer to think of it as what happens in the she-shed, stays in the she-shed.”

He chuckles, a low dark rumble that makes my nipples peak in arousal. “Considering there’s a sex swing in here, I feel like this place abides by that motto.”

“I can’t believe you brought that up.”

He licks along the top of my bra, blowing gently on my skin and my belly flutters. “Better distract me then.”

His hand glides down my back, unhooking the latches of my bra and awareness floods me.

“I’m a sweaty mess,” I pant as Noah lets me come up for air, his tongue shifting to the top of my bra.

“I like it when you’re messy,” he growls, licking the red marks left on my skin when he pulls the bra away.

I push on his shoulders. “I don’t.”

He stops, dropping the bra on the floor, but keeps me pinned with his hips. “What do you need?”

“I need a shower. Please?”

Slowly he backs away, and the air pebbles my nipples. He groans, dragging a hand over his eyes. “Please be quick.”

I strip off my leggings, loving the way he swallows as he takes in my naked form. I've never been self-conscious, but I know I look a little different than I did when I was starving myself on Hot House. I straighten my shoulders. If model-perfect is what he wants, there are plenty of groupies out there with that look.

He locks his hands behind his head. "If you don't want me licking every inch of that beautiful body right this second, I suggest you get your ass in the shower now."

I crook my finger, not willing to wait a minute longer. "Wanna wash my back?"

He growls, the sound sending a thrill through me, before shoving his sweatpants to the floor and pulling off his shirt as he heads to the tiny bathroom. I step in behind him realizing I may not have thought this through completely. His big body crowds the small space.

"I don't think we'll fit."

"It's going to be tight." He opens the shower door, turning on the water. Steam quickly fills the air.

He reaches for me, gently pushing me into the spray before laying a bunch of towels outside to catch the water. He steps in and I'm surrounded by warm water and wet, hot muscles. He widens his stance so I'm between his legs and grabs the soap from the little shelf above me. I feel him lathering his hands behind me and then he slides them over my rib cage, leaving behind foamy bubbles as he glides up my breasts and over my shoulders, massaging my tired muscles.

My head tips back, bumping his chest. "That feels so good."

"You've been working so much on the house. Your muscles have got to be tired from all that lifting and cutting and sanding."

"I guess it is a workout," I murmur, my eyes drifting closed as he sweeps my hair over my shoulder and circles his thumbs just below my neck. "You really are perfect, aren't you?"

“Maybe you bring out the best in me.”

We're so close, I feel the vibration of his words and my heart does a funny tremble. I know my reputation. I don't bring out the best in anyone. I need to bring this back to my comfort zone. I shift, tilting my hips and my stomach tightens at the hard length of him pressed against the small of my back. He slides against me, sending little sparkles of anticipation shooting through me. Noah continues to wrap me in slick, soapy sensation, his hands massaging under my arms, over my shoulders and down to my ass. He teasingly slides his fingers between my cheeks, before gliding outward, squeezing my ass in his big hands. I moan, my hands going behind me to pull him closer. He clamps his hands around my wrists and pulls my hands up, over my head, placing my hands flat against the shower wall. I'm directly under the spray now, feeling it more on my back as his hands drift back down, his palms pausing over the hard peaks of my nipples, circling with a maddening, feather-light touch that sends a rush of heat between my thighs. I push my hips back and he dips, his hard cock sliding over my ass.

“Let me wash your hair.”

I nod, even though I can't tell if he notices, groaning as his hands gently tunnel through the heavy mass. He's careful not to scrub too hard or tangle the strands around his big fingers, even though I feel them catch a little on his calluses. The tenderness of his hands is a contrast to the hard heat of him pressing into me behind and I know I'm soaked and not from the shower. He draws me up to rinse my hair and I raise my arms, to push the wet strands away from my face. Suddenly, his hands are on my breasts, lifting them into the spray, and I moan as the tiny drops sting my too-sensitive nipples before gasping as his fingers shield them, only to pinch them into aching arousal.

“Are you satisfied?” he growls in my ear when the last of the suds has disappeared.

“Not even close,” I grind out.

He laughs, a low, grumbling sound that makes me shiver as he turns the water off. “I meant with your shower.”

Cool air hits me as he steps out, but just as quickly, a soft, fluffy towel wraps around me.

“I don’t know how to do that origami towel thing girls do with their wet hair,” he says, holding a smaller towel in his hands. He’s dripping wet, water cascading down his magnificent body. My mouth goes dry at the sight of his cock, thick and nearly bobbing against his belly. I take the towel and fold it under my knees, before dropping down in front of him. Water snakes down my back from my hair, but I don’t care. All I care about is driving this man wild.

I look up at him from beneath my lashes and his hooded gaze clashes with mine. “Get up, India. I get to taste you first.”

My pussy throbs at his words, but I need this. I need to take back some control of the situation, because I’m about to melt into a puddle of anticipation here on the floor.

I drag my nails lightly up his thighs, loving the way he shivers, and I lean in, inhaling the scent of soap, musk and clean skin. Cupping his balls, I tug slightly and use the tip of my tongue to lick up his length before glancing upward to see his jaw slacken as I open my mouth and take him inside. He pumps forward and I take him deeper, my lips stretching over his thickness, and I grip his hips, digging my nails into his muscles.

He groans. “Fuck, yes.” He pulls my hair away from my face. “Look at you. You are so beautiful with your mouth wrapped around my cock.”

The intensity of his words shoots through me like a firecracker. My tongue swirls around his cock and I feel the tremor in his body as I slide my tongue over the tip, licking the precum gathered there. I stroke up, using my hand to glide up and down while I twist my mouth side-to-side, increasing the rhythm with every pump of his hips.

I’m enjoying myself immensely, lost in the taste of him, the way his entire body is tensed, the burn as I take him further

down my throat. I suck hard, hollowing out my cheeks as I pull swirling my tongue over the top before he thrusts again, fucking my mouth. His hand tightens around my hair, and he stills, pulling away from me, hissing as my fingernails scrape his thighs.

“India.” He kneels so he’s facing me, palming my nipples again like he can’t stop touching them.

Everything feels swollen and aching and I want to beg him to touch me, but I can’t. I’ve never felt this needy and out of control. I stand up shakily, only to have him press his face against my lower belly. My brain swirls and I see colors behind my closed eyes as his teeth graze my hipbone.

“Fuck. I can’t lay you out here and feast on you like you deserve. This fucking bathroom is too small.” He gets to his feet and drags me behind him into the warmth of the main room.

Pushing me down into the ruffled white bedding, he nuzzles my neck before gently lifting me and sweeping my wet hair and spreading it across the pillows, warm from the sun spilling in from the windows. “Is this okay?” he asks, spreading my legs.

I arch up, pulling him down on top of me, his heavy weight leaving me breathless. “This is better,” I say, leaning up to nip his bottom lip.

“What about this?”

I catch a glimpse of his teasing smile before he dips his head and catches one of my nipples with his teeth, dragging it slightly, before soothing the burn with his tongue. My hips buck underneath him as I arch into his mouth. “Mmm, maybe that’s better,” I purr as he switches his attention to the other breast, pinching my nipple before flicking it with his talented tongue.

My body is almost too sensitive from his touch in the shower and sucking his cock turned me on so much I’m practically shaking from the need to come. “Just fuck me

already, Noah.” I say, hating the whine in my voice and the way my hips are twisting restlessly under his.

“Oh, I’m not going to fuck you.”

Wait. What? I nearly cry out when he lifts his weight away from me, clenching my hands into fists to stop from reaching out for him.

He must have seen the desperation on my face because he leans forward, and somehow, without touching any other part of my body, takes my mouth in a fierce kiss. He breaks away and stands back.

“Yet. I’m not going to fuck you yet.” His eyes look bright as sunlight streams through the window creating slashes of gold across his face. “You think a quick fuck is what I have in mind here? I’m going to make every cell in your body respond to my touch. Every breath you take from here on out is going to remind you of the way I make you feel.”

He fists himself and longing stabs me, the throbbing between my legs nearly unbearable.

“When I slide between those soft thighs and that sweet honey I see glistening between your legs coats my cock, I want you to know how *I* made you feel. Not Mr. Perfect. Not some wannabe who only knows your last name. Just me.”

NOAH

I see her throat working and it takes every ounce of effort I have not to fall on her and pump my cock deep inside that sweet, hot pussy. I'm emotionally raw, wanting her in a way that feels primal. When I saw her on her knees, her deep red lips wrapped around my cock, her chest heaving with arousal, I felt like someone ripped open my chest and exposed my heart, beating in time with her breaths. She's spread out before me like a goddamn offering and I'm her god.

Not the Guitar God. I've been here before, some woman panting for me, but it's never felt like this. It's never been this combination of aching and emotion and realness where my brain is completely shut off to everything except the desire to melt into her.

Her hands go between her legs and my brain misfires. As much as I want to see her touch herself, to learn whether she likes it fast and hard or slow, gentle strokes of her fingertips, right now, I need to hear her come from my touches. I need her to feel her shaking from my hand and no other.

I step between her legs and cover her hand with mine, drawing it to the side. "Keep your hands off," I say falling to my knees in front of her.

I lean in, breathing in the sweet smell of her soap mixed with the syrup I see coating her pink, perfect pussy and turn my face, sucking deeply on the flesh of her inner thigh. I want to leave a mark, there, where it's private, where she can remember when she looks down later and then, because I can't

resist any longer, I spread her with my fingers, my cock ready to explode against the soft cotton sheets spilling over the side of the bed. When I touch my tongue to her swollen nub, she whimpers and I slide one finger into her pussy, loving the way her cream slicks over it. Slowly, I pump it in and out, in time with her breathless little cries as she squirms against my mouth.

Shifting slightly, I pull back, dragging my finger out of her and look up her luscious body. She's a masterpiece from the soft curve of her belly, across the sweep of her ribs, where her chest is rising with every panting breath and up to the satin-smooth globes of her breast, topped with the ripest berries I've ever seen. Her eyes are hooded as she gazes down at me, and while I thought her beautiful with her mouth stuffed full of my cock, the way her face flushes when I lick my finger full of her cream and glide it back down the center of her hot pussy, makes her look radiant. I push two fingers inside, watching as she bites her lip, her eyes drifting closed.

"You're addictive," I say, loving the way her pussy clamps around my fingers when I graze my thumb over her clit.

"I think it might be the other way around." Her head falls back, and she shudders as I swirl my fingers deeper.

"That feels good?"

She nods and I slide my thumb down her slit, back over the arch of her swollen clit and down the other side, my cock nearly bursting at her low moan. I dip my head again, using both hands to expose her fully and follow the same path with my tongue, dipping into her honey, dragging it up one side and down the other, my finger pumping in time with her bucking hips, while her frantic whimpers tell me how far I can push her.

I slow my pace, flicking her clit as her thighs tighten around my head and drown against her gorgeous, wet, hot pussy. I feel the orgasm winding her body tighter and tighter as if it were my own and I pull my finger out, replacing it with my tongue, lapping at her like a goddamn animal while my

hands stroke her writhing body, holding her hips down to heighten the sensation as she explodes under my mouth.

Her high keening echoes around the room as aftershocks wrack her body and I glance up to see her gorgeous tits shaking with the intensity of her orgasm.

My body hurts, my balls drawn up tight as precum leaks from my cock. Her hands grasp my shoulders pulling me over her and I hold myself up from her body, not trusting that I won't come all over her the second my cock touches her skin like some adolescent with his dream girl.

And then it hits me.

“Fuck.”

“Yes, please,” India pleads sweetly, her beautiful face flushed, her hair a tangled shadow against the white pillow.

I dip my head, touching my forehead to hers. “Baby, I want nothing more than to shove my cock deep inside you and hear you scream again, but I didn't bring any condoms with me.”

India blinks, her eyes glazed. “I don't need a condom. I'm on the pill and I'm clean.”

I shake my head. “So am I.” Laird is a total prick about us being totally careful and makes us get regular health checks and I've never been with a woman before without a condom, at least not that I remember. “But you don't have to...”

“I got bloodwork done after I found out about Cody. It's in my purse.” She pushes at my chest. “I'll go get it.”

“India, stop.” I lift her hand to my lips, kissing her knuckles. “If you're able to move right now, I haven't done my job nearly well enough.”

She bites her lip. “I just...” She looks away. “I know I've, um, dated a lot of guys.”

“Hey.” I frown down at her. “I don't need to see anything. I haven't exactly been celibate my whole life either. We are adults. I trust you.” And I do. I've never had this

overwhelming need to claim a woman's body, without any barrier, like I do right now.

Her eyes clear and she gazes up at me. "I trust you too." Her voice breaks a little and I capture her mouth with mine, cupping her cheek while I deepen the kiss, the heat returning between us but something else is there too, something delicate I want to hold onto forever.

Slowly, I lower my body, shifting to roll her over me, loving the play of sunlight across her skin. I slide her down until I'm notched exactly where I want to be and I hold my breath while she lifts her hips, grasps my cock and I push up into her, loving the way she gasps as her body clenches around mine. I feel the resistance as she stretches to accommodate me and my cock twitches. I take a deep breath, resisting the urge to flip her back down and pound into her until my body releases deep in her soft, sweet cunt.

She braces her hands on my chest and rocks her hips, setting a steady pace that has my eyes rolling back in my head at the way her pussy glides on my cock, tight and wet like warm silk. Still, nothing prepares me for the pleasure spiking through me as she moans above me, watching her heavy tits sway with her movements. Impossibly, my balls tighten more as I buck my hips, no longer able to take her slow, sinuous rocking.

"Noah," she gasps, grinding herself down against me.

I grasp her hand, bringing it between her legs, not sure how much longer I can hold on as my orgasm builds at the base of my spine. "Touch your pussy."

A flush blooms on her chest and I feel her clench around me as her fingers glide over her clit in tight little circles. My cock pulses as she rocks forward, using my thrusts to grind her hand harder against her nub.

"That's it, beautiful girl. Work that sweet cunt."

She rocks back, one hand coming up to cup her breast, pinching her nipple, and I groan. I watch as her fingers dance over her clit, lifting her so I can see her pouty lips stretched by

my cock. I pump up into her, slowly, loving her breathless whimper as she tries to grind down against me.

I loosen my grip, letting her rock faster, and the slick sounds of our bodies is hot as fuck. Her swollen lips are the same deep pink color as her nipples and my mouth waters at how gorgeous she is. I pull her down to me, her thighs tensing around my hips and I lift my head to capture one of her tits, tonguing the pebble-hard nipple. My orgasm builds like a heavy wave as she screams, her pussy milking my cock in hard ripples until my climax explodes out of me in a hot rush. I grab her hips, thrusting up, harder and deeper into her softness while stars explode behind my eyes and all the blood in my body pulses in time with the storm washing through me. My orgasm goes on forever, my cock twitching as she says my name over and over before collapsing on my chest, her pussy still greedily sucking every drop of my cum into her body.

I thought I felt like a god every night when I hear the crowd roar my name in a stadium filled with eighty thousand people, but that feeling is nothing compared to this. My heart is beating out of my chest and a growl escapes me as India moves, my cock letting me know it's not done with her.

“Fuck. That was unbelievable.”

“I don't think I can move,” she says from across my chest.

“Then don't.” I blow strands of her chestnut hair out of my mouth and gently lift her off me despite her protests. I lay her back in the soft bedding and press a kiss to her puffy bottom lip, licking the teeth marks she's left there. “Shh, I'll be right back.”

Her lashes flutter and my heart tugs. With her wild tangle of damp hair, no make-up and her lips reddened from our kisses, she looks young and innocent, so different from the sultry siren the world recognizes. I press a kiss to the tip of her nose and drag myself out of the bed, hating the instant emptiness of not having her in my arms.

INDIA

I feel like I might throw up. That's twice so far today, for far different reasons. I twist my head, watching Noah's naked form walk through the sunlight filtering through the shed windows and pretend my heart isn't fluttering like I have some stupid crush when I see him fill a tray with muffins while he re-sets the coffee machine.

How can I feel so bad when just seconds ago I felt better than I ever had in my whole, entire life?

I am so fucked. And I don't mean in the amazingly thorough, bone-melting way that Noah just commanded my body.

Fucked in that I'm clearly falling in the same trap I always have. What did I think was going to happen? That Mr. Perfect wasn't actually going to be amazing in bed and I'd have a mediocre orgasm while he got off, brush his dark blond hair back into perfect place, salute me with a fist pump and saunter out the door?

Noah Whitlock isn't Mr. Perfect. He's whatever exists beyond perfect.

I roll to my side, propping my head up on my hand, and watch him return to the bed, sliding the tray in front of me with a grin that would have melt my panties, had I been wearing any. My body is still slightly shaky, and I reach for a muffin, taking a big bite to stop any stupid words from falling out of my mouth, like 'you are the most amazing person I've ever met and ohmygooooo, can I have your babies and

worship you for the rest of my life?' *Gag*. I'm sure I'm no different than any other girl who ends up in bed with Noah.

I need to be cool, calm and in control. I do this all the time, right? My mistake with Cody was letting my guard down too fast. Noah is just like all the other guys I know. Just like my dad and his crew, and I already know I don't want that in my life.

Nope, I scratched my itch, and no one needs to know about it. I am not that girl banging rock stars and fame-whores anymore. I need to get my focus back to the project. Once I get the floor done, I can start editing the video for my submission and the landscape guys will be in to implement the design I've worked out.

"So, what's on the agenda for us today? I know we have to tackle those floors, but my real estate guy sent me a house I should probably check out, if you have time to come with me."

The word 'us' has my belly doing a little somersault. "I have to tackle the floors, yes. And I'm going to meet with the landscape contractor and film some of that piece, to get the before shots. Why don't you take Blaine to check out the house?"

Noah rolls his eyes. "I'm not taking Blaine. I love the guy, but somehow, he'd end up getting the real estate guy to find a house with a hot tub big enough for twenty-five people and that's not what I'm looking for."

He trails his fingers down my arm teasingly, and the goosebumps make me shiver. "I'll help you with the floor. I can even get some action shots of you with the nail gun." Leaning in, he moves the plate of muffins and captures my mouth in a gentle kiss. The somersault in my stomach explodes in a kaleidoscope of butterflies. I can feel my resolve weakening with every slow drag of his lips against mine. Pushing against his chest, I roll back, away from the temptation of spending the entire morning basking in the glow of Noah Whitlock. If he could bottle that stuff, he'd be a millionaire several times over. Or maybe that's the secret to Kingmaker's success.

“Okay, okay, already. But no more kissing. We’ll never get any work done otherwise.”

He draws an ‘X’ over his chest. “No kissing. Not until the floor is finished anyway.”

He rolls off the bed, grabs his sweatpants and is dressed before I can muster the energy to stand. My legs feel wobbly and the ache between them lets me know I’ll be remembering what happened this morning all day.

I brush by him on my way to washroom. His hand shoots out, wrapping around my wrist. “Where are you going?”

“I need to wash up. You don’t have to wait for me.”

He tips my face up to his. “I don’t mind waiting, but can you do me a favor?”

I lick my lips, regretting my no kissing stance from a minute earlier. “Depends what it is.”

“Don’t shower again. I want to know you can still feel me all over your body. I want the stickiness on your thighs to remind you of how you panted under my mouth and the way you screamed my name when you felt me coming inside you.”

I swallow hard. The fire in his eyes triggers a flame of heat deep in my belly and the low, gravelly tone of his words makes the hair on my neck stand up. He’s barely touching me, the grip on my wrist no tighter than a bracelet, but I can’t make my feet move. When did he ever remind me of a schoolboy? I nod.

Satisfaction flares in his gaze and he smiles. “Good girl.”

I’m practically melting when I get to the washroom and I turn on the sink, noting the bright pink circles on my cheeks and my puffy mouth, swollen from his kisses. How am I ever going to concentrate on the floor today with every twinge in my body reminding me how amazing Noah can make me feel?



I FLEX my fingers in the heavy construction glove as I stare across the room. I've managed to get a good start, but the ricochet of the nail gun has taken its toll on my wrist and arm. There's no way I'm going to get this finished today, even though it's not a large room. I slide one of my hands under my arm to pull off the glove and take my phone out of the tripod. I have a bunch of texts and two missed calls from Cody. As if I'd want to see his face right now. I made the mistake of checking my DMs and I have a ton of requests, but I'm sure all of them are gloating messages about the fact that their beloved MadCo is back together. I roll my eyes, my finger hovering over the reply space.

Lose this number.

I take a deep breath, immediately regretting that I responded at all. I stare at the phone but there's no indication he got my message. I slowly exhale.

"That's a pretty heavy sigh for someone who looks like they've made great progress." Noah slides the patio door closed behind him.

He's full of dust and clay and the blue denim he changed into earlier has grass stains on the knees. In preparation for the landscapers, he thought it would save time if he pulled out some of the dead sod and cleaned up the old shed area. I love Millie's garden and want to put something similar in here, a little oasis for the pool that's going in. My heart clenches at the expense, but Noah reached out to his manager who is some kind of weird financial genius and the guy re-worked my project numbers, showing me where I could add a little more oomph and likely get a bigger return when I sell. Noah's been an amazing cheerleader on this project, kind of how I envisioned Cody would be, but honestly, there's no way Cody would've gotten his hands dirty the way Noah has.

"Yeah, I'm just slower than I thought I'd be." I shrug. "And I'm not as patient as I could be." I rotate my shoulder, wincing at the tightness in my muscle.

"Come here," Noah says.

“What? Why?”

“Because there might be sand and little rocks on my clothes, and I don’t want to damage the flooring, but you look tired, and I need to touch you.” He grins. “Plus those knee pads you’re wearing are giving me all kinds of ideas.”

I’m drawn to him like a magnet. I step around the flooring piles and up into the kitchen. He pulls the step ladder around and gestures for me to sit, while he uses a towel to wipe his hands. He leans over me, and I can smell fresh earth and sunshine, clean male sweat and whatever scent it is that is pure Noah. I want to rub myself all over him and run away at the same time.

I feel a few tugs as he pulls the band out of my ponytail, and I groan as my hair falls around my shoulders. The tension in my head immediately eases and my eyes drift shut as his fingers comb through my hair, massaging my scalp before moving down to my shoulders.

“You have magic hands,” I say drowsily.

“I know. I heard your appreciation this morning.”

“Noah...”

“Shhh. I’m just teasing. I know you said no kissing until the floor is done. That’s why I’m going to grab that nail gun and finish it up, if you’ll let me. I can’t wait to taste you again.”

My heart hammers. I want that too, but I can’t fall into this trap with Noah. This is not us. He’s not some nice guy next door I can date like a normal person. I need to remember that he’s leaving to go on tour with one of the hottest rock bands around in a few weeks and I’m going to do something completely different with my life. Something that doesn’t involve having my life on display to be dissected by anyone with an opinion.

“We’re just hooking up, right?” I ask.

“Hooking up?” His fingers dig into a particularly sore spot. “If that’s what you want to call it.”

“I don’t really want to call it anything. I’m just out of this thing with Cody and I really want that mentorship. It’s a new direction for me.”

“So I’m your rebound guy?”

“No, I don’t mean that. It’s just, well, it’s convenient. I was here, you’re staying at your grandmother’s next door. It’s temporary, like a vacation hook-up. That’s all it is.”

“You think I would have hooked up with any random girl who moved in here?”

I shrug. “Maybe?”

He bends, nuzzling my neck. The scrape of his stubble sends shivers through my body. “Maybe I would have.” He chuckles darkly at my sharp intake of breath. “But you’re the only one driving me crazy.”

The phone on the table buzzes. It’s Noah’s. “Want me to pass that to you?” I ask.

“Nope. I’ve got it.” He picks it up, switching on the video. “Hey, sis. Where are you?”

“Laird’s place. It’s so beautiful here.”

“Where’s the asshole?”

I blink. Who is Noah talking about? I thought his sister was supposed to be with Tanner and I thought they were best friends. Although I should know better than anyone not to believe everything in the media. Maybe it’s just a front.

“Noah. He’s your best friend.”

“Yeah, and a few months ago you’d have been the first person calling him an asshole, so things change.”

“I’m not a baby, anymore, Noah. I know what I’m doing.”

Noah shrugs, the tension in his shoulders evident. “I know you’re not a baby, Sterling, but you are my sister, and you don’t deserve having to deal with Tanner and his shit. You’ve had too much other shit to work through your whole life.” He glances over at me. “Anyway, are you okay?”

“I am. I just hate being the thing that comes between you and Tanner. I think he misses you.”

Noah shakes his head. “He should have thought about that before he went after my sister.”

A sigh echoes through the kitchen. “Noah. Just stop. You don’t need to take care of me.”

“Someone has to look out for you. Look at this mess you’re in now. Is he there? Does he know you called me? Do you need me to come get you?”

“No to all of your questions. He’s out for a run—”

Noah snorts, rolling his eyes. “So, it’s not going well, then.”

“Noah.” The voice is stern. “It’s going fine. You don’t always have to take care of everyone. Let Tanner and me figure stuff out for ourselves. You always do this, and I love you, but when you take care of everyone and worry about everyone else, it’s just a distraction from focusing on you.”

“What is that supposed to mean? You’d prefer it if I was a self-centred jerk?”

“No, but Tanner was talking to Laird and apparently, you’re in Nashville looking for the perfect wife? What the fuck?”

My jaw drops. What. The. Fuck. Indeed. Noah swings around, his gaze meeting mine. My eyebrows shoot up while I wait for his next words.

“No, it’s not like that.”

“Well, what is it like, Noah? You’re worried about Tanner screwing up my life, but you seem hell-bent on screwing up your own, for what? Because the label wants some story to sell? You’re forgetting that it’s my job to do that, right?”

Noah blinks before turning and walking out the door, taking the phone with him.

Well. It’s not like I was eavesdropping. He took the call right in front of me. I turn, looking out into the backyard, to

see Noah gesturing wildly with his hand. I mean, I'm like reality tv royalty but this seems like a lot of family drama, even for me.

I stand, stretching, and eye the floor dubiously. Back at it, I guess.

Behind me I hear the patio door slide open and something clatters on the table. I look up just in time to see Noah unbuckle his belt and push his jeans to the floor.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He toes off his boots to get his jeans off and kicks everything out of the way. "Give me your knee pads."

I'm momentarily dumbstruck as he walks towards me in nothing but a damp t-shirt and fitted boxer-briefs. "Why?"

"Because you're tired and I feel the need to nail something." He glowers at me. "And yes, I meant that the way it sounded, but I know you need to get this out of the way first." He raises his hand, making a gimme motion. "Take them off and grab a drink."

"You don't need to do this." I clear my throat. "I can do this on my own."

He glowers at me. "I know you can, but you're struggling with this part, and I can help. Let me help you."

Bending down he unstraps my knee pads, and the callused pad of his fingers caresses the sensitive space behind the joint.

"Um, was that your sister?"

He fastens the pads around his own legs and motions for my safety goggles. "Yep."

"I thought Tanner was your best friend," I say, lifting them off my head and passing them over.

Noah slides them on and pins me with a hard stare. "He was." He stands, slapping the gloves in one hand. "Sterling nearly died as a kid. She needed a kidney transplant, and my family went through a really hard time trying to get her one."

I bite my lip. “I’m sorry. That must have been so hard.” As an only child, I always wanted a sibling. It wasn’t that I was lonely, really, because there were people around constantly. It was more that there wasn’t anyone to share the experience with. Commiserate. Someone who felt the way I felt when my mother iced out my father, flicking the lights on in the middle of the night on tour and ordering someone to pack a bag because we were leaving right then. Someone who understood what it was like to wake up alone in the big house and not know when anyone was coming back.

“It was. Watching someone you love struggle...” Noah looks away. “We all struggled. And Tanner practically lived with us. He should think of her as his own sister.”

I shake my head slowly. “But she’s not his sister. And she’s okay, now, right?”

“She is. She never gave up hope. Which is why she shouldn’t be with Tanner. She should be with someone who didn’t know her at her most vulnerable. Someone who doesn’t remember the hospital trips and the weakness and the days of my mom crying in the kitchen. She deserves to forget all that stuff.”

“Why should she forget it?”

Noah blinks down at me. “I’m sorry?”

I hold up my hands. “Look, I don’t know your sister, or the situation and I can’t pretend to even understand what it’s like to worry about losing a child.” I think about Whitney and those dark days of trying to convince her she had a lot to live for. I draw in a deep breath.

“Your sister fought for her life. She didn’t give up and that fight made her the person she is today. Maybe she wants Tanner *because* he knew her at her worst.” My heart is thumping at his scowl, but I continue.

“I saw a picture of them and, yes, I know better than anyone that a picture can be taken out of context but they both looked happy. I think it’s amazing that you love your sister and want to look out for her, but maybe she wants to make her own

decisions.” I pause wondering how much to say but Noah seems like he’s actually listening, so I plow forward. “There are lots of reasons someone might not feel in control of their life. For your sister, she had you and your parents and everyone looking after her, and it may have felt overwhelming, even though it was because you all care about her. She deserves to be happy, of course, but she also deserves to find out what it is that makes her happy rather than being told what to do.” I shrug. “Or what not to do. If you’ve known Tanner since you were a kid, and he’s your best friend, are you such a bad judge of character that after all these years you don’t trust him now?”

Noah opens his mouth and then closes it, shaking his head. He slips on the gloves and picks up the nail gun, testing the weight in his hand.

I hold my breath, waiting for him to tell me to mind my own business, but he just picks up a board, examining it before lining it up against the last one I did and hitting the trigger. I twist my hands in my lap and try to keep my eyes off the buff rock star in his underwear and knee pads meticulously lining up boards. I should have just kept my mouth shut. I walk up into the kitchen and pop the cap on my water bottle before taking a long swig.

“India?”

I turn. Noah should look ridiculous in the safety goggles and underwear but somehow, he manages to pull the whole thing off as if he’s in some kind of music video. I’ve definitely gotten a few shots of my “assistant” as I’m detailing the project, but I have to think of an alias for him because no one would ever believe Noah Whitlock spent his summer vacation here doing this. With me.

“Hmm?” I murmur around a mouthful of water.

“How did you see pictures of my sister and Tanner?” He pushes the safety glasses up with the back of his hand. “Were you googling me?”

I swallow, suddenly realizing what I’d said earlier. “Why would I google you? I think we’ve already established that

you're the one googling me.”

“Well, then how did you see a picture of them?”

I shrug. “I guess it just came up in one of my feeds. I do know a lot of those gossip bloggers you know.”

“Right.” He grins. “If there’s anything you want to know about me, I’m an open book.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Relief spreads through me at the sight of that cocky smirk. Aside from Whitney, I’ve never really had friends where I feel comfortable discussing anything serious, or giving an opinion beyond what someone should wear, but I couldn’t help myself when it was evident how upset Noah is about this thing with his sister. I can’t help second guessing myself though. Just because we slept together doesn’t mean he wants my advice on the people in his life.

I wave at the floor. “Anyway, back to work. That floor isn’t going to nail itself.”

He sinks to his knees with a salute. “I know, I know. Speaking of nailing...”

“Don’t even think about it, handyman. I’ve got somewhere to be later today.”

“A hot date? He might be thinking about nailing.”

I laugh, happy to be on the receiving end of his teasing for once. “I bet he is, but we’ve got a house to look at it.”

Placing my water bottle on the counter, I glance at my phone, noticing I have several new messages. Behind me, I hear the steady trigger and bang of the nail gun. I flick open the screen. All the messages are from Cody.

Lose this number.

Come on, Indy.

You have to talk to me at some point.

What’ll it take for you to do our show?

Hello????

Madison says you want me back.

The last text nearly gets me. I absolutely do not want him back but of course Madison would say that. She thrives on drama. If Cody hadn't been dating someone, Madison probably wouldn't have fought as hard to get him back. I roll my eyes. That's not entirely fair either. I have no idea if she fought at all. For all I know, Cody texted her one night to tell her he couldn't stop thinking about her. That's how it started with me, after all, and I was so stupidly flattered I fell for it.

In your dreams.

I hit send before I think about it, holding my breath when I see three little dots appear on the screen. I stare at it, but it disappears and there's no reply. A vague sense of discomfort settles in my tummy, and I take another drink of water, hoping to wash it away.

NOAH

“**A**nd over here is the kitchen. Completely remodelled and a gourmet chef’s dream.”

My realtor, Justin, drones on as I round the corner to peer into the kitchen. It’s beautiful and clearly very expensive, with trendy red and black cabinets in a high gloss finish, and all the bells and whistles, but I kind of feel like I’d get a headache if I was in here for long. Maybe the issue isn’t the house. Maybe it’s me.

On paper this place should be perfect. The former owner was a hip-hop artist who did some collaborations with a few of the bigger names in country music. It’s got large rooms, perfectly designed for entertaining, according to Justin, and a yoga loft, music studio and even an indoor basketball court.

It’s fine. It meets my top criteria, which is that it’s not in L.A. Maybe Gordon would like the yoga studio. It’s bright with floor to ceiling windows and nearly white hardwood floors. I have to admit that the only reason I didn’t turn around and walk right back outside when I saw the size of the place is that India is taking her job pretty seriously and I love watching the way she walks through the house, her loose, white sundress swaying softly around her first-class ass. With her sneakers and her hair tied back, she looks the complete opposite of the woman everyone knows as India Rook and I love that I get to see this secret side of her, even if it is only a vacation fling. My heart pangs at the idea of walking away in a few weeks and I push it aside.

I'm definitely an idiot. Maybe Blaine is right, maybe I do get too attached to the women I sleep with. This feels a lot different than anything else has before.

"Soooo, what do you think?" Justin asks, deftly twisting the metal bracket off the bottle of champagne chilling in the ice bucket on the island.

"I don't know." I hate it except for the fact that India is here with me. I shrug. "I guess I like the basketball court."

"Right?" Justin nods his head while easing out the cork. "I'm telling you, Noah, this house is everything. Did I mention the custom garage, with upstairs loft and room for eight cars and a boat?"

"A boat?"

"Yeah, there's some great boating around here. It's not the Pacific of course, but definitely some great lakes and beaches."

India wanders back to my side, resting her arms on the counter. I can't stop myself from sliding my hand over the silk of her hair, loving how she bumps her hip with mine as Justin pours the champagne.

"Let's ask your friend here what she thinks," Justin says, passing us each a glass with a knowing smile. "How long have you been together?"

India straightens and my fist tightens at the urge to pull her back to me. "Oh, we're not together."

Justin winks at me. "I'm not trying to blow your cover, man. Good on you for keeping it hush-hush." He mimes twisting a key between his lips. "Real estate agents respect confidentiality."

India shoots me a look and I shake my head. I introduced India as my friend, leaving her name out of it. It's possible Justin recognizes her, but I'm not so sure.

"What else do you have to show us?" she asks, tipping her glass towards Justin.

He frowns. “Well, we’ve toured the property, but if you two need some time to look around yourselves, please take your time. Might I suggest the primary bedroom? Did you see the his-and-hers dressing rooms?”

“We did. But I mean other houses. Maybe something with features a little closer to his list?” She narrows her eyes. “You did get his list, didn’t you?”

“I did.” Justin turns to me. “I thought this would be perfect for you.”

I glance around at the garish kitchen. “I’m looking for something a little more—” I look to India, “what’s the word?”

“Traditional,” she says firmly. “Maybe something warmer. And I think he wants something that can’t be described as gigantic.”

“You want something smaller?” He seems genuinely confused. “But this is perfect for a musician. I’m sure you’ll be entertaining, the rest of the band...” He shakes his head and looks over at India. “Ma’am, I appreciate you’re not in the industry, but Noah should have a house to a certain standard. I’m certain this is all bit overwhelming for you at this point, but trust me, you’re going to want something extraordinary to fit in with the scene here.”

I choke on my champagne. Justin definitely doesn’t recognize India. I’m trying to catch my breath when she steps forward, draining her glass before thumping it on what I think is a concrete countertop. “We’re not buying this house together. As for fitting in with the scene here, I don’t think that’s an issue.” She glances over at me. “Is that an issue?”

I shake my head, both scared and amused by the fire in her eyes. Amused for me, slightly scared for Justin. I get it. She’s the one who set the rules on this thing between us, and I’m just playing along. Justin is being obnoxious but really, the idea of buying a home with India, working on it together, coming home together sparks something in me – something that would send her running if she knew what I was thinking.

“Definitely not an issue.”

She spreads her hands on the counter. “Noah asked me to help him find a house here. He wants something very different than this whole L.A. vibe you’re selling. I’m not from here, and even I can do better than this.” She waves her hand, looking like a queen. “I don’t know who you think you’re dealing with here, but Noah Whitlock isn’t some up-and-comer who’s thirsty to show off his status. If you want to sell a house to the Guitar God, you’d better find something that doesn’t scream ‘hookers and blow’ when you walk through the door.”

Justin’s jaw drops before he stammers an apology.

India smiles and I recognize the slight tilt of those full lips, the way she focuses on him with those dark hazel eyes. She’s like a beautiful cobra about to strike.

“So, Justin. I’m sure you must have all the connections around here. You look like a very successful realtor.” She reaches across the island and pours herself another glass of champagne. Her voice has dropped and there’s a husky tone to it in sharp contrast to her earlier frustration as she lifts the glass to her lips. I’m mesmerized by the way she sips, her tongue darting out to catch a wayward drip. “Oops.” A sultry giggle I’ve never heard before escapes her. I glance over at Justin who appears dazed when she tips her glass towards him with a little wink. “Why don’t you show us how good you are by finding my friend here the perfect house.”

“The perfect house?” Justin blinks. “Yes, you’re right. Something different. Something that works with your list.” He finds his confidence again and smiles back widely at India.

Jealousy spears me right in the chest when she licks her lips and nods emphatically, leaning against the counter in a way that molds that innocent-looking sundress to her magnificent tits. Justin is lucky he kept his eyes above her neck.

“Traditional architecture, think something classic and elegant. Even a little bit understated,” she says. The words sound like real estate terminology, but her tone is all phone-sex operator.

“Of course.” He manages to tear his gaze away from her and somehow remembers I’m also on the other side of the island. “Why don’t we talk a little bit more about what you’re looking for.”

I’m not sure what just happened here, but a little bloom of happiness unfurls in my chest when India elbows me in triumph. True, we haven’t found a house yet, but, as Justin starts showing me a couple of homes that aren’t yet listed, I realize this is the most engaged Justin has been over showing me something that fits my list rather than what he thinks I should be looking at.

“I’m sorry if I was rude, earlier,” she whispers as we stand in the grand foyer.

“You weren’t,” I assure her, “but what was that magic you worked in there? I think Justin might actually go buy a house just to sell me what I want.”

She arches her eyebrows. “Sometimes you just have to be really clear about what you want.”

“Oh really?” I lean in even closer, my lips brushing the shell of her ear. She smells like lemon and vanilla and summertime. “How far would that get me with you?”

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip, but she shakes her head. “What you want and what I want appear to be different things.”

I sweep my hand up under her ponytail, to the bare skin of her back. “I’m not so sure. What I want is to make you scream my name while I bury myself deep inside you. Is that clear enough for you or are you saying that’s not what you want?”

She shivers, leaning back against my chest. “What about what your sister said earlier?”

“Please don’t talk about my sister when my cock is so hard for you, I might drag you back to that ugly kitchen and bend you over the counter because I can’t wait a second more to feel you under me.”

“Shh. Justin will hear you.”

“I don’t give a fuck if he hears me. Realtors are bound by confidentiality remember?”

She giggles but moves away from me. I reach out and tug her back.

“That kitchen is pretty ugly, isn’t it,” she says.

“Listen, it could be my dream kitchen if I got to spread you out on that island and taste your sweet pussy again.”

“Your future wife might not appreciate that.”

What the hell? I stare at her, not registering the words for a few seconds, before it rushes over me, a feeling like I’m doing something wrong. I haven’t thought about that stupid suggestion in a couple of weeks and it’s the last thing I want to think about now.

“I’m not engaged.”

“But that’s why you’re here, right?” She folds her arms around herself. “You weren’t really *clear* about everything you’re looking for, were you?”

INDIA

He steps past me, opening the door. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I bite my lip, walking out into the warm evening. “I thought you were in Nashville looking for a house, not a wife.”

Noah walks next to me, his arm brushing mine as we head to the truck. The fob beeps, unlocking the doors and the sound is so loud in the silence between us. He opens the door and I slide in, wishing I didn’t notice that he didn’t touch me or tweak my ponytail as I did.

The rumble of the engine as he starts the truck goes right through my body. It reminds me of Noah’s low growl in my ear, while he watches me touch myself, and sitting next to him with his scent filling my head is messing with my insides. I should stop talking. It doesn’t matter why he’s in Nashville, and if he’s actually looking for a wife, which is weird, it really has nothing to do with me. I just hope he’s not looking in my direction for anything other than burn-up-the-sheets sex.

Why would a star like Noah be looking for a wife anyway? Rock stars fuck their way through their fan base and a wife is merely an accessory some of the time. Even though Noah doesn’t seem like half the player the other guys in Kingmaker appear to be, he’s still the Guitar God and destined for short-term, dramatic relationships that play out publicly. Even his last girlfriend, that lingerie model, is still coming up in stories about how perfect they looked together. I am not interested in

having that kind of attention directed to me or knowing that the new woman he's sleeping with is looking me up online. My days of being mocked in the media are over.

I glance at his hands, the way his long fingers are wrapped around the steering wheel and remember them wrapped around my wrists, holding me in place. My body twitches as my mind replays how his calluses felt on the sensitive flesh of my thighs and how deft his fingers were at drawing out pleasure, like I was instrument tuned just for him.

I reach forward to crank the air conditioning.

"I am looking for a house," Noah blurts into the silence.

"Forget I asked. It's none of my business."

"L.A. is a lot," he continues as if I hadn't said anything at all. "You know what it's like, it's impersonal and weird and it's a long way from my family. Not my band family, but everyone else."

"I get it."

"The endless parties, the way people are always surrounding you, the constant, frenetic pace. The pictures, videos, every movement being recorded. After—" he pauses. "After a while, it just seemed like too much."

He just described my entire existence. It was – is – too much.

"So, it really is just about a house? Because I'm not interested in hooking up with someone who's taken, or even thinking about it. My reputation is bad enough already and I don't really need another homewrecker ribbon."

"You know I'm single, right? I've never cheated on anyone before."

"Technically I haven't either, but that doesn't stop people from believing it. And sometimes someone else's version of reality is what becomes the truth." I hear the bitterness in my voice and bite my tongue.

Noah's fingers whiten on the wheel. "The label kind of had this idea. It's been a crazy time for us and there was some bad

press, stuff that had their PR team working overtime. You know how they say bad press is good publicity?” He slides a quick look my way, nodding when I nod. “Well, my label doesn’t think so. They like to control the narrative about us. We’re the dream story – high school friends who made it. Bad boys good enough to stay inside their lane.”

“You guys aren’t exactly ice cream and bubble gum pop.”

“No, we’re not. But we do hit that market. That audience likes the tattoos and dirty lyrics and the little bit of danger of being on the darker side, but when the bad boy story the label was selling became a little bit too close to the truth, they stepped in. Now they want something to distract from all the other stuff. A fairytale wedding.” He snorts. “Some starry-eyed girl meets a rock star and gets swept off her feet.”

“They told you to find a wife?” I really wish any of this shocked me. My dad has a lot of control over his career now, but the label is god in many instances. “Which one of you is doing too many drugs?”

He shoots me a look. “Why’d you ask that?”

“Did you forget who my dad is?” I take a deep breath. I grew up so much in the spotlight that all my real secrets are so buried it’s hard for me to even think about them, let alone voice them out loud. “You know my parents were always breaking up and getting back together, right?”

“Yeah, that must have been hard.”

I wave off his sympathy. “Well.” I swallow hard. I don’t know why this is so difficult. Everyone knows about my dad’s battles with drugs and alcohol. “One of the times my parents broke up, it wasn’t really their decision. My dad was on tour, and he was barely able to dress himself, let alone perform. They had to get him into rehab, but there was an... incident.”

I look over at Noah’s chiseled profile, the slight twitch in his jaw. “Were you there?” he asks. “During this incident?”

“Sort of. This was one of the tours where we were filming footage for the show, so I was in the hotel with a nanny, but the label wanted mom to try and talk some sense into dad. It

was late and they were having a private dinner and I wanted an extra dessert, so I talked my nanny into taking me to their room, but it wasn't really private." I can still picture the whiteness of the tablecloth and the drops of whatever dad was drinking, looking like blood on the linen. "Dad's agent was there, mom was crying, and my father." I swallow again, scrubbing my palms down my thighs. "My father looked really bad. His hands were cut and swollen, which is why he couldn't hold his drink properly. His eyes were glassy, and he was muttering to himself." Looking back, I can see now how far gone he was. He'd lost so much weight and acted like a stranger whenever I was around. "Anyway. There'd been an accident. He'd gotten into an argument with the manager over his drug use after cutting a show short and left with one of the crew. Somehow, the guy let my dad drive and it didn't end well."

Noah's hand lands on my leg, squeezing slightly.

"He didn't die. The guy. But he was really messed up. The label paid for all of his treatment and rehab on the condition that he didn't say my dad was driving."

"But what about the accident? Wasn't there a police report?"

I shake my head. "From what I heard, dad managed to wave to someone from the window and called his security team, who was already chasing him down. They made it to the scene first and got dad out of the car."

"Jesus. They discussed all this with a kid in the room?"

I rest my hand on top of his. "I was mostly invisible unless I was on camera. Everyone was so messed up, no one really noticed me." I pause. "I've always been mostly invisible unless I'm doing something to stir up shit."

"Anyway, one of the police officers was skeptical about the accident and decided to investigate further. I don't know what happened, but it didn't go anywhere. The label was scared though. Edward Rook was out of control and fans were complaining. Venues were complaining. And my dad didn't give a shit about anything. Well, almost anything. He cared

about being the great Edward Rook. So, the label came up with an idea to explain his so-called depression –they would say he’d found my mom cheating. Suddenly he’s able to go to rehab with none the wiser and gain sympathy for being the man screwed over by his unfeeling wife. All he had to do was let the divorce play out in the public.”

“Your mom didn’t cheat on your dad?”

I sigh. “Later she did, but not this time. I’ve always thought of it as the first crack for them. My mom didn’t want a divorce and she didn’t want to be classified as a cheater. It’s not as bad as it is today with social media giving everyone a platform to state their opinion or worse, spout their lies as truth, but it was hard. The label was adamant though. He could agree with their idea, or he could keep spiraling out of control all on his own.” Noah flips his hand over, folding his fingers around my suddenly cold ones. “I still remember my dad telling my mom that it was just a business decision.”

My heart starts thumping and I close my eyes as we stop at a light. “So yeah, I get it when you say the label wants you to do something that sounds crazy to distract from something else, and usually in your business, it’s because someone is out of control.”

He slides his hand out of mine and I instantly miss the warmth. I reach into my purse grabbing my phone and see I have more texts from Cody. He didn’t even text me this much when we were together. I shove it back to the bottom of my bag.

“It’s not me,” Noah says quietly. “I’m just trying to keep everyone together.” He stares straight ahead. “A few things have gotten out of control. We’ve managed to weather most of it so far, but Slade has been on a downward spiral. Too much of everything – his personal life playing out in the media, the sex tape, and yeah, coping with pills. That’s why the twins went back to the ranch this summer before the tour.” “A few things have gotten out of control. We’ve managed to weather most of it so far, but Slade has been on a downward spiral. Too much of everything – his personal life playing out in the

media, the sex tape, and yeah, coping with pills. That's why the twins went back to the ranch this summer before the tour."

"I knew it wasn't you. At least not with drugs. With all the time we've been spending together, I know the signs and you're almost too straightlaced."

"Let me assure you, I've never been accused of being straightlaced before, but right now I'm staying with my grandmother. It's not exactly 'hookers and blow' as you so eloquently put it to my realtor at Nana Stella's."

My face burns. "Anyway, my point is that you're a fixer. You're trying to fix everything and when you can't, you get angry, like with your sister and your best friend."

"I don't try to fix everything."

"Really? What about my house?"

"I'm trying to help you. And help my Nana. That's different than being a fixer."

"Okay, well what about this thing the label wants? Isn't it you trying to fix something for someone else, for Slade and the rest of the band?"

"No. It's me doing what's good for the band. And if some fairytale wedding makes the label happy, maybe it's what I have to do."

"What about what makes you happy? Will you do what they want only to regret it later?"

"What makes me happy right now is touching you. Tasting you. Knowing what you sound like when you come apart under my hands. I'll worry about everything else later."

My breath catches. "But it's just sex, right? And no one has to know about us?"

"If that's how you need it to be, I'll take you however I can get you."

I nod because I don't trust myself to say anything to that. It is what I need. I can't get ripped apart again, humiliated for entertainment.

We don't speak for the rest of the drive but his words and the intensity behind them stay with me. When we pull up to the house, I notice Blaine and Noah's grandmother are sitting on her front porch. Noah turns into her driveway and shuts off the engine.

"Are they reading?" I ask squinting.

Noah sighs. "It looks that way. I should have parked down the street."

"I don't mind. Your grandmother is lovely, and Blaine seems nice."

"He is nice. He can be too nice."

"You sound jealous."

"I am jealous. If we're a secret thing, I want all of your smiles to myself."

My heart thumps faster, but I quickly shove the feeling away as we get out of the car and head up the steps. I'm not about to catch feelings when I've made it clear this is just about sex.

"How did it go?" Nana Stella tucks a bookmark into the pages and lays the book on her lap.

"Not the house for me," Noah says, shoving his hands in his pockets. He turns to Blaine. "What are you doing here?"

Blaine holds up his paperback. It's a black cover, with skulls and roses. "Reading about something called a 'reverse harem'. I would have just called it a good time, but who knew?"

"Someone at the hotel leaked that Kingmaker was staying there and it caused a bit of a stir. Poor Blaine had to sneak out in a wedding cake truck." Stella pats his leg. "Can I get you another plate of cookies?"

Blaine rubs his stomach. "Thanks, Nana, but I shouldn't indulge too much."

"Since when is that your philosophy?" Noah mutters.

“Hey, what’s got your panties in a knot?” Blaine looks over at me. “Have you been dealing with this grump all day? First, he ditches me at the party last night and then I don’t hear a thing from him all day.”

“Sorry, you seemed busy, and I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

Blaine nods. “Well one of us had to be entertaining and it certainly wasn’t going to be you.” He tilts his head at Stella. “This one practically sat in a corner all evening.”

Stella looks over at me. “Well, he was up bright and early this morning. He said you were getting an early start next door?” She stands, patting me on the arm. “I hope you enjoyed the muffins?”

Her tone is innocent, but the arch of her eyebrows tells me she knows something is going on between me and Noah. My cheeks heat. “Delicious,” I croak.

“There were muffins this morning?” Blaine says.

Noah meets my gaze. “Not for you there weren’t,” he says. “Seems like you could have ordered muffins with breakfast if you wanted them.”

“I suppose. My room was pretty crowded though, and I just ordered everything off the breakfast menu. I don’t remember seeing muffins, but it doesn’t matter. They wouldn’t have been Nana Stella’s muffins.” He shoots her an endearing grin.

“You’re welcome to my muffins any time, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Nana. Want to come to the show with me tomorrow night?” Blaine asks.

Stella shakes her head. “No, thank you. But please, let me know how long Ajax is here for. I really want to meet this woman who knocked him off his feet.”

“Jax and Natalie are here? What show?” Noah asks.

Blaine stands, tucking the book under his arm. “Yeah. When Garrett Colt invited him and Natalie down, he also

talked him into doing a few songs at his club. You're coming, right? And you too, India?"

I feel Noah's eyes on me. I shrug. "Oh, I don't think so. I still have a lot of work to do next door."

"Do you need an extra set of hands?" Blaine asks. "I know Mr. Perfect here has been helping you, but if you need some expert assistance, I've got some time, and unlike Mr. Perfect here, I grew up on a ranch, so I'm used to real work."

"A ranch with real cowboys?" That sounds pretty cool.

Blaine nods. "Yep. One of my brothers was actually a rodeo champion but he retired from events and became a pick-up rider."

"What's that?"

"A pick-up rider is like the rescue cowboy. When someone goes down or something goes wrong during an event, the pick-up guy needs to get in and get the rider off or away from the bronc or bull in the ring. It's hard work and can be just as dangerous as competing." Blaine spreads his hands. "If you need me, just say the word."

Before I can say anything, Noah moves in a little closer to me. "I think we're good," he says, turning to me. "Besides don't you have the contractors coming in tomorrow? There won't be much for you to do, and the show isn't until tomorrow night."

"It's a private party," Blaine offers. "Garrett isn't advertising who will be there, so hopefully we won't be mobbed."

"I'll think about it," I say, mostly to get them off the subject. I know I should just say no. The less time I spend with Noah at this point, the better. It is getting dangerously comfortable for something that should firmly stay in hook-up territory.

"Can I try to convince you on the walk home?" Noah says quietly with a smile that makes me forget about limiting our time together. My belly flutters as I think about all the ways he might convince me to do what he wants. I shoot a quick look

over at Blaine, but he and Stella seems to be comparing passages in their books.

We walk down the street in silence which suits me just fine. I'm not eager to get back to the seriousness of our earlier conversation. This is just a temporary hook-up. A way for me to transition into this new role where I'm a serious career woman who doesn't attend every party in town and isn't leaving a trail of bad press and broken relationships behind her. Yeah, that's it. I'm not quitting cold turkey because Noah is exactly my type, except for the fact that he doesn't seem to be an asshole, but I'm keeping it private and away from my old life in L.A., which is a huge change. Small steps. Like people who chew that gum or vape as part of the process to stop their smoking habit.

We get to the gate, and I unlock it, as Noah crowds in behind me, his big body hot against mine.

"This white sundress is driving me crazy," he says, sliding his finger under the shoulder strap.

"It's pretty plain."

"Nothing is plain on you." He pushes me through the gate and grabs my hand as we cross the garden.

Once we're inside the shed, he releases the curtain ties, shielding us from view. I'm glad he hasn't brought up our conversation in the truck. It's none of my business anyway. We're not involved. We're not getting involved. We're not anything beyond this vacation fling. After this, he'll go on tour, I'll finish the project and sell the house, and hopefully start a new chapter in my life.

Noah walks towards me, and I get a close-up view of the full force of his magnetism. He's overwhelmingly gorgeous and it's only too easy to see why fans go crazy over him. I hold up my hand and he halts.

"What?" he says, brows furrowing.

"I just want to look at you for a minute."

A slow smile spreads across his face. "I knew you thought I was hot."

My lips twitch. “We’ve already established that you’re hot.”

“Oh, right. But you’re immune, aren’t you?” He reaches out, grabbing my hand and brings it to his mouth. He kisses the tips of my fingers, before sliding his tongue over my pointer finger, keeping his eyes on mine. “I’m going to devour you until you’re screaming my name and then I’m going to fuck you so hard and so deep that every time that sweet pussy clenches you’ll remember how my cock feels.”

The air leaves my lungs. Noah is sweet and funny and goddamn hot as hell in the bedroom. “Have you ever thought about a really explicit album where you talk like this? It would go triple platinum in about ten seconds.”

He shakes his head, taking my mouth in a fierce kiss. Just about when I think my knees are going to give out, he grips my chin and pulls away, holding me in place. His eyes search mine. “These words are just for you.” He tugs my hand down between us, pushing his hard cock into my palm. “This is just for you.”

“At least for tonight,” I whisper.

His fingers tighten on my face and his blue eyes burn for a second before he crushes his lips beneath mine, walking me backwards until the edge of the daybed hits my legs. My dress sways, creating a cool breeze that swirls up my legs, sending shivers through my body as it brushes against the wetness on my thighs. Noah’s leg shoves between mine and I grind helplessly against him while he plunders my mouth.

He lowers us both to the bed, his hands snaking under my dress to pull off my damp panties. Straightening, he twirls them around his finger, pulling a giggle from my chest. He shoves them in his pocket, before unbuttoning his shirt. I go up on my elbows to watch as his ink is revealed under his white dress shirt and my mouth goes dry when he unbuckles his belt and his pants dip down over the flat planes of his stomach.

He pushes my legs wider, kneeling between them, and grips his cock, stroking it hard before positioning the tip right

against me, swiping it down my slit. “Fuck,” he growls, rubbing it slowly over my clit. “You’re soaked for me.”

He backs away and I reach for him, but he grabs my hands, pinning them to my sides. “I said I would devour you.” He pushes me back on the bed, dragging my hips to the edge before flipping my dress over my face. The white material is voluminous and light, but effectively blinds me so all I can do is feel. His warm breath blows across the sharp points of my nipples and my stomach ripples as he lightly circles his tongue, first over one nipple, then the other. I want him to suck them hard, knead the sensitive flesh, but instead, he delicately attends to each one, teasing me until I’m writhing under his ministrations. I can’t even reach up to pull him to me because his hands are still pinning my wrists while he continues his slow torture, despite my pleas for more.

“Stay still.”

He moves down my body, gliding his hands over my hips, spreading me with his fingers and traces his tongue up and down my slit in the same light teasing strokes he used on my nipples. It feels so good, the sensation somehow heightened by the fact that I can’t see anything but the fabric of my dress. His mouth covers me, licking and sucking, the pressure building between my legs when he slides a finger inside me, curling it against a spot that makes me buck.

At that, he splays his free hand wide against my belly, firmly holding me in place while he does what he said he would do. He devours me, but not like a starving man. Instead, he’s savoring me, every swipe of his tongue, every suck and nibble, is like I’m his favorite feast and it might be his last meal.

My fingers twist in the sheets beneath me. “Oh, please, Noah. I need you.”

His hand presses down on my belly and he somehow buries his face deeper against me, increasing the pressure on my clit, flicking it, circling it with his talented tongue while shimmering pleasure continues to build inside me until I explode, grinding my pussy against him, the sharpness of his

stubble cutting through the liquid bliss with an edge that only heightens the strength of my orgasm.

“God,” I pant, feeling him lift himself from the floor and over my body.

He pulls my dress away from my face, his hand going behind my head to lift me for a kiss. His lips are wet, and I lick my essence from his mouth, loving the way he groans. His hand sweeps down my body, pausing to deliver a sharp pinch to my nipple, before continuing down, spreading me and positioning his cock at my entrance.

Every nerve ending is on high alert waiting to feel that thickness push into me, but it doesn't happen. My eyes open and Noah is staring down at me. I feel like I'm drowning, barely able to breath. With our gazes locked, he buries himself inside me with a slow thrust. My hands come up to his shoulders, my nails digging into the muscles as his tempo increases, driving into me with short, hard strokes that have me chasing my pleasure again, lifting my hips against his.

His breathing deepens as he pounds deeper into me, lengthening his thrusts, filling me so completely that my body feels like it must be an extension of his. Suddenly he slows, reaching between our bodies, gently sliding his thumb over my clit. I shiver.

“Is it too much?” he asks, slowly dragging himself out before firmly thrusting in deeper than before.

I shake my head, overwhelmed by the way my body feels. My dress has fallen down over my breasts, the cotton abrading my nipples with his every movement. It's a delicious feeling that spikes through my body while his thumb glides in soft circles over my clit. His cock pulses inside me, stretching me with his thickness.

“It feels incredible. But I want it to be incredible for you, too.” I sweep my hands up over his arms, his muscles like steel under my fingers.

He smiles, gently nipping my bottom lip with his teeth. “You think this isn't enjoyable for me? Feeling how greedy

your pussy is for my bare cock?”

My pussy clenches at his words. I am greedy. Greedy for the way he makes me laugh, makes me feel, in bed and out. He continues his rhythmic stroking, soft fingers on my clit as if he's strumming me, coaxing my pleasure while he moves his hips, quickening the pace while little sparkles of light dance around my vision. My fingernails sink into his shoulders.

“That's it, hold on to me tighter. You feel so good.”

He groans as I come in what feels like a burst of starlight, electricity splintering through my spine, rippling waves of bliss that go on and on. Noah pulls his hand away, grabbing my leg and lifting it over his hip while he slams himself into me, somehow triggering another climax that leaves me whimpering as he fills me up.

Noah drops his forehead to mine, breathing heavily. His big hand comes up, sweeping the hair away from my sweaty face. I'm caged in but it feels more like a cocooned. When I was younger, I saw a movie where there was a bed with these heavy, hanging curtains. I begged my mother for a canopy and as soon as it arrived, Diane and I DIY'd a replica from the movie with dark purple velvet that had my mother shaking her head. She had no idea why I'd want to shut myself in. But lying here in Noah's arms, gives me the same feeling of security. I don't feel shut in, but it feels like the rest of the world is shut out. I close my eyes, suddenly unable to bear the tenderness I see in his. A tear leaks out from the corner of my eye.

“Hey, what's wrong? Did I hurt you?”

Noah shifts, like he's going to move away, and I clutch his hips to mine, shaking my head. “No, I'm not hurt.” But I'm going to be. I've never felt like this before. Usually, I just walk away. Even with Cody, it stung, for sure, but those were feelings of frustration, anger and embarrassment. With the flooring done, the bulk of my work is over. The kitchen work is pretty much finished, and the bathrooms and bedrooms will be ready for me to decorate next week. I'll do that while the landscape guys eat up the rest of my budget. I need to film the

transition of the backyard space, along with how the back of the house opens up to incorporate the outside and then put together the video pieces.

Originally, Cody's production team was going to do all of that, and I wondered how I was going to pull off something that looked as professional as I wanted. I texted Whitney and, after fielding a few messages about her suggestions for taking Cody and Madison down, I finally asked her for help. She called me crying and wanting to know if I experienced some sort of spiritual breakthrough while 'roughing it' here in Nashville because she can't remember me ever asking for help. I assured her I hadn't, but she insists that something must have happened because I sound different – happy, excited, calm.

I'd like to think it's the project. That being able to focus on something I'm passionate about, something I really want to do, has brought about the change. And some of it is definitely the project. I have a sense of accomplishment that brings me peace in knowing I made the right decision to stay and forge ahead, even though I'm terrified I'll fail. But it's not just the project. It's Noah.

Working side by side with him, having him cheer me on and believe in what I'm doing – that I can do it – makes me happy. It's a feeling so foreign to me, I didn't recognize what it was until now.

Noah thinks I'm more than just some bad girl barbie capitalizing off my parents' fame with no talents beyond how my boobs look in a dress and being able to convey my fuckability on social media.

I lean up, pressing my lips to his. I'll always be grateful to him for giving me a glimpse of the person I can be. Millie was right. Seeing yourself through the eyes of other people can sometimes be a good thing.

He kisses me back, soft, gentle kisses that make my heart ache. This is not good. It's going to hurt so bad when it's over. But at least my heartbreak will be private.

“Can I stay the night?” he asks.

I hesitate and he dips down to nuzzle my neck. “No one’s going to know.”

“Your grandmother will. Blaine will.”

He rolls off me. “Please don’t mention my grandmother when we’re in bed together.” He laughs. “But honestly, she’s got eyes. I’m sure she knows I’m not just being a good neighbor.”

I cover my eyes with the back of my arm. “She must think I’m such a slut.”

He pulls my arm away. “She doesn’t. I promise.” He presses a kiss to the palm of my hand. “As for Blaine, I might be jealous of the way he flirts with you, but he’s one of my boys. No matter what, we have each other’s backs. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Noah’s pants vibrate from the floor. “It might be your grandmother,” I say, my eyes going wide.

“She doesn’t check up on me,” he says, chuckling.

His pants buzz again, and I nudge him with my foot. “Aren’t you going to get that?”

“Nope.” He rolls up on one elbow, smiling down at me. “I don’t care if the world is burning right now.” He traces patterns on my tummy with his free hand.

I wiggle out from under his arm. “Well, I need to go to the washroom.”

“Is this your way of saying I should be gone when you get back?” he calls.

I hesitate. I should keep it casual. Every minute more I spend with him takes me far beyond scratching a notch in my bedpost. But I can’t help it. It’s like knowing I’m going to regret eating the entire pint of ice cream, but I can worry about it another day, and right now it tastes so good.

“You can stay.”

When I finish washing my hands, I splash some cold water on my face. This is an interlude only. One day soon, I’ll be

taking pictures of spaces I created instead of making sure to tilt my face to the best source of light. Noah's just part of that whole phase out of my old life. I pull my dress over my head and drop it on the floor, grabbing an oversized t-shirt I had hanging next to the shower.

When I walk back into the room, he's checking his phone.

"Is the world burning?" I joke.

"No, just my sister's."

I sink down next to him. "What's wrong?"

"Tanner's writing again." His frowns, scrolling through what looks like a poem.

"Well, isn't that a good thing?"

"It's what the label wants. Tanner's lyrics are incredible. Raw, edgy. Sexual." He passes the phone to me. "Take a look at this."

Let's pretend, you and me

We're all alone

There's no history

Let's pretend

That you won't walk away

That you'll catch me

When I fall—

Let's pretend

You'll whisper what I want to hear...

The biggest lie of all.

Oh. Oh wow. Sometimes I used to hang around when my dad and the band worked out lyrics and music and it's a process to get to something magical. Most of their later stuff just came from the label, packaged specially for them by whomever was the hottest writer out there at the time, but

every now and then they played around with some stuff written by one of them. My dad was a poet. He loved poetry and imagery and painting with words, but his label wanted stuff that would sell records. The audience for drug-fueled, drawn-out dreams made into music has waned. Sometimes, I'd listen to my dad's gravelly voice and think he was some kind of wizard, and his songs were spells, bewitching my mother and everyone else around us, but those songs didn't frequently make it to his albums.

I read the lyrics on the phone screen again, scrolling down slowly. These words, with Kingmaker's signature dark rock sound will be mesmerizing. I can picture Noah, under a spotlight, playing the guitar like he's pouring himself into woman – like he poured himself into me – because this song definitely has a guitar solo, you can hear it, even though there's nothing here but lyrics. This is magic.

“There's a lot to unpack here, Noah. When did he write this?”

“He says he finished it this morning. He apologized to me, saying he never wanted to cause a problem because my family means more to him than anything in the world.” He rests his chin on my shoulder. “Tanner lived with us most of the time. He's kind of like my adopted brother.” He reaches around and takes the phone with a sigh. “I don't know really know what to make of this. I'm glad Tanner's writing again, but he says Sterling is his muse.”

I half-turn on the bed. “Why is that such a bad thing?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “I don't know. If he fucks it up, Sterling gets hurt, and I lose my best friend. The band suffers. It just seems like a lot.”

“What if he doesn't fuck it up? I mean, you said he lived with you and that your family is really important to him. Don't you think he's scared of fucking it up too?”

“You don't know him, He's got issues.”

“Don't we all have issues?” I point at the phone. “Read those lyrics again, Noah. They're heartbreaking.”

He flicks his fingers up and down the screen. “I know.” He glances up at me. “I know.”

“If he wrote this song about your sister, he feels something, and I wouldn’t say it’s just about getting in her pants.”

Noah squeezes his eyes shut and screws up his nose. “Please don’t make me picture that.” He scrubs a hand over his face. “But I hear you. I know him. He’s my best friend.”

He stands, reaching for his pants on the floor.

“Are you leaving?”

“No, I am going to call my sister and what I’m about to tell her isn’t something I want to say when I’m bare-assed naked.”

“What do you want to tell her?”

He holds up his phone. “That he loves her. And I will be okay with that.” He points a finger at me. “Don’t go anywhere.”

I flop back on the bed, fisting the sheet in my hand and pulling it over my face. It smells like Noah, and I drag in the scent, wondering how long it will last after he’s gone. When our interlude is over, and we get on with the rest of our lives.

I don’t know how long I was lying there, the sheet tucked up under my nose, when I hear the door open and shut. I don’t move when the bed dips and Noah tucks himself in behind me. He’s naked, his long, hard body warm against mine and I can’t help snuggling myself closer to him.

“I thought you were asleep,” he whispers.

“Mmm, I think I am,” I mumble.

“Thank you.” He kisses me on the shoulder.

“For what?”

“For helping me see things better. You’re a good woman.” He slides his hand up under my shirt to cup my breast before anchoring it securely around my middle. “Maybe the best woman.”

My eyes snap open and I hold myself still until I hear Noah's deep, even breathing from behind me. We're cuddling like a real couple, his hand warm on my skin, and I should be drifting off to sleep after the way he rocked my body.

But his words rocked my brain. No one has ever called me a good woman before. Oh, I've been called good for sure – good at stealing boyfriends, good at getting the party started, good at disappointing my parents – but never like Noah said it.

I peer into the darkness all vestiges of sleep gone. I try to think of all the times I've ever slept with someone and there's never been this feeling of comfort, of belonging.

Of it being this good.

NOAH

I enter the house the next day, completely blown away by what is happening. I might have put the paint on the walls and helped with some basic stuff, but now we're at the next level.

The backyard is buzzing with workers, and it looks like things are moving fast. There are so many people here I can't even see India.

This morning when I woke up, she was gone. A little blue sticky note, shaped like a bird was stuck to her pillow, letting me know she'd gotten up early to meet the backyard contractor.

I wish she had woken me so we could have gone together, but I get it. I'm not her first priority. Hell, I don't even know if I'm on her list of priorities at all. I've never had anyone not want to acknowledge we're sleeping together. I sidestep a guy carrying a bench and follow him down the hallway. He turns into the primary bedroom and India's low, sultry voice floats out, wrapping around me like a silk scarf.

She doesn't meet a single description on my list. But after talking with Sterling yesterday, maybe the heat is off me for a bit. Hearing her voice go soft when I told her Tanner was in love with her made my chest tight. It's real between them and when Tanner sings that song on stage, the song he wrote for my sister, the label is going to fucking lose their minds with all the fairy-tale shit. I don't want Sterling to be in the spotlight, like an insect under a microscope for her relationship with

Tanner, but she says she doesn't care. She knows how it works and she says that no one can touch the private relationship between them unless they let all the bad stuff in.

But I see how India was hammered by the gossip blogs and even the magazines growing up. It's amazing to me that she's halfway normal. Some douche even dedicated a chapter to taking her virginity in one of his tell-all books. I didn't read it, I just happened to read about it during one of my late night online searches. I mean there's all kinds of shit out there about us too and the thought of my sister running that bullshit gauntlet makes me rage.

I peek through the doorway to see India directing the guy with the bench. I let out a low whistle that has her spinning towards me.

"Wow. You've done all this just this morning?" The soft, blue space has been transformed with heavy cream-colored curtains in a rich fabric that somehow looks cozy and furniture that looks both elegant and comfortable. The bed has a velvet tufted headboard that I know India agonized over, but I can absolutely picture pinning her up against that fabric and slowly entering her from behind so that the velvet caresses her gorgeous tits. I shift my hips, hoping to hide my growing erection from the guy who's shifting furniture around for her.

"The groundwork was done. This is just dressing it up." She lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug.

"This is amazing, India." And it is. Her smile hits me in the chest with a thump and I grab some pillows from the bag on the floor to help her fluff them.

"Holy shit. You're Noah Whitlock."

We both turn to the furniture guy, who is standing there with his mouth open.

"Man, Kingmaker is my favorite band." He steps over to me and I reach out my hand to shake his.

"Thanks. What's your name?" I ask.

"Josh." He pumps my hand enthusiastically. "Wow, I can't believe it's you. Is this your place?"

“No, I just did some of the work around here.”

Josh blinks, then laughs. “Oh, right. I get it. Pretty funny.”

India moves to place some of the pillows on the bed, but I see the tension in her shoulders.

“Hey, ma’am would you mind getting a picture of us?” Josh pulls out his phone, handing it to her.

She brushes her hands on her shorts. “Sure, no problem.” She holds it up in our direction. “Mr. Whitlock, put your arm around his shoulder.”

I roll my eyes at her attempt to be formal, as if I wasn’t making her cry out my first name in the middle of the night but follow her directions while she takes about twenty-five photos for Josh, who is doing an impressive analysis of the Easter eggs he claims are in our last few music videos.

Finally, India hands the phone back to Josh and he remembers he’s there to do a job. I thank him for being a super fan, and on a whim, I pull out my own phone, quickly sending a text. “Hey man, if you’re not busy tonight, why don’t you and friend head down to the Jewel Box? A friend of a friend owns it and I’ll put you on the list.”

“That new speakeasy? It’s impossible to get in there.”

I wave my phone. “Just give your name to the guy at the door.”

Josh’s face lights up. “Thanks, man!”

“No problem.”

“Ma’am, I’ll just go get that chair now.” Josh says, practically running out of the room.

“Well, *ma’am*,” I say as she bends over the bed, sliding her hand into the edge of the pillows, giving them a slight indent. “I must say, this bed is much bigger than the one where you’re staying.”

She straightens. “Don’t get any ideas.” She sweeps her hand around the room. “I’m almost done here.”

“And it looks perfect.” I walk up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. “Is this why you left me this morning?”

“Shh.” She elbows me gently in the stomach. “Josh is on his way back.” She turns in my arms. “That was really nice of you just then, by the way. He was over the moon.”

“He was a real fan. Wait until he realizes Ajax is performing tonight.”

“Without the rest of you? Is he leaving the band?”

“No, he took on a side project as a way to deal with some stuff and it’s been great. We actually helped him produce it and Tanner worked on some of the music with him. He did a set at one of our after parties in Chicago and it was awesome.” I can’t resist the feel of her body in my arms, and I lean down, pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. “That’s the good morning kiss I didn’t get earlier.”

There’s a commotion in the hallway and she steps back quickly. “I have a lot to do here today.”

“I get it. But I’d like you to come with me tonight.”

She looks away. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I think it’s a great idea.”

“I just...” She bites her lip. “I mean, it’s none of my business, but it might hamper your plan if I’m there.”

“My plan?” My plan was to spend the night hanging out with her at a cool bar with my friends and then hopefully spend the night with her again. I glance at the big, beautifully made-up bed, emphasis on big. I’m perfectly cozy with her in the daybed, and really, the closer the better, but I have to admit it would be nice to fully stretch my legs out without fearing I’ll end up on the floor.

India walks over to a dresser, rearranging some books and a vase that look perfectly fine to me.

“What are you talking about?”

She tilts her head. “You don’t owe me an explanation or anything, but I know how these things work. You want to

make the label happy, I get it.”

Oh. We’re back to that. “Look, neither one of us needs to worry about that right now. We still have a couple of weeks before the band starts ramping things up in preparation for the tour.”

“Doesn’t the label want you to be some Prince Charming before that happens?”

I shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

Her back straightens. “You’re right. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

Exhaling hard, I cross the room, coming up behind her. “Are you mad at me?”

“No.” Her voice is high. “No, of course not.”

I’m not certain what has triggered this topic coming up this morning, but I’m not going to let it ruin the time I have left with her. “You have nothing to worry about.”

“I’m not worried.” She turns so fast, her ponytail hits me in the chin. “I’m not wife material.”

“I know that.” I feel like I stepped into a minefield. Especially when her gaze snaps to mine.

Taking a step back, she crosses her arms. “Good, we’re agreed then.” Her eyes are shadowed.

The air in the room is heavy and I can’t help feeling like I’ve hurt her somehow. Last night I fell asleep so fast, my body wrapped around hers, and my last thought was that I couldn’t wait to wake up with her. Then, when I did open my eyes and she was gone, the pang of disappointment that hit me was surprising. The first thing I thought of was seeing her. When I saw her note, it felt kind of like the morning we got the news that the talent scout had loved our set – anticipation, joy and a little bit of fear all rolled into one.

But I can’t tell her any of that because she’ll run so far in the opposite direction, I’ll never see her again.

“We are.” I say. “So let’s just have a fun night to celebrate all your hard work.”

She nods slowly. “You’re right.” She waves a hand around the room. “I mean, we’re almost done here and then we’ll both be leaving. A few more nights won’t hurt.”

My chest aches. “Right. I’m pretty good at being your dirty, little secret.” I keep my voice deliberately light and teasing even though I want to grab her and kiss her and demand to know why she doesn’t feel the same way as me.

A frown appears on her face. “What do you mean by that?”

Fuck. What did I mean by that? I certainly don’t want her to think I want more because, again, opposite direction. And as much I love looking at her ass, I’d prefer not to be completely in her rear-view. “Well, you don’t want anyone to find out about us and so far, we’re all good.”

She blinks. “Noah. We’re in Nashville and we haven’t exactly been on the circuit.” She raises her hand to rub her temple. “And it’s not that you’re my dirty, little secret, just that there’s nothing between us. Nothing to get blown up online, nothing to speculate about and nothing for anyone to talk about. It’s just sex and I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

“We wouldn’t.” Maybe if I agree with her, she’ll stop reminding me how little I mean to her.

“I mean, your label isn’t going to stop making demands about image. It’s such a big deal all the time and really, you have to agree, my image isn’t going to help yours at all.”

“Right.” Wait what did I agree with? I meet her shuttered gaze. “Look, whatever you need is fine by me, and if that means we stay low-key, that’s cool. But I really would like you to meet Ajax and Natalie is cool too. I promise the whole thing is low-key.” Who have I become? I’ve never had to beg anyone to go out with me before, but honestly, maybe that’s part of India’s appeal. She’s not impressed by the fact that I’m in a band, actually, it’s probably a huge mark against me

considering who her father is. She's not looking for me to up her celebrity status, as she wants out of that part of the business. She wants to be taken seriously for her design talent, her ability to turn a pile of wood and brick into something that feels like a home, not her ability to date influencers and rock stars.

“Look, it'll just be like it is now, except we'll be out with friends.”

“Your friends.” She sighs. “Will you be bringing out the purple hair?”

I laugh, my chest feeling lighter at the small smile I see tugging at the corners of her mouth. “No purple hair tonight. I'll be who I really am instead of the hot neighbor who does construction.”

Her lips twitch. “I might miss that guy.”

“Whenever you want to see that guy, just ask.” I reach out and hook a finger through one of the belt loops, tugging her closer. “He's happy to bring his hammer anytime.”

She laughs and wraps her arms around my waist. “You're crazy.”

For a while I thought she drove me crazy, but now I wonder if she's right and I am just crazy, but if it's true, I'm crazy for her. I dip my head, kissing her like we have all the time in the world.

INDIA

I *'m not wife material.*
I know.

This stupid, pointless exchange has been running through my head all day. So much so, I made a stupid, rash decision and called Whitney, confessing everything to her.

“Let me get this straight. You’re just fucking Noah Whitlock, one of the hottest guys to put his fingers on a guitar, let alone your lady bits, and you told him you want to keep it a secret and he agrees and you’re mad about that.” Whit pauses, tapping a blood-red nail to her lips.

“I’m not mad about that. I’m concerned that things have gone too far. He wants me to meet his friends at this private party tonight at Garrett Colt’s club.”

“Mmm. Garrett Colt. He’s got that whole stern cowboy-daddy thing going on.”

“Focus, Whit. Please.”

“Sorry, it was just me fantasizing out loud. But back to you. You want to show up looking like India Rook on fire to show Noah Whitlock what exactly? That you’re a bad option?”

“It’s a long story. But this is what I need to do. Noah was like my transition blanket to help me move from my old life to this new one. He likes me, with no makeup and sawdust and no loose script to play off of.”

“And that’s a bad thing because...?”

“Because I’m done with rock stars and gamers and influencers and actors and anybody who wants to live their lives having the public pick them apart. If I show him who I was, he’ll see that I’m right about this being a short-lived, physical thing only.” If Noah knows I’m not wife material, showing him the old India Rook will solidify it. Then he’ll stop saying all kinds of sweet things that twist my heart when I know nothing can come of it.

“Oh, honey. Maybe you shouldn’t fight this so hard.”

“I can’t do this again, Whit. I need to start over on my own terms. Not with someone like Noah Whitlock whose label calls the shots. His social media following is insane. I don’t want to end up like my mother.” I hear the catch in my voice, and I press my tongue to the roof of my mouth willing away the sting behind my eyes.

Whitney studies me for a minute. “What do you need?”

“What don’t I need?” I draw in a shuddering breath. “I don’t really have a lot of clothes and stuff here because I thought Cody and I would be working on the house, and I figured we’d be flying back to L.A. a couple of times, so I didn’t pack my usual look to have on hand.”

“Alright. I got you. I’m going to text you an address. My friend Omar does events on the east coast and he’s near Nashville doing some music videos. He’s amazing with clothes and make-up and I’ve been trying to scout him for my team for some time. He will know what to do.”

The ping comes through immediately. “Thanks, Whit.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m pretty sure you think bringing the full India Rook experience is going to turn him off.” The video bounces as Whitney throws up her hands. “All that reality show stuff is not you, babe.”

“I know that. That’s what I’m trying to change.”

“No, I mean...” She blows a raspberry. “I don’t know how to say it. What I mean is that you don’t have to change. You’ve convinced yourself you’re the girl from all those different

versions of India Rook. The selfish daughter, the maneater, the serial dater of lame-ass famewhores. I grew up with you and you are none of those things. We're all elements of characters who make bad decisions sometimes, but we didn't grow up with a bunch of cameras ready to film it in a way that maximizes drama. I'm not certain anyone who takes the time to actually get to know you will suddenly think you're an awful person. Who are you trying to convince anyway, Noah Whitlock or yourself?"

I stay quiet because I'm afraid if I open my mouth, Whitney will hear too much.

"Oh, Indy. Babe. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset," I rush the words. "This is supposed to be my transition phase. It's just sex. No drama. Nothing." I squeeze my eyes shut. "There's nothing between us."

"Okay. Go see Omar. And maybe, while you're at it post some shots to your Instagram. You don't have to say where you are, but at least fight back against the shit MadCo is throwing your way. Remember, looking good is the best revenge and Madison can't hold a candle to you when you bring it to the table."

I roll my eyes. "I wish I'd never gotten involved with him. He keeps texting me like I've somehow done him dirty, and in the meantime, I'm still getting DMs telling me to burn in hell." Anger floods through me. "Why is that, huh? Why do I have to suffer through it?"

"It's a cesspool baby. You can't read that shit."

"Yeah, but why? There are real people typing those messages. Do they not realize that there's a real person reading them?"

"You're not real to them, India. They see you on tv, or on their phones, or they see your gorgeous ass in a bikini on some fancy boat and they can't take their own misery."

We fall silent for a minute and then Whitney points her finger at the screen. "You're the only one who can let them knock your crown. It's hard but you need to pick it up and do

what is meaningful to you. They don't own you. They don't control you unless you let them." She laughs. "Hang on babe, I need to take a note or something. That is some real motivational shit there. I need to put this on a wine glass or something."

I brush away a tear. "Jesus, Whit. You nearly had me."

"What? It's all true. Now get the aforementioned gorgeous ass to Omar and have him work his magic. I want to see you go viral. Oh, and get me a picture of Garrett Colt." She purrs. "That man is daddy delicious."

"Alright." I smirk. "If he wasn't rumored to be crazy about his beautiful wife, I'd think about propositioning him so Noah could get the message."

Whitney sobers. "I don't think that's a good idea."

My heart aches at the thought of seeing the disappointment in his eyes, but maybe it's better this way. Maybe it's better if he sees me the same way as everyone else.



I STEP out of the black Escalade and resist the urge to tug down my skirt. Oversized t-shirts and sneakers are definitely more comfortable. But the bouncer immediately opens the door and I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirrored glass. I look way overdressed for what appears to be a used bookstore, but the man in the dark grey suit holding a tablet tells me I'm in the right place.

"Name?" he asks.

"India Rook."

He doesn't even blink. "Your party is already seated inside, Ms. Rook."

I glance down at my phone as he leads me to a bookshelf. I can't hear a thing, but under my feet there's a steady vibration. Noah's texts shine up at me in the dim light.

Are you coming?

I'll make it worth your time later...

No pressure

Want me to ditch? A only has eyes for N anyway

My stupid heart skips a beat but maybe I was just startled by the slight snick as my guide pulls a book out of the shelf causing the wall to pop out revealing a brightly lit, brick-lined alley. He steps aside and waves me forward. I take a tentative step forward, music swirling towards me. The walls of the alley are hung with gilt frames, each one holding black and white photos of famous musicians. I pause at one of my dad, elbows resting on top of a bar, his head thrown back in laughter. He's in one of his stage outfits and his long-term drummer is standing next to him, sticks in mid-twirl. My phone pings and I keep moving down the alley.

At the end of the hall is another door that magically opens as I approach, classic country rock spilling out with the sound of excited voices. A woman in turquoise cowboy boots and a white leather dress smiles in welcome, handing me martini glass. I take a curious sniff, getting notes of chocolate, coffee and bourbon.

"How did you know what I wanted to drink?" I ask, smiling in return as I take a sip of the delicious cocktail.

She taps her tablet. "Mr. Whitlock ordered for you. It was made once you checked in at the front door." With another smile, she ushers me into the bar, and I blink as my eyes adjust to the dim light. The area is huge with high-top wooden bars, surrounded by people. I turn slowly, looking for Noah but I don't see him. A few people close to me start whispering and I straighten my shoulders, determined not to be paranoid. The woman at the door touches my elbow, "Marcus will take you to your party."

Another man in a suit appears at my side with a smile, leading me through the crowd to yet another door. At this point I'm feeling a little like Alice in Wonderland as I walk down a short hall and enter another room. This one is more intimate than the other room, and I see tables and round banquets situated at the perimeter. Marcus winds through the

crowd to a banquet near the front, by the stage, and I follow him, drawing up short as someone moves directly in my path.

“Well, well, well. India Rook. What are you doing outside of L.A.?”

I look up, past the vintage leather jacket, to the scraggly grey-blond beard and heavy curls hanging to his shoulders. I can't believe I once thought he was the most handsome musician I'd ever seen. I was fifteen at the time, so I get a pass on that one. “Zander Storm.” I look around the room, tossing my hair. “This isn't L.A.?” I tap my mouth, quickly pulling my hand away when he steps closer to me. “My driver must have taken a wrong turn on La Cienega.”

He laughs and I dart a look at the table where he was sitting. There are a few people there I recognize, all of them staring avidly at us. “You were always so cute, India,” Zander says, placing a hand on my hip. “What brings you here tonight?”

I shift away. “Just meeting friends.” I peer over his shoulder to see Marcus standing by one of the banquets.

“I wouldn't mind meeting your friends.” Zander reaches for me again, causing me to spill some of my drink when he knocks my hand.

“Don't worry about that, I'll order you another.” Noah's deep voice cuts through Zander's leering apology as he checks my dress for damage. There isn't any, but that's not stopping Zander from practically sticking his face in my cleavage.

Noah bares his teeth at Zander, smoothly taking my drink and pulling me close to him at the same time. My breath catches at the sight of him. I thought he looked amazing in grey sweatpants and a t-shirt, but tonight he's gone all out. A crisp, white dress shirt, the sleeves rolled and cuffed to emphasize his muscular forearms and all that gorgeous ink, is tucked into dark blue denim and he's wearing a grey sweater vest that should look ridiculous, but somehow manages to highlight his broad shoulders. His hair is artfully mussed, that single, sexy lock hanging over his dark-rimmed glasses. Like Clark Kent, only give him golden brown hair and amp the sex

appeal up to a billion. My eyes drift down to his lips, and I squeeze my thighs together, remembering how good he makes me feel. How his mouth looks when he smiles.

He's not smiling now.

"Whitlock," Zander nods. "I guess Kingmaker's here for Ajax?" His eyes drift down to Noah's hand on mine, and he smirks. "Who are you here for, India?"

Tensing at the insinuation in his tone, I pull away from Noah and shrug my shoulders. "You know me, I can't resist a good party."

I feel Noah's eyes on me, and a gnawing pit grows in my stomach. He shouldn't be surprised. This is what he signed up for by inviting me.

Zander's eyes drift over me in a slow perusal. "You look good India. If you're looking for a party, you can always count on me." He winks at Noah. "You know Indie, here for a good time, but not a long time."

Next to me, Noah bristles and I'm surprised by the low growl that reaches my ears. I step forward quickly, twirling my hair, a practiced smile on my lips. "Zander, honey, I'm pretty sure I aged out of your preferred type." I widen my eyes, glancing around the room and lean towards him, cupping a hand like I'm about to impart secret information. "In fact, this looks like the kind of place that requires legitimate ID to show the patrons are over twenty-one." I emphasize the number and mock grimace an 'oops' expression. "Looks like you might be at the wrong party."

Zander blinks and Noah steps up next to me, handing me my drink while sliding an arm around my waist. "Let's go. We're up front," he says, archly, throwing a dark look over at Zander.

Stiffly, I let him walk me to the table, where I see Blaine, who rises to give me a hug.

"That loser looked like he was begging for attention," he whispers in my ear.

Grateful for the support from such an unlikely corner, I take a deep breath and hug him back before sliding into the banquet, one hand on the hem of my dress to keep it from catching on the plush, burgundy velvet. A woman with dark hair is seated inside, one hand around a cup of coffee and she lifts the other towards me in greeting. “Hello, I’m Natalie.”

I shake her hand. “Hi Natalie. I’m India.”

The woman gives a little shimmy of her shoulders. “Oh, I know.” She bites her lip, rolling her eyes. “I’m sorry. I should be used to meeting people by now, but I’m a huge reality television nerd.”

I swallow hard. Great. My reputation precedes me, I guess. Just like with Zander. Just like always. I want to shrink into myself, but instead I paste on my widest smile, feeling the warm press of Noah’s thigh next to mine. Before I can say anything, Natalie taps herself on the forehead.

“I’m sorry, I’m such an idiot. I never meant to make you uncomfortable.” She lays a hand over mine. “I only meant that I recognize you.” She glances over at the stage, where I see a giant, blond man in black jeans and cowboy boots checking the equipment. “I know better than to judge a book by its review in a gossip magazine.”

As I watch, the hot cowboy jumps off the stage and makes a beeline for our table. He presses two fingers to his lips and points at Natalie, who giggles back at him, a blush staining her pretty cheeks.

Somehow, he manages to tear his eyes away from her and turns them to me. He glances at Noah and leans over the table, extending his hand. “You have got to be India. I’m Ajax and I’m happy to finally meet you.” He squeezes my hand and smiles and suddenly I understand why Kingmaker is so popular. With Noah, Blaine and Ajax at the table, it’s like all the air is sucked out of the room. Yes, they’re gorgeous, but there’s star power here too. It’s almost overwhelming, like being in a room that’s full of charisma. Ajax heads back to the stage after warning Blaine to keep an eye on Natalie. It’s hard not to be impressed. Ordinarily, I’d be flirting with all of them.

Frankly, Blaine, with his devil-may-care attitude has fuckboi written all over him, and that would ordinarily put him squarely in my fascination zone, but the flutters in my stomach are all for Noah. He hasn't looked away from me for a single moment and despite my intentions for this evening, to show him he's exactly right and that I'll never be 'wife material', I want to lean into his quiet confidence.

He somehow manages to make me feel like I'm the only one in the room with the heat of his gaze.

But we're not the only people at this party. I can't believe Zander Storm is here. God, wasn't he one of my worse decisions ever?

Noah leans in closer like he can read my mind. "Zander Storm?" he asks softly.

"An old acquaintance." I take a slug of the espresso martini, wishing I could drink away the bite of shame at the memory of all my stupid teenage decisions.

"I bet he can't nail a floor like I can."

I shift closer, loving the way he pulls my hand into his lap. The softness of his wool vest tickles my fingers. "Your skills are unparalleled." The walls of the banquet shelter us from the rest of the bar, and I close my eyes, relaxing as the lights dim in preparation for Ajax taking the stage. Noah pulls me closer, and I breathe deeply. He smells so good, and my body tightens in response to his proximity. In the dark, no one can see us. I toy with the chunky leather strap on his wrist while Blaine tells a story about a stagehand who mistook him for Slade and pushed him out on stage with a pair of drumsticks once.

"I'm glad you came tonight."

"Any excuse for a good party, right?" I look over my shoulder at him with a flirtatious smile, loving the way his profile looks in the semi-darkness, all shadows and sharp cheekbones.

His dark blue gaze meets mine. "You don't have to put on an act tonight. We're among friends."

"Zander Storm isn't a friend."

Noah lifts my hand to his lips. “You don’t have to worry about him.”

I melt a little more as he kisses the palm of my hand. “I’m not worried, but I thought we were going to be more low-key.”

“I asked for this booth for that very reason. We’re private here.” He drops his hand to my leg and squeezes. “Very private.”

I glance over at Natalie and Blaine, but they don’t seem to be paying attention to us at all. I twist toward Noah, shivering as his hand slips a little further up my thigh. A shadow falls over us as a server leans in with fresh drinks. She places the glasses on the table with a smile and moves away. Noah presses his fingers up my spine. “Relax, India.”

With his free hand, he picks up his drink, toasting Blaine as Natalie erupts in peals of bright laughter. “If you keep that up, Ajax is going to march back here and claim his lady.”

Blaine waggles his eyebrows. “I just might have to fight him in that case.”

Natalie laughs again. “No worries there.” She pats Blaine’s hand. “No offence, Blaine, but you’re too much for me.” She turns to me. “We had a hard time getting through the first bar when the guys walked in. Normally, Serge is with Ajax but he couldn’t join us on this trip.”

“Who’s Serge?” I ask, taking a sip of my fresh cocktail. I lick my lips. The bartenders here are generous, that’s for sure.

“Kingmaker’s head of security,” Blaine answers. “And that guy is scary.”

“He’s effective,” Natalie answers. “And I’m immensely grateful for him. Anyway, Garrett’s got security for the club, so it wasn’t too bad. Blaine promises he’ll head back out to the other bar after the show to act as a distraction. He doesn’t really care about being ambushed.”

Blaine tosses back his drink. “Well, I’ve got to find some company for the evening.” He winks across the table. “Here I am sitting with two of the most beautiful women in Nashville and you’re both off-limits.” He shakes his head sadly.

I can't help myself and I laugh. Blaine Adams won't be lonely for long. The lights go even lower and a hush ripples through the room as Garrett Cole vaults onto the stage. I should pay attention, so I can give Whit a play-by-play later but suddenly Noah's lips are on my neck. My breath hitches as Noah reaches for me, cupping my face and tilting my head towards his.

"You look beautiful tonight," he murmurs.

"A far cry from how you're used to seeing me," I nip at his bottom lip, tasting the remnants of his scotch.

"It doesn't matter what you wear, India. You could wear a garbage bag and I'd still want you." His thumb strokes my lip. "I'd still know you. The way you move. The way you taste. The way your body responds to me."

His words envelope me in heat, my pulse thrumming between my thighs. "But I look different tonight. This is how people usually see me."

"Is it?" He leans in and captures my mouth in a kiss, kicking my pulse into overdrive. He pulls away, his breath skimming over my lips. "It might be how others see you, but it looks like armor to me. I prefer you in nothing at all." He kisses me again, nudging my lips open and licking inside. I hear the strum of a guitar as if it's a million miles away and break our kiss. Across the table, Blaine is watching us, his expression serious, although maybe I can't see it clearly in the semidarkness.

"We need to be good," I whisper, reaching for my drink. "The show is about to start."

Noah chuckles low, the sound rumbling through me. "If that was being bad, I'll take it all day long." He presses another kiss to my shoulder. "I never thought something bad could taste so sweet."

I sip my drink, blaming the flush heating my body on the alcohol. How did I think I'd be able to waltz in here and show Noah why we were a bad idea when all I want to do is crawl into his lap and block out the world? Noah twists his glass

slowly on the table while he focuses on the stage. Natalie is riveted, her face upturned while she watches Ajax, as if he's the sun she needs to bloom. I wonder what it would be like to not play in our world. If I was just a normal girl, would I be starstruck by Noah? Would we have even met? Would it bother me to know how many other women would trade their left arm to wake up next to him?

Ajax turns on his stool, aiming his golden smile at our table. Blaine whoops, but you can sense the connection between Ajax and Natalie as if it is a tangible thing. I nudge Noah who leans in, and whisper, "they're in love, right?"

I feel him nod next to me. "Hell of a thing. He jumped off a stage to get to her." Noah's hand drifts down, but instead of landing on my leg, he twines his fingers with mine. "I'd jump off a mountain for you."

The lights on the stage blur, my thoughts swirling like the steam rising from Natalie's coffee cup. I drain the rest of my drink, my fingers fumbling as I set it back on the table with a thump.

"Are you okay?" Noah whispers.

I swallow hard, pulling my hand out of his grasp. It's like I can't get enough air and when I drag in a breath, all I can smell is the sweet smokiness of Noah's bourbon, and the subtle spicy scent of his aftershave. I nod, keeping my eyes on the stage, relieved when Garrett comes out again after the first set and encourages everyone to drink more and adds that his wife wants everyone to mingle, which draws a laugh from the crowd. Another band comes out, some pop country newbies, and immediately launch into a dance song that has people rising to hit the small dance floor in front of the stage. Ajax appears at our table and jerks a thumb at Blaine, so he can move in by Natalie.

"Great set man. And look, Natalie didn't even have to kick you in the ass this time," Blaine says. "This is my cue to go find a dance partner." He stands and it's like the invisible barrier I imagined around our table disappears. Women approach him fast and furious, checking out the table, their

flirtatious laughter competing with the music. I look up as a leather-clad hip bumps our table.

“Fancy seeing you here.”

“Rachel?” Noah sounds surprised. The tall, blonde woman in the lace bustier and skinny leather pants looks familiar to me but I can’t quite place her.

“I guess I know why you haven’t been returning my calls,” she says, sliding her gaze over to me.

“What are you doing in Nashville?” Noah asks.

“Well, it seems like this is where all the action is this weekend.” She picks up his drink and takes a sip. *Oh. Rachel.* This is the model Noah was dating. I furrow my brow. Was it really past tense? Maybe Mr. Perfect isn’t so perfect after all.

I straighten, shooting him a furious look. The crowd around Blaine has clearly noticed something juicy is happening, and a few of them are looking at us curiously. I flick my hand under my hair, loosening it from behind my ear so it falls like a curtain shielding my face. Natalie notices and inches closer to me, gripping her coffee cup.

“I still can’t get used to the crowds they draw,” she says. “Crowds make me anxious.” Her eyes are kind. “If you need a break, I can go with you.” Ajax murmurs something I can’t hear, but she shakes her head. “I’ll be fine, Jax.”

I notice her fingers are white around her cup. “Thanks, but I’m okay,” I lie, pasting on a big smile as I swing around to Noah. “Hey, thanks for letting me sit here, but I’d better get back to my table,” I say, brightly.

Rachel pauses in whatever she was saying, her eyes flicking over me dismissively. “Move, Noah,” she says, backing up with his drink. “Then I can join you.”

Noah frowns at me, not budging. Sweat prickles the back of my neck. *Please just move.*

“This is your table. You’re with us,” he says.

I shake my head, the fast movement making me dizzy. “No, it’s okay. I’ll be fine.” I push against his leg.

Noah leans in, caging me in his arms. “Don’t India. Rachel is not my girlfriend. This is our table. You’re with me.”

My hands grip his forearms, the muscles and sinew like steel cords under my fingers. “I’m not with you, Noah.” I let a slow smile cross my face, licking my lips as I pretend there’s a producer behind me who’s told me to liven things up. I lean in, kissing him on the cheek while I meet Rachel’s glare. “He’s all yours, honey.” I tuck my legs up on the seat and lift myself up to the table, deftly pivoting around Noah while lights flash on his shocked expression. I push off the edge and stand, adjusting my dress to make sure my ass isn’t hanging out. Immediately my mind conjures the memory of Noah rescuing me as I tried to break into the house my first day here, and I blink rapidly, tears burning behind my eyelids. I turn, blowing a kiss to the table, and duck into the crowd of women gathered near the table. One of the girls thinks I’m there to dance, and she shimmies against me while I move on autopilot through the bodies pressing onto the dance floor. I search the corners trying to find the ladies’ room and finally see a vintage neon purple silhouette of Marilyn Monroe with her skirt blown up pointing the way. I head down the hallway, not noticing until I push open the door that Zander Storm is behind me.

He crowds in behind me, a hand on my hip. “I’d forgotten how beautiful you were,” he says. “This dress is something else.”

I freeze, stunned at the stench of beer and cigarettes that washes over me. “What the hell are you doing?”

His hand squeezes my hip, while his other slides around the front of my stomach. “Oh, come on, Indie. It hasn’t been that long. You were always down for a bathroom quickie.”

I shake him off, wiggling out of his grip and try to calm the fast beat of my heart. I scan the doors and they’re all open and empty. Of course. “I’m not interested, Zander. Get out.” I head to the mirror and pretend I’m fixing my lipstick. My cheeks are flushed, and my eyes are a little red-rimmed and hazy. Behind me, Zander lifts one side of his jacket, pulling a small square envelope from an inside pocket and shakes a couple of tiny pieces of paper into his hand.

“Want some?” he asks, sliding one into his mouth.

“No thanks. Could you leave? I have to pee.”

“Leave the door open. I like to watch.”

“Ew, please don’t be gross.”

He stalks towards me, licking his finger and tapping his palm to pick up another sliver. “I won’t tell Whitlock. Those guys are probably all getting blowjobs by now anyway. They opened for us once. They get a lot of pussy.” He gives a wolf whistle. “Does he know I was your first?”

My eyes dart around his shoulder, looking for a way out when his arm whips around me and he sticks his finger in my mouth, hooking over my bottom lip to poke beneath my tongue. Whatever’s on his finger dissolves like sugar, a bitter, powdery taste that makes my mouth water. I bite down and he pulls his finger out, shaking it. I wish I’d drawn blood.

“What the fuck, Zander?” I spit into the sink. “I don’t do that shit. What did you do?”

He laughs pressing his hips into my backside. I gag, feeling his hardness rub against me. “Get off,” I grind out.

“We will, I promise. Relax, luv. It’s just a little something Dr. V cooked up.”

Dr. V. is the most notorious designer drug dealer on the east coast. Even I’ve heard of him, mostly because my dad talks about how his shit is dangerous. Cold sweat prickles between my shoulder blades. “What the fuck is it, Zander?” My heart pulses and a weird heat infuses my body, my nipples tingling, while my tongue feels swollen and sore. “Am I going to die?”

“No. It’s mild, just something to make us feel good.” He brushes his hands up the front my dress and I moan at the sensation. I want to rub myself against him, but the thought makes me vomit. Yeah, he took my virginity, and then he told everyone about it. He even fucking went on some lame podcast and said I gave him a taste for virgin pussy and that I begged him for sex. I shudder, bringing my elbow back, but

it's like I'm moving through water, and he easily deflects me as my eyes drift closed.

A crash sounds behind me and my head snaps up as Noah blasts in, grabbing Zander by the back of the jacket, yanking him away from me. "What the fuck is going on here?" he growls.

My head drops. *I'm not wife material.*

I know.

Zander stumbles back, raising his hands in the air. "Whoa, mate. We're just getting reacquainted."

Noah grabs him again, pulling him closer. "Are you fucking high?"

I spit again in the sink, my body shivering, my heart kicking against my ribs. "Noah," I gasp.

He immediately turns to me, dropping Zander to the floor like the sack of garbage he is. I expect to see disgust on his face, anger, even jealousy but when I see concern and fear, I start to shake. He reaches for me, his hands on my shoulders, and even that slight contact sends tingles throughout my body. He ducks down, looking into my eyes. "Did you take something?"

"He—I don't know what it was."

Noah gently takes my hands and puts them on the counter. "Hold on, baby." He whirls, squatting next to Zander, who's head has rolled back against the door of one of the stalls. "What. The. Fuck. Did. You. Give. Her." He bites out each word, looking over his shoulder to make sure I'm still standing, or not moving or something.

The door swings open again, and Natalie and Rachel walk in. "Did you find—" Rachel's voice breaks off as she spots me, her head swivelling to take in the scene on the floor. She immediately moves to me, wrapping an arm around me. I tense, the sensation of her body pressed to mine overwhelming. "Are you okay?"

"I'll get her some water," Natalie says.

Zander isn't making much sense and I wince when Noah shakes him. "Does she need a hospital?" he grinds out. "If you've given her something poison, I'll put you in one."

"No! It's mild, just a bit intense the first time. It's like an aphrodisiac, thanks to me, she'll be an even hotter bitch in heat."

I hear the crack of knuckles on flesh and Zander howls just as Natalie bursts in with Ajax, Garrett and more men in grey suits.

"Here, drink this." Natalie holds out a glass, pressing it into my hand. I raise it to my lips, hating the way my hand is shaking, and take tiny sips. The cool water is soothing, and I feel a little better, even though my pulse is still pounding. I squeeze my thighs together and rest the glass against my cheek. The men in grey march Zander out the door and Garrett stops near me.

"I'm so sorry this happened in my club. Do you need a doctor? Anything? My driver will take you anywhere."

I shake my head, hating the way the room blurs when I do. "I'm fine." Noah takes a step towards me, taking the empty glass from me and passing it to Rachel. His hands are gentle, and I want to push myself into him, but I'm conscious of the way everyone is watching me.

He wraps his arms around me, and I barely stifle a groan, biting my lip so hard I taste blood. "I just want to leave."

Garrett nods. "I'll have a car brought around."

We exit the washroom and I'm grateful my head has stopped spinning, but the heat building in my body is unbearable. Every nerve ending is attuned to the sensation of Noah's skin against mine and his breath against my neck is sweet torture. When we pass through the larger bar, it's a sensory overload. The volume of music and the murmur of voices; too much perfume and the press of bodies moving, dancing is like a fever dream. I want to crawl into a hole, and simultaneously, I want to rip off my dress and rush into the

crowd, feel the pressure on my skin, hands on my body until I explode. I whimper, rubbing my breasts against Noah's arm.

"Want me to carry you?" he asks.

"No. I just need to get out of here." Finally, we're at the door to the alley hallway and I can breathe a little steadier. I pull away from Noah and sag against the wall, letting the brick scratch my naked back. It hurts in a pleasurable way, my nipples peaking to diamond hard points, and I move again, not caring about the snags in my dress.

Noah reaches for me. "Where does it hurt? Are you itchy? Sick?"

I don't know how to explain it. "It doesn't hurt exactly and I'm not sick, but I'm hot. I press my hands to my stomach, the ache between my legs intensifying. "It feels like I'm hot on the inside."

He takes my hand. "That's it. I'm getting you to a doctor." He walks me through the alley, the lights almost too bright after the dimness of the club.

"Please." I tug for him to stop, bringing our linked hands to my chest. His eyes darken as I place his hand over my breast. "I feel like I'm on fire."

I moan at the touch of his hand, but he stills immediately. "I can't. It's the drugs he gave you."

"I need you to touch me."

"You need to get home and rest." He scoops me into his arms, eating up the distance to the secret door with his long legs. At the entrance, the wall shifts and the man in the grey suit waves us through.

"The car is coming around the side, off the main street," he says, leading away from the front of the building to a side door I hadn't noticed earlier. "It might take a few minutes, as there was an accident not far from here and traffic is backed up."

We step out into a real alley, one that smells really good, like pastry and chocolate, and on the other side, I see an old-fashioned sign moving slightly in the breeze with the word

'bakery' written on it. Noah curses at the sound of sirens from the street.

"Put me down."

My feet find the ground, but I don't step away. Instead, I turn in his arms, liquid fire rushing through me.

"Are you going to be sick?" he asks, holding me tighter. "Where is the damn car?"

I shake my head, panting. "Noah. It hurts. I ache." I stumble against him, and he backs up to the brick wall, his legs between mine. I press into him, rubbing myself like a kitten against his chest. His big hands stroke my back in long soothing motions, but I don't want soothing. I want it rough and hot. I want him to make this ache between my legs disappear.

"Shh, baby. I'm so sorry," he whispers as I press my face into his neck. I would be embarrassed if I could actually think straight, but all I can do is feel. The heat of him at the apex of my thighs, every twitch of his muscles and the way he's so solid, just like the brick wall behind him. I whimper and his ragged sigh brushes my ear.

Noah's hand skates down my back to flirt at the hem of my dress, which has ridden up to my hips as a result of my writhing. I still, holding my breath while his fingers tease at the edge of my panties. "Do you want me to touch you?" he asks, his voice low and rough. He turns me so my back is to his chest and his cock is hard and hot against my ass. I spread my legs wider,

I shudder, not caring about the slickness on my thighs, or the way I'm shamelessly trying to grind against his lap. "Yes, please." I hear the plaintive note in my voice as I throw my head back.

Noah turns his head, looking left and right while sliding a hand between my legs, over my soaked panties, moving slowly, delicately as if he's afraid I might break. It's not enough and I reach up pulling my dress down over my hard nipples, gratified to see Noah's gaze go dark. His other hand

comes up, pinching one, then the other as a strangled cry escapes me. “Harder,” I gasp.

He pinches my nipple tighter, the sensation shooting straight to my pussy, where he continues his soft stroking. It feels good, but I can't let go, I'm wound too tight. He stops, tucking my breasts back in my dress, turning me to the wall. He places my hands against the rough bricks and covers me with his body, his hand going back under my dress, under my panties, roughly stroking and rubbing my swollen clit. My fingernails claw at the brick, my perfect manicure disintegrating while Noah takes me apart cell by cell with every caress of his fingers. Sparks of pleasure so intense to be nearly painful explode through my body. My vision blurs as my orgasm goes on and on, my muscles shaking and if Noah didn't have an arm wrapped around me, I'd be an incoherent puddle on the ground.

Bright lights swing into the alley and Noah quickly pulls me away from the wall, lifting me into his arms. The large black SUV slows to a stop, the driver jumping out to open the door. Noah somehow manages to get both of us in the back seat, cradling my shivering body against his while he gives the driver the address.

Then we're whizzing through downtown Nashville like some sort of dream sequence where I can only see Noah's profile, outlined lovingly in the glow of streetlights as we pass beneath them, and I drift off to the strong beat of his heart under my ear.

INDIA

It's too hot.

My eyes open to darkness in an unfamiliar room. Over me, a crisp, white comforter that still smells new, tickles my nose. I push it off, realizing my body is still sore and aching, heat swirling through me, although thank God it doesn't feel like the inferno from earlier. I turn my head to the side, startled to see Noah next to me, his beautiful mouth slightly open, that lock of hair falling across his face. Moonlight streams in from the window and I realize I'm in the project house, in the bedroom, with Noah.

As if he can sense me, his eyes open and he smiles causing my belly to flutter. I shift, restless against the sheets hating the empty ache between my thighs. How long is Zander's drug going to last in my system? What if Noah hadn't been at the club with me earlier?

"Hey you," he says, going up on one elbow so the sheet drops to his hips. "How are you feeling?"

My nipples peak in the chill of the air-conditioned room, but it does nothing to cool me off. I roll to my back, squeezing my thighs together to try and stem the rising desire inside me. Flinging a hand over my face, I groan. "Tired, but I'm too hot to sleep, and that feeling is starting again."

The bedsheets rustle next to me, and Noah lifts my hand. "What can I get you?"

"Nothing." I roll away, facing the other wall. "I'm sorry I ruined your night."

His hand strokes down my naked back. “You didn’t ruin my night. I’m exactly where I planned to be. In bed with you.”

His touch is too much and not enough all at the same time and a rush of guilt hits me. If my plan had worked out tonight, Noah should have seen that I’m not the girl for him. Maybe he did see it. Maybe he was coming to tell me he was leaving with that Rachel girl but then saw what a disaster I was.

“Rachel is your girlfriend, isn’t she?” I ask.

His hand stills. “No. Rachel is my ex-girlfriend, and before you jump to any conclusions, we’ve been broken up a while.” He glides his fingertips back up my spine.

My back arches and the ache between my legs intensifies as my pussy contracts around emptiness. I need to come again, but I hate the needy desperation I felt earlier, like I wasn’t in control of my body. His hand sweeps down over my bare ass, squeezing and a moan escapes me, even as my hips move back towards him. He rolls me to my back.

“What do you need, India?”

I squeeze my eyes shut, shaking my head. “I hate being out of control.”

“I know. Did it help when I touched you before?”

I bite my lip, nodding. I should just take a cold shower or something, wait out the effects of the drug, which hopefully don’t last much longer. Noah dips his head, capturing my nipple in his mouth, his teeth delivering a delicious burn that has me crying out.

“Is it too much?” he asks.

“N-no,” I stammer, wanting even more. “It’s not enough.”

He lifts his head, capturing my chin in his hand so I can’t look away. His eyes are hooded, dark with intent. “I won’t hurt you, India.”

“I know.” I’m writhing on the bed, my hips seeking the pressure of his.

“Stop fighting it. Give up control to me and just ride it out.”

When I nod, he leans in, giving me a fierce kiss that sends my head spinning. The kiss is hard and hungry, but somehow sweet and soothing at the same time. When he pulls back, he’s breathing hard.

“Fuck. Just kissing you is like an out of body experience,” he says, stretching my arms over my head and pinning them there with his hand. I turn my head, mesmerized as always by the sexy sweep of ink wrapped around his sinewy forearm. I arch up and nip his wrist, enjoying the swift, sharp intake of breath. He chuckles, the low, deep rumble vibrating against my chest, and he retaliates by delivering a feather-soft whisper across my nipple, teasing and tempting, until I’m arching up, needing something more to take the edge of the knife-sharp desire cutting through me.

I shudder when he runs the tip of his tongue between my breasts, plumping them together to feast on my nipples, switching his attention from one to the other. “I can’t get enough of you,” he murmurs before his teeth close around one nipple, biting hard enough to start a deep, pleasurable burn that rockets straight to my now-throbbing clit. His hands glide down, whisper-soft touches over my ribs and stomach, until he grips my hips, digging his fingers in to hold me in place. The ache in my body intensifies, my whole body swelling with sensation as he licks and kisses every inch of my skin, dragging his teeth along the curve of my belly. He moves his hand under me, kneading and caressing muscles that are tight and sore and I feel like I’m wrapped in him. I breathe because he gives me air, I see because he’s the light above me. I know I’m messed up, the drug in my system heightening my senses, my emotions pinging all over the place while ecstasy shimmers on the horizon. My whole world narrows to the press of his lips on the inside of my thigh, the scrape of his stubble, the way his groan echoes around us when he swipes his tongue through my slit, then covers me entirely with his mouth, devouring me, pushing all thoughts from my brain until it seems like every throb of my heart beats at his will.

My thighs start shake and the pleasurable burn flares like a sparkler as my orgasm rushes over me, the intensity almost too much, until Noah lifts himself off me, notches his cock at my entrance and thrusts hard, burying himself to the hilt. My pussy contracts around him, the invasion overwhelming while I claw at his shoulders.

“Fuck,” he hisses, edging his hips in tighter against mine. “Hold still.”

But I can't. The way he has me stretched open, every wiggle and arch strokes my clit and the fullness deep within me hits some pleasure point I don't know even existed before now. He leans up, which pushes his hips against mine and I scream his name. It echoes around me like it's coming from some other person, like my brain and body have disconnected and they're spiraling away from one another. Above me, he's like a statute, watching me come apart, and he slips his hand between us, moving his thumb in a slow teasing circle, barely touching me while he fucks himself into me slowly, deliberately, my body humming with tension.

“Faster, Noah,” I pant, gratified when he increases the tempo, just a little, the steady thrust and glide bringing me closer and closer to another orgasm.

“I can feel your sweet pussy clutching me,” he says. “Greedy. Little. Pussy.” He thrusts hard in time with his words. “Come all over my cock, baby. Let me feel it.”

He throws his head back as my entire body contracts, my spine arching as I cry out, white-hot pleasure-pain ripping through me as he drives between my thighs, his own release pulsing inside me while I crash down like shooting star. He collapses over me, his big body slick with sweat and I lick his neck, savoring the salty taste on my tongue. He laughs and rolls off me, dragging me so I'm spooned, nestled against his chest and thighs while he wraps a strong arm around me. He presses a kiss to my hair.

“Feel better?” he asks.

I shiver and he pulls the sheet up over me. “What even was that?” I ask, dazed. I couldn't even chalk it up to the drug.

Sure, some of the crazy response has to be the effects of whatever that asshole gave me and maybe that's what kept my body going well beyond its limits, but the way Noah touched me, held me, controlled the pleasure until I was a puddle of incoherent ecstasy...

That was something else. It felt a lot like trust and ... I yawn, my body and brain finally starting to shut down. Noah cuddles me closer.

"That was us lighting up the night," he says quietly. "I'll never let anyone hurt you."

This feels steadfast and true. I try to lift my head, but total exhaustion has me in its grips and the steady warmth of Noah's body behind me, the weight of his arm around me is too comforting to resist.

NOAH

I don't really want to move. India's deep, even breathing and the way my arm wraps around her curves is too satisfying. I can't even process what happened tonight, or the rage I felt when I walked into that bathroom and saw that bastard with his hands on India. Worse was the panic I felt when I realized he'd given her something. We might be around shit like that all the time and God knows we've all indulged, but I never really liked the whole out of control feeling from getting high. Ajax was big on the numbness effect and Slade just likes any excuse to get fucked up. Tanner won't touch the stuff and Blaine says he doesn't discriminate against anything that makes him feel good.

But India didn't take that shit because she wanted to. He forced it on her, like he had a right to, like she wasn't even a person to him. Burning anger builds in my chest. Like he had a right to her body. What kind of fucked up guy needs to drug a woman to coax a response from her? And I get it, some dudes are so fucking bored they experiment with shit like this but what would have happened if I hadn't been there? What would have happened if India had been with some douche who didn't realize what was going on and assumed she was into it because I know that's how it would have been portrayed on those goddamn shows she wants to leave. India Rook, the party girl who never makes a good decision when there's a bad one tempting her. Jesus.

I take a deep breath and press a kiss to the top of her head, the scent of her perfume grounding me. She is here with me,

and she seems fine. I'm thirsty though. Shit. I lift my arm a fraction of an inch, not wanting to wake her, and drag my pillow down against her back, tucking the sheet and blanket around her as I slide out of the bed, pulling on my boxers. The window coverings aren't all in yet, and the last thing I want is Nana Stella to somehow see me trotting around bare-assed.

In the kitchen, I pour a glass of water and glance around, marvelling at the transformation India has achieved. She says the bones of the house were good, and anyone can paint, as I've clearly proven, but she's got a magic touch that I can see everywhere. Things I would never notice before, like way the copper sink gleams with warmth against the dark granite of the counters. I lean against the island and grab my phone from the pile I dumped there earlier. I was far more worried about India than any of our stuff, but I need to text the guys and let them know how she is. My screen lights up with twenty-two missed calls.

I frown, looking down the list. Laird's called the most and seeing how he's supposed to be in Europe on his version of a vacation, which is really just prepping stuff for our tour, I should call him first. I frown down at the phone, my chest tight, waiting for him to connect. Is it my sister? Did something happen?

"Where have you been?" he asks.

"What's wrong?" Dread twists my stomach. If it's something to do with the band, he'd call Tanner first. I think of all the things that could go wrong in the wilds of Canada. Maybe their canoe tipped over and they drowned. "Is my sister okay?"

"Yes, of course. She's clearly excellent at her job and she and Tanner are doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing, which is more than I can say for you."

I blink. "What are you talking about?"

"Aren't you supposed to be visiting your grandmother? Maybe being set-up with some sweet granddaughter with stars in her eyes?" Laird's cultured tones are clipped.

“I am visiting Nana. I’m still in Nashville.”

“And what have you been doing in Nashville, exactly?” Laird doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “Not keeping a low-profile, or romancing some sweet southern belle, that’s what. I swear to God, you boys are going to give me a heart attack. That’s your plan, right? Some sort of catastrophic medical trauma that just ends me.”

You’d think Laird was a fifty-something drama queen, instead of a fit, healthy thirty-something business genius. “What’s wrong?” I cut off his tirade, running a hand through my hair.

“What’s wrong?” His voice goes up two octaves. “India. Rook.”

I grip the countertop, my heart thudding in my chest. “What are you talking about?”

“Did you learn nothing from Slade’s disaster?” Laird continues.

“Put down the espresso and take a deep breath and tell me what the fuck you are talking about.”

“I’m talking about the video that went viral a few hours ago. It’s clearly you and that reality tv diva fucking in an alley. Even her tits are out, Noah! I mean, she’s bared it all before, but she’s never done a sex tape. I guess none of the multitude of guys she’s been with were famous enough.”

“Shut up, Laird.” I bite out, my teeth grinding. “You don’t know what happened.”

I hear his sharp intake. “I don’t care what actually happened. What I know is that you were at Garrett Cole’s for Jax’s show. I also know that India Rook happened to be there. There are a couple of people saying she was there with Zander Storm, and you invited her to sit with you. Then it gets a bit confusing because someone has a picture of her hugging Blaine, but the result is that you and she end up in an alley, next to a goddamn bakery of all things, where someone was working and happened to look out the window. Imagine their surprise when they got a free sex show.”

“There was someone at the bakery?”

“Are you seriously asking me that right now?” He sighs. “According to TikTok, this guy was in prepping for an early order and heard a noise in the alley. When he looked, India Rook was flashing her tits at you and you obliged her, letting her ride you in some kind of kinky lap dance outside the club side door.

“We didn’t have sex in that alley.”

“Maybe you didn’t stick your dick in her, but the whole thing looked pretty sexual to me.”

“You watched it?”

“Jesus, Noah. Not for fucking kicks. Let me tell you I have no interest in seeing you guys and your exploits and yet somehow it ends up burning my eyeballs anyway, doesn’t it?”

“It was drugs, Laird.”

“For fucks’ sake. Aren’t you visiting your fucking grandmother? What are you getting up to in Nashville?” Laird’s explosion rings in the kitchen.

“Keep your voice down. It’s not me. Zander Storm drugged India at Garrett’s club. Some bullshit chemical aphrodisiac, that’s why she was like that in the alley. Whoever caught it on video and published it should be in jail. She didn’t do that willingly.”

Silence.

“Laird?”

“I’m checking to see if this hotel has a fucking defibrillator because I’m going to need one.”

“Why? What did I say? I was trying to help her!”

“Noah. Either you just admitted to me that you took advantage of a drugged woman who was not in her right mind to consent to sex and all the evidence she could ever need is out there for anyone to jerk off to at this very moment or you swooped in tonight to rescue her in some kind of fucked up

white knight complex that all you boys seem to have developed.”

“I didn’t take advantage of her. And I didn’t swoop in tonight. India and I were there together.”

“Together? What does that mean? Again, you’re supposed to be visiting your grandmother and hopefully looking for some sweet girl to sweep off her feet and instead you got caught with your hand in India Rook’s cookie jar!”

“There isn’t going to be some sweet girl, Laird.”

“Well, not now there isn’t, that’s for sure.”

“I can’t do what the label wants.”

“Listen, Noah. The label wanted a story and all you had to do was put a ring on the supermodel you’ve been fucking for a year. A goddamn supermodel. No one thought you’d actually go looking for a girl to marry, we all just thought it’d open your eyes to the simple answer you already had!”

“You tried to manipulate me?” My voice is cold. I trust Laird to have my back. Even though he can be as over-protective as a mama bear sometimes, I always thought he had our best interests at heart, not the label’s.

“I don’t see it as manipulation. You’re better in a relationship and Rachel is pretty great.”

“I don’t love her, but it sounds like you do, so why don’t you just move on in to my place in L.A. and sell the label that story.”

Laird heaves a sigh. “I don’t love Rachel.”

“Well, nothing else makes a whole lot of sense to me. Why am I getting pushed so hard on this? And besides, Rachel knows we’re over and she’s cool with it, or at least she seemed cool with it at Garrett’s club tonight.”

“She was there?”

“Yes, and she saw me with India. What’s more, she even helped when we found India all messed up from Zander Storm.”

Another sigh. “This is why I shouldn’t go on vacation.” He pauses. “Look, Noah, I’m sorry. One of the executives started dating Rachel’s mother and Rachel was miserable after you broke up.”

“First of all, she broke up with me. Second, you’re really telling me you played some kind of fucked up matchmaker because some asshole wanted to impress Rachel’s mother with how much power he can wield? What about how miserable I would be being married to someone I didn’t love?”

“Oh, come on, Noah. No one marries for love in this business.”

It’s just a business decision. I remember India’s words back in the truck when she told me about her parents first divorce. Fuck. “Maybe it’s rare, but I’m not ruling it out.”

“Are you telling me you plan on marrying India Rook? Christ, Noah. She will chew you up and spit you out. Have you seen her shows? Forget about her, have you seen Edward Rook’s shows? That man is certifiable, and it appears the daughter didn’t fall too far from the tree.” He laughs. “God, it’s kind of perfect for her to launch into some new stratosphere with Kingmaker isn’t it. Has she convinced you to appear on one of her shows? It must be a ratings thing. What a coup for her! I mean, she’s not the first to use a sex tape to make herself a household name.”

My head snaps back as if he’s hit me. “Laird, I’ve always respected you and value your opinion on most things, but in this case, I’m telling you to take your opinion and shove it up your tight, close-minded ass. India Rook is nothing like her shows and you are very wrong about our relationship. She’s the one who wants to keep it a secret. The only thing that bothers me about that video is that it’s a violation of India’s privacy, but I would walk out on a stage tomorrow night and tell the world I’m hers if she’d let me.”

“What video?”

India’s voice, soft with sleep, is like a spear to my stomach. I turn, taking in her dark, tousled hair, the photo-perfect curls from earlier hanging loose and tangled. Her eyes

look enormous in the dark kitchen, the smudged makeup making her look young and vulnerable. I swallow hard.

“Is that her?” Laird’s question cuts through the silence.

“We’ll talk later,” I say, switching the phone off.

India and I stare at each other across the kitchen expanse. She’s wearing the shirt I discarded on the floor when we got home and fell into bed, and she pulls it around her now. I remember laughing when she tried to yank it off me, one of the buttons flying. I step toward her, but she shakes her head, holding up a hand. “Who were you talking to?”

I clear my throat. “How long were you standing there?” I say, wincing at how lame that sounds to my ears. Clearly, she’s been there long enough but I’m trying to buy a little more time.

A little more time where it’s just us.

She bolts into action, brushing past me to grab her bag off the counter. I try to reach for her, but she shakes me off. “Who was on the phone?”

“Laird.”

She digs frantically in her bag. “Who’s that again?”

“Our manager.”

She holds up her phone, the screen lighting up with as many notifications as mine.

“India.” I reach for her hating the way she flinches when I touch her shoulder. I draw my hand back quickly. “I’m sorry.”

She releases a shaky breath. “What is it?” Her voice cracks a little at the end. “What am I going to find when I open this thing up?”

I gesture to the phone. “Just put it down.”

She whirls, waving the phone around. “And what good would that do? I could smash it into a million pieces, and it still wouldn’t make a difference.” She paces, my white shirt fluttering around her thighs. “Why would your manager know about me?” She points the phone at me. “Is this about whats-

her-name? The model? I knew it. You cheated on her, didn't you?"

I straighten my shoulders, stung by the accusation. "I can't believe you would think that. I'm not a cheater, or a liar."

India tosses her hair over her shoulder. "What are they saying about me?"

A faint scraping sound reaches my ears. Where is that coming from? I hold up my hand, cutting India off. "Shhh."

"Are you kidding me right now? Are you serio—" I lunge for her, wrapping my hand around her mouth before dropping down behind the island.

"Listen," I hiss. The scraping sound intensifies and my heart thunders in my ears. India's eyes are wide in the dark.

"What is that?" she whispers, grabbing my hand.

I strain, listening to the scraping sound turn into a rattle, like someone is trying to jiggle one of the doors open. It's coming from the mudroom area. Sweat pricks the back of my neck and my mind flashes to the mess in the house when we first opened the door. Has that guy come back? I squeeze her hand and make a stay here motion as I ease around the side of the island, trying to see into the dark garden. The rattling intensifies. This isn't Blaine or anyone else we know. They would have called by now for us to let them in. I wave at India, motioning to the phone in her hand. "Call the police," I whisper.

"What are you going to do?" she squeaks, her hand shaking as she switches to the emergency screen. "Stay here with me."

But all I can think of is that Nana and Gordon are next door. What if the guy gives up here and goes there? I crouch and slowly move towards the mudroom, keeping my back to the cabinets. There's a toolbox still sitting here, leftover from the work today and I reach inside, my fingers wrapping around the handle of a hammer. I lift it out and for good measure, I grab a screwdriver too, wishing I had pockets in my briefs. I hook the screwdriver in my waistband at the back and hope I

don't somehow stab myself with it as I carefully make my way into the mudroom.

At the door, I can see the handle jiggling and rage fills my chest. I take a deep breath and move in close, holding the hammer in one hand as I slide my fingers up the door to the bolt. With a twist of my wrist, I unlock it and pull the door open, using the power in my legs to launch myself at whomever is on the other side. The guy gives a surprised shout as I grab the front of his shirt, pushing him away from the door. He falls backwards holding up his hands, as I raise the hammer.

"Hold up," he cries.

I pause, feeling the adrenaline spike in my muscles, as I stop the forward momentum of my arm. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"I have a key." His eyes are wild, and he pats the ground around him. "I swear, it's here somewhere."

"Stop moving," I grind out. "The police can sort you out in a minute."

I sense a movement behind me. "Get back inside until the police get here."

"Cody?"

I freeze, squinting down at the guy on the ground, as India steps in beside me. I lower my arm completely when the guy looks up.

"India? What's this crazy guy doing in our house?"

Our house? Hang on now. "You're Cody?" I ask.

"Yeah." The guy starts to sit up until I step forward and point at him with the hammer.

"You can stay on the ground until the police get here."

Cody glances over at India. "India?"

India folds her arms and steps back leaning against the door frame. She looks pretty unsympathetic to me as she shakes her head. "What are you doing here, Cody?"

“You wouldn’t answer my texts.” He shoots me a quick look, going up on his elbows.

“Where is Madison? Is she lurking around here too?” She angles her hip, and I don’t miss the way Cody’s eyes drop down her body. Anger simmers in my gut. “I can’t imagine she let you come out here to see me all by yourself.”

Flashing lights flicker against the windows of my grandmother’s house. “The police are here,” I say, just as I hear the sound of breaking glass and a shriek.

“Police!” Two officers appear around the side of the house, weapons raised. I drop the hammer and wrap my arm around India.



“So, let me get this straight. You’re the ex-boyfriend?” The police officer sits at the dining room table pointing his pen at Cody, who nods, slumping in the chair.

“And she’s your current girlfriend?” He motions to Madison who is sitting next to him, in handcuffs, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. It probably would have gone better for her if she hadn’t refused to get out of the car when the police arrived, forcing them to break the window and haul her out. Madison’s decisions got worse from there, ranging from the old ‘don’t-you-know-who-I-am’ (the cop didn’t and told her he didn’t much care) to kicking one of the police officers in the knee, which is how she ended up in restraints. Personally, I’m glad for them, because the venomous look she gave India when she laid eyes on her sent a chill through me.

The police recognized my name immediately, and I admit to feeling a bit smug at the deferential treatment it afforded, especially when I saw how pissed off it made Cody.

“I can’t believe you got us arrested, you bitch. Just wait until I tell my followers,” Madison says to India ignoring the warning from the officer.

India doesn't even look at her. Ever since the police arrived and we dealt with Nana, who immediately rushed over to see if things were okay, she's been quiet. The police let us get dressed, but unfortunately, the only clothing we had here was what we'd worn to the bar earlier. I threw on my slacks but couldn't bear the way India looked at her dress as if she'd rather wear a sack of thorns than put it back on, so I told her to keep my shirt. The fact is, I love how she looks in it, and that has nothing to do with how sexy she is (although she is). It's dumb, maybe, but having my shirt wrapped around her curves feels like a claim. My shirt, my girl. She would roll her eyes at that for sure, but right now with her asshole ex pouting across the large, wood family-style table India chose for this space, I'll take what I can get in the claim department.

Nana took one look, assessed the situation and after giving India a quick hug, left and came back, talking her way past the police to hand India a pair of bright, purple sweatpants, which she is presently sporting, along with my dress shirt, her arms crossed over the front where the buttons gapped. She's been thumbing her phone for the last five minutes, her expression grim. I've ignored the buzzing of my own phone, but every vibration is a reminder that we have another thing to deal with when we sort this mess out.

"Madison..." Cody says in a warning voice.

"Oh, what? You're going to take her side now? How are we even supposed to have her on the show now after her porno went viral tonight? How do you want to spin that?"

India's head snaps up. "I'm not going to be on your show ever. I'm done with reality stuff."

Cody cocks his head. "What was that video tonight then?"

India chews her lip. "You saw it?"

"Everyone has seen it. Millions of views. It got taken down from a few places and I think it's behind a paywall now."

The thought of someone profiting from India's misfortune makes me sick. I need to call Laird back, get my dad involved,

anything to stop this from hurting her further.

“How did she convince you?” Cody jerks his chin in my direction, and I want to punch it.

“It was a private moment.” I want to tell everyone what really happened to India, but I don’t want to violate her privacy any more than it has been. I walk over to her side, but she doesn’t look at me. Tension radiates from her body as I wrap an arm around her.

Madison snorts. “So private it’s got more than a million views. I guess one way to show you’re over Cody is to hook up with someone from Kingmaker. That’s what you do right? You’re kind of like a serial killer, but with dating. Either way, the guy ends up fucked.”

“Madison,” Cody mutters to no effect.

India flinches under my hand and I look at the cop who was asking questions earlier. “Is this how your questioning usually goes?”

He shrugs. “You all seem to know each other.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that this guy was trying to break into her house.”

“I bought it,” Cody pipes up.

“With my money,” India fires back. “And then you didn’t show up and told me you wanted nothing to do with it. So, I changed the locks and did the project on my own.” She turns to the cop. “Just get them out of here, please.”

“You don’t want to press charges?”

Madison bursts into tears and Cody angrily attempts the same explanations he’s been making for the past thirty minutes or so. India shakes her head, stepping away from me.

“And give them more opportunities to talk shit about me?” She makes a slashing motion with her arm. “Get your girlfriend to shut-up, Cody. I won’t press charges about your attempted break-in, in the middle of the night, if you take Madison and get the hell out of here.”

“It was the middle of the night because that’s when our plane landed.”

“And you came to see me first?” Her eyes narrow. “You didn’t expect me to be here, did you?” She stalks to the table, planting her fists on the rustic wood. “You were going to do something to the house, weren’t you?”

Madison hiccups. “If you didn’t have your stupid little home decorating project, you’d have no choice but to do our show.”

India stills. Cody’s eyes widen and he backs his chair up as much as he can, with two cops standing behind him. I walk to the table and stand next to her, my heart pounding with anger.

“If she was here and you broke in, having her go through that fear would be enough for me to kick your ass, but if I find out that your plan to was destroy what she created here for some stupid prank, or to leave her without options, there isn’t a place far enough you could run to avoid me.”

“Are you going to let him threaten me?” Cody looks up at the officer.

“Oh, it’s not a threat. And I’m not just talking about kicking your ass either. Your show is so important to you, you’d try to ruin her life? Just you wait until I happen to mention in an interview how lame your pranks are. Or Tanner can talk about how uncool you are when he’s on stage. Or how about my sister, who happens to be Kingmaker’s social media manager, incite our fans to attack you the way you two sat back and let them attack India?”

I feel her gaze on me and I reach out to take her hand. Her slender fingers are freezing cold, and I squeeze them gently, willing the heat of my rage to warm her. Has no one ever stood up for her? Stood by her?

I turn to the cops. “This woman received death threats just for dating this guy.”

“Here in Nashville, ma’am?” one of them asks.

“No, back in L.A.” India pins Cody with a glare. “You knew. You saw the messages telling me to slit my wrists in the

bath tub or wishing I'd get hit by a car, and you did nothing. You said I was too sensitive for the business, and then you asked me to be on your show where you would portray me as wanting you back and you knew what would happen then." Her voice catches and I squeeze her hand again. She looks at me, her eyes dark. "I even got messages about how someone should rape me because I'm so desperate I need to steal someone's man."

My heart seizes and I pull her away from the table. "Just press charges. Leave them to the fucking wolves," I say, softly.

"It won't end. I'll be a laughingstock, desperate for attention." A tear shimmers on her cheek. "Just like with this video. I look like a monster trying to devour you. That's what they call me already, you know. A man eater." She pulls her hands out of mine, hugging herself. I reach out to pull her into my arms, but she stops me, stepping back. "Don't Noah. This only worked if it was just you and me and now it feels like the whole world is in it."

She walks past me, head held high and addresses the police officers avidly watching this whole mess go down like they have a VIP invitation to filming.

"I won't press charges. You don't deserve to have any connection to me, and I refuse to be part of whatever circus you two are putting together." India snaps her fingers. "On one condition. Leave me alone. Don't text me, call me, talk about me, don't even close your eyes and picture me." She tosses her hair and turns to Madison. "This condition applies to both of you. If I find out my name is in your mouth, I'll let him loose on his promise." She points a thumb in my direction, before turning and walking out of the room, leaving me with a stupid grin on my face in admiration.

I let the police take Madison and Cody away, watching from the front door as they're escorted to their car. India let them off too lightly in my opinion. The warm breeze caresses my face as I watch the sky lighten, an indigo stripe appearing in the inky blackness. I really don't want to face the day. I lower my head, suddenly feeling exhausted.

I head back inside and pick up my phone, even though it feels a lot like handling a snake. I check the time. It's early, but at least we're in the same time zone.

I tap Sterling's name and wait for her to connect.

She answers on the second ring. "It took you long enough to call," she says.

I grin. Just hearing her voice makes me optimistic. "You could have called me," I say, trying not to picture what's going on when I hear Tanner's low grumble in the background.

"I figured you were fielding calls from Laird and Vera."

"Laird, yes, but I haven't heard from Vera yet."

"Okay, let's get the obvious out of the way," she says, drawing in a deep breath. "A freaking sex tape? Like, I don't want to see that."

I rub the back of my neck. "Well, I wasn't too happy about seeing pictures of you and Tanner either, but what can you do?"

"But India Rook? She collects guys like designer shoes."

"But Tanner Steele? He's so dark and miserable," I fire back. "I can't believe you would make a judgement like that."

"Hey, I don't know her, I only know what I see online. You've known Tanner forever. You should know better."

"Yeah, well. That video doesn't show everything."

"God, there's more to see?"

"I don't mean it like that." I drag my hand through my hair and glance down the hallway. I haven't heard a peep from India, and I really should go check on her, but I need to take care of this first. "I mean, it wasn't a one-time hook-up. She's the person who bought the house next door to Nana and she's really nothing like what you see online. That's kind of the role she's been thrust into."

"Well, she's Edward Rook's kid. That's got to fuck you up a bit."

“Right, so here’s the thing. I’ve been helping her with this project, and we’re friends.”

“More than friends according to Tanner, based on that video.”

“Sterling...”

“What? I couldn’t watch it myself, so I had him do it and describe it to me in a very PG way.”

“I need you to fix this. I need you to kill any shit-talk about India.”

“Laird thinks the easiest way for it to blow over is to chalk it up as another India conquest.”

“I will burn it down if Kingmaker comes out with anything negative about India. You spin it just like you spin it for me. Protect her.”

Sterling gasps. “You really like her. What about Rachel?”

“Rachel knows about India and whatever ideas she was harboring about us are done. She can move on quickly.” A thought hits me. “Did you know Laird was trying to push me back to Rachel with this wholesome fairytale shit?”

“I did not. I know the label wants you to come up with some feel-good story for the tour, but I didn’t put two-and-two together. That’s crazy.”

“There’s a lot of crazy stuff in our business.”

“Okay, well what really happened, Noah? With India?”

“Someone thought they could take advantage of her.” Sterling’s outraged curse rings in my ears. “Yeah, and just because she’s got a reputation doesn’t make it open season on her. She seems okay now, physically, but this is such a violation, and I can’t imagine how she’s feeling.”

“Have you asked her?”

“It’s been a night.”

“Okay, so you want me to spin it into what?”

“I don’t know. Something that doesn’t make her look like a villain.”

“Are you sure about this, Noah? You could just let it go.”

“I’m sure about her.”

Sterling’s voice softens. “I hope she’s who you think she is.”

She’s everything. “She is.” I disconnect the call and turn my phone back off.

I look down the dark hallway, a million thoughts running through my head, but the one I’d had when I was talking to my sister kept overpowering all of them. *She’s everything.* I don’t know exactly when or how it happened. Maybe it was when I saw her gorgeous ass hanging out of that window. Maybe it was when she tucked her t-shirt into her shorts and crawled around on the floor taping the trim for paint. Maybe it was the first time I kissed her, but somehow, my feelings for her were inevitable. I don’t give a shit if everyone thinks I fall in love every five minutes. I know the difference. I wanted to be in love. I figured if I gave every relationship an honest try maybe it would happen, maybe I’d finally feel that spark.

But it never did.

Until India.

Just holding her hand feels so fucking good and what happened tonight – Zander Storm and Cody Dickface, or whatever his name is – it doesn’t matter. In this moment, I remember what my parents said about the secret to their relationship.

There’s no secret. We just knew.

I just know. What good is being a goddamn rock star if I can’t date who I want? Her dad married a chicken for crying out loud, and he’s still a legend.

I start down the hall, following the faint light into the bedroom. India is sitting on the bed, holding a pillow to her chest. Her dark curls spill over my white shirt and my fingers itch to bury them in her hair, pull her down into the sheets and

hold her until the sky goes from hazy to bright blue and dark again. I wish we could just lie here in this cozy cocoon she created and block out the world.

“Hey,” I say softly, hovering at the door.

“Is everyone gone?”

“They sure are. I’m sorry all this happened tonight.” I push off the door frame and walk to the bed, sinking down beside her. She doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t move away, so I wrap an arm around her, and she turns, resting her head against my shoulder.

“Want some ice cream?” I ask.

She laughs. “That sounds so normal.”

“It *is* normal. We can do whatever the fuck we want today.”

She sighs and her breath hitches a little, causing my heart to stumble. I squeeze her tighter, but I can feel her slipping away, even though she doesn’t move.

“I’m going to try to finish up with the contractors and just be done with this.”

I freeze. “Just be done with what?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Noah. You’re going on tour in a month or so and I’ll go…” She sits up. “I’ll go back to L.A. or somewhere else. Eventually, people will forget about the video, or someone else will do something stupid and everyone will talk about them, especially if I’m not around.”

“What do you mean, not around?” I feel out of the loop completely, like she’s on one wavelength, and I’m on another, completely separate one. I hear her words but they’re not making sense to me.

“No matter what, I’m not going back to reality television. I just can’t do it. It’s not who I really am.”

“You can do whatever you want.” I lift my arm, gesturing to the room we’re in. “This is proof. As for the rest of the world, fuck ‘em. I’ve got enough swagger for the both of us.”

India disentangles herself from my arms, sliding off the bed. She thrusts her hands through her hair, sweeping it back and twisting it so it falls in a long rope. “There is no us, Noah.”

INDIA

I can't look at him. At his gorgeous, disheveled dark blond hair, or his broad shoulders that I just want to hide behind and pretend he's strong enough to protect me from the nightmare out there.

I'll need to face it soon enough. I swallow, the sour, bitter taste lingering in my mouth. I can't even process what happened after, with Cody trying to break in here of all things. Thank God I changed the locks. He'd been trying to use the old key – the one he should have given to me before I flew out here. I scrape my hair back from my face again, tugging the handfuls in frustration. I already sent a quick text to Whitney who keeps calling me, but I can't face anyone right now.

"There is no us, Noah." I say, my heart shriveling up at the words. "There was just sex. And tonight, it wasn't even really me and you." I swallow hard again, forcing the words out despite the pain in my chest. "I would have fucked anyone tonight, if they'd been with me." My hands are shaking, so I clench my fists, fixing my gaze over Noah's head.

"I know that's not true." He stands, reaching for me, pain written all over his face.

"Please don't touch me," I say, stepping back, but not before I catch the hurt in his eyes. I know I'll break if he touches me. I'll throw myself into his arms and cry and pretend I believe that everything is going to be okay. But it's not.

The comments.

I skipped right to them and God, the comments. About me, my body, my career – nothing is off-limits. Depending on which ones you read, I’m too fat or my ass is clearly surgically enhanced. My tits are lopsided, and Noah Whitlock can do so much better. Hasn’t he ever heard of sloppy seconds? I squeeze my eyes shut, wishing my brain didn’t keep seeing the text like a rolling litany of hate. For every one comment that was positive, there were twenty more designed to rip my heart out. The comments about Noah, the way we were together in that video. I can’t bear to have him read those comments. To react to those comments. To have to look at me knowing what people really think about me.

I shrug, turning away from him. “This was never going to last, Noah. You agreed. It just ended a little earlier than we expected. But it’s over.” I start to unbutton my shirt, to give it back to him, but then I think better of it. “I’ll have your shirt cleaned and delivered to your grandmother’s.”

“Fuck the shirt, India. You’re telling me you can just walk away from me?”

The horrible ache in my heart intensifies, but I school my features, putting my game face on one last time. “I’m not walking away from you, Noah. This is my house and I’m asking you to leave.” I turn and meet his gaze, pressing my tongue into the roof of my mouth to keep the tears at bay.

The silence in the room is thick. A muscle jumps in his jaw and I see a sheen of emotion in his eyes that is nearly my undoing. I don’t want to hurt this amazing man. I steel my emotions. That’s exactly why I have to push him away. In the long run, being with me will only hurt him. His reputation, maybe his career, and eventually, he’ll resent me for it. Noah is so good.

And all I’ll ever be good at is playing the bad girl.

“Please leave. I know you think you need to take care of me, but I am fine.”

“Is this what you really want?” His cheekbones are stained with color but he’s not backing down.

I nod. “Thanks for all your help with the house. You’re a good friend.”

“Is that all I am to you? A friend?” His voice is incredulous.

The silence between us grows louder while he waits for my answer. Finally, I nod. Noah blinks and then abruptly spins on his heel and walks out the door. I hold my breath, counting in my head until I hear the door slam shut. The tears burning my eyelids finally spillover when I hear the tiny whirring sound that lets me know he engaged the lock on the door. Mr. Perfect, until the very end.

INDIA

It's been two weeks since I wrapped up the project, approved the video submission Whitney's team helped me put together, and wallowed in my misery, here in the house that reminds me Noah at every turn. This is what I've always done. Walk away, focus on something new, no hard feelings.

Except this time, it's different. I don't know how this guy got under my skin in such a short amount of time, but instead of focusing on anything, I find myself watching YouTube footage of Kingmaker concerts and sobbing into my ice cream. Despite the fact that I've been a complete bitch to her grandson, Nana Stella showed up on my doorstep two days after I sent Noah away with muffins, ice cream and a pitcher of margaritas to formally invite me to join the Fifty Shades book club. Then she told me that Noah's dad, or at least his firm, had successfully obtained an order to start the process of getting the video pulled down on the basis that it was non-consensual. I panicked a little at that, not wanting Noah to be expose to any backlash or assumption that he had done something wrong, but then I spoke with my agent and realized this whole thing was connected to the affidavit I'd signed about what happened that night. I'd thought I was making a statement to protect myself, but as it turns out, Noah was rescuing me again.

At least I assume it was Noah. I can't say for sure because I haven't spoken to him in person since he left that morning. He texts me every day, fun, friendly texts that make my throat burn with all of the emotion missing from the words on my

phone. Friends without the benefits. It's psychotic because he's acting exactly like he's just friend, which is what I wanted him to do, but at night I miss the heat of his skin against mine and during the day I catch myself missing his corny lines, the way he hummed as he worked and the wicked smiles he'd throw my way.

I'm a mess.

My phone rings and I glance at it, not recognizing the number. Reluctantly, I tap the screen. "Hello?"

"May I speak with India Rook, please?" The woman's voice on the other end is posh.

"This is she." It had better not be a reporter or worse, some screenwriter who thinks the next big streaming series is a tell-all about my life.

"This is Melinda Fontaine, one of the judges from the HomeLove project."

I lose my ability to breath. Have they decided so soon? "Yes," I croak.

"I wanted to reach out to you directly because I really loved your submission."

"You did?" Excitement bubbles up in my chest. Maybe this is it, the call I've been waiting for.

"I did. You have an amazing natural talent. Unfortunately, you were not the successful candidate for the competition."

I blink, my elation bursting like a bubble. "I'm not?" I swallow the lump in my throat, trying to remember if I have any ice cream left in the freezer. "Well, thank you for letting me know and for the opportunity."

"I'm sorry, Ms. Rook. I know you must be disappointed at this decision."

Disappointed? Disappointed is when you realize there's no ice cream left in the freezer. Devastated is what I am right now. I had so much pinned on this opportunity, and I enjoyed working on it so much. Some of that can be attributed to Noah, but I was happy. For the first time in a very long time, I woke

up excited to do more than recover from a hangover and decide which pictures I should post to my social media feeds.

“... I can give you time to think about it.”

I shake my head. Was Melinda still talking? “I’m sorry, I think I missed that last part,” I say.

“No problem, I understand. Part of the mentorship from the competition was an opportunity to learn and work with me. I was very impressed with your passion, the fact that you didn’t choose an ostentatious celebrity mansion to work on, and the way you kept the original feel of the house, while updating it to still be luxurious and livable. I’d like to offer you the opportunity to work with me, to learn more about design and expand what you seem to do naturally. It won’t necessarily lead to a show, but if you are truly interested in continuing your education, I would love to help you.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, stunned.

“I recognize you may want the television opportunity and I can’t guarantee—”

“No! I mean, thank you, but the tv part wasn’t the biggest draw for me at all.” And it’s not. After being away from it this summer and dealing with the leaking of the video of Noah and me, I can say with absolute certainty that I’m not unhappy about losing the television part of the competition. “I would love to work with you, and I really, really appreciate the offer. This is amazing.”

“Great. I have some obligations with respect to the competition, but HomeLove is aware I was going to reach out to you with this offer. I am truly sorry that you didn’t win.”

It feels like a win to me. After we talk for a few more minutes, I get more excited about what’s happening. We end the call and I immediately want to text Noah to share the news with him. My hands are shaking so I text Whitney first.

Thank you again for all your help with the design comp

That’s what friends are for doll

I didn't win

Those bastards! They wouldn't know design talent if it hit them in the face with a paint brush

I can always count on Whit to have my back. She'll be planning a boycott of the network any minute now.

One of the judges reached out to offer me an opportunity to work with her and continue my education

That's great! I'm so proud!

Crap. Gotta run. Virtual drinks later?

She follows it up with a series of heart, wine glass and cheers emojis and I respond with a heart back. I wander into the kitchen and gaze out at the garden, now perfectly landscaped with low-maintenance shrubs and perennial flowers. It isn't as dramatic as Millie's wildflower garden or Nana Stella's beautifully maintained flower beds, but it's simple, organized and peaceful. The pool gently ripples in the sunlight, and I smile. It really is a soothing oasis.

Not winning the competition means I don't get the prize money either. I'm determined not to go back to reality television, and I want to prove to my parents that I'm doing more than spending their money on clothes, parties and top-shelf cocktails. As much as I hate the thought of it because I feel sort of attached to this place, I don't need it anymore. I should sell it to someone who appreciates it, who can raise a family here and find peace in the little slice of comfort I've created.

My heart pangs as I google real estate offices in the area. Maybe I should just ask Millie for the name of her sister's cousin-by-marriage neighbor as I plug in the zip code. The results pop up with Justin's smiling face and I wonder if Noah ever found a house to buy or if he just gave up the idea of Nashville. I haven't seen him next door and I'm afraid to ask

Nana about it. I keep my texts to a minimum, responding only when he texts and always in the friend zone.

Maybe once I sell the house, it'll be easier to pretend I don't have a mountain of regret for sending Noah away that morning.

NOAH

I sink down onto the couch next to my mother, who curses and throws down a pile of wool, accidentally hitting me with the knitting needles. “Ow,” I protest, shifting away from the weapons which causes Gordon to dig his tiny claws into my arm.

“I’m so sorry, honey.” Mom glares at the blue tangle. “Whoever said knitting is relaxing doesn’t know what they’re talking about.” She pats my leg. “I don’t think I did any permanent damage.”

“What do you need to relax for?” I ask, alarmed. I would have thought mom would be more relaxed behind the wheel of a sports car than trying to knit... whatever that thing is supposed to be.

“Oh, no particular reason. I’m trying to convince your father to ease back at work and we thought we’d find some hobbies.”

I look around the lake house, which I think has new furniture since I was here a couple of months ago for our annual Fourth of July party. “Are you bored, mom?”

“Not exactly, but with you kids off on your world tours and exploits, I thought a meditative hobby would be a good idea.”

“And by exploits you mean...”

“I’m not a prude by any stretch of the imagination, Noah. And I’m glad your father’s firm was able to step in and assist your label with that video, but—”

Heat creeps up the back of my neck and my cheeks burn. “Mom, you didn’t actually see the video, did you?”

She twists her lips, giving me major side-eye. “I didn’t, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t hear about it, and once I heard what happened to that poor girl, well. Noah, I can’t believe you weren’t more careful.”

I pet Gordon on the head, relieved my mother didn’t see me in the act. It’s bad enough when I know my parents are in the audience occasionally. I’m not a self-conscious person, but Kingmaker can veer over into dirty, gritty and seductive and letting some girl from the audience lick water off my chest? Well, let’s just say I try not to think about my mom when it happens. This whole train of thought only serves to remind me that India will never be at one of my shows. She’ll never be backstage waiting for me. She’ll never feel the heart-pounding excitement of being part of the energy with me.

I slump further down the couch. Ever since I left Nana’s I think about her every minute. The smell of coffee in the morning reminds me of her and when I lay my head on my pillow at night, my arms ache to hold her. I’ve stalked her socials, but she hasn’t updated anything. I’ve also kept an eye on Cody and Madison and so far, they haven’t so much as breathed in India’s direction. I noticed that commenting has been turned off on her public pages and I’m comforted that dad was able to swing into action and have one of the partners in his firm act swiftly to control the video.

I text her every day. Stupid little meaningless inquiries that show I’m exactly where she shoved me – deep in the friend zone. She texts me back, responding just enough to answer me but never enough for me to read anything into it. I shouldn’t have walked out of the house the way I did. At the time, I was trying to be understanding because what happened to her was awful and devastating, but at least it happened to us together.

Or at least I saw it that way. She obviously didn’t.

I am trying to give her space, but what if I give her so much space it can’t ever be closed again?

“Are you going to talk to me about this?” Mom asks.

“The video? Hell no.”

“About the girl. Nana likes her.” Mom laughs softly. “Apparently she’s joined the book club.” Gordon’s moved down and is investigating the wool blob. Mom shifts it off the couch, giving him a quick stroke on the neck. “You’ve had lots of girlfriends, honey.”

“India isn’t my girlfriend. She didn’t even want to be seen in public with me.”

My mother bristles. “Does she think she’s too good for you?”

I shake my head. “No. The complete opposite. She’s kind of a character on those reality shows, and she’s been exposed to them since she was a child, so I think she kind of thinks as herself as the villain, or the bad girl, or the one fans can count on for drama.”

“Typecast.”

“Yeah, kind of. Anyway, I think she thought I was too good for her.”

Mom leans over and ruffles my hair. “I think you’re too good for most things.”

I pull away, smoothing my hand over my head. “I’ve had lots of girlfriends, but I’ve never felt this way before.” I duck my head. “I was even jealous over Blaine.”

“Oh sweetie. He’d never do anything to hurt you.”

“Logically, I know that, but it didn’t matter. I wanted to be the only one she saw.”

My mom takes a deep breath, turning to me on the couch. “What else was different?”

“We laughed. A lot. I actually like her. I like that she doesn’t take me seriously and that me being Noah Whitlock, part of Kingmaker, was kind of a negative for her.”

“I imagine it is considering who her father is.”

I shrug. “How did you know dad was it for you?”

“I’ve told you before, some of it is just knowing.” She smiles and pats my leg. “Knowing in your heart that this is the person for you, no matter what happens. Sometimes, when your dad used to work crazy hours, or was away for business, my day didn’t feel complete because I didn’t get to kiss him goodnight. He’s like the other part of me.”

That’s how I feel right now. Like my days are blending together without any sort of completion. I can’t leave for Europe without letting India know how I feel. I can’t let this space just drift wider until she can’t find her way back to us.

And there is an *us*. I just have to convince her of that fact.

INDIA

“Sold? That quickly?” I bite my lip, listening as the realtor talks about all the interest she had in the place and how well it showed. I nod, trying to dredge up some enthusiasm. It’s not her fault it sold faster than my heart would prefer. She names an offer price that has my jaw dropping.

“Wow. That seems like a lot.” It’s more than I paid, which I expected, having listed it to try and recover the costs of the project, but I didn’t expect it to go that high. I accept the offer and she lets me know she’ll email me the paperwork shortly for review. Satisfaction blooms in my stomach. I did it. I flipped this house. I depended on myself, and I did it.

With a little help.

I shake off the thought. I haven’t heard from Noah at all in over a week and I figure he must be busy getting ready to go on tour. I can’t bring myself to ask Nana Stella where he is and she doesn’t bring it up, except to say that she hopes he goes to some of the Christmas markets while he’s in Europe.

Christmas is still a couple of months away but suddenly my throat catches at the thought of having a tree, sparkly and magical in the corner, over by the window where Noah first rescued me. Christmas has always been about holiday episodes, parties and finding the perfect outfits for each event. I’ve lost track of how many Christmases I’ve had in the summer, unwrapping presents and drinking hot chocolate, just to film those episodes for airing months later. I turn away,

debating whether I should break the silence and text Noah, just to let him know the house has been sold. His grandmother will tell him, I suppose as soon as the realtor changes the sign.

My shoulders droop and I trudge back to the kitchen. I open the fridge and take out a bottle of champagne that the realtor placed there. I don't know if it was for the showing, or the open house we don't need now, or if I'm supposed to give it back to her, but I twist the cage and gently release the cork into my palm. I grab a glass from the shelf and pour myself a measure, letting the bubbles tickle my nose before I take a sip. I guess I need to figure out what I do next. My mentorship will start in the new year and I'm so excited about that, but I need to think about where I want to live first.

The doorbell chimes and I check my phone to see if anyone texted me. My realtor said she'd email me the paperwork, so it can't be her. I open my doorbell camera and see a delivery guy standing with his back to the camera. He's got grocery bags in both arms and he's wearing a ball cap so I can't really see anything except the large happy face on the front.

"Hello?" I ask through the speaker.

"Dinner service."

"I didn't—" *Wait a second.* "Can you face the camera, please?" I stare at my phone, my heart quickening as the guy jostles the bags and tilts the hat up with his forearm, giving me a glimpse of the dark ink swirling around his wrist. I run to the door, flinging it open.

"Noah," I gasp.

His blue eyes meet mine and he smiles, making me go weak all over. "What are you doing here?" I ask.

"Waiting to be invited in?"

I step aside and he strides in, heading straight for the kitchen to deposit his bags on the island. Dazed I watch as he unpacks them, as if he'd just stepped out for a quick grocery run.

"What is all this?"

“Dinner.” He pulls out a bottle of wine and nods at the glass in my hand. “We’ll open this one after you’re done.” After he’s unloaded what looks like an entire gourmet order, he brushes his hands on his slacks and pulls open the island drawer to grab a couple of the pans I bought after I moved out of Millie’s she-shed. He twirls one like he’s on the Food Network. “Nana told me you’d moved in here.”

“I did, but it’s not for long.” I take a sip of the champagne. “I sold the house.”

He doesn’t react, but instead moves the groceries to the back counter and wipes down the island. He washes his hands and starts unwrapping potatoes from their foil wrappings. “I baked these earlier so they should be good to go.” He peels the potatoes and slices them in half, reaching back for a weird looking silver press thing.

“What’s that?” I ask, sliding onto one of the stools on my side of the island. I’m not really sure what to make of him suddenly showing up prepared to cook but I’m afraid to ask too many questions. I miss him and the emotional rollercoaster I’ve been on every time I look at him.

“Potato ricer.” His deft actions have me eyeing his muscular forearms and I’m not sure I knew how sexy cooking could be. Within a couple of minutes, he’s got a pile of potato sprinkles in front of him, and he beats an egg and pours it on top of the pile, adding flour, salt and a few spoonfuls of what he tells me is ricotta cheese, before gently pressing the whole thing together.

As I watch he rolls out the dough and cuts it into little pieces, using a fork to make fancy shapes. I sip the champagne, confused, but content to just watch this gorgeous man doing whatever it is he’s doing in the kitchen.

Finally, he looks up. “I promised you I would make you my mind-blowing gnocchi recipe when you found me a house.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t...” I trail off. “It’s you. You bought this house,” I say faintly.

He wipes his hands on a kitchen towel. “I bought *our* house.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand.” I grip the edge of the island. “You’re leaving for the tour soon.”

“I am. But the tour will be over in five months, and I’ve got to have a place to live.” He stretches his arms out. “You’ve made this place everything I could ever want. There’s just one thing that’s missing.” He rounds the island. “You.”

My heart is hammering, and I snatch up my glass, draining the last of the champagne, ignoring the sharp burn down my throat. Eyes watering, I turn to him. “What are you talking about?”

He moves next to me, leaning against the island. “This house is us. I mean, it’s you – don’t get me wrong, you did all of this – but this house brought us together.”

I give a choked laugh. “I think it was the window I got stuck in that did that.”

“And boy, am I grateful I was there to help you.” He gives a low whistle. “When I saw those curves draped there, like low-hanging fruit—”

I smack him in the chest. “Stop it.” Sobering, I slide down off the stool. “I still don’t understand.”

He gently lays his hands on either side of my face and tilts it up. “I know you told me to leave, and I did. I know you think there’s nothing between us to build on, but there is. I’m your friend, India, yes, but I’m also so much more and I think you know it too.” He brushes his lips against mine and I shiver.

“I know you don’t want to date a rock star, and I promise you, I’m also more than that job. When I’m with you, I’m just Noah Whitlock. Your friend, part-time handyman, ice cream connoisseur and the man who is so in love with you he can’t think straight.”

“You do?” Tears fill my eyes. Hope and fear battle with each other in my chest. “But—”

He shakes his head. “You don’t have to say it back.” He drops his hands to my shoulders. “When I say I love you, it’s not just because I want you. Being away the last couple of weeks, there’s no doubt in my mind that I want you. I’ve wanted you, I think, since I saw you skulking around the yard here like the world’s worst cat burglar.”

A watery sniff escapes me, half-laugh, half-exasperation.

“But despite wanting you so much, it wasn’t just that. First, I thought I had to convince you that we belong together, but I realized I was wrong there too. The words aren’t about trying to convince you of anything. I just love you. It’s a state of being for me, like breathing or playing guitar. It’s who I am. Just a man, not perfect, who is in love with you.”

It’s as if all the air has been sucked out of the room. My heart is thundering like I’m trying to run from something, or maybe it’s that I need to run to something. I’ve been so scared of making the same mistakes that I didn’t see what was directly in front of me.

“Is this the part where I say, ‘you make me want to be a better woman?’” I ask, my eyes blurring.

He kisses the tip of my nose. “No. You’re already the best woman for me.”

“I wasn’t lying when I said I don’t want to date a rock star because of the craziness that comes with that whole lifestyle.”

“Well, don’t date me then. Move in here with me. Let me feed you gnocchi and ice cream. We’ll be the happiest, most boring couple on the planet and there won’t be any good gossip about us.”

My jaw drops. “Move in with you?”

“Well, maybe marry me first.” Noah stuns me by dropping down to his knees. “I was planning on wowing you with my gnocchi and chicken meatballs and then asking, because there’s no way you’ll say no after you get my balls in your mouth.”

I choke. “Did you really just propose to me and make a balls joke at the same time?”

He looks up at me and grins. “Can you resist me?”

I sink down to my knees. “I can’t. And I don’t want to.”

“Does that mean yes?” He searches my face, the earnest, optimistic look in his eyes my undoing.

I nod, the tears that had been threatening to fall ever since he walked in spill over and Noah swipes them away with his thumbs. “I never want to be the cause of your tears.” He leans in and hugs me, stroking his hands down my back. The gentle touch makes me cry harder.

He leans back. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“I missed you. I’ve never felt lonely in my life, until I sent you away.”

“Well, I’m back and I’m not going anywhere.”

“Except on tour.” My heart cracks at the idea of being without him again.

“You’ll come with me, won’t you?” He frowns. “What about the timing for the HomeLove thing? When will you hear about that?”

“Oh. I didn’t get it.”

His eyebrows shoot up before narrowing again. “Are they blind? Why not?”

I stop him with a hand on his chest. “It’s okay. Melinda Fontaine called me and said she loved my submission and offered me a chance to work with her.” I shrug. “It’s an amazing opportunity and she’s the person I wanted to mentor me anyway. I still can’t believe she saw something in my work.”

Noah covers my hand with his. “Why can’t you believe it? You’re amazing. And she didn’t just see something in your work – she saw something in you. Your passion. Your talent.”

I thump his chest. “Stop, you’re going to make me cry again.” I cuddle in against him. “She has some commitments with the show for a few months, so it looks like I might be free.”

“How do you feel about Europe?” Noah slides his hand under my ponytail, tugging the ends. “I know being on tour is rough, but I don’t know that I can spend another minute without you.”

“Maybe if I bring a toolbelt for you.”

He laughs. “I’ll even wear it on stage, if I know you’ll be there waiting for me afterwards.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

Noah captures my mouth in a crushing kiss. It’s full of sweetness and hope and I throw my arms around his neck, tumbling us both to the floor. The kiss goes on and on, drugging me with pleasure, until he breaks away, leaning over me with a smile. “If we keep this up, I’ll never get around to dinner.”

“Right now, I’m only hungry for you,” I say, wiggling out of my dress.

He pulls his t-shirt over his head and my mouth waters at the sight of his sculpted chest, those gorgeous tattoos that are all mine now. I roll up on my knees and trace my tongue over one of the dark lines. He pulls me closer, dipping his head to lick the sensitive spot along my collarbone, making me shiver. His mouth drifts down, nuzzling my cleavage while he unhooks my bra, sliding it down my arms and tossing it behind him.

“I am the luckiest man in the world,” he says right before he captures my nipple with his lips, causing my back to arch when he nips at the hard tip with his teeth. “I get dessert first.”

I slide my hands into his hair, holding him against me while he licks and sucks my sensitive breasts. “I can’t wait, Noah.”

He doesn’t let up with his sweet torture, but inches my panties down my thighs, much too slowly. I shimmy them the rest of the way off and spread my legs, guiding one of his hands to where I need his touch the most. He slides a finger through my center, groaning at the wetness he finds there. He

dips inside, wringing a moan from me as I buck my hips, wanting more.

Noah kneels over me, guiding his cock to my entrance, swirling it there before slipping it in, and my pussy contracts hard. “Greedy girl,” he says, dropping his weight to mine, his hips thrusting.

Heat rushes over my skin as I rock underneath him, tilting my hips up so he hits every secret, sensitive place inside.

“You feel so good,” he grinds out, fucking me hard and deep and just the way I need. My nails scrape down his back as the pleasure builds in my body and he catches my lips in a fierce kiss, thrusting his tongue in my mouth while he pounds into me and I come apart beneath him, raw and aching and gasping.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me.”

I open my eyes at his husky demand, and I see his gaze is so fierce, the color high on his sharp cheekbones. His body feels like steel over mine and I see he’s trying to control it, to make sure I’m wild with pleasure first. I reach up and cup his cheek.

“I love you, Noah.”

His jaw tightens and I feel his body harden before he snaps his hips to mine, tension rolling through me before it breaks and my entire body is electrified while he groans my name, collapsing over me.

I wrap my arms around him, amazed at the thundering of his heart against my chest.

“I kept looking for a spark,” he mutters against my cheek.

I kiss his shoulder. “I’d say you found it.”

He pushes himself off me, smoothing my hair away from my face. “I love you, India Rook. I will always love you.”

I tilt my head, looking up at the groceries spread on the counters, his silly hat thrown on a chair and the home we created together, even though neither of us knew it at the time.

“You know what we should do after dinner?” I say, tracing my finger over the muscles in his arm.

“More of this?” He wiggles his hips, reminding me that he really does have the stamina of a rock star.

“Well, yes, but I was thinking ice cream.”

He arches a brow. “Vanilla?”

“It’s not boring,” I protest.

“No, it’s not.” He drops his forehead to mine. “It’s perfect.”

I know there’s no such thing as perfection, but right now, lying together like this, it feels pretty close.



THANKS FOR READING Noah and India’s story. I hope you enjoyed it and if you did, please consider leaving a review, it’s so helpful for authors and we really appreciate it.

Blaine’s story is next! <https://amzn.to/3FhbUPS>

TEQUILA AND CARPE DIEM were my downfall. At least that’s what I tell myself the next morning when I realize I talked my best friend’s older brother into instructing me in the art of seduction...

It’s no secret I’ve never been a fan of my best friend’s older brother.

Don’t feel bad for him – he doesn’t need me; he has millions of fans the world over.

Blaine Adams is a rock star, and he knows it.

He’s handsome, charming and far too arrogant for his own good.

But when I need lessons in how to make a man sit up and beg, I can’t think of a better teacher.

He's completely off-limits.

My best friend will lose her mind.

I might have already lost mine because when he agrees, with one tiny little condition, I commit to doing what he wants, when he wants it for three months.

It won't be a problem because I can definitely resist the temptation that is Blaine Adams. I don't even like him...so why am I counting down the minutes until the next lesson?

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