

MILEHIGH
love



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Rock Star

EMBER DAVIS

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Mile High Rock Star (Mile High Love Series) by Ember Davis

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Contains explicit love scenes and adult language. The suggested reading audience is 18 years or older.

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For anyone hoping to join the mile high club—hopefully it's in
a private jet.

Commercial aircraft bathrooms aren't big enough and we all
know it.

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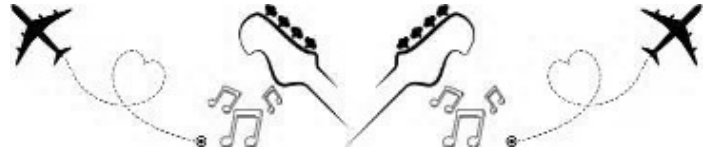
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CHAPTER 1

ELLINGTON

Nervousness isn't exactly a sensation I'm used to, but right now I'm a mixture of curiosity, nervousness, and anxiety. It's all because I have no idea why I'm being called into the conference room at my brand-new job. I'm used to not knowing how a mission is going to go after my years in the military, but I knew I had some control because the skills I had to rely on were so deeply ingrained and I could trust my instincts.

I've only been working for Higgins Security for a week, and this is my first assignment, if I am getting one that is. I uprooted my entire life and moved to Denver to work at HS team because I was searching for...something after leaving the military. The moment I got the job and started the process of moving, it felt right.

The guys who run Higgins Security—Blake, Duncan, Ryder, Grayson, and Sebastian—are all former military who know what it's like to rejoin civilian life. They know what I've been going through. The struggle to find your place again in a different world from the one you've been living within while serving is very real. I've been drifting for almost a year, never really finding my footing, but I hope this move will help me.

It feels like my feet are almost on solid ground again.

Which is ironic because having my feet on the ground wasn't exactly part of my military life as a helicopter pilot. Maybe that's why I haven't been able to find my place because I haven't been in the sky. I don't know, but I'm determined to figure it all out.

When I open the door to the conference room, I'm a little surprised to not only see the main core of HS at the table, but also the guys from the rock band Suburban Outcasts. I've heard they're friends and that HS handles the security for SO

as well as their record label, White Picket Fences Records. I don't recognize the woman at the table, and I focus on her to prevent me from embarrassing myself.

It's hard not to know who the guys in Suburban Outcasts are. Cole, Elliot, Gavin, and Booker are household names and I've been a fan of their music for years. I've never had their posters or anything, but their fame combined with how attractive they are would make anyone a little starstruck. Even me.

I clear my throat and Blake Higgins gives me a big smile and motions for me to come and take a seat at the table between himself and the woman I don't know. When I sit down a bottle of water is passed to me and I don't waste time cracking the seal and taking a drink. Is it hot in here? What is going on?

"Thank you for coming down so quickly, Ellington," Blake begins. I give him a nod as he passes me a folder. Not going to lie, it's a thick folder and I eye it warily when he points to it. "Inside you're going to find a lot of information on your first assignment."

Booker Holland, the bassist for SO, snorts, "Don't let everything in there scare you off." "Ow," my eyes snap up when he shouts out to find him rubbing the back of his head and glaring at Gavin. "What the fuck was that for?"

"Don't scare her off before she can find out what we're asking of her," Gavin, SO's drummer, warns.

I can't help but smile because they remind me of some of the guys that I spent years around. Brothers. It's clear they're family and don't take each other's shit. I relax slightly, their banter putting me at ease, and open the folder to find a dossier about Hayes Jennings and cringe.

I've heard of the rock star. Kind of like with SO, it's hard to ignore him and what he's up to. I don't follow his career closely or anything, but when he's splashed all over the tabloids and news for his antics, it's difficult to ignore completely.

“Hayes Jennings?” I look up at Blake and then around the table again. “He needs some protection?”

“What he needs is an attitude adjustment,” the woman next to me sneers, “or a lobotomy.” Grayson chuckles and leans over to kiss the woman’s temple which causes my eyes to go big and round. The woman looks at me and grins. “I’m sorry, I should have introduced myself. I’m Kat and I run PR for WPF Records, amongst other things.” Grayson clears her throat, and she chuckles under her breath. “I’m also Grayson’s wife.”

“Should have led with that, Kitten,” Grayson grumbles and I bite my lip to stop from smiling.

She sasses him, “Technically, I’m here as a representative of WPF which means, no, I shouldn’t have led with us being married.” She rolls her eyes and gives me a look that screams ‘men, am I right?’. “You have the skills we’re looking for to not get to the bottom of a stalker situation which has come up with Hayes.”

“It’s no wonder he’s picked up a stalker,” Cole Howard, lead singer for SO, interjects. “He doesn’t put enough distance between himself and his fans, especially the female ones.

I grimace as I start to flip through the file which includes articles about how Hayes is a womanizer complete with a string of broken hearts behind him as he tours for the first time with WPF. There are also a few articles about destroyed hotel rooms and various drunken escapades, one of which involved him skinny dipping in a fountain.

“We take stalking very seriously,” the gravity in Blake’s voice has me looking over at him. Something passes across his face, but it’s there and gone so quickly that I almost miss it. When I look around the table, it’s clear there’s a story there. “We’ve run background, again, on everyone working on the tour, but we have reason to believe we’re looking at a fan.”

“Okay.” I nod and clear my throat. “Regardless of who it is, we need to make sure Mr. Jennings is safe.” Booker smirks when I refer to him as Mr. Jennings, but he’s a client and I’m determined to maintain a certain level of professionalism. “So, I just need to go and shadow him? Make sure he’s safe?” I

swallow hard as I glance down at an article about his after-concert exploits. “He’s probably not going to be happy if I’m getting in the way of him and his,” I pause and search for the right word, “fun.”

Kat sighs and something in the sound telegraphs I’m not going to like whatever she’s about to say. “We need you to do more than keep him safe, even though it is a huge part of the job.” When I look at her, I can already see the apology in her eyes. “Hayes has made some very bad PR decisions on this tour so far.”

“I’m not really a grown man babysitter,” the words come out harsher than I intend them to, but they’re out there now and I’m not going to apologize for them.

“Oh fuck,” Booker whispers under his breath. “She’s perfect for this.”

I eye Booker, but he just grins at me as if he knows a secret.

“You’re going to pose as Hayes’ girlfriend. It’ll give you a reason to be close to him and on the tour while putting you in a position to keep him safe and keep unwanted,” Kat pauses like she’s searching for the right word, “attention and women away from him.”

My eyebrows shoot up as I look at Kat and my mouth falls open before I can snap it closed again. “No one will believe this,” I argue. “There’s plenty of evidence showing how he’s been screwing across the country on this tour. If I were his girlfriend, I’d look like a fool, and no one will believe I’d still be standing by his side.” I thumb through the articles in the folder to emphasize my point. “I’d be a laughingstock and nothing more.”

“Love at first sight,” Grayson interjects, very unhelpfully.

“I’m sorry,” my tone full of disbelief, “what?”

Elliot runs a hand through his hair and leans forward as he looks at me. “It’s a thing in this family—love at first sight. Hayes is now part of the family because of WPF, to a certain extent. It’s happened to all of us around this table and now it’s going to happen to him and you.”

“Uhh,” I hold the sound out and shake my head, “I don’t get it.”

“You’re going to get on a plane and meet Hayes in the city he’s in right now. You’re going to get to know him. Then you will go to Seattle, where his next show is.” I perk up a little at the mention of my hometown, the one I just left. “You’re going to go to the concert and then backstage. You’ll pretend to meet each other for the first time and,” Kat claps her hands together and I force myself not to jump or react, “bam, love at first sight.”

“It’ll be something the media can run with,” Cole adds as if this plan isn’t ridiculous. “It’ll explain why he was running around and acting a fool since he hadn’t met you yet. He’ll sweep you off your feet,” when I scoff, he grins at me and adds, “metaphorically speaking, of course, and convince you to go on tour with him.”

I’m pretty sure my eye is twitching with the notion of what I’m supposed to do here. Not only protect the man, from himself basically, but I need to pretend to be in love with him after a staged meeting and then be swept up in a whirlwind of fame and charm.

This sounds like a horrible plan.

Duncan, the tech guy for HS, speaks next. “I’ve already scrubbed all mention of you working for HS. You’re our newest employee and haven’t worked with clients who would know better.”

“You have the skills we need to do this,” Blake’s voice is serious.

He’s not commanding me to take this job, he’s not saying that if I don’t then I won’t be working for him, but I can feel the implications. This is an opportunity, a job, and client who needs protecting. It’s not the stalker I’m afraid of, it’s everything else being asked of me.

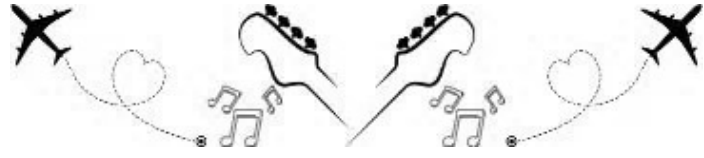
“I’m not sleeping with him,” I blurt the words out and the horrified look on Blake’s face has a blush working its way up my neck.

“We would never ask you to do such a thing,” Kat sounds just as pained as Blake looks. “The relationship part of this is a smoke screen to help his image and create some distance between him and his fans, one of which is more than likely his stalker.”

I look down at the file in front of me and know there’s only one decision here. When I look around again, a sense of determination fills me. I can do this, not only for the client, but for these people who are counting on me to do my job.

“When do I leave?”

I swear there’s an audible sigh of relief around the table and I can only wonder what the hell I’ve gotten myself into. Not like it matters—there’s no going back, only forward.



CHAPTER 2

HAYES

My head is pounding, and it makes my stomach churn. The pressure behind my eyes is at the point where I don't want to open them. I should because if I don't, then that fucking ringing will never stop. Is that my phone or someone else's?

Hearing a feminine groan next to me has dread pooling in my gut. Not again. I promised myself I wasn't going to do this again. It's not the first time I've made the same ridiculous self-promise. Then a gorgeous woman would throw herself at me and I was powerless against it. I open one eye barely enough to look through and take in the other side of my bed where a very naked woman is laying.

Fuck.

I'm never going to hear the end of this. I can only hope she didn't take any pictures of me to post on social media. That would be just what I need. More fucking scandals. As if I haven't left a trail of trashed hotel rooms, parties, lost drunken moments and women who have spent the night with me in my wake. It's not a good look and I know it.

I don't have any other excuse than it's what is expected of me, and I give into it. No one has ever really tried to hold me accountable for my actions. Even my old label dropping me and leaving me flapping in the wind wasn't enough deterrent considering how quickly White Picket Fences picked me up. The guys of Suburban Outcasts know about life on the road, they've lived it.

The woman next to me sits up and I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting her to know I'm awake. I wish she'd just get her clothes and leave. Her voice is like nails on a chalkboard, "So cute when you're sleeping."

She reaches out and runs a finger over my arm and I flinch. I hope she thinks it's just one of those sleep reactions. When I

feel the weight on the bed shift and hear her padding across the hotel room, I almost breathe a sigh of relief.

I'm shit at these situations because I really don't want to hurt the woman's feelings. I also happen to want her gone. Wouldn't it be worse for me to have the reputation of a bed hopper and an asshole? I think I should only be one.

When I hear the bathroom door close, I hop out of bed and grab my jeans from the floor, pulling them on without even looking for my boxers. They're probably around here somewhere, but as soon as I get this woman out of here then I'm going to take the hottest shower known to fucking man and try and get my shit together.

I glance at the clock and barely stop myself from shouting. I settle for muttering under my breath, "Fuck."

This isn't good. The bus was supposed to leave a few hours ago and knowing my luck, they've left. It's not the first time on this tour I've had to catch up to everyone. They have a schedule. So do I, but I can get to the next stop on my tour faster by other means. Not like I should be doing it that way, but what the fuck else am I supposed to do?

Two things happen at once—the door to the bathroom swings open and my phone starts ringing again. I'm fairly sure I know who is trying to call me and that is going to have to wait for a moment. I know I've made the right choice when the woman, whose name I don't know even a little bit, lights up when she sees I'm awake.

"Good morning," she screeches like a fucking hyena and starts to approach me. She's swaying her hips in a way she thinks I'll find seductive, but she looks like a horse. It's not good and it's not sexy. She runs her hands up her hips and cups her tits as if to present them to me. "I was just going to come back to bed."

"You need to leave," my voice comes out harsher than I intend, but I'm fighting some major stomach upset and the pounding behind my eyes has me seeing double.

I'm getting too fuckin old for this shit at 34. I need to be taking better care of my body and not pouring liquor down my throat after every show. I need to slow the fuck down before the headline isn't about a scandal, but about my death.

I know these things, but then I'm in a situation where I can make a decision about the path I want to take, and I seem to always make the bad one. I'm not particularly proud of it. But once I've decided, it's kind of a done deal and regretting my actions won't change them.

At least that's what I tell myself to assuage even a little bit of the guilt inside of me.

"You don't mean that," she pouts up at me and I cringe.

I wave a hand around the room to encompass her strewn clothes, which look more like scraps of fabric at this point. "I do mean it. You need to go. I'm running late and need to get my shit together so I can check out."

Her face falls as if she was expecting me to take her on tour with me or some shit. I'm not going to. I would never meet some groupie, have a good time with them, and then take them on the road with me. Talk about a recipe for disaster.

I watch as tears glisten in the woman's eyes while she's getting dressed. She's moving at the speed of a fucking sloth, probably thinking I'll change my mind. I won't.

The moment she's gone, and my phone has stopped ringing, heralding blessed quiet, I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. I order some room service quickly, knowing full well I can't rush off until I talk to someone about a plan. Again.

I already know Kat is going to have my balls for this. Again.

Hopefully the person who took my order knows just how badly I need the tankard of coffee I just ordered. Although, probably, a fuck ton of coffee, which is what I actually said, might be hard to measure. I stumble into the bathroom and deal with myself including drinking some water and taking something for the headache which feels like it's trying to bore its way out of my skull.

When my phone starts ringing, again, I know if I don't answer it then I'll have who the fuck knows banging on my door within a matter of minutes. The security people on the tour don't like me much already. Probably because I keep putting myself in ridiculous situations for no fucking reason.

I'm not at all surprised to see Kat's name looking back at me from my phone and I sigh as I answer, "I know I missed the bus. I'm sorry."

Kat's voice is crisp and filled with annoyance, "You can shove your sorry up your ass, Hayes." I blink a few times and barely stop myself from laughing. Kat is a ball buster of the highest order and I respect the hell out of her for it. "You should know you're on speaker phone."

"Okay," I hold the word out. When she doesn't tell me why I'm on speaker or who else I'm talking to, my palms start to sweat. "Is there a plan to get me to the next city? I can be there before the crew."

"Before we get to that, I have a few questions," her tone takes on an icy quality I know all too well and comes out when she is not at all impressed by my actions. "Is the room trashed again? Did you have yet another groupie with you when you woke up? What the fuck were you thinking considering we just had a talk about not only your image, but, more importantly, your safety? You've been getting threats of the unhinged variety. Why would you, yet again, pick up some random woman?"

"The room isn't trashed. I just have some laundry on the floor, but I'll pick it up." I sound like a little boy being scolded, but I don't really care. If they chose to, the guys from SO would be within their right to finish out my contract and cut me loose. I don't want that to happen. I might be a fuck-up, but music is all I have. "I did have a woman with me, but she's gone now. I wasn't thinking and nothing bad happened."

"This time. Nothing bad happened this time," I recognize the voice on the other end of the phone as Blake Higgins. He runs Higgins Security and has overseen my tour's security. I swallow hard because Blake is not the kind of man you want

to piss off. First off, he's huge. Secondly, he's a little scary. "My team can watch over you, but you continue to put yourself into stupid situations you don't need to be in."

"You're killing us here, man," Gavin's voice has a hard edge to it. Every time I've been around Gavin he tends to be on the serious side, but with an easy-going quality to him. Especially when he's around his wife, Iris. Right now, he sounds about ready to lose his shit which is not like him and has me taking notice. "This tour should be about your music and not what you're doing off-stage, but you're giving everyone too much to talk about."

I run a hand over my face because I know he's right. I hate it, but he is. I realize, as I'm sitting in the hotel room alone, which is normal for me, I feel lonely. That is a new feeling for me. Or, maybe, it isn't and I'm only just now willing to acknowledge it.

"I also got word that your stalker left another present for you last night at the venue," Blake is all business and I sit up a little straighter.

My voice sounds small, "Another pair of panties?"

"Yes, amongst other things, but the details aren't important. What's important is it's clear this isn't going to stop. We want to make sure you're better protected and the way you keep exposing yourself by going out, picking up women, and not giving a flying fuck about your safety isn't helping," I can hear the warning in his voice.

Normally, I'd be fucking thrilled to get a pair of panties sent to me. I've had them thrown on stage before and it didn't bother me. The gifts this certain fan turned stalker weren't so bad at first, but then the notes started, and they've become progressively more threatening. I don't even want to know at this point.

"We have a solution to all of our problems," Kat's voice has an ominous quality which sends a shiver down my back.

It might sound like the solution I'm about to hear is optional, but I know, in my gut, it's not. This is what is going

to happen, and I can either go along with it or I can put my entire career at risk. For once in a long fucking time, I need to be smart about this.

“Lay it on me,” I try and cut some of the tension by keeping my voice light.

Booker laughs, “This is gonna be so good.”

The anticipatory glee in his voice sets me on edge which doesn’t go away as Kat lays out the plan for one of HS’s employees, Ellington, to join me on the road. I’m assured that she has the skills to protect me, but I feel like they’re not telling me everything.

“How is one more security person going to change anything? You made it sound like you had a PR solution as well.”

Kat takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “You’re going to meet up with her on the plane in a few hours to go to Seattle; it’s where she’s from. You’re going to get to know each other on the ride. Then, at the concert in a few days, you’re going to meet backstage, as if for the first time. You’ll tell the world you fell in love with her at first sight and she did the same. She’ll play the role of going on tour with you, pose as your woman for the cameras, and be close to you to prevent your stalker from getting closer.”

“That means no more groupies,” Cole’s voice is stern.

I’m still trying to process everything and it’s possible I haven’t slept off all the alcohol in my system because this plan sounds ridiculous to me.

“You can’t be serious,” I spit out the words.

“Very serious.” Kat’s tone is filled with disappointment, “You’re a grown ass man, Hayes. It’s time to clean up your act, both for yourself and for the press.”

“We also need someone on you all the time to make sure you’re safe,” Blake cuts in.

“You can’t really think that some rabid fan is really this much of a risk to me, right?” I scoff, “This is overkill.”

“Hayes,” Blake barks, “the last gift she left was in the tour bus and found this morning when they went to roll out. When the water in the fridge was checked, it had been tampered with.” My blood runs cold. “You need to take this seriously and with the issues Kat is trying to fix, this is the best solution all around.”

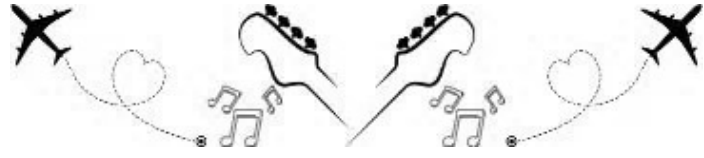
“You can finish out this tour without fucking your way across the country,” Kat snaps and I swallow down the retort on my tongue because I know it won’t do any good.

“Make the rest of the tour about the music,” Cole implores me.

“Fine,” I bite out, knowing full well I don’t have a choice.

As they tell me about the plan, about the lies I’m about to weave, which I don’t really have an issue with, I let my mind wander. Maybe this won’t be so bad—I have been wanting to slow down and this gives me an excuse. I just hope whoever Ellington is can handle life on the road because even without the groupies, I’m still going to be me.

Let’s see if she can handle it.



CHAPTER 3

ELLINGTON

I don't mind flying when I'm the pilot, but flying a helicopter was not on the agenda today. Instead, I'm in the plush private jet which belongs to SO and sitting on a tarmac waiting for Hayes fucking Jennings to arrive. I'm already annoyed and the fact that I've been waiting for over half an hour is not helping.

I want to get this show on the road, get this job done, and then go about my life. It's the only thing keeping me in the seat right now—the desire to do this job well so that the guys at Higgins Security can see the worth in me being hired. Seattle wasn't the place for me, and I can see myself building a life in Denver.

I'm not going to allow anyone to derail that, especially not some manwhore of a rock star who doesn't know when to fucking quit with his teenage boy antics. The only problem I foresee is that I do think Hayes is unnecessarily sexy. I have since the moment he became famous and I kind of love his music.

I don't plan to tell him either of those things. His ego is probably already too big to fit on this plane and I'll be damned if I do anything to inflate it further. No fucking way.

Just do the job. Get in, get out and show your worth.

Yup. That's the plan. My stomach clenches with fear I'm not used to. This isn't like any other mission I've been on.

I itch to reach for the file again, but I've been over it more than once and know it backwards and forwards. I've read through all the information on all the security guys who have been watching Hayes' back along with the crew and the rest of the guys playing backup on the tour.

There's no more studying to do on the assignment, the only thing left to do is to take it on. That is, if Hayes would fucking

show up.

From the small briefing I got before I stepped on the plane in Denver, Hayes has been made aware of the plan. That is, of course, after he was awoken, and a groupie left his hotel room. I can't explain it, but knowing he was with some woman last night has a knot forming in my gut.

I'm not one to say people should only fuck when they're in love or anything. Hell, I've had my fair share of flings and one-night stands, but damn. Hayes has made it his mission to fuck his way across the country while on this tour. It makes me wonder why and what he's hiding from.

It can't all be the fame, can it? I don't want to believe it, but maybe I've already giving him too much credit and his behavior reflects the kind of guy he is. He's going to be in for a rude awakening because there are certain things I'm not going to tolerate while on this assignment.

It might be fake, but there is no way he's going to make a fool out of me, especially once the media gets wind of the whole thing. My stomach tightens when I look out and see a nondescript SUV pull up near the airplane. Is it because of him or the thought of what I'm going to have to do?

No doubt, my family, especially my sister, will see the social media storm. I already called and told my parents to not worry about whatever they see, and that I can't talk to them about it. They know I moved to Denver and they're going to see right through the whole charade. Thankfully, my sister isn't in Seattle anymore and we're not close. I hadn't told her about my move to Denver.

Simone will believe the lies. She'll hate it and hate me even more for the hoopla, I'm sure. She's always thought life was a competition between the two of us. No matter what I did or how I did it, she's taken every choice in my life as a personal affront to her.

I stand when the door of the plane opens and two security guys walk on, both giving me a chin lift, before they move to the back and find a seat. Hayes is the next to step on, wearing

jeans and a long-sleeved henley. While his dark hair looks like he just rolled out of bed, his beard is immaculately cared for.

When his dark eyes come up and meet mine, I suck in a sharp breath and hope he doesn't notice. Hayes Jennings is more handsome in person than he is in the media. The henley he has on stretches across his body and looks damn good. He's not anywhere near as muscular as some of the men I've met in my life, all things considered, but it's clear he takes care of his body.

I'm sure he needs a lot of stamina to be able to go out and perform the way he does. Fuck. I push that thought from my mind because I do not need to be considering how much stamina the man has. Not even a little bit.

Hayes blinks twice and seems to shake himself before he starts to close the distance between us, and the third security guy enters the plane and starts to speak to the flight crew. I try not to fidget under the intense gaze fixed on me. I'm a fucking badass and I need to remember it. I've flown missions other pilots would have balked at and faced opposition the rock star in front of me couldn't even imagine.

I got this.

Hayes smirks and I fight my body's reaction to him.

I'm fucked.

"Hello," Hayes' voice is smooth like a river flowing over worn rocks, but there's an edge to it which could capture and cut me if I let it. He looks down my body and then back up. A slow smirk forms on his face and I steel myself. "I have to say, telling the world I've fallen in love with you in an instant isn't going to be difficult at all, Babe."

I narrow my eyes at him and force my voice to be level and professional, "Mr. Jennings, don't call me babe. I'm Ellington. You can also call me El if there's anyone around to hear it, but only then."

His eyes flash with something which tries to sear me from the inside out, but I'm not going to be giving in to his charms.

Far too many women already have and I'm not going to be one of those statistics.

"I love a woman with a sassy mouth, Babe," he enunciates his little nickname for me, and I barely stop myself from cringing. "You gotta know that men in love use cute little names for their women. People will expect it," there's a challenge in his tone.

"I'm not your woman," I bite out the words.

"Yet." He leans toward me and lowers his voice an octave, his words rushing over me like a cool breeze on a hot day, "And I'm not talking about the little show we're supposed to put on. I admit I wasn't too happy about the whole thing, but I'm looking forward to it now that I've met you."

I clear my throat and take a step back before sitting down in my seat. "We'll be taking off soon. I suggest you find a seat since we've already been waiting for you to grace us all with your presence."

He plops down into the seat next to me and when I give him a hard glare, he grins at me like he's won something. He hasn't. I don't think.

I open my mouth to tell him to sit somewhere else, but he cuts me off before I get the chance, "We gotta get to know each other, right?" He shrugs one shoulder casually and even that small action is sexy as fuck. "We can't do that if we're not sitting together."

I close my eyes and try and find my center. It's difficult when every breath I take has the scent of him invading my senses. He smells clean, and there's a woody quality to the cologne he has on along with a hint of spice.

When I open my eyes, he's staring at me intently and it makes my pussy clench. His eyes are soulful, but I remind myself I'm not the only woman who has been pulled into his orbit and I won't be the last. This is just temporary and it's not even real. Yes, I need to spin a lie for the media, but the most important thing when it comes to this assignment is his stalker.

“I’m here to keep you safe, Mr. Jennings. Let’s keep the focus where it belongs.”

His shoulders slump and he tips his head back against the head rest. “The whole stalker thing kind of skeeves me out.” His lips curl up in disgust. “I don’t know who it is. I’ve tried to remember someone I’ve seen around a lot or something, but it’s all one big blur.”

“Maybe if you cooled it on the partying and the women it would be easier for you to remember,” my voice comes out a lot softer than the reprimand I intended it to be.

He cracks one eye open, his tone turning defensive, “You’re saying I deserve to have a stalker because I like to enjoy myself and I’ve had consensual sex with women while on tour?”

I pull my head back as if I’ve been slapped and gasp, “No, not at all.” The way Hayes is eyeing me tells me he doesn’t believe me. I don’t like the look in his eyes, as if he’s judging me. It doesn’t feel good, and I realize I’ve been judging him. I swallow hard and force myself to look at him again. “No one deserves to be stalked. What I am saying is that your behavior has made you vulnerable and made it harder for people to do their jobs and protect you. It exposes you unnecessarily.”

He runs his fingers through his hair, and I have to force myself to not take in how sexy the action is. “I’m a rock star, Babe, it kind of goes with the lifestyle.”

“Speaking of your lifestyle, I think this is a good time to talk about some ground rules for our little arrangement,” my voice is firm, not allowing for an argument from him.

He flashes me a wicked smile. “I’m not so good at following rules.”

I huff and arch an eyebrow at him, hardening my stare. His eyes sweep over my face, and he leans into me before he whispers, “Did I mention that you’re beautiful, Ellington?”

I can feel my cheeks heat, but I keep staring him down. His words do something to me, even though I have my doubts

they're sincere. Still, it's a compliment I have a feeling I'll be carrying with me for a long time.

"Fine," he playfully rolls his eyes, "lay your rules on me."

"Your safety is the number one priority. You'll follow directions and protocol when it comes to appearances and anytime you're around fans." I clear my throat and try not to fidget in my seat. "As far as the publicity thing, it's my understanding that you know the plan?"

He nods slowly, his eyes sweeping down my body as if he's touching me. "At my next concert, you'll have backstage passes and when I see you across the room it's love at first sight." His eyes come up and meet mine, something in his dark brown depths I can't quite read. "The cover story is that I fell, and then charmed you into finishing the tour with me."

"Yeah," I croak before coughing to try and cover it up. The slight quirk at the corner of his mouth tells me I fail. "Once it goes public, that's it. It has to look real which means no groupies." My tone goes sharper, "Not a single one. The whole thing will fall apart if it looks like you're cheating. I'm not some doormat who would take that bullshit."

Hayes holds his hands up to placate me, but the thought of him cheating on me, even though this whole thing is fake, has my blood boiling. "I'm not going to cheat on you, El," his voice is soft and my eyes snap to his. When he reaches out, he takes my hand and unclenches my fist; I didn't even realize I'd been doing it. "I won't make you look like a fool. I promise."

"Won't that be difficult for you? You've been fucking everything that moves this entire tour," I sneer the words with a little more venom than necessary.

He leans close enough for his breath to skitter across my earlobe. "Even though you being jealous is hot as fuck, you have nothing to worry about." I pull away from him, hoping he can't see the way my nipples have pebbled. His body slumps back, his voice grave and tired, "Honestly, I'm relieved because all the ladies and everything I've been doing has been exhausting."

The question slips from my lips before I can stop it, “Then why have you been doing it?”

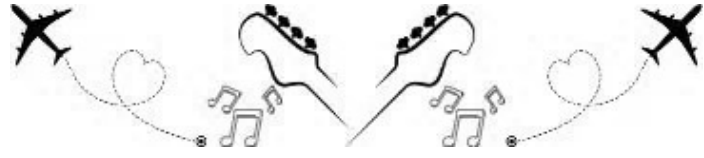
He looks deep into my eyes and whispers, “I don’t know, but I’m damn glad you’re here and I don’t have to anymore.” It must get too heavy for him because he smirks and wiggles his eyebrows at me. “Since I won’t be having fun with groupies, that must mean you’ll be in my bed having fun with me, huh?”

My spine snaps straight. “I won’t be sleeping with you.” I narrow my eyes, my voice cold, “Consider it another rule.”

I can’t believe I forgot who I was talking to for a moment. He looked so vulnerable. I won’t forget again.

“We’ll see, Babe. We’ll see,” his voice is full of amusement and innuendo.

Fuck. I’m in trouble.



CHAPTER 4

HAYES

I might be finishing up my concert in Seattle to a sold-out show, but there's only one woman on my mind. Ellington. She's been the only thing I can think about for days now, and I have a feeling that's going to be the case for the rest of my life.

My first thought when I saw her was that I wasn't going to have to pretend about a damn thing as far as falling in love at first sight. She's a fucking stunner, but there's so much more to her. She's around 5'8" to my 6'2" with dark hair, and stunning blue-green eyes. She has an athletic body even though it was hard to get the full extent of it considering she was covered up with leggings and an oversized hoodie.

She was dressed casually, but she was far sexier than any of the other women who have worn body hugging outfits in the attempt to get my attention.

When she looked at me, I could see the wariness in her eyes and a feeling of determination washed over me in a way it never had in my life. It was a feeling I didn't even have when I set out to make music my career and that took a fuck ton of grit. Meeting Ellington had something waking up in me I didn't even know was there and my purpose in life realigned.

It should have made me feel untethered or unsure, but it didn't. Any doubt in my life and my worries about the man I was becoming disappeared because she gave me a reason to not question a damn thing. I had never understood when people would say things happened for a reason and the path you walked was leading you where you were supposed to be until I looked into my woman's eyes.

I could tell she wasn't nearly as impressed with me as I was with her, but it was cute as hell to watch her try not to show that she finds me attractive. Maybe it's because I was in tune with her and looking for every little sign, but I saw it clearly.

When she was setting out her rules for me? I wanted to pull her into my lap and kiss her until she understood that spending meaningless nights with groupies was not going to be a problem for me at all. Not with her in my life. I'd never really been ashamed about my behavior before, but seeing the jealousy on her face, though she tried to hide it, and the judgement in her eyes almost gutted me.

We arrived in Seattle and have spent some time together behind closed doors, but we've had to be careful about it since it wasn't time to put on a show. She's guarded around me which bothers the hell out of me, but also makes me even more determined to show her she can trust me. Showing someone who I really am, letting them behind my walls, doesn't come easily to me.

I learned early on in my career, long before I signed on with WPF, that most people can't be trusted. They'll use you for their own gain and not think twice about it. They'll twist a situation so they're the only winner without thinking about the way their behavior hurts someone. They'll try and sink their claws into you for money and fame, but it's never for love.

How can I show Ellington she changed me the moment I met her? Made me better? Made me remember the man I used to be before I became jaded with life and fame?

I don't know, but after tonight I'm going to get more of a chance because after we 'meet' for the first time, I'll be able to spend all my time with her and not give a single fuck about who sees us. I'm already looking forward to hours in the bus with her while we roll down the road.

"Seattle," I speak into the mic, smiling big as I push my sweaty hair back off my face, "I think there's something in the air tonight. Can you feel it?" The crowd roars and I chuckle, wishing I could look into Ellington's eyes right now. "Tonight is one of those nights where anything can happen. Be safe going home and keep your eyes open for those moments that change your life."

I step back from the mic and take a moment to let the energy of the crowd wash over me. When I turn and stride off

the stage, I'm disappointed that my woman isn't waiting in the wings for me.

Don't worry. Next time she'll be right there, where I want her. Be patient.

Easier fucking said than done.

I shower quickly and then plop down on one of the couches in the dressing room while a few of the guys touring with me as my band mill around. The moment the door opens, I look up and try not to look too sad that Ellington isn't the first fan through the door. It's hard as fuck to keep a grin plastered on my face.

The women who flock around me are just white noise and I only give them the bare minimum attention. I swear I can feel her getting closer to me, as if something is pulling us together. I step away from the woman in front of me. I've had to brush her hands away from my chest more than once and am grateful when one of the guys in the band comes over and distracts her.

I don't want Ellington to see me even looking at another woman. The mountain I have to climb is steep, I don't need anything else making it more difficult for me.

When Ellington steps through the doorway, it's as if all the air is sucked out of the room. She's wearing jeans which hug her body and a sparkly top shows off her tits and makes my mouth water. She was gorgeous when she wasn't dressed up but seeing her like this is like getting punched in the gut. Her face isn't caked in makeup, but the bright red lipstick she has on makes my dick take notice.

What I wouldn't give to see her lips wrapped around my shaft and her eyes looking at me while she's on her knees.

Her eyes sweep across the room, and I can see the nervousness in the way she's holding her body while taking in the sea of women. I wish this wasn't the way it has to go down, for so many reasons. I wish I could have told her on the plane I was a fucking goner for her, but she wouldn't have believed me.

I have the rest of this tour to convince her there is nothing fake about this arrangement.

Then I'll have to send Blake, his team, Kat, and SO a fucking gift basket for bringing this woman into my life. I don't think I'll ever be able to thank them. It's a surreal feeling to know you've been irrevocably changed with a single glance, but I'm damn glad I was.

Showtime.

Our eyes meet and I'm striding across the room before I even realize I'm doing it. A woman steps in front of me and touches my arm, but I bark loudly, "Not interested."

I don't even look at her and I'm sure she's pouting, but right now I only have eyes for Ellington. This is my chance to show her everything I was feeling the moment I stepped onto the plane and I'm not going to fuck it up.

When I'm toe-to-toe with my woman, I grin down at her and notice the way her breath hitches. "Hey Babe." She narrows her eyes at me, but my grin only widens. "What's your name and where have you been my entire life?"

She smirks at me and shifts her stance, cocking her hip out. "Ellington," her voice is a little breathless which makes my cock throb.

"Beautiful name for a beautiful woman." I lean into her space and run my nose up her neck. "You're mine," I whisper against her skin.

When her hands come up to my chest, I'm not sure if she's going to pull me closer or push me away, regardless of the role she's supposed to be playing. It's as if everything expected of us falls away.

"I'm yours?" She scoffs, "With all these beautiful women surrounding you, I'm sure you can find a plaything for the night."

I pull back from her and search her eyes. I don't like the doubt I see there; I want to eradicate it. "I haven't been able to see anyone but you from the moment you walked into my life," I admit sincerely.

Ellington's eyes go wide as she stares at me. I have no doubt she's looking for the lie, but she's not going to find one. For the first time since I met her, I'm being completely and totally honest. I need her to see the real me, the one I've hidden away to protect myself from the heat of the lights and fame.

Before she's able to process if my words are real, a woman in a tight dress, which has most of her boobs popping out while barely covering her ass, comes sauntering up. "Hayes Jennings, I've been waiting all night to get the chance to talk to you," she coos at me, I'm sure thinking it sounds sexy. She looks at El and sneers before dismissing her. "Your time is up, hun," the sarcasm dripping from the endearment alone could power a damn city and does absolutely nothing for me.

Ellington, to her credit, doesn't flinch and arches an eyebrow at the woman, looking down at her like she's scum on the bottom of a boat. It's not a far-off assessment.

"Not interested," I try and keep my voice level, but there's an edge of pissed off to it I can't hide and could care less about.

The woman leans toward me trying to show off her tits, but they're fake as hell and I know, without even touching them, that Ellington's are all natural. Fuck, they'd feel so damn good in my palms. I'm not going to lie, I've had fantasies about my woman's tits in the last few days which make me feel like a horny teenager who has never gotten to touch a pair before.

"I'm sure I could show you a good time," the woman's words drip with innuendo and if this had happened at my last show, I'd probably be taking her to some dark corner somewhere. Too bad for her because I know what I want and the fake woman trying to get into my pants isn't it. "There's a hot club not far away. We could have some drinks, you know, before the real party begins."

Ellington shoots me a look that says *is she for real?* and I cringe because, yeah, she is. I square my shoulders before wrapping an arm around my woman's waist and tucking her into my side. I file away the realization that she fits against me

perfectly to dive into later. Right now, I have some chivalry to perform.

“Listen, I’m sure you’ll find someone at the club tonight, when you go. Alone. Me? I’m not going with you. I found exactly what I’m looking for and I’m not letting go anytime soon.” The woman’s mouth falls open and I’d be tempted to tell her she’ll catch flies, but I don’t want to waste any more of my time on her. I turn toward Ellington and give her my best smile, the one which usually has panties dropping in about two seconds. “How about we get out of here, Babe? It’s too loud in here for us to really get to know each other.”

I don’t know if she’s acting, but the smile she gives me and the way her voice goes husky has me hoping she’s not. “I’d love that.”

I lead her out of the room, not giving anyone else a second glance except for two of my security guys as I pass them, knowing they’ll fall in line behind me. I whisper in El’s ear, “When we get outside, there’s going to be a lot of fans waiting around. I usually sign a few things and greet some people. Are you good with that?”

I really do love my fans. I realize I’d be nothing without them. I try and take time out after every concert for a little meet and greet, as long as the crowd is controlled. My fans, the real ones who are about the music, aren’t like the groupies. Well, most of the time they’re not.

“It would probably be a good idea. Some of them will snap pictures and get the story rolling about us meeting tonight,” she leans into me and whispers in my ear.

My heart drops a little because of how she’s focused on the job, but I don’t let that feeling last. I have no doubt she was given the full run down of the man I’m portrayed in the media. I’ve done a damn good job of living up to all the hype so far and not only on this tour. It’s going to take some time to show Ellington I’m a new man, all because of her.

I have the time.

The moment we step out of the stadium, the fans waiting start to yell and cheer. Security guys have the crowd under control and behind some barricades, but I look at Ellington for confirmation before I move toward them. She looks surprised before scanning the area and giving me a small nod.

I don't let go of her as I lead us over and people start shouting my name and lights from flashes start going off. I take the opportunity and kiss her temple, the crowd getting even louder when I do. I only let go of Ellington to step a little closer and sign a few things. Normally I'd take some selfies, but I'm not feeling that tonight. I want to get my girl alone on the bus.

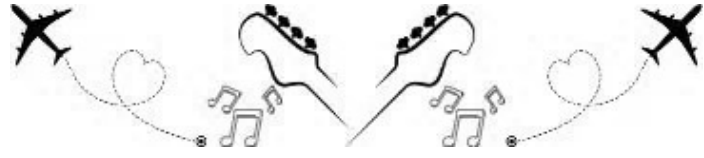
Someone shouts, "Who's the girl?"

I look over at El to find her eyes big and round. I turn back toward the crowd with a big smile on my face, "I told you I had a good feeling about tonight. I met my forever backstage and I'm not letting her go."

The crowd goes fucking wild and I wave before snagging Ellington's hand and leading her toward the tour bus. We'll follow through with making it look like she's bringing stuff with her tomorrow, even though I'm hating the show of it now.

When the door of the bus closes behind us and we sit down on the couch in the living area, we let out big breaths. After glancing at each other, we burst out laughing.

Something settles inside of my chest, a feeling I've never had before—this is right. I'm never letting her go. Now to convince her I meant every word.



CHAPTER 5

ELLINGTON

The sound of messages coming into my phone is what pulls me from a delicious dream which may or may not have involved Hayes not leaving me alone last night in the big bed at the back of the tour bus. It was just getting good too which leaves a sour taste in my mouth for more than one reason. I should not be having hot, almost getting heavy, dreams about the man I'm supposed to be protecting from a stalker and the press.

Crossing the line between pleasure and professionalism is not a good idea. It would be all too easy to do when it comes to Hayes.

I'm not sure if he's an amazing actor or if the words he spoke to me last night at our, alleged, first meeting were real. My heart heard the sincerity in his voice and fluttered in my chest. My head is telling me he's simply trying to sell the story.

I don't know what to believe and my gut is not helping matters because my instincts are acting like a naïve virgin, wanting to believe everything that happened last night had nothing to do with the story we're supposed to be weaving.

All in all, I'm pretty sure I'm screwed.

I grab my offending phone and am not a bit surprised that it's my sister or that she's sending me screen shots of photos and links to articles about Hayes meeting a mystery woman at his show last night. I click on a few of the links which include some videos of what he said to his fans outside.

That damn fluttering is back and I take a deep breath to try and tamp it down. Now is not the time to get some stupid crush on the man. It can only end in heartbreak, and I'd be the only one broken. It would be better to be smart about this. I

want to show my worth to HS, and I can't do that if I can't keep this whole thing professional.

When my phone rings, I groan seeing that it's Simone calling me. My parents are big jazz fans which is how we both got our names—from the last names of jazz legends. She's lucky she got one that doesn't have people thinking she's a boy before she meets them, but she never saw it that way. She's never realized just how lucky she is for what she has. It's one of the things which has put a wedge between us.

“Good morning, Simone,” my voice is still thick with sleep when I answer.

“Did you really hook-up with Hayes Jennings? It's all over the internet. I can't believe this,” she hisses as if, somehow, I've done her wrong.

I sigh, “It's not like I planned it.” Lie. “I went to his show last night and had some backstage passes because of a contest I won.” Lie and only plausible because my sister doesn't know me; I would never enter a contest where the prize would be tickets and backstage passes. It's not that I don't like music, but it's just not something I would really do. “I'm not even sure what happened. We saw each other across the room, and he swept me off my feet.” Not as much of a lie as I wish it was.

“Of course this would happen to you,” she sneers.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Just what I said,” she snaps. “I'm sure mom and dad will be thrilled and, what a surprise, you didn't even have to work for it.”

My eyes slide closed, and I take a few deep breaths to try and get myself under control before I rip into my sister. It's always been like this between us, and I hate it, but there's nothing I can do about it now. She blames me for her own shortcomings. It doesn't matter that I had to work my ass off when I joined the military and prove myself every single step of the way. She's never taken responsibility for herself.

From my vantage point, she was the pampered one by our parents since she was the baby. She never saw it that way. I'm sure she never will.

"It's not like what happened is a personal affront to you, Simone," I try and keep the exasperation out of my voice, but I fail. Before she can screech something which I'm sure would only piss me off more, the door to the bedroom opens to reveal Hayes. "Look, I gotta go."

I don't give Simone a chance to say anything, but I do hear the tell-tale screech of indignation before I hang up the phone. I'm sure I'll pay for it later, but right now I don't care. Not when I'm looking at Hayes standing in front of me. He's shirtless with his jeans riding dangerously low on his hips and showing off not only the tattoos on his chest, but that sexy as fuck V-line. How does something so simple have the power to make even the most level-headed woman a stupid, drooling mess?

Before Hayes can say anything, I drop my phone onto the bed and swing my legs over the side. "Looks like it's working." I nod toward the phone. "That was my sister. She sent me links and screen shots."

"It didn't sound like she was congratulating you," there's a coldness to his voice and I know, without him even saying, it's not directed at me.

"We aren't tight like some sisters are. She's always thought I was the golden child, but the reality is she's the baby and has been handed everything." I shrug as if it's no big deal even though it hurts me deeply. "I'm sure neither one of us are right, but it is what it is at this point."

He makes a humming sound and I look at him to find him studying me intently, as if he's trying to pry me open and see the rest of my secrets. If only he was the kind of man I could trust with all of me. I'd give myself, and the things I've kept hidden, over willingly.

"How about breakfast and then we can pretend to carry your stuff from the car where it's waiting for you." Hayes grins at me and I let out a woosh of breath, thankful he's not

pushing me to talk about my sister. We've spent some time together behind closed doors in the few days before the show, but we never got personal. It was probably a mistake to do it now. "Trust me, you want to eat now before we get on the road," he adds and winks at me.

I nod and look down at myself, realizing I'm wearing one of his shirts and will have to put my clothes from last night on again. It's all part of the narrative we want the press to grab ahold of and run with.

"Breakfast sounds great," I tell him as I stand, thankful his shirt is long enough to not show off much.

By the way he looks at my legs, it's enough; I fight against the blush that wants to rise on my cheeks. I've never been a blusher before. Then again, I've never had someone look at me with the same unbridled lust and hunger that Hayes does.

There's no one even here to see it right now. My gut and heart swoop simultaneously.

There's a playfulness in his tone, "Let the games begin."

He knocks on the doorjamb before leaving the bedroom to give me the space I need to get dressed. By the time I step into the living room, he's ready to go and I force myself not to look too hard at him. I don't know how he can look so effortless and so sexy at the same time. It's a skill and one I don't have because I'm pretty sure I look mussed—exactly like I should all things concerned.

Hayes smiles when he sees me and holds his hand out for me to take. It feels momentous when I don't hesitate to reach out and grab what he's offering. The way he entwines our fingers feels like we're locked together.

I like it. Too much.

"You look beautiful, Babe," Hayes whispers against the shell of my ear, now exposed after pulling my hair up into a high ponytail.

I want to scoff or deflect, but the sincerity in his eyes when I look up at him won't let me. I give him a small nod because I

can't seem to find my voice. It's not like me at all and I need to get a handle on the emotions swirling through me.

When we step off the bus, there's an SUV parked close by and we head that way, two security guys flanking us quickly. As much as I want to acknowledge them, I don't.

I look over to where the barricades from last night still sit and notice a few people with cameras and give Hayes' hand a squeeze. When he looks down at me, there's a smile on his face. He's so relaxed right now that it's hard to remember he's a famous rock star.

Before he opens the back door for me, he cups my cheek and stares into my eyes. A moment passes as if he's looking for something. When his lips meet mine in a soft kiss which causes me to gasp, I'm pretty sure he found whatever he was looking for.

It should terrify me, but, instead, it sends a thrill down my spine.

He pulls back far too soon, not deepening the kiss even though part of me wants him to. With a wink he lets go of my hand so I can slide in the back of the vehicle before he jogs around to the other side and climbs in next to me.

The whole encounter has left me in kind of a daze which lasts all through breakfast. Hayes doesn't seem to mind as he pulls me into simple conversations. Our heads are close together like we're sharing secrets instead of talking about the next few stops on the tour.

I don't bother looking around to see if anyone followed us. I'm sure they're there and we're giving them exactly what we need to in order to make this whole story work just as it should.

For the first time, the thought of all of this being fake has me feeling sad. I try and bury the feeling by putting a smile on my face and leaning into the role. If Hayes notices, he doesn't say anything.

When we leave breakfast, we drive around and stop at my old apartment building in town in the back, making it look like

I still live here. I know Duncan would have done his computer thing as a cover.

I'm not even sure if the press has identified me or not, but there's no reason to take the chance. We have to make this look as real as possible. I'm quiet as we sit and wait an appropriate amount of time. How long would it really take me to pack enough to finish out the tour with Hayes?

I don't even know, I learned to pack quickly and lightly when I was in the military. I guess it wouldn't take me long at all.

Before I can over analyze the situation, both of our phones go off with the sound of an incoming message. When I pull mine out, I see a message from Kat.

Hayes gently prods, "From Kat?" I nod and he offers me a small smile. "Mine too."

When I open the message, I'm not surprised by what it says.

Kat: Looks like everything is going as it should. I've prepared a statement for the press to continue to steer the narrative and answer the tons of questions the office has gotten this morning. Make sure you post on Hayes' social media.

I don't bother replying, I have a check-in scheduled for later today. It seems Hayes has the same idea because he slides his phone in his pocket and looks at me expectantly, "Ready?"

"Yeah," my voice comes out weaker than I want it to, so I clear my throat and try again, "I'm ready. Let's go on tour."

Hayes chuckles and grabs my hand, giving it a squeeze which does more to calm me down than I'd like to admit. I'm not even sure why I'm nervous now all of a sudden. Maybe because this is real now, it's happening and going just the way we want it to go.

I know better than to let my guard down though. Not with the situation. Not with Hayes.

There are more paparazzi at the barricade when we arrive back at the bus, and I find all the activity that was happening this morning with getting the set packed up and ready to roll out has died down. When Hayes hops out and around to my side before I can open the door, I let out a gasp. I get a smirk in response as he grabs my hand and anchors me. Again.

I'm even more surprised when he leads me to the back of the SUV and grabs my bag. Questions are being shouted, but neither of us respond as we head toward the bus. It's only once I'm inside that I breathe a sigh of relief.

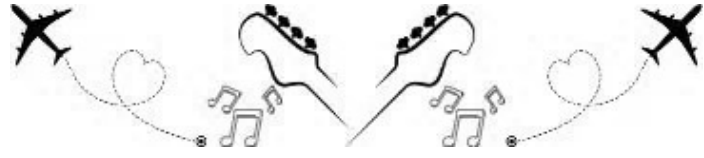
"Come on, Babe," Hayes goads me, "take a selfie with me so we can announce to the world that love at first sight exists and I've found the other half of my soul."

I blink at him a few times, but I go along with it. It's only a few minutes later when I get the notification on my phone that I've been tagged in a post. When I open it up and read what Hayes wrote, my jaw drops.

Across the room last night, I fell in love with the woman who exists to be mine. I knew there was something special in the air last night, I could feel it building, like a storm rolling in. Thank you, Seattle, for bringing Ellington into my life. Now I won't have to finish this tour searching for connection meaninglessly and feeling lost. We're hitting the road together and I can't wait.

Well, fuck. I guess it's out there now and there's no going back. When I look up at Hayes, he simply smiles at me. He looks so damn happy that my breath hitches. Is this real or does he just know how to weave words together to touch your soul?

I guess I'm going to have the chance to find out.



CHAPTER 6

HAYES

I have never experienced blue balls to the level I have in the last three weeks since Ellington has been on the bus with me. Everything about my woman calls to me and I can't even think about looking at another woman. If I don't get some relief soon, I don't know if I'll survive.

I know, it's dramatic, but it's true.

I've lost count of the number of times I've jerked off since this woman has breezed into my life. I've never stroked my own dick so much before.

The only consolation is that every moment I've spent with my woman has caused me to fall deeper for her. I'm in awe of her. Not only is she beautiful, but she's kind, thoughtful, funny, and so damn strong. Sometimes I look at her and wonder what she saw while serving because of the shadows I sometimes see in her eyes, but I don't need to know, I just want to chase those memories away.

When we're in public, she is the perfect fucking woman on my arm. She doesn't shy away from the affection I give her—like when I can't help but grab her ass or kiss her lips. Even better, she initiates contact with me as well. It always takes me by surprise, but I love it and hold those moments close.

Then when we're behind closed doors, she tries to put a wall between us. I don't know if she realizes it or not, but every time she puts that wall up, it's not quite as tall or strong as it was the time before. I'm slowly getting behind her defenses and she's finding it harder to keep that line in the sand between professional and personal.

I want the line erased to never be drawn again.

I think she's almost there, but she worries about what my intentions are still.

She looks at me sometimes as if she's waiting for me to let her down. It stings, but I also understand it. I can see how she has no reason to trust me, except, of course, everything I've shown her about myself in the last few weeks.

I don't remember laughing more than I have with my woman since she's come into my life. We spend time watching movies and talking about all sorts of things. Another activity we've picked up is putting puzzles together. She found one at one of those huge rest stops and picked it up on a whim. I didn't remember the last time I'd done a puzzle and was all in when I saw the excitement on her face. It's been fun and with every piece put in place, it feels like we become closer.

I think some of my favorite moments over the last three weeks is when she'll be sitting in the lounge area, her feet tucked up underneath her, while listening to me play and sing. She's inspired me in new ways, and I find myself always needing a notebook to jot down lyrics and a guitar so I can strum a melody.

Sometimes when I'm playing around with a song, she'll pretend to read, but I can tell all her focus is on me. I've never felt pride like I do when she's listening to me. I can't even explain why, other than knowing she's special.

It's just her. It'll always just be her.

I know it like I know the time I have to convince her is slowly draining from the top of the hourglass. I need to move this along and give us both the relief we need from the sexual tension which zaps between us like arcing electricity.

I'm almost done with the concert tonight and when I glance over to the edge of the stage, Ellington is there. Our eyes lock and something passes between us, something different, something deeper. More. It's so much more and my heart thuds against the inside of my chest.

Tonight.

I have to make it happen tonight. We both need the release; we both need to put it all on the line. We can't continue like

this. It's driving us both up the wall and we're already so close to the moment it all explodes.

The rest of the concert is a blur. I swear I can hear my woman cheering and clapping above the roar of the crowd. I swear I can smell her sweet arousal even though it makes no sense. Everything in me is calling to her and I can only hope she's not going to deny what we both want. What we both need.

I play through the set and rush to the wings, almost tripping over my feet to get to my woman. Her eyes are big and round as I stride up to her. She must know. She must feel this.

I thread my fingers through the hair at the nape of her neck and slam my lips onto hers, not giving a single fuck if it's a photo op or not. When I sweep my tongue along her bottom lip, she gives me nothing, but I'm not going to be deterred. I need to taste her more than I need to go back on stage for the encore.

When I nip at her bottom lip, she gasps and gives me the opening I need. It's just a little crack and I use it to plunder her mouth. It's a precursor for what I'm going to be doing to her body later and by the way she clings to my shoulders as her body trembles, she knows it.

I break away from her lips, air sawing in and out of my lungs as I stare down at her. She looks a little dazed as she whispers, "I don't think anyone captured that for social media."

"That is the last fucking reason I kissed you, Babe." She blinks up at me and I can see the war in her eyes. "It's just a preview. We've been dancing around this for weeks and I can't take it anymore. I'm a musician, but I'm a shit actor. Everything I've said to you or about you is completely truthful."

A whimper falls from her lips as the drumbeat for the encore starts. I release her and keep my eyes locked with hers as I step back onto the stage. I only break the connection with her when I have to and stride to the middle of the stage, the

crowd fueling the hunger gnawing at my gut, hunger I've never experienced before Ellington came into my life.

How I make it through the encore, grab my woman's hand and lead her to the dressing room, I'll never know. Once we're inside, I turn toward her, my voice gruff, "Stay right here. I'm going to shower quickly then we're going to the bus and I'm stripping you bare so I can finally, fucking finally, have you."

I don't give her a chance to respond; I've told her what is about to happen. I shower quickly, needing to make sure she's exactly where I left her. I'm not disappointed, but she's no longer dazed by my words or my kiss. Her arms are crossed across her chest and her eyes are narrowed.

She's sexy as fuck when she's riled up. I can't help but grin at her and I swear I can see her anger ratchet up a notch or two. I walk right up to her until we're toe-to-toe.

"I'm not sleeping with you," she spits the words.

"Oh, there will be no sleeping happening. I'm going to fuck you until you forget your name and all the reasons you've kept a wall between us," I vow.

"This is a job," she insists.

It would be more believable if her voice didn't waver slightly.

"This is much more than a job. It has been from the moment we looked at each other." I let my gaze linger over her as I take her in. I have no doubt she could kick my ass if she wanted to, but I know she wants me just as much as I want her. "I get why you didn't want to give in. I didn't earn the right to worship your body, but things have changed. I've shown you the man I am, Ellington, the man I am because of you. Because you came into my life, and I finally understand what it means to want more."

She opens her mouth to protest, but I bend, plant my shoulder in her abdomen, and stand while taking her with me. "Hayes," she gasps.

I spank her ass and stride out of the room, not missing the grins on the faces of the security guys waiting outside. They

know the truth of this whole arrangement and I don't have a doubt they've also known she was mine from the moment we met on the plane.

As I'm striding toward where the buses are parked, my tour manager shouts, "What about the VIPs?"

I don't break stride, I don't even slow down, as I throw over my shoulder, "Not tonight. Compensate them however you want, but I'm not going to be swarmed by groupies tonight."

Ellington lets out another huff and I smooth my hand over her ass. I've seen the jealousy on my woman's face when the VIP pass holders have descended after the show. Some of them were respectful, but others didn't give a single fuck that we've been very public about our relationship. I've shut those women down, hard.

I'm grateful as fuck when I can slam the door to the tour bus closed behind me. It's even more satisfying slamming the door to the bedroom closed. I slowly right Ellington, sliding her down my body and making sure she can feel just how much I need her as I do.

"Your fans aren't going to like this," her words are an accusation, but there's a teasing lilt to her voice.

"I don't fucking care," I growl the words before cupping her face in my hands and kissing her again.

It might be because we're alone or she's just tired of fighting it, but I feel the moment El gives into the fire between us. We start pulling at each other's clothes, each piece getting us closer to what we want, what we need.

When we're finally naked and our skin is touching, I lay her down on the bed, covering her with my body as I kiss her hard. The way her hard nipples scrape against my chest causes my body to shudder and my cock to leak pre-cum. I almost jump out of my skin when her hand wraps around my shaft and strokes me.

"Fuck," I bark. "You need this just as much as I do." When I look into her eyes, I demand, "Tell me."

“I’m done fighting this, Hayes,” she pants. “I need you.”

“Thank fuck,” I growl before burying my face in her neck, kissing and nipping at the skin there.

She arches her back and wraps her legs around my hips. “Don’t make me wait. I need to feel you inside me. I ache,” her voice breaks, the physical need she’s been trying to deny pushing her arousal even higher now that she’s not fighting it.

My cock is so hard it fucking hurts and as I settle between her legs, my length glides between her pussy lips. “Damn,” I grunt, “I can feel how wet you are for me.”

“Hayes,” my name on her lips is a breathy plea I am fucking powerless against.

“You want my dick?” I smirk at her when she nods her head vigorously. “Words, Babe, give me the words and I’ll make all your suffering end.”

“Our,” she pants, “our suffering.” When I grind my hips down against hers, my cock gives her clit some friction which isn’t nearly enough. Her voice is filled with sass and annoyance. “I want your cock inside me, Hayes. Fuck me.”

I pull my hips back from hers and reach between us, circling her clit with my finger before I grip the base of my shaft. My lips hover over hers as I whisper, “I’ll always give you what you need, Ellington.”

Those words hold so much more weight than just fucking her. The way her eyes flare tells me she knows it too. Before the moment can be lost, snatched from us by someone else or her doubts, I position myself at her entrance and fill her with one hard thrust.

My lips crash down on hers and I swallow down her shout as I groan with how fucking good her pussy feels around my dick. She’s so wet and hot that I close my eyes, rip my lips from hers and tip my head back while taking a deep breath so I don’t lose my nut right here and now.

I need to make it good for her. I need to fuck her so good that she always remembers and doesn’t try to put up those

walls between us again. I need her surrender; I can almost taste it.

As I start to move, Ellington moves with me, meeting my thrusts and pushing me to move faster and harder. Every time I fill her pussy it feels like the love I have for this woman grows. As much as I've wanted to be buried inside of her from the moment I saw her, and my dick was begging me to give in, I'm glad we didn't hop into bed.

She is so much more than the pleasure I'm feeling right now, so much more than her body. She's everything. I can't tear my eyes away from her as pleasure washes over her features like a kaleidoscope.

Her walls start to flutter around my shaft and I grunt, "Come on my cock, Babe. Let me feel it. Let your body show me how good it feels."

Her head tips back and I suck the sensitive skin of her neck, right below her ear, into my mouth, before biting down lightly. Her nails scour my back as her wall squeeze me and she moans my name as she comes.

Powerless.

No one would be able to resist the way her body is begging for my come and I'm simply a man who has gone too long needing everything she has to give. I try and fight it, thrusting a few times, but I know it's a losing game.

I wrap my arms around Ellington as she clings to me, her orgasm rolling through her, and push every inch of my cock inside of her and let go. With every jet of my cum all I can think about is the fact that I've marked her inside and out.

She's mine.

We're wrapped up together breathing hard with sweat on our skin. "You didn't use a condom," there's no judgement in her tone, no accusation, but the edge of fear is enough to help me focus.

"I would never put you in danger, Ellington," my voice is hard and sincere.

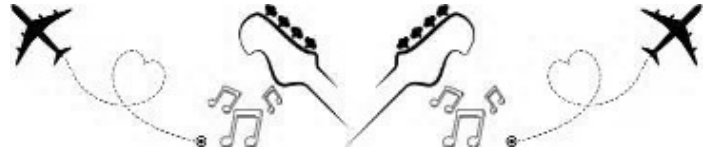
She relaxes, melting against the bed and bringing me with her. I roll us so we're both on our sides and our gazes meet.

"I know," she whispers, "I trust you."

I kiss my woman, hoping she can feel just how much I need her in my life. Hoping she can taste the sacrifice I'll make when it comes to worshiping. I will give her everything I am without a second thought just for the chance of her giving me the same.

"You're mine," my voice is hoarse, but by the way she snuggles against my chest, I know she heard me.

It's enough. For now.



CHAPTER 7

ELLINGTON

I've been getting regular updates in regards to Hayes' safety as well as the whole public relations circus I've been pulled into. The PR thing is going great and the internet is all a flutter over the relationship we've put out there for the world to see. To say the reputation Hayes was working so hard to drag through the mud is now turning around would be an understatement.

People who are all about celebrity news, which I never cared about before in my life and still don't to a certain extent, have dug up my military record and say I've tamed the wild rock star. If they only knew that what started as fake has become all too real, they would be running with the story too. Pictures of us since I came on the tour a month ago are all over the place.

It's kind of daunting. My parents think I'm living a fairy tale. Honestly, in the week since Hayes and I had sex, blurring the lines between fake and reality, it kind of has been. My sister is pissed and always loves to send me pictures where I'm not caught in the most flattering light. If only I was surprised by Simone's actions.

Nothing surprises me anymore.

How could it after Hayes said things to me that I would have never imagined he would say considering his reputation?

In the three weeks we were pretending, at least while I was trying to convince myself it was all fake, Hayes showed me a side of himself I know he hadn't shown anyone in a very long time, if ever. Who knew the rock star who loved to fuck groupies and leave trashed hotel rooms would be a puzzle genius? I would have never thought it, but the man is a savant.

The only thing which worries me, because I do believe Hayes when he says I'm it for him and he can't look at another

woman, is the stalker. She's continued to leave little gifts for him at venues and hotels as we've traveled. All the intel is being run through his security team, HS, and myself, but I haven't told Hayes about it. He doesn't really need to know.

The last note, which was left with more panties—I mean really, does this woman own stock in Victoria Secret?—is the one that worries me the most. It was filled with venom over him being with me and promises she'll get to him and have him. While she didn't say *if it's the last thing I do*, it was heavily implied.

People who are able to create fantasy worlds involving themselves and strangers are not to be taken lightly. The depth of their sickness is mind blowing. The fact that we're working on it blind, with the packages not being able to be tracked farther than the person who delivers them, is a problem.

The whole situation rests heavily on my shoulders. Now that I have feelings for Hayes, real feelings which are deeper than I'm willing to admit, the stakes are so much higher. This is one of the reasons I wanted to keep it professional between us, even though I was almost drowning in the sexual tension. Getting too close can cloud a person's judgement and make them act rashly. I don't want to put Hayes in danger because I love the man.

Oh fuck. Love the man?

Yes, you love him. You have for a long time. Welcome to the party. The love party.

This complicates things, but it doesn't make my mission impossible. It just means I need to be even more vigilant. It means I need to keep my head on straight.

Easier said than done as I look over at Hayes as we're heading to a club to make an appearance before his show tomorrow night. I had no idea about all the little things, like interviews and appearances, which go along with a tour. It's not just a matter of Hayes going from city to city and playing in front of an audience. He's practically participating in a full-on press junket at the same time.

The whole thing is wild and I'm damn glad his security team is solid because I would never be able to do all of it on my own. I rely on them to do their jobs and I keep myself close to Hayes as a line of defense his stalker, hopefully, won't see coming.

Tonight Hayes is in a pair of leather pants which are so damn tight I'm pretty sure I can see the vein that runs along the side of his cock. That's paired with a tight t-shirt which is hugging his muscular shoulders while allowing for the ink on his arms to peek out. It's been a battle of wills not to drool on him so far.

"You're a million miles away," Hayes' voice is husky as he yanks me out of my thoughts and I look at him, trying my hardest not to take in the way his pants—leather pants—fit him.

"I'm not," I huff and bat my eyelashes at him. He's caught me, but he doesn't need to know. Right?

He hooks an arm around my neck, pulls me against him, and kisses me hard. He speaks against my lips, "I know you don't like these things. Neither do I. I'd much rather be on the bus with my cock buried deep inside of you while you're pulsing around me."

I yank myself back from him, my mouth slightly open in shock. Not so much at his words, but what they do to my body. Before I can chastise him or climb onto his lap and ride him like my pussy is begging me to, we pull up at the club and the door opens. Hayes slides out first before offering me his hand and tucking me into his side.

The club is dark, and the base line is flowing through me the moment we step inside. It's also packed which sets me on edge immediately, but I know Hayes' team is right there at our backs. I wish this wasn't how the night was going, but I'm not going to do anything to stand in the way of his obligations.

"Stay close to me, it's busy as hell in here. Only have a drink if it's brought to you by the team," my lips brush against Hayes' ear as I speak to ensure he can hear me over how loud it is.

He squeezes my ass and winks at me as we're led through the club and into the VIP area. A few women notice my man right away, their greedy as fuck eyes following his every move. I've seen him shut down more than one woman who has gotten too close or taken too many liberties.

I'm not really worried about him being loyal to me, but it's hard to trust. It's not so much him I don't trust, but it's them. I'm not delusional and I know a lot of people will try to take advantage if they think they can with zero regard for who it hurts along the way.

When we sit down, Hayes pulls me down onto his lap, his hand landing on my upper thigh which is exposed in the sequined dress I have on. I found the dress earlier today when we spent a little time exploring the city and Hayes insisted on taking me shopping to find something special to wear tonight.

His fingers tighten and my nipples harden in response. I survey the club but feel his eyes boring into me. When I turn to look at him, his eyes are intense and filled with hunger.

"I hope we don't have to stay long," he whispers against the shell of my ear before nipping at it. "You look too fucking sexy in this dress. You probably didn't notice the number of men who were looking at you as we walked in, but I did. You're mine."

I blink at him a few times before throwing my head back and laughing. The way his eyes narrow at me tells me he isn't amused. "Then you must not have noticed all the women checking you out in your leather pants," I sass him.

Hayes takes my mouth in a brutal kiss which leaves me breathless. We only pull apart when someone clears their throat. I look up to see a waitress with a sour as fuck look on her face as she takes me in. When she diverts her attention to Hayes, she's all sweet smiles.

One of the security guys steps up next to her, but she pays him no mind. Her voice is chipper and fake as hell, "What can I get you tonight, Hayes?"

She says my man's name like she knows him and it has my spine straightening and the hair on the back of my neck standing on edge. "Just some water," his voice is flat when he answers, but by the way the waitress beams at him, she doesn't notice.

We both look out over the club and I keep my eye on the waitress, who is being followed closely by security. The water bottles are both sealed when we get them, which puts my mind at ease somewhat. I'm not sure how long we sit before Hayes lifts me off his lap, stands, and then snakes his arm around my waist to pull me flush against him.

"Dance with me," his voice is full of need and I can feel the hard ridge of his cock as it digs into me and I can only nod.

I'm nervous considering dancing isn't something I spent a lot of time doing, but I'll give it my best shot. When we're on the dance floor, I'm pulled against Hayes' body and find it easy to move with him. We fit together perfectly and the way his hands roam over me has me forgetting we're in the middle of a club at all.

His hands are running all over my body and I get lost in him. Until someone knocks into me, and I stumble. Hayes grabs me and makes sure I don't fall over. We both turn to find a woman in a dress which I'm hard pressed to call a dress at all, eyeing Hayes. She's smiling flirtatiously at my man, but he just stares at her, his eyes hard, until her smile falls.

Hayes grabs my hand and doesn't look back as he tugs me behind him out of the club. I know we're probably supposed to stay longer, but I'm not going to argue with him if he's ready to go. Security follows behind us closely and there are the flashes from cameras as we get into the car where we're silent during the ride. There's no hotel room for the night at this stop and I'm more than fine with it.

The tour bus has become my own little sanctuary, a bubble that protects us. I love our space and everything it comes to represent while we've spent time together. It's also easier to lock down for security and I'm all for that.

I can feel the annoyance and anger rolling off Hayes. The moment we stop, he's out of the car and around to my side before I can climb out myself. When he scoops me up in his arms and carries me to the bus, I run my fingers through his beard, trying to calm him down.

"It's okay, Hayes, really," I try to reassure him.

He looks down at me, his eyes intense and focused, until he gets us inside the bus. When he sits me down on the dining area table, his hands plunge into my hair, and he takes my mouth in a brutal kiss which leaves me breathless and dripping wet.

"I need to taste you," he growls against my mouth, "then I'm going to bury my cock inside of you and have you screaming my name."

Hayes drops to his knees and pushes my dress up before hooking his fingers over the sides of the lace thong I have on. He doesn't pull the fabric down my legs, no, he rips it right from my body. The action makes me gasp and the feral look in his eyes has me trying to squeeze my thighs together.

I can't though, because his body is blocking me. He pries my thighs open and dives toward my pussy like he's thirsty and I'm the oasis he's stumbled upon. When he sucks my clit into his mouth, my hips jolt off the table, but his hands are there, calloused and strong, to hold me in place. After swiping his tongue along my slit, gathering my juices, he stands abruptly.

"Take out my cock," his voice is demanding and gruff.

I fumble a little, the leather almost too tight, but the moment his length is free, he slams into me. I lean back on my elbows, my hands gripping the edge of the table as he fucks me hard and fast. His eyes bore into mine, telling me everything I need to know.

This man owns me. Body. Soul. And heart. All of me.

I can't think of a single reason why it's a bad idea.

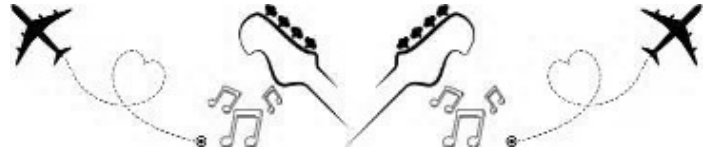
He cages me in, arms on either side of me as he drills into me, every thrust getting us closer and closer to the edge. I

know the moment we're going to tumble over because the air seems to still around us. It quiets, gathering strength, before we're flung over.

Falling.

Tumbling.

Caught.



CHAPTER 8

HAYES

It's done. I almost can't believe it. The last show of the tour is done and now it's just a matter of heading home and finding my normal life legs again.

It's always jarring—going from life on the road and then being at home without the same things driving you.

I'm looking forward to taking some time and relaxing. I was so consumed with proving myself to WPF Records in terms of getting an album out of me, recorded, released and getting ready for the tour, all after moving to Denver in the first place, that I didn't get the chance to settle into life there. It's something I'm craving now in a way I wasn't before.

It's all because of Ellington. I want to see what normal life will be with her. Where we come home to each other at the end of the day and celebrate all the little things that make up a life. I'm even excited about the prospect of doing something as mundane as going to the grocery store with her.

We haven't talked about what happens when we're back in Denver, but I hope she knows everything I've said is true. We need to talk about it, I can't make assumptions and hope she's on the same page as me. I need to make sure she is.

I want her to move in with me, into the house I bought when I moved to Denver, but never had a chance to make into a home. I know she'll make it feel right in a way it never did before.

Maybe I was just looking for her, knowing I wasn't complete, when I bought it. I didn't even realize it was a possibility, but now I look back on certain things in a different light. The house is big enough for us to start a family if it's something she wants; I hope she does. It's big enough to be exactly what we need for the rest of our lives.

I'm not going to accept anything less than forever with my woman. Does she know?

We finished the last puzzle we picked up last night. When she put the last piece into place, we stared at each other for a moment, getting lost in each other. It's always that way between us. I could stare into her eyes and never come up for air, drowning in the blue-green depths which hold me captive and make my heart feel like it's beating for the first time.

"It's done," she breathed out, a sadness in her voice I wanted to chase away.

I reached for her and cupped her face in my hands, "We finished the puzzle, but I'm far from done with you, Babe."

She blinked at me and gave me a smile, but there was something like resignation in her eyes which I wanted to chase away. When I brought my lips to hers, the kiss was soft and sweet. Until I couldn't take it anymore. When my tongue swept between her lips, the fire between us ignited.

As tempted as I was to sweep the puzzle off the table, I didn't want to ruin something we had spent so long putting together. Instead, I hauled her up with me and strode to the back of the bus where I laid her down on the bed we've been sharing for so long that I know I won't be able to sleep in bed without her again.

I undressed her slowly, my lips trailing over her skin as I exposed it. I wanted her to feel my love for her and the way I can't go through this life without her at my side. We haven't said it, but I know she feels the same about me that I do about her.

I didn't want her to ever think the tour or the job were at the root of my words and that is why I've held them back. I'm not sure if not saying them has been the right choice or not, but I have a feeling I'll know when the time is right for confessions of the soul and heart.

I worshiped El's body with my mouth, memorizing every curve, every whimper from her lips, every breath she took.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I buried my cock inside of her. It wasn't fast and frantic. I took my time with her.

Every glide of my hips and press of my lips was in the hope of imprinting myself onto her soul the same way she'd done to me over the course of being at my side. I never want her to doubt what she means to me. I want her to feel my hands on her when she's not near me. I want her to hear her name coming from my lips as a moan.

As we moved together, languid and slow, we looked into each other's eyes. It was all we needed. When we came together it was like a rolling wave lapping at the shore instead of a tsunami. I'll take my woman however she needs and last night we both needed that. The affirmation, the gentle, the soft.

It's a moment that the rest of our lives will be built on, the first brick for the forever on top of the foundation we've built during the tour. I know we're building something strong here, something that will weather the storms life throws our way.

When I step out of the small bathroom backstage, it feels different tonight, like I didn't just wash off the sweat from being on stage but washed away the entire tour.

It's kind of bittersweet. The road is where we met, it's where we fell in love, and now we'll be opening a new chapter.

Will it be difficult for us to find time to be together when we have other options? What will working for HS look like for her? When we're not worrying about the cameras all the time, will she see I'm not really what she wants? What does the label expect of me when it comes to my next album?

I can't imagine going on another tour without my woman by my side.

I shake off all the questions as I rub a towel over my head to dry my hair. I don't have all the answers right now and that's okay. The only way to find out what will happen is to live it. As long as El is at my side, I know it'll be a life worth living.

“Hayes,” a woman’s sickly-sweet voice has me jerking my head up and my eyes narrow at the woman standing in front of me. I notice she has a pass hanging around her neck, but it’s not a VIP pass, it looks like a pass given to employees of the venue. She smiles at me, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “I just came by with a complimentary bottle of Hammond Whiskey to help celebrate the end of your tour.”

When she walks toward me, her hips swaying as if she’s trying to seduce me without the realization that my dick doesn’t respond to any woman other than my own because he knows where home is, I take a step back. She sets the bottle and a glass on a table where other refreshments are set up.

She puts the glass in her hand down before she cracks open the seal on the whiskey and pours some into the glass. There’s an expectant look on her face and I realize I’m being rude, but it takes a moment for me to find my voice. I don’t know why, on the outside she seems like a perfectly nice woman, but I’m wary.

“Thank you. That’s very kind of the venue,” I force the words out of my mouth.

When she smiles at me this time, it’s genuine and I relax a little bit. With the glass in her hand she approaches me, but doesn’t get so close that it makes me feel like I’m being hit on. It’s the only reason I take the glass from her.

I glance around the room again and wonder where Ellington went. She was here when I stepped into the shower, but she might have needed to speak with someone and stepped out. I don’t know what has happened, but the security guys have been extra alert the last few days. I figured it has to do with my stalker and the end of the tour coming up. If there’s something I need to know, they’ll tell me.

I trust Ellington with my life.

I take a seat, thinking about my woman and have a drink. When I look back up, I’m startled by the woman still standing there. I had been so lost in thinking about El I didn’t even realize she was still here.

I finish my drink and the woman is in front of me and pouring some more into my glass without needing to be asked. The way she's looking at me, expectation written all over her face, has my gut swirling. What is she waiting for?

"I appreciate you delivering the whiskey from the stadium, but was there something else you needed?" I shake my head. Are my words slurring? I take another sip of my drink. "I'm not trying to be rude or anything," it's a half-hearted apology.

"You don't remember me," there's a bite to her words, "do you?"

I cock my head to the side and study the woman. She doesn't look familiar, but there's something about her which sets me on edge now that I'm looking closer. When she takes a step toward me, I want to stand, but my limbs feel heavy and like they're not under my control.

What the fuck?

"Go on," she encourages me, her lips curling into a sinister grin, "take another drink."

My eyes cut down to the glass in my hand, but I don't move my head because it feels like it would be too much fucking effort to do so. My thoughts turn sluggish, like I'm wading through pudding. It shouldn't feel like this, right? This isn't normal.

The glass slips from my fingers and the woman huffs as if I've done something to annoy her. I should stand up. I *want* to stand up.

She takes another step closer and her face contorts in anger.

"Should I know you?" My tongue is thick in my mouth and every word is a battle. I feel sick. I don't like this. "Where is Ellington?"

Not the right thing to say if the way the woman takes a step closer to me is any indication. "You don't need her anymore. I know you were just using her to make me jealous," her words are full of so much rage that if I could move away from her, I would. But I'm stuck. She takes a deep breath and seems to pull herself together, smoothing her hands over her hair. "It's

okay,” she murmurs the words to herself more than to me. There’s conviction in her tone, “I’m going to make it so we’re together forever. Just like it should have been from the start.”

I try and push up from the couch, but I flop back down, everything feeling heavy as my breathing starts to become rapid and panic sits on my chest. I glance down at the glass and know she must have done something to the drink.

I was watching her closely though. I watched her open the bottle’s seal.

“It was in the glass,” she answers my unasked question which I’m sure is written all over my face as I try and piece together what the fuck just happened.

I shake my head and look back at her. This is the woman who has been sending me ‘presents’ and notes. She talks like she knows me, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen her before.

The woman straddles my lap, placing her hands on my shoulders. Her touch makes me feel like I’m going to throw up. I want to push her away, desperately. I pick my arms up but am only able to lift them a few inches. Not nearly enough.

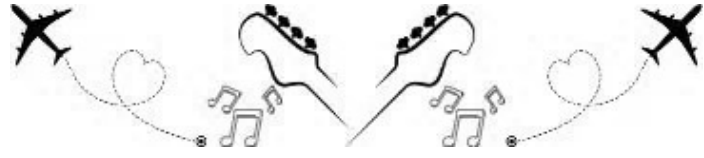
It feels like all my strength is gone. I won’t be able to fight her off and I feel helpless.

“Let’s put on a show, lover,” she licks up my neck and nips at my earlobe. “I’m sure your little whore will be back any minute. I can’t wait to see her heart shatter at our feet,” there’s a glee in her voice that turns my blood to ice in my veins.

I hate this.

Ellington is never going to forgive me if she walks in right now. I don’t even care what this woman, who is now rubbing her hands all over my chest like she owns me, does to me. I know I’ll be haunted by the hurt in El’s eyes for the rest of my life.

That is my regret, and I haven’t even lived it yet.



CHAPTER 9

ELLINGTON

I'm rushing to get back to Hayes' dressing room after being notified about the last gift left for Hayes at the tour bus during the concert. I called Blake to inform him and then spent time coordinating with most of the security team, leaving one of them at the door to stand watch. My gut clenched when I was told that the note left this time said, "Time's up."

I had hoped with the tour ending after tonight's concert that we had dealt with his stalker by not allowing any access. With those written words ringing in my ears, it's a lot more difficult to convince myself we've been successful. The only good thing is I know he's safe right now.

We had put off the VIP pass holders entering, so I don't think she'll be able to get to him. It was the only reason I allowed myself to step away instead of waiting until he got out of the shower. The thought of something happening to him now is a fear that burrows deep.

He's so much more than a job.

He's the man I love and the one I want to spend the rest of my life with.

I would have never imagined such a thing when I was first handed the file on him. He's shown me a different man from the one in the articles the file contained. What's that saying? When someone shows you who they are, believe them?

I believe in the man Hayes has shown himself to be. He's not the same man who fucked a different groupie in every city. The way he looks at me, like I'm his whole world, makes me believe his words are sincere and his actions back them up.

After coordinating with Blake and Kat, we decided to cancel the VIP guests all together. They might be mad, but Hayes' safety comes first, and I won't do anything to compromise it. Instead, we're going to head to the airport and

hop on SO's plane to get back to Denver and not waste any more time.

I'm walking down the last hallway leading to the dressing room and am about to fill the security guy at the door in on the situation when he glances at his watch. It's an action which takes less than a second, but there's something about it that sets my teeth on edge. It makes no sense, but I've learned to trust my instincts.

He snaps his head up when I quicken my steps and close the distance between us. I force my voice to be even and calm, "What is it?"

He glances at his watch again and shakes his head. "I let someone with a delivery in, a venue staff member, about ten minutes ago."

Rage fills me and I want to lay into the guy about how stupid that was, but something is telling me not to waste my time right now. Instead I reach for the door handle and find it locked. My eyes are big and round as I look up and watch as the man's face pales.

I take a step back and kick the door hard, almost crying out in relief when the flimsy lock on the door breaks and the door swings open with a bang.

I'm not at all prepared for what greets me. A woman with long blonde hair is straddling the man I love. She's fully clothed, but her hips are grinding down on him while her hands roam over his chest. At the commotion, she looks over her shoulder, a look of pure triumph on her face.

My eyes fill with tears, threatening to fall, at the sight in front of me. "Shit," I hear grunted at my back, but it sounds far away, as if I'm hearing the curse through a tunnel.

A tunnel filled with heartbreak and pain. Should I really have expected anything else from a rock star like Hayes? One who has pretended all this time that there's something real between us with sincerity? My heart shatters with the realization that it was all pretend.

The woman throws her head back, her blonde hair flying, and moans, “Hayes.” She starts to fumble around at his waist, I’m sure to pull his cock out. I suck in a breath at her next words, directed at me, I’m sure, “We’re kind of busy here.”

Something about her voice, a note of desperation in it, has me pushing my personal feelings away and detaching so I can take in the whole scene. I notice the way Hayes’ hands are limp next to him and he hasn’t turned his head to look at me.

I would expect more of a reaction from him. If not from me barging in here, then from him being engaged with the woman on his lap. I know how it feels when I’m riding Hayes and he can’t keep his hands off me—they roam from my tits to my hips, squeezing and helping me keep rhythm.

He’s not doing any of that.

This...isn’t right and my gut feeling has nothing to do with being in love with Hayes Jennings.

“It’s not real,” I murmur at the same time I hear, “Ma’am, something is wrong.”

My feet are moving before I even realize it, my body on autopilot. I grab a handful of blonde hair and wrench her away from Hayes. She lets out a shriek, but I ignore her. Now that I’m closer, I notice the glass on its side next to Hayes’ foot and the liquid which has spilled on the floor.

The woman I’m holding onto swings at me and my head whips around to look at her. There’s something in her eyes, something not right. Cold reality slaps me in the face and I know what I’m really seeing instead of the smokescreen she wanted me to see at first.

“He was all over me,” she sneers, “from the moment I walked through the door. You’ve been replaced,” she spits the words.

“No,” Hayes moans, but I don’t take my eyes off the woman, my fingers tightening in her hair.

When she swings again, her fist lands against my side, but it’s weak as fuck. I grin and by the way the woman pales, it’s not a nice grin. “My turn,” I seethe.

When I swing, my punch lands in her gut which causes her to try and double over, but the grip I have on her hair won't let her. My voice is cold, "You're the stalker."

"He's mine," her voice is so high pitched it's hard to hear, that note which makes you want to shake your head to get the ringing which remains to stop. "You can't have him. He was always supposed to be mine."

"So you decided to sneak in with an employee pass and drug him?"

"You saw him, he was all over me," she insists. When I look into her eyes, it's clear she believes every single word. She's delusional. "He loves me. We're meant to be together."

The rest of the security team rush into the room and I know I should let the woman go so she can be cuffed and dealt with. I need to take care of Hayes too. When I look out of the corner of my eye, I see he's being looked over.

When the woman swings again, she aims for my face and I jerk my chin back, her weak ass attempt to hit me doesn't make contact. "Wrong fucking move," I speak each word slowly.

When I punch her this time, it's an uppercut to her jaw and her eyes roll back in her head. Her body goes limp and a member of the security team is there to catch her when I let go of her hair. If a few strands are wrapped around my fingers when I do, then it's just how it is. I don't feel even a little bit sorry about it.

Knowing she's going to be taken care of, I turn my attention to where it belongs—on Hayes. It might take some time to get the image of another woman straddling my man out of my head, but it's not his fault. I hope, by focusing on him, I can push that image out of my mind permanently.

I kneel down next to my man and cup his face in my hands. His brown eyes are glassy as he blinks at me a few times, I'm sure trying to bring me into focus. "El," he breathes out and my heart clenches.

“You’re safe,” I assure him. “We’re going to get you to the hospital so you can get checked out.”

I barely get the words out of my mouth before paramedics are rushing into the room along with some local police. The guys will have to take care of making statements because I’m not going to leave Hayes’ side. I can’t.

I shouldn’t have ever left him, even to get a briefing. I should have stayed in the room. Guilt clogs my throat as Hayes is put on the stretcher, my feet moving and keeping up as he’s wheeled out of the stadium and loaded into the back of the ambulance.

There are fans at the barricade at the edge of the parking lot, but I don’t care. For the first time since I’ve been on tour with Hayes, the fans are quiet. I’m not surprised, I can barely form a thought let alone say anything.

It’s a blur as we’re taken to the closest hospital, and I force words past my lips when I’m asked what happened. I have no idea what he was drugged with, the best I can offer is a vague timeline and hope it’s enough. When I’m asked if I’m family, I don’t know what to say.

Is it possible Hayes won’t want me after this? After I wasn’t there to stop it before it ever started? Am I family? Where do I even begin?

As much as I want to force my way into the back where he’s being treated, I don’t. I can’t. Not yet.

Blake answers on the second ring, his voice smooth, “Ellington, I’ve already been briefed on what happened tonight.”

I barely swallow down a sob and turn away as a few of the security guys walk into the waiting room, speak to the person at the desk, and head toward where I know the man I love is being treated after being drugged.

I don’t deserve to be back there with him.

I don’t deserve a job at HS.

“I’m sorry,” I croak the words.

Blake's voice is softer, "What are you sorry for?"

"It got personal. Real. And I wasn't there. I should have been there. I was supposed to keep him safe."

"Ellington," Blake barks my name and my spine straightens. There's understanding that sounds bone deep when he speaks again, his voice soft, but stern, "You will not blame yourself for this. Do you blame the person who was watching his door?"

"No. She had a legitimate pass."

"Then why are you blaming yourself?"

"I love him," I whisper the words, every sound broken.

"Of course you do. Your paths crossed when fate wanted them to cross. You loving him isn't a weakness, it is a strength. You didn't let the visual you were presented with stop you from seeing the reality. You saw what she didn't want you to see and then you acted."

I take a shuddering breath. Blake's words sound right, but they don't *feel* right. Not yet at least.

What if they never feel right?

What if Hayes can't forgive me? What if I can't forgive myself?

"If you don't move forward and follow your heart and put this behind you, for both of you, then she wins," Blake's sage words break through the ache in my gut and it's as if my heart beats again for the first time since I walked into the dressing room tonight.

"You don't need to update me on the status of the client. The guys will. I want you to be at his side for the both of you. Say the things you haven't gotten the chance to say and hold each other close."

"How do you know we didn't say it yet?"

Blake chuckles, "Call it a hunch." Well, he's not fucking wrong. I wish I had told Hayes how I feel about him and I

desperately want him to tell me the same. “Take tonight and take care of him. The plane will bring you home tomorrow.”

Home.

It feels bigger now with Hayes in my life. I don’t know if he’ll blame me, but I do know I’ll fight for the man I love. I’ll fight for his heart with everything I have because I know, now, I can’t live without him.

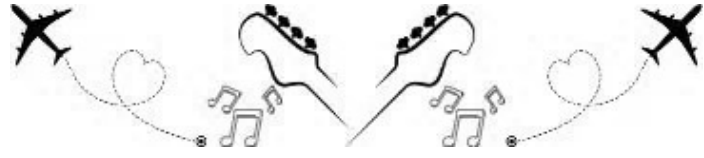
“Thank you, Blake.”

“That’s what family does.” I let out a breath, a sense of peace washing over me. “Take the next week off work and then I’ll see you back at the office.”

I gasp, “I still have a job?”

There’s admonishment in his tone, “Yes, Ellington, you have a job. You’re an asset to Higgins Security. I knew it when I hired you and nothing is going to change that.”

He hangs up before I have a chance to reply and determination fills me, even though the guilt remains, as I start to move toward the back, knowing if I’m asked again if Hayes Jennings is my family that there’s only one answer—he’s my heart and soul. I hope he feels the same.



CHAPTER 10

HAYES

Ellington has been quiet ever since last night. I noticed it, but I was out of it when I was released from the hospital and told to sleep off the lingering effects of the drugs. I know she was with me in the hotel room, but I don't think she slept next to me. Honestly, I don't think she slept at all.

She hasn't looked me in the eyes and it's killing part of me. The quiet between us is too much for me to handle on SO's private jet as we travel to Denver.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want that woman on my lap like she was when you walked in," my voice is laced with the guilt that has been swirling in my gut.

Ellington's head snaps up and her eyebrows furrow together. "You're sorry?" Her voice rises an octave and I'm not sure if it's because she's mad or something else, "You're sorry?"

"Yes," I swallow hard, "I'm sorry. I wouldn't cheat on you and I'm sure it looked like I was. Nothing she did was consensual."

Ellington closes her eyes, a pained look crossing over her features before she opens them again, her blue-green eyes boring into mine. "You have nothing to be sorry for," her voice is vehement. "Nothing at all." Her eyes cut away from mine, "I'm the one who is sorry."

I reach over and cup her face in my hands, rubbing the pads of my fingers back and forth across her cheeks. "Why are you apologizing to me? You don't need to."

"I wasn't there," her voice is so small. I hate it. I breathe out a breath it feels like I've been holding since this morning when I woke up, feeling like shit, and she wouldn't look at me. "I should have been there. I should have never left you alone."

If I was there then she wouldn't have had the chance to get that close to you."

I was updated this morning by Blake who let me know that she confessed to all the notes and following me around the country. She admitted I had signed something for her outside of the first show on the tour and I smiled at her. From that little interaction, she spun an entire delusion. The only consolation is that she'll be getting the help she needs.

Now to put all the guilt my woman is feeling to rest; she has nothing to feel guilty about.

When the ding indicating we're allowed to move around the cabin goes off, I rip my seatbelt off and then my woman's before I stand up and scoop her into my arms. I can't even describe how good it feels when she wraps her arms around my neck.

Her voice wobbles, "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking you to the bedroom where we can have a proper conversation. There are some things I need to make sure you're aware of. Then I'm going to make love to my woman to remind us we're right where we're supposed to be."

"Hayes," she sighs. "Do you think that's a good idea? You went through quite the ordeal last night."

"There is nothing in this world that could stop me," I practically snarl the words as I walk through the bedroom door, kicking it shut behind me and tossing Ellington onto the bed.

Her eyes are big and round as she looks up at me. I start to strip off my clothes as I look down at her, my voice gruff, "Take off your clothes."

Her movements are slow and tentative, but she does what I say which has my cock going so hard that I'm concerned I won't be able to wait to bury myself inside of her. I'll need to because we have some things to talk about first.

When I'm naked in front of her and she's still wearing her pants and shoes, I help get her undressed the rest of the way. As I stalk around the bed, her eyes follow me, a wariness in

them I haven't seen in a long time and hate even more now. I've seen my woman unguarded, I've experienced it; I won't settle for less than that now.

I slide onto the bed so I'm laying on my side and facing my woman. With a grip on her hip, I roll her so she's facing me completely. Her skin is so fucking soft, and it's been too damn long since I've touched it.

"Have you been blaming yourself since last night, Babe?"

She looks over my shoulder, but that isn't going to work for me. I pinch her chin between my thumb and forefinger, bringing her gaze to mine. "I should have been there," her voice is soft, but insistent.

"No," I bark before I crash my lips against hers. She moans against my mouth when our skin touches after I pull her body flush against mine. "I could never blame you for the actions of another person, Ellington," I speak against her lips, not wanting distance between us.

"I don't know, Hayes. I'm all messed up. My first thought last night when I saw," she closes her eyes, her voice breaking, "what I saw, was that I should have known better. I doubted you, but you were being assaulted. I wasn't doing my job; my duty was clouded by my feelings."

"You didn't run," I point out. "Most people would have seen what you did and run the other direction. You didn't. You took another look. You saw what you weren't supposed to and you stepped in and helped me. I don't even want to think about what you saved me from or what could have happened." I press my lips against her forehead and breathe in her scent. "Because of you I don't have to."

When I pull back, tears are welling up in her eyes and she shakes her head. "I don't know," she says the words again as if they'll change anything. They won't.

"I love you, Ellington." My words are simple, but true. "I do know," I tell her firmly. "I know you're mine and that I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you. I know fate put

you in my life when I needed you the most, the one person meant for me. I know.”

El freezes and I swear not even her heart is beating as she stares into my eyes. I can see the walls she’s tried to build around her self start to crumble as my words sink into her, reminding her, reassuring her. Giving her what she needs.

“Hayes,” she breathes out, “I love you.”

“I know,” I tease her right before I lean in and kiss her again.

This kiss is hungry, filled with *what if* and *could have been*. I roll us so she’s underneath me, deepening the kiss as my hands roam over her body. Her legs wrap around my waist, my skin branded by hers.

“Hayes,” she moans against my lips as she rocks against my length. I know it’s not enough for her because it’s not enough for me. “I need you,” she pleads.

“When we get home, you’re moving in with me. I can’t be away from you, not after being so close to you for so long. I won’t be able to sleep without you. Not anymore. We’ll figure everything else out as we go, but just know I’m not letting you go, El. Not now, not ever.”

Her arms wrap around my shoulders, holding on to me as if she’s trying to ground herself. “Okay.” I pull back from her sharply and stare down at her. She gives me a cheeky grin, “What? Did you think I was going to fight you on it?”

“Yes,” I tell her honestly.

The giggle that comes out of El is so not her and yet all her at the same time. “I’m not going to fight you on what I need and want too. I was already worried about how I’d be able to sleep without you and now I won’t have to.”

I rock my hips against her, my dick brushing against her clit and causing her to arch her back. Her nipples dragging against my chest feels so fucking good, I have to clench my jaw so I don’t come too fucking soon. I need to be inside of her first.

“Ready to join the mile high club, Babe?” I wiggle my eyebrows which makes her laugh. “I have to say, we lucked out because we get a bed.”

Ellington looks up into my eyes, her smile big and bright. “I’m ready for anything with you, Hayes.”

Her words hit me right in the gut. I make a silent promise to not let this woman down. I can’t. I won’t.

When I pull my hips back, the head of my cock slides down her slit and catches on her entrance. As much as I want to slam into her, I also want to savor this. I slide in slowly.

El’s legs hitch up higher on my hips and I’m able to get even deeper, the action causing us to moan. I tilt my head back, enjoying the way her warm, wet walls squeeze my length.

“So fucking tight,” I grit out through my teeth.

I pull out just as slowly, pausing when just the head of my dick is still inside of my woman. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and she fucking begs, “Please, Hayes, fuck me hard. I need it. Erase all the bad, all the doubt and the guilt.”

I slam inside of my woman, her scream turning into a throaty moan that is better than any song I’ve ever written or performed. I could listen to my woman make that sound every day for the rest of my life; I fully intend to do just that.

As I start to move, I reach back and grip her leg, pulling it forward and positioning her leg over my shoulder. I’m able to fuck her even deeper as our eyes are locked together, giving us a connection that is more than our bodies.

It’s soul-deep and I’m never going to let it go.

“Your greedy pussy is begging for my cum,” I growl and watch as her eyes darken with lust.

I can’t control my body’s movements and give myself over to the hunger this woman has only ever been able to bring out in me. I fuck her hard and deep, moving in a rhythm that matches our combined heartbeats.

Ellington's moans grow louder every time I hit the back of her channel. I know she's close and I'm not going to be far behind. I can't help myself when I'm with this woman. Not only does she turn me on, but her love for me amplifies everything.

The tension in my body grows as I pump in and out of my woman. Her hair sticks to her forehead and droplets of sweat roll down my back. It's kind of surreal to know we're flying in the clouds right now. I feel weightless, but it has nothing to do with the plane.

It's all her.

All Ellington.

The woman I plan to marry someday and make mine in all ways. The woman I plan to carry my babies. The woman I'm going to love for the rest of my life.

"Love you, Babe," I grunt, barely able to get words out as I try and hold off on coming until she does.

She'll always find her pleasure first.

I reach between us and strum her clit. It's all she needs to go over the edge, her walls clamping down on my shaft as she comes hard. I fight against how tight she's squeezing me and jackhammer into her wet heat a few times.

It's too much and not enough.

"Show me how much you love me," El pleads and I know exactly what she's asking for.

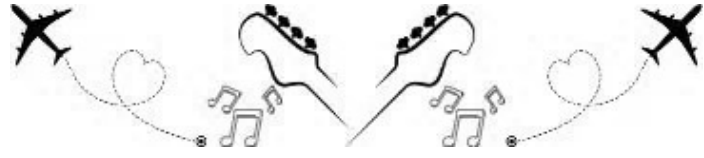
I bury myself deep inside of her and fill her with my cum. I'll always give her what she asks for, what she wants and needs, even if she doesn't know what it is. She's my everything and I'll do whatever I need to do to show her that every day for the rest of our lives.

When I collapse next to her, I pull my woman against my side and lean down to pepper kisses all over her face. "I can't wait until we get home and can start building our life on more than rolling down the road from city to city."

She grins up at me, her blue-green eyes sparkling. “I don’t know, it was the perfect way for us to find our forever. I’ll go on the road with you anytime, Hayes, because there’s no place else I’d rather be.”

I tighten my hold on her because I know she means every single word. As we soar through the air, I think of the first time I met my woman. She was guarded. She didn’t trust me. She wasn’t sure how it would all end up.

I knew and I’m damn glad I was right. She turned my world upside down and gave me a purpose I’d never known before. Now she’s in my arms and I’m never letting her go.



EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER *ELLINGTON*

When I open the door to our home, the first thing I hear is Hayes playing the guitar. It brings a smile to my face, it always does. It has since the first time we were on the tour bus, and he pulled out his guitar and started working on a song.

It was like seeing beyond the veil and into a land I shouldn't have been able to see. It was special. I loved every second of it. I could look at him and see more than just the rock star with a tattered past. I could see him. All of him.

I lean against the entry way of the living room and let the music the man I love is playing wash over me. It brings me back to center. Is there a better way to be welcomed home?

When Hayes looks up and sees me, he puts his guitar down and stalks my way. The moment he's close enough, he snags me with an arm around my waist and hauls me against his chest. The way he looks at me, as if everything else in the world could fall to the wayside and he wouldn't even notice, always makes my breath hitch.

"Babe," he growls, "I missed you."

"You've been checking up with me all day." I roll my eyes and hope he can't see how much I like the way he keeps in contact with me. He's been working on an album, but I've been on a new job being protection for some big corporate guy visiting from New York who thinks his money should buy everything. Including me. It doesn't. Hayes hasn't been happy about it. "Even more than usual," I point out.

"I think I have reason to check up on you," he gives me a meaningful look, but I just shrug.

I know he trusts me, the same way I trust him. We've built a damn good life on the foundation of rolling down the road on the tour bus a year ago. That's not why he's been more on edge, especially with some man sniffing around.

Two weeks ago, I had quite the surprise in finding out I'm pregnant. It wasn't exactly something we planned, but it happened. I was shocked and barely processing the positive pregnancy test in my hands. Well, the fourth pregnancy test because false positives are absolutely a thing.

I must have been taking way too long in the bathroom because I was brought out of my stupor by Hayes knocking on the door and calling out to me to find out if I was okay.

"I'm fine," my voice broke and was shaky as hell.

That was all it took for Hayes to open the door and walk in as if the bathroom isn't a place where most people value privacy. I was just standing there holding a pregnancy test, unsure how to react and wondering how he would.

He froze, his eyes bouncing back and forth between my face and the test. "Is that," he swallowed hard and shook his entire body like a dog who just got out of the bath, "do you want to tell me or do you want me to guess? I don't want to ruin this moment for you, El."

With his words all my doubts and questions vanished. My voice was thick with emotion, "Ask me."

A huge smile spread across his face and I swear the man was vibrating, "Do you have something to tell me, Babe?"

"I'm pregnant," my voice was stronger and surer than I thought it would be.

Hayes closed the space between us and captured my face in his hands. When he kissed me, he poured all his love into it. Not just his love for me, but for our baby as well.

He's become much more possessive now that I'm pregnant. From what I understand, from the women who are part of the HS family, it's happened to all the men who make up the Higgins Security, Suburban Outcasts, and Banks Ink. family.

I kind of find it hot, but I'll never admit that to Hayes or anyone else in case it could be used against me later.

I can't believe we're going to have a baby. I'm elated. Hayes is going to be a great dad. I haven't told my family yet. The only person I'm wary about telling is Simone. I know Mom and Dad will be thrilled, but I have no doubt Simone will have something snarky to say. Our relationship hasn't gotten better and I'm pretty sure it never will. Not until she grows up.

"I don't like how this guy can't take a hint," Hayes grumbles.

"You're cute when you pout," I tease him.

Before I realize what he's doing, Hayes pulls a ring out of his pocket and slips it onto my finger. My mouth hangs open and when I look up at the man I love, he has a smug as hell look on his face.

"Now he's going to know you're taken," he sounds so pleased with himself.

"You're supposed to ask," I insist. I gasp, horror filling me. "Is this because I'm pregnant?"

Hayes shakes his head slowly. "Today marks one year since we got on that plane and came home together. I've been planning on asking you to marry me for six months and ordered the ring then." I look down at the ring on my finger and take in the simple, emerald cut stone. It's not too big which I appreciate because of my job. "I love you, El. I've loved you since the moment I walked onto that plane. You turned my world upside down and I don't want to live without us walking through this life together. You've given me so much," his hand comes down and rests on my still flat belly, "and now you're giving me a family."

"I'll marry you, Hayes," I barely get the words out past the lump in my throat as tears fill my eyes.

Pregnancy hormones are wild. I'll deny any other reason for my tears until my dying breath.

"I know."

Hayes winks at me before he captures my lips in another kiss and I'm lost to how damn good this man makes me feel. It shouldn't have worked on paper, but who gives a fuck about that? I sure don't; he's mine.

Want more Hayes and Ellington?

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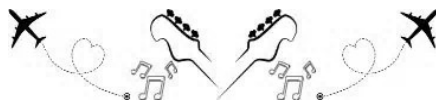
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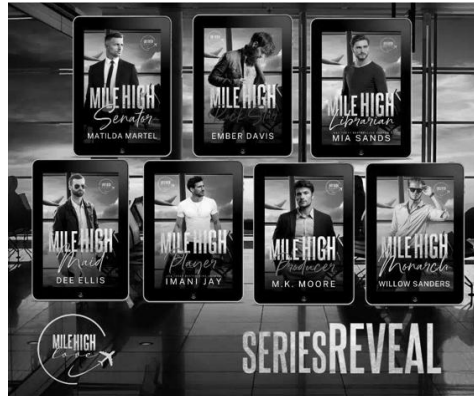
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You can find a complete chronological reading order for my Denver Family books and a book map that covers the entire universe on my [website](#).



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ember Davis loves alpha heroes with a range of emotions, but a strong sense of how to take care of their women. She loves her heroines from all walks of life, just like her heroes, and she wants them to be real and relatable. Her heroines tend to be sassy, opinionated and smart.

Ember is a stay at home mom of two who recently refound her love of books and all things romance and is so glad that she did. She's always been creative but writing and creating stories that she would love to read satisfies dreams she had as a little girl. She loves butterflies, the color purple and enjoying time with her family.

Psst...it's totally a pen name, but everything above is 100% true.

If you enjoyed this book, or even if you didn't, I'd really appreciate you leaving a review and/or a star rating on Amazon! This is a whole new world for me so any feedback you're open to giving, I'd love to have.



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