

ONLY GIRL TRILOGY #1

Only Girl



MARION DE RÉ



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READER EXPECTATIONS

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

Cursing: Not a lot, but a few F-bombs

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

Triggers: Mention of drug addiction

Style: First person present, single POV

Ending: Cliffhanger (HEA in Book 3)



To my amazing readers:

Sorry—not sorry—about that last cliffhanger.

Don't hate me. I love you.

THE DISCOVERY

OH MON DIEU. NON! This is not happening.

My arms fall to my sides along with the get-well-soon cup I was holding.

“Lou, wait,” my traitorous boyfriend says, buckling up his jeans. “It’s not what you think.”

I want to scream and tell him that when people say that it’s always exactly what’s going on, but I can’t. Tears brim my eyes and I won’t be able to contain them much longer. I turn on my shaky legs and get out of there. I don’t need an explanation. Anyway, they didn’t leave much to the imagination. I mean, that slut Aubrey was wiping her mouth as soon as she saw me.

“Wait, Lou!” Jared yells behind me.

Why is he following me?

“Non. Laisse moi tranquille.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone, doll! I’m sorry. I don’t know what just happened.”

Memory loss? Seriously?

“You’re disgusting. I never want to see you again.”

I slam the door behind me and expect it to make a noise matching my anger, but my weak force and Jared’s ancient oak wood door can’t compare.

I tighten my coat around me and put my hood on. Not that it’s of any use; my face’s already drenched.

This was supposed to be a good day. I *had* a good day. This morning, the subway arrived just when I stepped on the platform. It wasn’t full, and I even had a seat. That’s like unheard of at NYC peak hours. And for once, my boss didn’t call me Luisa but Louise! After two freaking years of slaving me around, this was a victory.

Then I came here and ruined it. He ruined it. I wasn’t supposed to, but when he called in sick this morning, I thought I’d bring him some soup after work. That’s the kind of girlfriend I am. The stupid one. The one who thinks that guys can be faithful and not jump on their new assistant. *Wake up, Louise!* They’re still men, even if you’ve been dating them for two years.

Merde. What a bastard. I feel my heart constrict in my chest, and I take in a deep breath, hoping it’ll make the pain go away.

Two weeks later

Entering the glass corridor, a wave of heaviness crushes me. It’s my new normal when I come to work. I take a deep breath

as I make my way to my cubicle, nodding to my coworkers who are already there.

When I sit down, I'm visually attacked by a sea of yellow post-it notes, courtesy of Maria, my boss. It's going to be a long day.

"Hey, Louise! How are you?" Abigail asks, taking a seat behind her desk across from mine. We don't actually work together, but we get along well despite our age difference. Also, it turns out she's one of the only decent people in this place.

"I'm good. Have a ton of work. You?"

She rubs her hands together. "Almost froze to death out there, but alive."

"How's your dog?" Abi's dog is the apple of her eye and got sick a couple of days ago.

"Oh! She's better, she's..."

"Louise, can I see you in my office, please?" Maria, my boss, asks, her head peering through her office door.

"*Please?*" Abi mouths, eyes widened in surprise. I know what she means. Maria's not usually that nice.

I follow her inside and sit across from her desk.

"So, I'm afraid I don't have good news." She folds her hands. "We're gonna have to let you go."

"What?" I exclaim, a bit louder than intended.

“I’m sorry. This is not my decision. I think you’re a good asset to this company. A few more years with me and you’d have made a great marketing manager. But we have to make some cuts and since you’re the last one in...”

“I don’t...” I start, but she cuts me off.

“I tried to stop it, but it came from Mr. Lion himself. My hands are tied.”

Taking a deep breath, I try my best to keep my tears in.

“I’m sorry.”

Swallowing hard, I get up. “I’ll finish what you gave me yesterday and...”

“It’s not necessary. You can get your things and leave now. You will be paid until the end of the month.”

“Oh, okay then.”

“Best of luck, Louise.”

I get back to my cubicle and fall into my seat.

“What happened?” Abi immediately asks.

“Got fired.”

“Wha—” she screams before covering her mouth with her hand. “Seriously?”

“Yeah... budget cuts.”

“Shit. I knew she sounded way too nice.”

I give her a weak smile, then pick up a discarded cardboard box near the printer and put my stuff hastily in it. I want to get

the hell away from here.

“I better go then.”

“Yeah... It was nice to meet you, Louise,” she says, standing up. “I hope we can keep in touch.”

“Yeah! You too. Thank you for being nice to me. I can’t say the same about everyone here...” I whisper as she takes me into her arms.

“Ahh, don’t listen to them.”

“They might have been right, though,” I say, looking at my feet. “Well, actually maybe not. Maria *complimented* me... right after she fired me.” I chuckle. “Can you believe that?”

“Of course I can.” She smiles fondly.

“Thank you. Bye, Abi. I’ll call you.”

“Bye, Louise.”

I put my coat on, grab the box, and make my way back to the elevator under the stares of my coworkers.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Just a few more minutes. Don’t give them that satisfaction.

Now that I think about it, I hated this place. I’m glad to be out of here.

I press the elevator button and it arrives at the same time. Unfortunately, someone grabs my arm before I can enter: my cheating ex-boyfriend.

“Lou, I’m glad I caught you. My dad just told me,” he says, scratching the back of his head.

“Leave me alone, Jared,” I manage to say, entering the elevator.

He stays just outside the door. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want things to go this way.”

I stay silent before looking away. The bastard has some nerves.

“You’ll bounce back, Lou. I’m sure you will.”

I don’t reply. Instead, I press the “closing door” button until it works and his stupid face disappears from view.

Bounce back? Seriously? How did I not see that he was such a douche? Today is a weird day. First Maria with her compliments, and now Jared’s giving me a word of encouragement?

Without a look back, I run out of the glass building into the cold January air. Lost and defeated, I stand there for a second, not sure where to go or what to do.

Someone bumps into me, almost making me fall on my ass. I turn my head to see them, but a woman smacks my arm as she passes by quickly. I hurry to the center of the plaza and sit on the fountain before someone really makes me fall. New Yorkers don’t like people in their way when they’re going to work. I watch them go by, walking fast, heads bowed to their phones or with a coffee in their hands.

That used to be me, not that I really envy them. I mean, I liked my job, but it wasn’t my dream job. Working as Maria’s assistant was no piece of cake, but I was grateful for the

opportunity. So, I was one hundred percent committed. I knew I had to start at the bottom and it would eventually pay off. What am I going to do now? Start all over again at another agency? Stupid Jared, this is all his fault. He's the reason I got fired.

Okay, this is just an assumption, but did I mention that Jared's last name is Lion, as in Lion Marketing Insights? Maria did say the order came from Mr. Lion himself... it's not hard to put two and two together: I broke up with Jared, so LMI broke up with me.

What gets me the most is that now everyone will think they were right, that I only got the job because I was dating Jared. I struggled a lot with that, so I worked harder than anyone else in the office. I was determined to prove my worth, and it turns out that I did—*an asset*, as Maria said earlier. But it wasn't enough. What kept me hired was the fact that I was dating the boss's son, and that's what hurts the most.

Putain. I can't believe it escalated that quickly.

I march to the nearest trash can and throw away every item from the cardboard box representing my time at LMI, except the New York photo frame of me and my family when they last crossed the Atlantic to visit. It's been eight months since we saw each other. I was too busy at work to make it for Christmas last year.

Tightening my coat around me, I start to move. I need to get out of here or I'm literally going to freeze to death. Who said anything about global warming?

2

THE BACKUP PLAN

THERE AREN'T MANY PEOPLE in the subway or in the streets, so I get home quickly. With a nod, I greet Joe, the newsagent at the corner of 1st and 11th, then hurry up the stairs of my building. I've been living in this apartment for two years and I'm pretty lucky. For New York, it's quite big. It has two small bedrooms, a bathroom, and a bright living area that opens to a kitchen. Of course, I don't live here alone, but with the closest person I have to a family here: my best friend Melissa.

I met Mel five years ago on my first day at NYU. I had just moved here from France and I struggled with the English language. She rescued me from a very awkward conversation, and we've been friends ever since.

"Mel, I'm home!" I shout, taking my shoes off.

Mel storms into the living room, fresh out of the shower in an aqua green bathrobe, her long curly red-hair dripping water all over the floor.

"Louise? What the fuck?" she says, surprised to see me here in the middle of the morning.

“I got fired.”

“Of course you did.” She rolls her dark-green eyes. “Cheating on you wasn’t enough, huh?” She wrinkles her pierced nose. “I hate that stupid bastard.”

To say that Mel hated Jared was an understatement. Ever since the first day she met him, she constantly said he was not good enough for me and that I could do better. I was stubborn and didn’t listen to her. Even if we see the world very differently, Mel always gives valuable advice.

“I know. You were right. I’m so stupid,” I say as she takes me into her arms for a comforting hug.

“Of course, you’re not stupid, babe. This could happen to anyone.”

I break the embrace. “Not you.”

“Well, no. Not me, but I’m not a good example. I refuse any kind of commitment because of my parents’ divorce, and my dick dad moving to California with his secretary,” she blurts out.

We look at each other for a second and explode with laughter. Mel likes to psychoanalyze her life. Her mom, Patricia, is a psychiatrist, which explains a lot.

“You should continue getting ready. I don’t want to make you late for work.”

“Okay, babe. I’m going out with the girls from work tonight. Do you want to come with?”

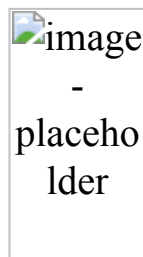
“No, Mel. I really don’t feel like going out. See you tomorrow?”

“Sure,” she says, disappearing into her room.

Normally, she would insist. She always does when I don’t want to go out, which is more often than not; we are very different in that way. Telling me that life is too short and I should make the most of it, but she doesn’t, probably sensing I want to be alone.

Walking to my room, I throw myself on the bed face first, and let go of my feelings.

I just want this day to be over.



IN THE MORNING, I wake up with puffy eyes and bright red cheeks. That’s what happens when you cry yourself to sleep.

It was one thing to lose Jared, but now to lose my job too? This is the last straw. My life was planned out. Now, I’m

disoriented.

“Lou?” Mel knocks at my door.

“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?” she asks, leaning her perfect dancer body against the doorframe.

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it. I’m fine.”

“Okay. I’m going shopping. You should totally come! It would take your mind off you-know-who.”

“Mel, you do realize that I need a job ASAP. Now is not the time for me to go shopping. If I don’t find something pronto, you’re going to need a new roommate!”

“Don’t be so dramatic. I’m sure you will find something soon. You were top of your class and are the hardest working person I know.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“That’s the spirit! I’ll finish getting ready and leave you to it.”

Dragging myself out of bed, I make some coffee, then grab my laptop from my bedroom. I’m just getting started on the job search when Mel closes the door on her way out.

I toss my slippers on and sit cross-legged on the couch. I quickly find some interesting listings that could suit me. They’re all more of the same. “Marketing Assistant at Blast Media. Nice pay. Holidays. Stability.” But do I really want to keep drafting budgets, making power points, and fetching

coffee? Because, let's be honest, that's what I was doing, and not using my creativity to work on thrilling projects with major brands like I expected. I only stayed at the time because resigning from my internship wasn't an option for me. LMI sponsored my visa, so if our contract ended, so would my right to stay in the USA. A year later, they finally hired me and I got a green card. At least something good came out of it.

I'm more and more convinced that I should do something else, but what?

Who are you, Louise Mercier, and what do you want to do?

I really don't know.

I was so defined by my relationship with Jared and my job that I lost myself along the way. One thing is clear, though, I will never let that happen again. This year will be different. It will be my year. I will not let myself blindly fall for another guy and I will find a job that I really like, not what everyone else thinks I should be doing.

By the time Mel barges through the door with more bags than I can count, I'm almost done updating my resume.

I bite back a smirk. "Is there anything left in the store?"

"They had some sales. I couldn't resist. And stop mocking me or I won't give you this magnificent dress I found for you."

"Mel! I can't buy any clothes right now."

Instead of listening, she holds a little black empire dress with smooth fabric and a plunging neckline in front of my

face. When I stand to protest again, she puts her hand in the air.

“Stop right there. It was a steal. Ralph Lauren, fifty dollars. They didn’t have my size and I just couldn’t leave it. With your boobs and curves, you’re going to make jaws drop!”

I’ll admit the dress is pretty, a bit too sexy for me, though. Something I would have never dared to pick up in the store.

“Mel...” I sigh.

“Shh. I know... I shouldn’t have. I’m the best friend ever. Don’t worry about it,” she says, showing off her perfect smile. I can’t argue with her. She’s won, and she knows it.

“How is the job hunt going?” she adds, going into her room to drop all her purchases.

“Total bust. I was never thrilled by my job, so now I’m wondering if I shouldn’t do something else.” Sitting down at the kitchen counter, I put my head in my hands.

“I know, babe,” she says, gently brushing my wavy hair. “But now that you are free and you don’t have to worry about your visa, take your time. Think about it. You don’t need to work right away. You have savings, and if you worry about money, I can talk to Anna. They always need more girls at VIP EVENTS.”

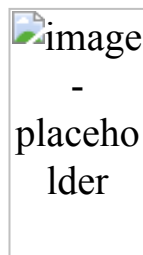
I peer at her between the gaps of my fingers. “Yeah, I’m not sure I’m cut out for that, Mel.”

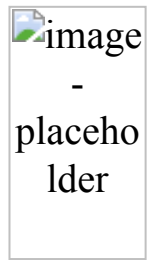
“Oh, come on! You’ll be perfect,” she says, clapping her hands. “I’ll ask tonight. Now, let’s order something to eat. All

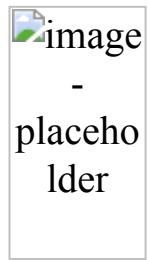
of this shopping made me hungry.”

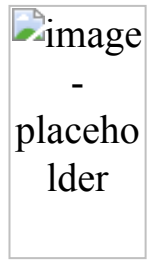
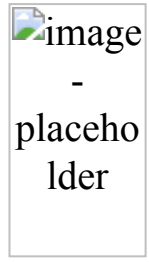
Taking my silence as agreement, Mel picks up her phone, then taps away. Well, at least it’s a potential backup plan. True, bringing drinks and food to rich people at cocktail parties in a mini dress is not very gratifying, but the pay is good, and combined with her dancer gig in a Broadway musical, Mel is able to live comfortably in New York.

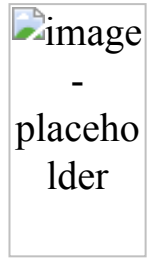
Anyway, I can’t afford to be picky. I need money to buy me time to think about the future, so this will have to do. If they’ll have me, I will put on my best smile and pour as many drinks as they ask me to. And who knows, it might be a good thing to get out of my comfort zone for once.











VIP EVENTS

“LOU! GET YOUR ASS here right now! We’re going to be late!” Mel hollers from the living room.

Shit. “Coming!” I finish reapplying my lipstick, my hands sweating so badly I nearly drop the tube into the bathroom sink again. Tonight is my first gig at VIP EVENTS. I’m replacing a girl who got sick and can’t make it. With one last tug to unsuccessfully lengthen my new dress, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. Damn! Mel was right. My body looks great in this dress. I barely recognize myself with the blow-dry she gave my dirty-blonde hair and the amount of makeup she put around my hazel eyes.

“I’m here. We can go.”

“Damn, girl. You. Are. Hot.”

“You think it’ll be okay, then?” I tug on my dress again, but the hemline insists on creeping back up toward my ass.

“Oh, come on! Now you’re just fishing for compliments.” She crosses her arms, pinning me with a smirk.

I laugh. “Fine. Let’s go.”

After exiting the subway at Fifth Avenue Station, and walking for about two minutes, we enter the service entrance of a luxurious hotel. Or at least I think it is, because the service corridor sure isn't. Peyton, Anna's assistant, greets us and shows us where to put our bags and coats before guiding us to the ballroom.

The room is marvelous. High carved ceilings with gildings, massive crystal chandeliers, and a shiny wooden floor. Dozens of tall cocktail tables scatter the room, and at the back, the DJ is testing his lights and special effects.

We join the group of people all dressed in black and white. A woman appears on the right through a draped door, and I know at once who she is. Anna, my new boss. Mel's description of her was on point. She is probably in her mid-fifties, the body of a model, short platinum blonde hair, clear blue eyes, and this icy beauty that northern European girls have.

"Okay, everybody, listen up for the briefing." Anna claps her hands. "Tonight is pop star Jack Rose's birthday. He is turning twenty-two and his team chose VIP EVENTS for the occasion. I don't need to stress how important it is that everything runs smoothly. A lot of celebrities will be here, and you know how demanding they can be. Cater to their every need. Be invisible but always near, and speak only when spoken to. I don't want to see empty glasses or food trays. The tables will also have to be cleared in a timely manner. You'll get food and drinks ready from the kitchen, so you just have to

go around the room. Is that clear? Any questions? No? Okay. Let's check out the different facilities."

Keeping a brisk pace, she shows us the kitchen, where a tall Italian looking man is pacing and talking super-fast to his staff. Thank God we're not working in here. Next, we follow her to the restrooms, guests' cloakroom, and a stocking area with stairs going up to the lobby.

"This is the place where you can have your dinner. I don't want to see you taking a break anywhere else. You'll have fifteen minutes each, and you will take turns to eat. I'll tell you when it's yours," she says before verifying our outfits one by one.

"Your roles have been posted." She points to a wall behind us and we all move to discover our assignments.

"Ugh. Cloakroom." Mel sticks a finger in her mouth, then proceeds to gag.

"No good?" I scan the list for my position.

"If you think choking on expensive perfume and body spray is good, then yes, it's good."

I bite back a laugh. "I'm on drink service."

Mel pretends to melt to the floor dramatically. "That's where the good tips and the hot guys are. Especially at a party like this."

"Oh... you know who might be there?"

“Yeah... only famous actors like Kyle Jenkins or Alex Smith!”

I’m getting even more nervous now, if that’s even possible. We all get into positions as the first guests arrive. Mel was right. The guest list is impressive. Actors, singers, TV show hosts, reality TV celebrities, and athletes.

I take a deep breath. *Let’s do this.*

I get the first tray of drinks and make my way through the crowd. A waiter with an empty tray rolls his eyes at me as I pass, causing me to pick up my pace. I do countless runs to the kitchen as more and more guests arrive. Everything is going well so far. I can do this.

Suddenly, applause and cheers fill the room. Jack Rose has arrived. He’s instantly swallowed by a mass of people hugging him, shaking his hands, and I can’t even see him properly from where I stand. While the guests are distracted, my colleagues and I take this opportunity to clear as many tables as possible and run to get refills. After a few minutes, the frenzy dials down, and the guests resume their mingling.

I’m about to go back to the kitchen when my eyes are drawn to him... Jack.

He’s gorgeous. Tall, with deep green eyes, and undercut slicked back blond hair. He has a natural charisma and confidence, making him magnetic. I can’t look away. He’s so different from what I imagined, not that I am a fan. I know maybe one or two of his songs, but I’ve seen his face on tabloids, on TV, and on the walls of my sister’s bedroom. She

is a huge fan, like most sixteen years old girls, which was the only thing that pissed off my mom constantly. Jack Rose kind of has a bad reputation. Between the girls and the fights, he's not exactly a role model. I've never paid too much attention to him, but right now I can't take my eyes off him. His eyes meet mine and the shock is imminent. Everything moves in slow motion and a burning feeling takes over my body.

"Waitress, a refill," says a fake blonde with blown-up lips on my left, showing me her champagne glass with insistence. I snap out of it and hurry to the kitchen. When I come back with her drink, she doesn't acknowledge me. She's in a deep conversation with her friend.

"I'm waiting for an opening. Last time he wasn't ready because he was still not over her," she says, waving her hand in dismissal. "Argh, so frustrating, I could give him everything he wants."

"For sure! How cool would it be if you became Mrs. Rose! You'd be like totally famous!"

"I *am* famous." She shoots her friend a glare. "Can I help you?" she adds, now looking at me.

"Um, no, sorry. I just wanted to clear your table, Miss."

"Seriously, what did she want? She's so weird! Did you see how she looked at Jack too?" she barks as I'm moving away.

Pretending I didn't hear her, I hurry back to the kitchen with the empty glasses. When the DJ says a few words and blasts some loud music, everybody heads to the dance floor. Anna

gestures for me to go take my dinner break. I'm so relieved to be off my feet. This job is no joke. I grab one of the salads prepared for us by the caterer and go into the designated area she showed us earlier. When I get there, however, someone is already sitting on the stairs.

Jack Rose.

"So—sorry," I sputter. "I didn't know anyone was here. I'll leave."

"No problem. I shouldn't be here, anyway. I'm supposed to be having fun with my guests," he says.

"I'll just go eat in the kitchen," I say, turning the door knob.

"Please sit down. There is enough space for the both of us on this step."

Crap. Heat rushes to my cheeks as I take the seat next to him. He offers me a wide smile.

"I'm Jack," he says, sticking out his hand for me to shake.

"I know," I respond, shaking it. Along with the rest of the entire world.

His mouth twitches. "Interesting name. I like it."

"Right, sorry. I'm Louise."

"Nice to meet you, Louise. Cute name." He's staring at me, and the burning sensation takes over my body once more. Instead of meeting his gaze, I lower my eyes and focus on opening the lid of my salad.

Silence stretches between us as the music is roaring in the distance. If I don't say something, I will liquefy on the spot.

“So, you're not having fun?” I ask.

He looks at me for a second, conflicted. Shit. I shouldn't have pried. This is none of my business. Why couldn't I just have wished him a happy birthday instead?

“Well, I guess I'm not since I'm sitting here instead of dancing over there,” he says. “Look at me: poor Pop star... His birthday bash is not good enough for him,” he adds with an annoying baby-like voice.

“Sorry, it was not what I meant. It was a genuine question, but you don't have to answer it,” I say, mixing my salad.

He pauses, as if inspecting me, before sighing. “Well, it must sound stupid, but no. I know I should love this, but this is all fake, all for show. The label wanted to do some big birthday party this year. I don't even know half the people here.”

He seems so honest and sad that something breaks in my heart. I really feel for him. He always looks so confident and pop star-like in public. I would have never guessed that it hid such vulnerability. I take a few bites of my salad—what can I say? I'm starving—before replying, “I'm sorry. It sucks, but if you want to take your mind off it, I'm here, for what it's worth.”

His face shuts down at once.

“Right, yeah. We can go up to my room,” he says, standing abruptly.

“What do you mean?” I shake my head, genuinely confused. Does he mean? *No!*

“Are you kidding me?” I yell. “I was just trying to be nice. You looked like you could use someone to talk to, that’s all! Jeez! Maybe it works with every girl you meet, but it sure as hell won’t work with me!” Putting the lid back on my food, I rush to the door.

He follows me and puts his hand on mine, preventing me from opening it.

“Wait, I’m sorry. Please stay,” he breathes.

My skin prickles with heat. I want to tell him to let me leave, but his touch is sending small electroshocks into my body, freezing me on the spot. His green eyes flash with a mix of desperation and sadness, and all I can manage is a nod.

With a heaving sigh, he sits back on the steps, then pats the empty spot next to him. “I truly thought you meant something else. Most of the girls are only after that, so they can say they did it with Jack Rose.”

I wrinkle my nose. “It’s disgusting!”

“Thanks,” he says, revealing cute dimples with his smile.

I giggle. “Sorry, not what I meant. It sucks to be used like that,” I say, focusing on my food.

“Yeah, it’s my life. Sometimes it’s great and sometimes it’s a nightmare. It was a dream to live off my music, you know?” He drums his fingers on his thighs.

I nod, not daring to reply, too afraid he’ll stop sharing if I do.

“It’s just so hard. The expectations, the pressure, the scrutiny. At times it’s just too much to handle and I wish all of this would disappear so I could just be Jack Rose, the person and not Jack Rose, the superstar.”

He stops for a second and slicks his hair back before looking away. “You must think I’m so spoiled and entitled, and I can’t blame you.”

“No, actually. I really don’t. I can’t imagine what you feel, but I know how it is to try to live up to certain expectations.”

He frowns.

“My parents, well, my mom, always has high-expectations for me. No matter what I do, it’s never enough. It’s just hard sometimes... but why don’t you stop, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your career. If you don’t like it anymore, why don’t you stop it?” I ask, taking a bite of my salad.

He’s staring at me with his eyebrows raised. “You know, I think you’re the first person ever to ask me that.”

“Really? I mean, if it’s not working for you anymore, it seems obvious.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, it does. Actually, I did take a small hiatus in my career. I needed time to myself, but the thought of completely stopping never occurred to me.”

“Why’s that?”

He cocks his head to the side. “Why don’t you stop talking to your mom? If her impossible expectations are too much for you?”

I lean back on my elbows and look him in the eyes. “Because I love her. I don’t want her not to be in my life.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “Same for me. I guess it’s more of a love-hate relationship. I enjoy writing music, composing, performing. All of this is great, but when I’m home, I can’t even go to the grocery store or to the dentist without someone taking my picture. It’s hard to relax while on holidays because they always find out where I am and stalk me the entire trip.”

“You should focus on the good, then. Remind yourself why you’re doing all this, and then maybe the other parts won’t feel as overwhelming.”

Someone opens the door, startling me.

“Ah, J. there you are, man,” a tall guy standing in the doorway says. “Come on! We’ve been looking for you. Time to blow out your candles.”

“Adrian, sorry. I was just getting some alone time. I’m coming,” Jack mutters. He puts his hand in his hair, slicking it

back once again, then turns to me. “Duty calls. Enjoy your evening, Louise.”

The way he says my name sends shivers down my spine, and I do my best not to squirm.

“You too,” I reply, but he’s already gone. As I finish my last bite, I hear in the distance, “*Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Jack...*”

Jack Rose is officially twenty-two, and shit, I’m officially five minutes over my break!

A LIFE-CHANGING PHONE CALL

THE NEXT DAY, I get up late with a heavy migraine. Stumbling into the kitchen, I take some pain relievers, then make myself something to eat. Mel's already gone to rehearsals—I really don't know how she does it. My feet and arms are still sore from yesterday. All I feel like doing today is sitting on the couch with a good book.

After eating a copious breakfast, I brace myself to call my parents on Skype. I have to tell them about my job, or lack thereof. I've been putting this off, but I can't any longer. It's painful to hear the disappointment in their voices, especially my mom, who doesn't hide her fear that I will remain jobless and alone forever. *“Louise, how disappointing! What are you going to do now? This is a disaster. You were doing so great! And Jared was such a wonderful man!”*

However, once the bandage is ripped off, I enjoy talking to them. Even more when my sister arrives and I get to tell her I met Jack Rose yesterday at his birthday party.

“Oh mon Dieu.” She gasps. “I saw all about it on Instagram. It looked so *incroyable!* I can't believe you went to that!” She

keeps going on in French about the party while I embellish the conversation I had with Jack to make her even more jealous. I am a terrible sister, I know, but it's harmless, really. Plus, it doesn't hurt to see my mom rolling her eyes at her for once.

I just get out of a relaxing bath when Anna calls to ask if I'm available for another event on Friday. Despite my body telling me otherwise, I agree. The thought of putting the heels back on for a night on my feet isn't very appealing, but it wasn't that bad. At least I still have a backup plan. Good thing too, because plan number one is not looking well. I spend all morning taking skills tests to understand what I can do, and interest assessments to see what would suit me the most. Saying it's a disaster would be an understatement.

Wanting to clear my head, I step out to enjoy the cold, sunny air. I chat for a moment with Joe, who shows me pictures of his daughter's birthday party, then stop at the grocery store. I'll make dinner again. It's the least I can do for Mel. She likes it when I make curry chicken, and since soon enough I won't have money for rent, I need leverage, so she doesn't kick me out.

I'm just entering my building when my phone beeps in my pocket. It's a text message from an unknown number.

Hi, it's Jack. Would you like to have lunch tomorrow?

Jack?

I text back.

Hi, I'm sorry but I think you got the wrong number. I don't know any Jack.

As I'm stepping into my apartment, my phone rings. The number is calling me. Reluctantly, I press answer, but don't say anything.

"Hello?" a voice inquires.

Wait a minute. I recognize this voice. No! It can't be!

"Louise? It's Jack. Jack Rose."

"Jack! How did you get my number?" Backing up a few feet, I lean against the wall for support.

"So, it's not a wrong number? I was gonna kill Adrian. He got it from your agency."

"Oh..." He wants to talk to me? This has to be a mistake.

"So, is that a yes or a no?"

"Sorry?" Jack Rose is calling me? I lift my gaze to the corners of the ceiling. Nope, I don't see any cameras. I'm still half-expecting Mel to appear out of nowhere saying, "*You've been punked!*"

"Lunch tomorrow?" he repeats.

"Oh. Yeah, I don't know. Why would you have lunch with me?" I ask.

"Wow, way to sell yourself!" He chuckles.

"Yeah, I'm just that good," I reply, feeling a bit more at ease.

“I guess I just liked your company and would love to talk more, but if you don’t want to, it’s cool.”

“Em...” Bringing my fingers to my temples, I begin rubbing in a clockwork motion. Do I want to? I think so. I mean, it’s Jack Rose, and I liked talking to him. And eating. Eating Jack Rose. No! *With* Jack Rose. My sister would freak, so that’s a transatlantic win.... and pop star surely beats assistant, right?

“Are you still there?” he asks.

Taking a deep breath, I answer, “Sorry. Yes. Okay, we can do lunch, I think.”

“All right cool.” I can almost hear him fighting a laugh and I mentally slap myself for being such an idiot. Thankfully, he doesn’t elaborate. “We can meet at my hotel where we had the party. There’s a restaurant in the lobby. Around twelve, if that’s good?”

“Sure, no problem.” I do have an empty schedule, after all.

“Okay, gotta go! See you tomorrow.”

And just like that, he hangs up. I spend the next minutes in silence, frozen, replaying the phone call in my mind. *Was that real? No, it couldn’t be.* I triple check my caller list and re-read his text message ten times.

When Mel arrives, I can’t hide my huge smile. She barely takes off her coat before I’m screaming. “Oh my God, Mel! Jack Rose just called me! I’m meeting him tomorrow for lunch.”

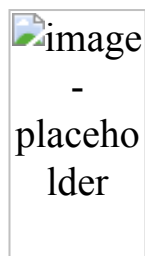
“What? Told you the cloakroom sucked. No Jack Rose in there. Tell me more!”

“He called me! I told you we talked during my break at his party.” She nods vigorously. “Well, he said he enjoyed talking to me and I quote ‘would love to talk more.’ How crazy is that?”

“That’s amazing! You’re going to have so much fun!” Grabbing my shoulders, she gives me a gentle shake.

“I’m terrified, though. What are we going to talk about? Oh no! What am I going to wear?”

“Calm down, babe. You’ll be fine. He liked your conversation, you said, so just be yourself. And you know I’m always there when there’s a fashion emergency. Let’s go see what we can work with.”



I EXIT THE SUBWAY at Fifth Avenue station like I did three days ago and I've never felt so unprepared for anything in my entire life. Why did I agree to this? What are we going to talk about? Our lives couldn't be more different. What if it's some kind of joke or a prank? Shit, I should go back right now. This is stupid.

"Are you lost, miss?" A balding old man in a suit looks at me.

"Sorry?"

"You seem lost. Maybe I can help you?"

Looking up, I notice I'm standing in front of the hotel—where I've been pacing and muttering to myself for the last ten minutes. This man is probably the bellman, wondering what the hell I'm doing here?

"Oh yes, right. I'm supposed to meet someone inside for lunch?" I say, like it's a question. What's wrong with me?

He arches an eyebrow.

"I mean, I *am* meeting someone inside for lunch."

"Of course, right this way. Let me escort you to the restaurant."

"Thank you." I follow him inside. There's no turning back now.

He opens the door, ushering me into a hallway. This place is incredible. I've never seen such a magnificent lobby in my

life. Sure, I don't travel much, but still, I'm sure I'd never stay in a place like this.

The high carved ceiling, similar to the one in the ballroom, holds a huge golden chandelier and, in the middle of the room, the biggest flower arrangement I've ever seen sits on a high round table. I follow him through one of the glass arch doors. My stilettos are echoing on the marble floor. I'm glad I listened to Mel and went for the navy-blue dress with black tights because everyone around me looks so fancy and classy. I clutch my black blazer with my sweaty palms.

"After you." He motions toward another set of doors.

I step into the most beautiful room I've ever seen in my life. I don't even notice right away it's the restaurant. We're surrounded by luxurious flowers and plants and a gigantic glass dome brings all the light in. I feel like I'm in a botanical garden. I wasn't aware that this kind of place existed in New York, let alone think I'd ever experience it.

"Good afternoon and welcome! Do you have a reservation?" the host asks.

"Miss..." the bellman starts, turning to me.

"Mercier."

"Miss Mercier here is meeting someone for lunch," he says.

"Yes, who would that be?" The host looks at me intensely.

Shit, should I say his real name? I'm not sure how that works. I heard some superstars use cartoon characters or fake

names to remain anonymous, but he didn't give me any warning. I have no other choice.

“Mr. Jack Rose please.”

He offers a wide smile. “Of course! He is not in yet, but let me take you to his table.”

“Um, all right, thanks a lot.” I wave goodbye to the bellman and follow the host, surprised by the number of guests here. Was I the only one who didn't know about this place? He leads me to a table at the back of the room. It's quite intimate, nestled between a big palm tree and a green hedge concealing most of the restaurant from view.

A few seconds after I sit, the waitress comes to my table.

“Hello, miss, can I start you off with something to drink while you wait? A glass of champagne, maybe?”

“Yes please,” I reply a little too eagerly. I love champagne. I grew up in the Champagne region, two hours outside of Paris, so it's a big part of my life.

“Sure. I will be right back.” She smiles.

When she brings me my glass, I drink it almost at once. If I'm going to do this, I need all the liquid courage I can get.

After waiting for over thirty minutes, I have a weird feeling in my stomach. Did he stand me up? He's the one who asked me to meet him. I don't need this. I'm not making the same mistake I made with Jared. This is the year of Louise Mercier and she's not going to wait around for a guy to show up, no matter how famous he is. When the waitress comes back for

the third time asking if I need anything else, I tell her to bring me the check.

I'm searching for the twenty-five dollars they're asking for my glass of champagne (seriously?) when I hear, "Louise! Sorry I'm late. I was on the phone and couldn't get away."

BEHIND THE MASK

HE'S EVEN HOTTER THAN I remembered. His eyes meet mine and there's the same desperation, the same need that I saw the first night we met. I want to act mad, but honestly, how could I? Instead, I smile and hear myself say, "No problem!"

"Thank you," he says, sitting down. He opens his mouth again, but he's interrupted by the waitress.

"Hello, sir. It's wonderful to have you here today." She gives him a flirty smile. "Can I get you anything to drink? Also, today we are serving our popular afternoon tea, but you can choose from our à la carte menu if you prefer."

"Thanks. We'll have the afternoon tea, please. No champagne for me, water."

"Of course, Sir. Miss, would you like another glass of champagne?"

"Yes, please." I'm not usually into day drinking, but the effect from the first glass is already gone, and it helps calm my nerves.

“So, I was going to say, their afternoon tea here is one of the best in the world. And I’m British, so I know a thing or two about teas.”

“You’re British? You don’t have the typical British accent?”

“I am, yes! My mum is American, though, and since my dad left us when I was young, I kind of mimicked my mum’s accent. I was teased so much at school for that, you have no idea. Sometimes, though, the British accent weasels its way in when I say certain words, or when I’m back in England.”

I chuckle, playing with a stray string hanging off the ends of my shirt.

He breaks the silence. “So, it’s a little awkward, I guess.”

I giggle. “Yeah, just a little.”

“Well, I invited you here because I enjoyed talking to you on Saturday. I can’t stop thinking about it.” His gaze is fixed on me.

“Um, okay.” My cheeks burn and I’m sure they look like two tomatoes right about now.

“Yeah,” he continues. “But not in a creepy way or anything. It’s just that for once it was nice to talk with someone normal, you know. I told you how my world is. Sometimes, I feel like I can’t trust anyone. It’s kind of lonely.”

“That must be hard.” I understand the feeling. I’m not one to make tons of friends and I really struggle to trust people. The result of bad relationships, romantic and friendly.

“Yeah.” His hand runs through his hair. “It really is. Honestly, most of the people I hang with are either working for me or in the same situation I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well famous... celebrities. And I love them. I know I have some good friends, but sometimes it’s just too much.”

“Oh, yeah, okay.”

“So, it’s not easy to just be myself. You know, like act my age and just have friends? When I meet normal people, they always treat me differently because of who I am. But you didn’t,” he adds.

Okay, so friends. I can do friends. I relax into my chair.

“Of course. Why would I treat you any differently, though? You’re just a man.”

“Exactly.” He smiles as the waitress brings us our drinks.

“So, Louise, where are you from? Louise doesn’t sound American to me?”

“No! I’m French,” I say, louder than intended.

“Ah! Could’ve fooled me! Your accent is great.”

“Really?” I ask, blushing some more. “Thanks for the compliment. It means a lot.” And it really does. Losing my French accent has always been a struggle, and it was my ultimate goal. I couldn’t stand when I started speaking and people would immediately reply with, “Oh, you’re French!”.

After a while though, it became, “Where are you from?” and now, nothing. So, mission accomplished.

“Cheers to that!” he says, holding his glass to me. “And to new friends!”

I want to say that it’s bad luck to toast with water, but I don’t want to make things even more awkward because of a stupid French superstition. Instead, I say, “Cheers!”

After a moment of silence, I ask, “You don’t like champagne?”

I mean, who doesn’t? If you don’t like champagne, you just haven’t had good ones.

“Oh no, I don’t drink champagne. Any alcohol, for that matter.”

I feel like there’s more to the story, but the waitress comes back at the same time. She puts on the table a three-tier platter garnished with mini sandwiches, mini burgers, toasts, scones, jams, butter, shortbread, and fruits. I’m in food heaven.

“Wow.” It’s really elegant, with a lot of colors and shapes. It looks so yummy too. I immediately go for the burger and it’s delicious.

“Pretty nice, isn’t it?” He beams. “So, what brought you to America?”

And I start talking. I stop sometimes between bites so I don’t spit all over him and he listens attentively. I tell him that I moved to the USA five years ago to attend marketing classes at NYU while working part time as a librarian on my campus

to pay for my tuition. That in my last year of college, I got an intern job at LMI, which turned into a permanent one, and that I now live in East Village with my best friend Mel. I deliberately dismiss the part where I got fired and cheated on by my boyfriend. I don't want him to think I'm some kind of loser, plus he probably doesn't even care about that.

“Wow, that's a cool story. You're very brave. I know it takes a lot of guts to leave your family so young and move across the world.”

“Yeah. You did the same, right?” I say, indulging in one last scone.

“Well, not exactly. I did get famous when I was fifteen, but I didn't move alone, though. I had my manager and publicist with me, plus my mum moved here with me for a while.”

“Fifteen! I can't even imagine. It must have been hard, leaving your friends and family so young.”

“Not really. At the time I was living the dream, you know? Small town British boy making it big in America with his music. I was so stoked.”

Guessing his mind has wandered back to the young British boy that he was, I take the opportunity to go to the ladies' room. I've been needing to pee since I got here and the champagne didn't help. I have such a small bladder. It's a big problem.

When I come back, our table has been cleared and my champagne glass has been filled. We talk more about my life,

which seems to interest him a lot, and I ask about his music, career, and touring, which would probably be the best part of this life for me.

“Visiting all of these countries must be pretty awesome. You’re so lucky. I never travel. I mean, I’ve visited France a bit, Spain, and Italy with my family when I was a kid, but that’s about it. I’m not a big fan of airplanes, though.”

He chuckles, making my pulse flick harder against my wrist. “Well, I wasn’t either, but I don’t have much of a choice now. You get used to it after a while. But yeah, traveling is great, but touring is a different story. I love being on stage, performing, and interacting with my fans. But I don’t really get to visit the places I go to. My last tour, I had five or six shows a week, resting at night and during flights or bus transfers. Sometimes, I didn’t even know what country, let alone city, we were in. It really took a toll on me; it almost broke me. That’s why I took a break for a while. I wanted to have some time to focus on me, see some of those places, my family.”

“Wow. I did not imagine it was like that at all. I thought that you, at least, had the day of the show or the day after to explore the cities or to rest.”

“That would be the dream. But in reality, the day of the show, we typically travel, do sound check, rehearse, eat, and then it’s show time. The day after, we leave for the next city and so on.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

“It is. And not only for me. For the entire crew, musicians, backup dancers, roadies, sound and light technicians, and caterers... there’s about a hundred people on tour.”

“That’s a lot of people! I never knew.”

“Yeah, and they’re like a second family to me. That’s the other positive part of the tour.” He smiles.

“So, you said you were taking a break from your career? What are you doing now?”

“I was taking a break, yes, for two years. Now the break is over. I just finished my album. It releases on Friday.”

“That’s great! Congrats.” I make a mental note to listen to it when it’s out. I might be surprised.

“Thanks, I’m excited. I really put my heart into this one, wrote most of it myself, produced some of it too. I’m pretty nervous about it, actually,” he says, slicking his blond hair back.

He writes his own songs? I didn’t see that coming.

“I’m sure it will be a huge success.” I smile.

“Thanks.” He grins. “That’s also why I’m here in New York. I’m in the middle of promoting it. I had a talk-show on Friday, and I’m doing more promo this week and the next before flying home.”

Home. Right. It did not even cross my mind that he didn’t live here, and was evidently going home. *Wake up, Louise, the guy doesn’t live in a hotel!*

“Cool, and where would that be?”

“Home?” He tilts his head to the side, and I nod.

“Well, I have a flat in London, but the place I spend most of my time when I’m not on tour is L.A. I recently bought a house, so it’s starting to feel more like home now. Before that, I was renting houses, and I lived in a hotel for a while, since I was always on tour, but it was pretty depressing.”

Okay, so maybe I’m not so dumb.

“That’s great. I’ve never been to California, but it’s definitely on my bucket list.”

“It’s a nice place to live. You should come and check it out,” he suggests.

“Sure,” I reply, blushing a little more. *Does that mean he wants to keep in touch?*

“Sorry, I have to take this.” He takes his phone out of his pocket.

I didn’t even notice his phone ring. He’s not at all what I expected. Definitely not the bad boy everyone thinks he is. He’s actually really sweet. While he talks on the phone for a moment, I drink the last of my champagne.

“Sorry.” He sighs. “I have to go now. I have interviews scheduled this afternoon and my manager wants to talk to me before we leave. “

“Sure, no problem.” I get up hastily and follow him outside of the restaurant and into the foyer. On our way out, dozens of

eyes follow our every move, and a few people are taking pictures with their phones. I smooth out my clothes nervously. “Um, where do we pay?”

“Oh no, it’s on me! I asked you to meet me here. It’s the least I can do.”

“Um, okay. Thanks.” I shift from side to side. “But you didn’t pay.”

He laughs. “Don’t worry, they’ll charge it to my room.”

The tomatoes are now sizzling on my cheeks. “Right.” *Why can’t I shut up?*

“So,” he says, putting his hands in his jeans’ pockets. “I would love to see you again while I’m in town. If you’re up for it, of course?”

He wants to see me again? My cheeks lift so high they could practically float off my face. Tempering my smile, I say, “Um, sure! But this time I choose the place.”

“Deal! Thursday afternoon work for you? Meet you here at two?”

“Great!” I smile.

“Until then, Louise. Enjoy your day.” When he hugs me goodbye, it’s like the floor has vanished under us. I can’t even answer him. I’m lost in the mix of his musk cologne and laundry smell. When he releases me, all I can do is nod and smile before walking toward the exit, trying not to faint on the way.

God. Why does he have this effect on me? No other guy ever has. I was never very confident, but still, I've never been that frazzled. The bellman greets me with a smile, opens the door, and asks if he can call me a taxi. I deny his request politely and tighten my coat around me before stepping down the stairs and onto the bustling Fifth Avenue.

Apart from that last bit, I think it went pretty well. He's nice and easy to talk to. It wasn't as awkward as I thought it would be, and I held my own in there. At least more than I thought I would, anyway. Well, except for that hug, but honestly, I dare anyone to do better on this one. He's such a good hugger too. Damn! I can't fall for this guy. This would be the dumbest of the dumbest ideas ever. *Get it together, girl, he's just a bored pop star who's got nothing to do and no one to talk to!*

I'm harsh on him. I know I am, but I have to be. Once he leaves, I'll never see him again and all this will just be a blurry dream. He did mention me coming to L.A., though. Did he mean it? No, probably not. He's not going to invite some random girl into his brand-new home like that. Anyway, I don't have time to dwell on that. Where am I going to take him on Thursday? And what kind of idiot am I to have suggested I would choose the place? The champagne must have gotten to me, and I got cocky for a minute. Now I have no choice. I have to find something good. He's been to so many places, he probably did a lot of crazy things, like bungee jump or parachuting. My thoughts are interrupted when I reach my apartment. I didn't even realize I was here yet.

“I’ve been waiting for you to come back!” Mel exclaims when I enter. “Tell me everything. How was it? What did you do? Are you going to see him again?”

I can’t help but smile at her eagerness and excitement. She grabs my hands and drags me to the couch.

“One question at a time, sista.”

“Sorry. I’m too excited!”

“Well, it was *really great*. We had lunch at the hotel restaurant, which, by the way, is out of this world. We had the afternoon tea because he said that it was the best afternoon tea in the world, and that he knew a thing or...”

“I don’t care about the food, Louise!” she cuts off. “What did he want?”

“Right, sorry. Well, nothing really, just to talk, I guess. He said it’s hard for him to make friends because the people he hangs out with are either famous or work for him, and that he appreciated that I treated him like a normal person at his birthday party.”

“Oh wow! That’s huge! Are you’re going to see him again?” she says, jumping on her seat.

“Yeah actually,” I moan.

“Why the long face, girl? You do want to, right?”

“Yeah, but my stupid mouth talked before I could close it, and said that I would choose the location.”

She bursts into laughter.

I pin her with a glare. “Seriously, it’s not funny. What am I going to do?”

She smartens up. “Sorry. When is this next date supposed to happen?”

“First of all,” I say, holding out my finger. “It’s not a date. And second, Thursday afternoon.”

“So soon? Girl, it’s definitely a date. No guy schedules a second meet-up two days after the first one unless he’s into the girl.”

“He’s not a normal guy. He’s only here for two weeks and he specifically said that he was looking for a friend.”

“Yeah, right, if that’s your story.” She rolls her eyes outrageously. Do I want it to be a date? Maybe? What? *No. This is not a date.*

“No Mel, seriously. That’s what he said.”

“Whatevs. So, where are you going for this ‘non date thing?’”

I sigh. “That’s the question, isn’t it? I have no clue.”

“Fancy restaurant?” she suggests.

“No. I wouldn’t even know which one to choose, plus I’m sure he goes to those all the time. And he said afternoon, not lunch.”

“Okay, so, Broadway show? It’s a pretty standard thing to do in New York. I can get you tickets to mine if you want?”

“I’m not sure. It’s kind of awkward and screams ‘date’ too loud. I don’t want him to get the wrong idea.”

“We wouldn’t want that, now, would we?”

I roll my eyes once again. “You did give me an idea, though. He says how much he likes my ‘normal life’ and that he never gets to visit cities he stays in. I wonder if he ever got the chance to visit New York like a tourist. I could give him some kind of tour, take him to a few places.”

“Fabulous idea, girl! See, your mouth trusts that brain of yours! Plus, it won’t cost you much.”

“True.” I sigh, falling back on the couch.

“Okay, good. Now we can focus on the most important issue.”

I lift my chin up. “What’s that?”

“What are you going to wear?”

6

THE CRACK IN THE PLAN

AFTER A SHORT NIGHT of sleep, I wake up at eight in the morning on Thursday and the first thing I do is reach for my phone to see if he texted me to cancel. Nothing. I'm relieved. Hopping out of bed, I follow the smell of pancakes to the living room where Mel is already cleaned up, dressed with an apron on top of her gym clothes, and has the biggest smile on her face.

“Wakey wakey! Nice dreams? I heard you tossing and turning all night.” She winks.

“Shut up. I slept terribly.”

“Pancakes?”

“Is that even a question?” I reply, sitting at the kitchen counter.

She puts three pancakes on my plate and drizzles them with hot maple syrup. Thank God for Mel. She makes some mean pancakes.

“Mmm, so good. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Not as good as your crepes, though. My mom still talks about it, you know?”

“Well, you can’t beat French food.”

It was last year that I brought crepes to Patricia’s Fourth of July party. She lives two hours away in Philly and the crepes were definitely the highlight of the day.

She claps her hands, startling me. She has *way* too much energy in the morning. “*So*, ready for today?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fine. Look at the sun outside. You’ll have a great time.”

“I hope so.”

“I’m sure you will, babe. Gotta go to rehearsals, but tonight, I want to hear every detail.”

“Of course, Mel. Have fun!”

I spend the rest of the morning pacing in the apartment and getting ready. I redo my hair at least five times only to end up putting it in a messy bun because that’s the only thing that’ll work now. My makeup is no better. I’m not very good at this. After the third try, my cheeks are so red and puffy, it looks like I’ve been crying all night. This is a disaster. After I rewash my face and do my makeup one more time, it’s already one fifteen p.m. I don’t have time anymore. I have to get dressed and get out of here. Looking at my face again in the mirror, I realize I look exactly the same as I did two hours ago. Great.

I grab the carefully planned outfit from the back of my swivel chair (black skinny jeans and an old rose sweater), put my sneakers and coat on, and get out in the crisp sunny air. Fortunately, the L train is approaching the station just when I step onto the platform, and fifteen minutes later, I'm once again in front of Jack's hotel. I enter the foyer and there he is, against the wall, talking with a tall, muscular guy. He looks even better than last time, casually dressed in blue jeans and a white sweater. His face lights up when he sees me, starting a rollercoaster ride in my chest.

"Hey," he says, hugging me. I do my best to keep calm and not melt right on the spot.

"Hi! Ready to go?" It comes out breathy.

"Lead the way." He grins.

I notice the muscular guy following us and I look at Jack interrogatively.

"This is Blake, my bodyguard. Blake, this is Louise."

"Nice to meet you." He smiles at me.

"You too," I reply politely. I must still look surprised, because Jack adds awkwardly, "Blake has to come with us today, if you don't mind. He'll stay at a distance, but I can't go without him. It's a safety issue."

"Oh, I didn't realize." This is insane. He can't go out alone?

"Sorry," he adds. "I know it's weird, but I don't have much of a choice." He messes with his hair.

“No worries, I don’t mind.”

All three of us step out of the foyer and down the stairs onto Fifth Avenue.

“Okay, so, since you said you never get to visit cities, I thought we could—”

“JACK! Oh my god! It’s him.”

A hoard of girls come running toward us.

“Jack, please, can we take a picture?”

“Jack, can I get a selfie?”

“Jack! Please sign my hand!”

“Alright, ladies, settle down!” Blake orders before putting his arms out to protect us from them.

“Sorry,” Jack apologizes.

I don’t reply because honestly, what can I say? We barely took five steps outside before a dozen girls surround us, and not all teenagers too! This woman is probably fifty years old, and she’s tearing up at the sight of Jack. How are we going to take the subway? I look at Jack and he’s smiling at the cameras, signing autographs, and taking selfies with his fans. He’s a natural.

“All right, ladies, we gotta go now,” Blake says, ushering Jack and me back into the hotel.

Jack looks at me and I can’t quite read his expression. Is it sadness? Embarrassment?

“So, this is my life.” He sighs. “Now you understand why I don’t have the luxury of going out alone.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. How could I have been so ignorant? I planned a full afternoon of sightseeing and public transportation without even thinking. He’s a superstar. Everybody knows his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think of this. I planned a whole day out.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault. We’ll just stay here.” The disappointment in his eyes hurts me so much.

“Wait! I have an idea! Do you trust me?”

“Sure?”

“I’ll be right back. Meet me at the service entrance in fifteen minutes.”

He barely has time to agree before I’m out. I speed walk, passing the excited girls and women before reaching the little souvenir shop on Sixth Avenue. I find everything I need, and hurry back to the hotel. Jack and Blake are waiting for me when I open the door.

“Wear this.” I give Jack the shopping bag. He opens it to find an “*I love NY*” cap and big *Statue of Liberty* glasses that cover half of your face. I also got a T-shirt for Blake and a cap for myself, so we all look alike.

“Disguises usually don’t work, and you’re right, no one will notice me wearing that for sure!” he says, putting the glasses on.

“True. But no one will know it’s you. They’ll just think you’re just another tourist. Isn’t that the point?”

He hesitates a moment and agrees, “Okay. I’m down, let’s try it.”

Blake changes T-shirts and I put my new cap on. We do really look like a normal group of tourists. I hope this works.

The three of us step outside. We see the girls on the corner at a distance, but they don’t seem to notice us. “So.” I clap my hands. “I was saying that since you don’t get to do any sightseeing, and I clearly understand why now, I thought I would show you around New York, starting by the first thing every New Yorker does.”

“What’s that?” he says, tilting his head to the side.

“Taking the subway,” I reply.

He laughs. “All right cool. Let’s go for a ride, I guess. It should be fun.”

“Yeah, tell me that again after, will you? First, let’s get the golden ticket: the metro card.” I select three Metro Cards on the vending machine and put ten dollars on each. Jack immediately takes out his card out to pay but I push his hand back.

“No way. I’m the one paying since I’m showing you around.”

“But...” he insists.

“No! Stop right there.”

“Fine.” He agrees, crossing his arms as I put my card into the machine.

We sit next to each other in the subway while Blake stands up near the door, on the lookout for any danger, or rather, teenage girls. Jack’s smile doesn’t fall off his face the entire ride. He really seems to be enjoying himself. I can kind of understand, when you ignore the various body odors and gloomy colors, it’s a nice means of transportation. You can really let your mind wander and your imagination run wild.

“So,” I begin as we’re exiting Bowling Green station. “I guess you’re dressed for the occasion.” I show them the tickets for the Statue of Liberty and Jack’s eyes sparkle with excitement.

“Cool! I’ve always wanted to go.”

“I figured!” I smile.

We arrive at the docks and seeing the huge line, I mentally high-five myself for getting the tickets online. Shit! I don’t have one for Blake.

“Um, Jack. I didn’t know there would be three of us. I only got two tickets.”

“No worries.” He glances at Blake.

A few minutes later, Blake is back with a woman who seems to be working here.

“Good afternoon Mr. Rose, please follow me,” she says. I look at Jack, who whispers in my ear, “Perks of being a celebrity.”

We bypass all the security screenings and jump straight on the boat. She leads us to the front, in a small cabin, before closing the door behind her.

“Okay, that was pretty cool! Is it always like that?” I ask as we sit down on the bench near the window.

He drums his fingers on his thigh. “Pretty much.”

“If it were me, I’d visit every single place on earth,” I joke.

“I’ll be outside, J,” Blake whispers before exiting the room.

When the boat departs, Jack looks outside the window and seems mesmerized by the water, or the view, or maybe both. He stays quiet, and he looks so peaceful that I don’t dare to speak the entire ride.

7

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

Once we get there, we disembark last and step foot onto Liberty Island. We walk around the museum reading attentively, at first, all the details about the construction of the statue, before zooming past the rest of the visit to enjoy the view of the Manhattan skyline.

“It never gets old,” I say, leaning my elbows on the stone wall.

“Been here often?” He leans up next to me. We’re only inches apart, his musk cologne making me heady.

“Yeah, quite a few times, actually.” I nod.

“I know the French built it, but still...” He teases.

“Ha-ha. Very funny,” I reply, unable to hide the large grin stretching on my face. “But yeah, every single person who comes to visit wants to see the Statue of Liberty.” I chuckle. “I don’t mind, though. I like it here, especially the view. Pretty cool, isn’t it?”

He smiles. “It is a pretty nice view indeed.”

But instead of looking in front of him, his burning eyes are on me. I pretend I don’t notice and keep looking straight.

“So, Louise, is it safe to say it’s your favorite place in New York?”

“No, actually. But we’ve been there today,” I say, looking back at him.

“What, the subway?” he asks, his eyes widening.

I nod and look away.

“I can kind of see that,” he replies. “It’s quiet, isn’t it? Peaceful. Perfect for thinking.”

“Exactly,” I let out, turning back my head to him. “Mel always says I’m crazy. Finally, someone gets it!”

I’ve always loved it. I just sit there during off-peak hours and think. It’s perfect for people watching. Everyone minds their own business and the vibrations of the ride soothe me.

His eyes are gleaming. Maybe it’s the fact that we have something in common?

After one last glance at the view, we head down to the park where we take dozens of pictures trying to get the perfect shot of us holding the statue in our hands. We even dare take a few selfies without wearing our touristic apparel.

We make it back on the boat and reach Manhattan thirty minutes later. We are taking a walk in Battery Park when we hear a loud gurgling noise.

I chuckle. “Sorry, that would be my stomach.”

We burst into laughter, even Blake, who hasn’t showed any kind of expression since I met him.

“Actually, I’m starving too,” Jack says, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s get something to eat.”

“I know just the place.”

Weaving our way through a thick throng of tourists, we walk a few minutes in the park and stop at a hot dog cart I’ve

been to many times before. We enjoy the juicy hot dogs, throwing pieces to the cute squirrels around us.

“Wow, you were hungry,” Jack says. I’m already done with my hot dog while he still has a few bites left.

“Eating is an important part of my life.” I giggle.

“I love it. It’s refreshing to hang with a girl who eats something besides salads and raw vegetables.”

“Ew,” I say, which makes him laugh. True though, I would never be able to follow any kind of diet. I tried before and it was an epic failure. I ended up gaining weight. Plus, I love eating too much, so I accept my few extra pounds.

After we’re fed, we walk through the financial district and reach our next stop.

“Brooklyn bridge! We drove on it once,” he says.

“But it’s even better when you walk it!” And so we walk. Every few feet, we stop to take pictures, as if we are the perfect tourists. No one seems to pay attention to us or to the muscular guy standing six feet behind us at all times. On our way back to Manhattan, we stop to watch the sunset and once more, his piercing green eyes linger on me, making me dizzy.

“I had fun today,” he says when we’re reaching the end of the trail. “The most I had in a while, Louise. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome! We only went to two places, but maybe one day I’ll show you more.”

“I would love that,” he replies, taking my hand in his, sending electric shocks through my body. It’s like all the blood disappeared from my hand. I don’t dare to move it. We head back to the subway and when we reach the turnstiles, we have no choice but to let go. Losing his touch feels like someone just planted a dagger in my heart. Why does he have this effect on me?

As we sit on the subway next to each other, a comforting warmth spreads through my body when he puts his arms around me, making me immobile once again. We just passed Spring St station when he says, “Wait, I didn’t ask where you live. We should get you home first.”

“Oh no, it’s not necessary. Let’s go back to the hotel, and I’ll head home next.”

“Do you live nearby the hotel?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter. Don’t worry about it.”

“Where is it, Louise? Please, I want to walk you home,” he says.

“In two stops. But really, it’s unnecessary.”

“Okay, we’ll get out then.” He tightens his arm around me.

We get out in Astor Pl, and he insists they escort me to the door of my apartment because it’s dark now. During the entire walk, he keeps my hand in his, and I’m kind of disappointed when I realize we’re already here. It never goes that fast usually.

“That’s me,” I say awkwardly.

“Cool building, very New York.”

“Do you want to come in?”

“Sure.” He smiles, following me up the stairs.

Why did I say that? Why the hell did I say that? Why! Crap. My hands shake as I try to put the key in the keyhole. It’s a mess in there. I didn’t clean my pancake plate. Countless pairs of shoes are lying around the entrance and there are clothes on the couch. Man, we really need to be more organized. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think teenage boys live here.

“Sorry for the mess. I left in a hurry.”

“No worries, it’s a cool place,” he says, peeking around curiously.

“Thanks! Do you want something to drink?” I back up toward the fridge.

“Sure.”

“Apple juice or Coke?”

“Coke’s good.”

I pour two glasses and put them on the counter between us.

“I guess I can take this off now,” he says, removing his glasses and hat.

He runs his hands through his hair like he always does. “So, is this your family?” he asks, pointing to the picture pinned on the fridge.

“Yeah, my parents and my sister when they came to visit last July.” I smile.

“Have you seen them since then?” he asks, sitting down on the bar stool.

“Nope. I couldn’t get off work.”

“I’m sorry. I know what that’s like... are you close?”

I chuckle. “Funny thing, we weren’t when I was growing up, especially with my mother and sister, but we are now. Living six thousand miles away from each other did us good. When we lived together, our relationship was really complicated.”

“How so? Can I ask?”

“Well, Eva has always been my mom’s favorite. We have a nine-year age gap because my parents struggled to have a second child. Actually, they’d just given up when my mom got pregnant with my sister. She called her ‘her little miracle.’” I roll my eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I love Eva, but my mom spoiled her rotten. She was always getting away with everything, while I never seemed to be good enough.” I sigh before taking a sip of my coke and wrapping my hand around the glass.

“What about your dad?”

“My dad has always been on my side. I’m his favorite.” I wink. “But it’s my mother who wears the pants in the family.”

“Is this why you came to study here?” he asks, taking a sip of his drink.

“Yeah, it’s part of the reason.” I nod. “It got harder and harder living in the same house as them. So, I worked my ass

off, doing whatever job I could find until I could afford the NYU tuition. I had a scholarship and savings, but my parents didn't give me anything. My mom said it would be good for me to earn it on my own. I resented her for that at the time, but now I'm grateful because I learned the value of hard work."

"Wow, she's tough. But you can be proud of yourself. A self-made girl." He raises his drink to me.

"Yeah." I smile. "And like I said, our relationship's better now and I miss them a lot. What about you? Are you close to your family?"

"Yeah, but my mom and sister are both in London, so I don't see them as often as I'd like. Even if I have the means to, I'm always so busy and they can't always come either." He taps his fingers on the counter. "Money can't buy freedom."

"I'm s—"

I'm interrupted by the front door. It's Mel, entering the apartment as gracious as ever.

"Lou, you're home? There's some weird guy sitting on our stairs, did you see? I hope—" but we don't get to hear the rest of it. She stops dead in her tracks when she sees Jack and me.

"Oh shit, sorry." Her hands fly to her mouth.

Jack and I burst into laughter over Mel's entrance. "No problem." He smiles. "It's me who's intruding. I should go anyway."

"Oh okay," I say, unable to hide the disappointment in my voice.

“I’m doing GMA tomorrow morning, so I’ll have to be up early.”

“Of course.” I nod. Mel is still speechless, standing like a statue at the entrance. I’ve never seen her like that before. It’s kind of funny. Finally putting one foot in front of the other, she moves from the door.

“Nice to meet you, Jack. I’m Mel, by the way,” she says, before heading to her room.

“Likewise,” he answers. I open the front door and we step outside. Blake is now standing up next to a black SUV parked on the street.

“Thanks for this wonderful day, L. I really enjoyed it,” he says, holding my hands, which once again sends electric shocks through my body. I swear my heart won’t take it much longer.

“Me too,” I whisper, unable to produce more words.

“See you soon,” he says before moving forward. He’s really close, too close. Is he going to kiss me? I panic, turning my head to go for the hug. It’s tight and warm in his arms and I’m lost in the smell of laundry detergent and musk. I wish I could stay here forever.

“Bye,” I say, as he pulls away, then walks toward his car.

He’s already in the car and driving away when the realization hits me. We didn’t set up another time to meet. Why didn’t I suggest a time and place? Why didn’t he? Maybe he doesn’t want to see me again. But then why would he hold

my hand or put his arm around me in the subway? Shit! I'm reading too much into this, which means only one thing: I'm falling for him. And one thing I know for sure is I can't fall for Jack Rose.

A FLATTERING SCHEME

I SPENT ALL DAY replaying over and over in my head my day with Jack. Mel is certain that there was definitely something more than just friendship in the way he acted, but I'm not so sure anymore. He hasn't called or texted which to me is a statement in itself. This is exactly why I didn't want to meet him for lunch to begin with. I'm not good with casually seeing guys, especially attractive ones who send mixed messages. Plus, I really don't want to be sucked into another dysfunctional relationship when I'm supposed to be thinking about my future. I haven't made any progress yet. At least I still have a backup plan.

Speaking of which, tonight is my second gig. Mel and I got Anna's call earlier today. We never know what type of event we're working before we get there, and this time is no different. We only know the dress code and the place, and in this case, it's black tie and Jack's hotel. Again.

We make our way to Fifth Avenue, enter once more through the service entrance, give our name to Peyton, and proceed to the Ballroom.

“Oh. My. God!” Mel gasps, and it only takes me a second to understand why. Jack’s face is everywhere: on a huge poster behind the stage, on big vinyl records hanging from the ceiling, and even on the cake, which is being delivered to the kitchen now, always the same picture: a blue album cover.

“Oh no,” is all I’m able to say at the moment. This must be his new album. He said he was in town to promote it. Maybe it’s a party to celebrate it? I don’t know how these things work. I guess I’ll find out soon enough. This also means I’ll see him a lot sooner than expected. I’m a big ball of nerves. What if he totally ignores me? How embarrassing! I’m just the waitress here, after all. We wait for Anna to arrive and I notice there are a lot more staff than last time. This seems to be a much bigger event, which doesn’t help at all with my nerves.

“It’s going to be fine,” Mel whispers in my ear. I don’t get to respond, however, because Anna just arrived, and she looks almost as stressed as I am.

“Listen up, people. Tonight is very important. You guessed it by the decorations... this is Jack Rose’s new album, *WHISPER* launch party. For those of you who were there last Saturday, do the same, but better and more efficiently. There are many important people at this event: A-listers, celebrities, label executives, etc. They all flew out from L.A. for this album release. I can’t stress enough how crucial it is that we do well. The future of this company, and your jobs, depends on it. I will not tolerate any screw-ups.”

How am I going to survive tonight? I take a deep breath as Mel squeezes my hand for support. We have the same assignments as last time, and I'm not exactly thrilled. More chances to bump into Jack or embarrass myself.

As she continues to lecture us about how important this event is, I'm distracted by Mel, who nudges me in the ribs.

"Look!" She's pointing at the entrance, and I understand what captured her attention. Leading to the door is a long red carpet, with dozens of photographers along it. The man who was looking for Jack the other night is here, talking quickly to a tall blonde woman in a pantsuit. He must be his manager or assistant. If he's here, it means Jack isn't far, and the event is about to start.

As soon as Anna approves my outfit, I rush to the ladies' room. Stress pee is a real thing, I swear. Taking a deep breath, I force myself to smile, ready to face the music, literally. When I get back, everyone is in position as the first guests are being photographed on the red carpet.

Light ambient music and chatter fill the room, and we start our back and forth to the kitchen with champagne and canapes. So far, no sign of Jack, but some huge celebrity sightings: Hannah Hayes and Candice Anderson, the singers, Wat\$on, Islay-J, and Bronislaw the rappers, but also actors Opal Davis and Sarah Kimmons.

This is quite a turnout. I almost forget why I'm anxious, because I'm so star-struck. I'm a big fan of some of them. I'm quickly brought back to reality though, as the cheering and

yelling tell me that the man of the hour must have stepped on the red carpet.

Sure enough, a few minutes later Jack emerges from the entrance, a huge smile on his face, his hair perfectly pushed back. He's dressed in all black and *damn*, he looks hot. The room temperature has just gone up one hundred degrees. Needing a moment to calm down, I go back to the kitchen to get more drinks. How weird is this? Does he even know I'm here? Of course not. I hope he doesn't see me or this is going to be too awkward.

Once my tray is refilled with chilled champagne glasses, I head back out. Jack walks onto the stage under a thunder of applause.

"Thanks, guys, for coming. I'm so grateful to be releasing my—" He counts on his fingers. "Fourth album already? How insane is that?"

There's a light chuckle among the guests.

He's such a natural, so charming.

"This one is really personal, too. I wrote most of the songs myself, so I hope I don't screw it all up!" He winks. "Well, let's find out. The first song is called 'Storm.'"

Music starts playing, and everyone concentrates on the lyrics, the music, his voice, and damn, he's talented. I never knew. I mean, I heard his music before on the radio, in stores, or in my sister's bedroom, but I really never listened to it and I never heard him live.

“Louise! What are you doing? Get to work!” Anna’s stern voice calls behind me.

Shit. I got distracted for a second. I keep up the pace, but I can’t help to glance at the stage every chance I get. Once he’s done, the crowd bursts into applause and he heads down the stage with a huge smile on his face. The DJ puts back on some background music and the chatter restarts around the room. Anna pulls me out of my reverie when she tells me they need help in the kitchen.

Half an hour later, it’s time for my break. I exit the ladies’ room and there he is, talking with a short brunette a few feet away. His eyes widen and shine when he notices me, which sends fireworks straight to my belly. I’m frozen. Should I go say hi? But then what? Is it weird for him? I’m the waitress. Surely, I can’t hug him with all his celebrity friends and colleagues around. He’s looking at me with his eyebrow arched, probably wondering what the hell I’m doing. He excuses himself to his guest, and I get lightheaded as he strides toward me.

“Hi there.” He smiles, then goes for a hug. Okay, that’s a bit weird. Why does he feel like a stranger when we were so close two days ago? He was in my apartment, dammit!

“Hi.” I feel the warmth coming to my cheeks.

“Surprised?”

“A little, yeah. I didn’t know what event I was working until I got here.”

“I know,” he says, his eyes sparkling.

“What do you mean? Wait, it was you, wasn’t it? You asked that I worked tonight?” I cross my arms against my chest.

“Guilty as charged.” He smiles.

“Now it makes sense! She would have never taken me for such a high-profile event with so little experience.”

“Well, I wanted you here. This way you can give me your feedback. So, how do you like it so far?” He winks.

I laugh at his scheme, flattered.

“It’s great! I loved what I heard, and so did the crowd.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.” He slicks his hair back. “Yeah, it seems they like it, but there’s more to come.”

“Are you going to sing the entire album?”

“No, only four more tracks. The DJ will play the rest, though.”

“Cool! It’s the first time I’m seeing you perform, actually.”

“What? You never came to any of my concerts? Ouch, that hurts.” He places a hand over his heart, looking falsely offended.

“I wasn’t much of a fan,” I say, fidgeting with my bracelet.

“And are you now?” he asks, stepping closer to me.

Damn! Only Jack Rose can turn a simple conversation into something so sexy. Is he really flirting with me? Here in this room with all his guests around?

“Definitely am,” I murmur.

We are so close to each other that I can feel his warm breath. My cheeks are burning.

“All right, everyone, let’s welcome Jack again on this stage for another set of songs,” the DJ shouts.

Talk about bad timing.

He pulls back. “Duty calls! See you later.” He winks. I don’t even have time to reply before he’s gone. Not that I can speak, anyway.

The rest of the night goes well. Jack sings more songs, including two duets. One with Watson, and the other with Hannah Hayes, whom I’m a big fan of. I didn’t know he was close to her. She has a totally different style of music. This is a fun night and I’m less nervous than I was before. I cross paths with Jack a few times, but I’m always working and he’s busy talking with his guests. With each song, I fall in love with the album more and more. It’s quite different from what I remembered about his music. I guess he decided to go in a different direction, more acoustic, and it looks like it’s going to pay off.

When the party is finally over and the guests are gone, I join Mel and the rest of the staff in the kitchen. We can read on our faces that we had a long night. We’re all exhausted. Even Anna, who had to step in because one of the other waitresses got a call about a problem with her son and had to take off in the middle of the party. We put everything away for the

cleaning crew and leave one by one. Mel and I are getting our coats when she nudges me in the ribs.

There he is, sitting on a chair, scrolling on his phone. Is he waiting for me? I make my way toward him painfully, my feet hurting me so much. Screw it! I'm taking them off. He looks up at the same time and smiles when he sees me whimpering with my shoes in my hands. He gets up and joins me.

"I'm meeting you half way because I'm not sure you're gonna make it," he mocks.

"Ha-ha. Laugh all you want, but these things are torture." When I shake my stilettos at him, he backs up playfully. Like he thinks the heel will take an eye out. "I'd like to see you wearing them for nine hours straight!"

"Okay. Sorry. Here, take my arm," he offers.

"Thanks! So, it's over. How did it go?"

"Yep. I was very anxious about tonight, but overall, I'm pretty happy about how it went. I think ev—"

I yawn.

He cocks his head to the side. "Am I boring you?"

"No. Sorry, I'm just exhausted."

"I get it." He chuckles. "Me too, actually. I just wanted to catch you before you leave. Are you available on Sunday night to come to a concert with me?"

"Sure, what concert? Where? What time?" I ask.

“So many questions.” He smiles. “My concert, and the location is kept secret until the last minute. It’s a private listening session for some of my fans. It will be the real test of the album.”

“Oh, that’s cool! Sure, I would love to come.”

“Great. Then I’ll pick you up around four if that’s okay for you?”

“Perfect.” I nod.

“Until then, Louise,” he whispers. He’s now very close to me, so close that I can smell his minty breath. His soft mouth presses with mine and my heart explodes in my chest. His hands travel to my waist as I wrap my arms around his neck to pull him closer, needing to feel his body against mine. The taste of his lips is addictive, making me long for more. Too soon, he steps back, and I moan at the loss of his touch.

He smiles at me, gives me another kiss on the forehead, and murmurs, “Sorry, I gotta go.”

He turns around and takes off, leaving me stranded, wanting more.

Still breathing heavily, I turn around and face Mel, Anna, and two other waiters looking at me, jaws dropping. Jack Rose just kissed me in the middle of this empty room. Of course, everyone saw us. I completely forgot about them. It always seems like we’re alone when I’m with him. I join them and no one dares to speak, except for Mel, who blurts, “Damn, girl!

That was hot!” We all laugh, and I know I’ve got some explaining to do.

OVERTHINK IS MY MIDDLE NAME

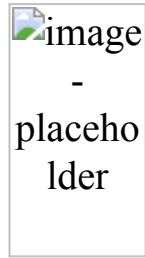
“I JUST DON’T KNOW what to make of this,” I say for the third time once we’re in the subway. It’s really late and apart from us, there’s only an old man asleep a few seats behind us.

“I know,” Mel says. “But don’t overthink it! That kiss was hot!”

“What did it mean, though? What should I do next? I’m so rusty at dating.”

“Chill out. Just enjoy the moment. Have fun. Most girls would die to be in your place. And anyway, are you even dating? It was just a kiss.” She yawns, settling in her seat before closing her eyes.

I rest my head on the window. This hurts a little, but she’s right. I can’t get carried away like I always do. I have to stick to my new way of life. No falling for a guy. We live three thousand miles apart and have completely different lives. This can’t be more. This will never be more.



IT'S ALMOST TWO IN the afternoon, but I can't bring myself to get out of my comfy bed, even though my bladder is killing me. I'm still recalling last night's events, well, one event in particular. Mel's right though. I shouldn't overthink it and just have fun. But that kiss. That kiss was magical. It was special. I'm sure it was. It's not just the romantic me talking. It's so frustrating to be in the dark like that. He has all the answers and I should gather up the courage to ask him. And I will. I have to. I deserve to know what it means to him.

All these conflicting emotions make me want to do something I haven't done in a long time. I quickly go pee, careful not to wake up Mel and grab my computer. I open the "book" folder that's been sitting on my desktop for more than four years now, and I write.

I started writing this love story when I arrived in New York. The thrill, the discoveries, the new beginning—all of this gave

me so much inspiration that it just came to me. But then it became complicated to write. Between my studies and work, I didn't have much time. And when I did have some free time, I struggled to find inspiration. It didn't help that Jared always thought it was a waste of time, either. Today, however, my head is flowing with ideas. My hands move with frenzy on the keyboard. I miss letters and punctuation, but I don't care. I can't stop. I can't ruin the flow, or I'm afraid I'm going to lose everything.

Mel knocks at my door. "Lou, are you okay?" I glance at the clock. It's after six.

"Come in." I can't believe I've been writing all day.

"What's up, girl? Still in bed? I just got back." Mel enters in her yoga outfit.

"I'm writing, actually." I smile.

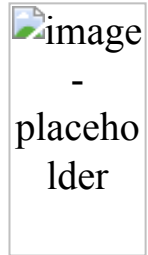
"No way! That's great! It's been a while."

"I know!"

"That makes me so happy, babe. I'll leave you to it then. Do you want to eat something? I'm gonna make grilled cheese sandwiches."

I say yes, (I always say yes to food) and I keep writing. A few hours and a few thousand words later, I'm happy with where this is going. I'm not an author by any means. I'm just writing the story that I would like to read. I think about the plot as I go, so I don't really know if it's going to make sense or not, but I enjoy writing it. Anyway, I have no intention of

publishing it. It would just be a personal achievement to finally finish it. I wrote short novels and started books so many times when I was younger, but I never stuck to it. So, if I can actually get through this one, I'll be proud of myself.



WHEN I WAKE UP the next day, Mel is already gone, so I take a long, warm shower. I wax my legs, my armpits, and my bikini line (you never know). I enjoy a big breakfast—well, since it's noon, it would be lunch. I make eggs, bacon, and even French toast for dessert.

After I'm fed, I do some research online for my book until the alarm on my phone goes off: it's already three. Jack will be here in one hour. Turning off my laptop, I get dressed in a black circular skirt that hides my butt, and a gray top and a leather jacket. Then I add some black transparent tights and my flat black ankle boots. I don't know if I'll be able to sit down, and my feet are not ready to endure heels again. I feel good about how I look. I let my hair down, and thanks to the repairing mask I just applied, my wavy hair looks shiny for once. As I wait on the couch, getting more nervous by the second, I think about whether he's going to kiss me and if it's going to be awkward.

Who am I kidding? Of course, it'll be awkward! I'm lost in my thoughts when the doorbell rings, startling me.

“Wow, you look good!” Jack says when I open the door. His blond hair is slicked back, and he's wearing black jeans and a gray T-shirt.

“Thanks,” I reply, feeling the heat burn across my cheeks.

He leans forward and kisses me softly, sending a rush of warmth through my body. My world turns upside down. I

forget where I am. It's the best sensation ever.

“Shall we go?” he asks, taking my hand, bringing me back to reality.

A black SUV is parked in front of my apartment, and he gestures for me to get in. He takes the seat next to me as I greet Blake, who's sitting in the front.

When the car starts, Jack takes my hand again.

“So, how are you? What did you do yesterday?”

“I'm good. I slept late. I was so drained. Then I wrote some chapters of my boo—”

I regret saying it immediately. Why did I tell him? No one knows about this except for Mel.

“Your book? You wrote a book?”

Thank God we're in a dark car because my cheeks are boiling.

“Um, no, yes. I mean, I'm writing one, but it's not very good.”

“Wow, okay.” He laughs. “I do know how that is, though. It's the same with song writing. The first draft always sucks, but the deeper you dig, the better it gets!”

“Yeah, I know. But it's just for me, I don't intend to publish it or anything. I've been writing it for some time now, but with the distractions at work, I didn't really have time to continue. And now that I don't have a job anymore, I have more time and I ended up writing until midnight.”

“Talk about being in the zone! I know what it is! But what do you mean you don’t have a job anymore? Weren’t you just working two days ago?”

Right. He doesn’t know about LMI.

“Well, yes, but I’ve been working for VIP EVENTS only for one week. I was working in a marketing company for about two years. They fired me ten days ago. That’s how I ended up at your birthday party. It was my first gig.”

“Not to be rude or anything, but I’m glad you got fired, Louise.”

“Me too, actually,” I whisper as Blake tells us we’ll be there in a minute.

I was just starting to feel at ease, but now I’m getting anxious again. *Wait, is there gonna be a red carpet at this thing?*

“Um, Jack? Can you tell me more about where we are going? Will there be photographers?” I ask timidly.

“Oh no, don’t worry, the show is in a secret location. Right now, no one knows where it is. Plus, we’re parking in the garage.”

Thank God. A few minutes later, we park in an almost empty parking garage, and follow Blake to a gray hallway bustling with people, mostly roadies and technicians, I assume, moving equipment and instruments. The woman I saw on the red carpet at the party greets us.

“Hi, J. How are you?” She hugs him swiftly.

“I’m good. This is Louise, the girl I told you about,” he says.

Wait? He talks about me?

“Hi, Louise, lovely to meet you,” she says, but her icy-blue eyes tell me otherwise. “I’m Kim, Jack’s publicist.” She appears to me as a woman you do not want to cross.

“Nice to meet you too,” I reply.

She leads us to Jack’s dressing room. It’s quite roomy. There’s a dark red couch in the middle of the room, and on the coffee table a huge flower bouquet and a chocolate cake saying “Welcome, Jack.” I also notice different devices, including what seems to be an air humidifier, and a fridge filled with snacks and drinks.

Jack looks around and thanks Kim. She takes it as her cue to leave.

“Here we are.” He sits on the couch and looks at the cake, rather unimpressed. “I’m glad you’re here L.”

“Me too,” I reply, taking the seat next to him.

“I hope it goes well tonight. It’s the actual test of the album, the only one that counts. If the fans don’t like it, that’s it.”

“So, no pressure!” I chuckle.

“None!” He smiles. “I’m gonna go do a sound check in a few minutes. You can come with me or you can stay here. It’s up to you.”

“I’d rather come if I can?”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he replies, before kissing me, making my insides burn. I can’t take this anymore.

“Jack,” I begin, not really sure how to address this. “What is this?”

“What do you mean?” He arches his eyebrow.

“Us. This. You kissing me, holding my hand,” I pause. “This is hard for me. I don’t know what’s happening. We live three thousand miles apart, we have extremely different lives, you leave in a few days—”

He stops me by pressing his finger on my lip. “I really like you L. I don’t really know what this means either, but we have to take it one step at a time, and see where things go.”

I feel like I’ve heard this a lot lately. Part of me wished he’d say he was as confused as me, or that we would figure this out. But he didn’t, and I have to wrap my head around that. Write it in my mind in bold, capital, sparkly letters.

This is not happening.

BACKSTAGE—ALL ACCESS

Someone knocks on the dressing room door.

“Yeah?” Jack shouts.

“Hey, J. It’s time for the sound check.” It’s the same man I saw the other night on the red carpet with Kim. “Oh, hi!” he adds, noticing me. I stand up as Jack introduces me.

“Hello, Louise, I’m Adrian Johnson, Jack’s manager,” he says, giving me a warm smile. I immediately like him. He has one of those faces that you know you can trust.

We follow him to the stage, then Jack is given his earpiece and microphone while I go to the pit.

It’s very strange to be in a concert venue, even if it’s rather small, almost alone. Jack walks on stage, giving me a swoon-worthy smile. He picks up his guitar and starts playing. The lights are constantly changing. I’m guessing they are testing that as well. He sings and plays for about half an hour, interrupting sometimes to say something to the sound crew.

“I hope that wasn’t too boring?” he asks, joining me when he’s done.

“No, are you kidding? It was great. You’re doing an acoustic show?”

“Yep.” He smiles. “My favorite kind, just me, my guitar and my piano, and a small crowd. It brings me back to my beginnings. It’s really about the music.”

“How small, though? This place still looks big to me.”

“I think there will be around one thousand people tonight.”

“That’s not small!” We have a very different definition of small.

“It is for me. Usually, it’s around fifty or sixty thousand people.”

“Wow!”

“Yeah, and it’s great, too. I mean, it’s amazing, but I wanted tonight to be special. So, we held a contest about a month ago and gave out a thousand tickets to attend tonight’s show. We decided to do it in New York so it would be easier to fly out European fans as well.”

“That’s nice, and what about your friends and family? Are they coming too?”

“No, I don’t have friends in the UK, at least not anymore. And my mum couldn’t come, so neither could my sister. She’s only sixteen.”

“Oh, my sister is sixteen, too. She’s—”

I’m interrupted by Adrian, who tells us that fans will enter the venue soon and that we should get backstage to grab something to eat. We follow him to a small cafeteria with lots of food options, making my stomach gurgle even though I had a big breakfast. I meet a few more people. Jack’s hair stylist Sandra, a tall pink-haired girl, Jody, his stylist, a small round brunette with beautiful hazel eyes, and Marcus, a tall, muscular guy, with big, funky afro hair, the photographer.

“So,” Jody says, sitting up straight, a large grin stretching on her face. “Louise, what’s your secret? You must have some kind of trick to have this one invite you backstage.”

“Yeah, totally! He never brings anyone back here,” Marcus adds, slapping Jack on the back.

“Except for his mom or sister,” Sandra says, winking at me.

“Um, I don’t know.” I attempt a casual smile, but this revelation intrigues me a lot, and I’m not sure how to process it. I guess I was expecting him to do this often. I was completely off when I thought he was a womanizer, but how could have I known otherwise? I’ve seen him in the tabloids with more girls than I can count.

Thankfully, the conversation shifts and when we’re done eating, Jody and Jack leave us so they can get him dressed. I talk some more with Marcus and Sandra before they, too, have to do their jobs. I don’t really know what to do with myself, so I make my way back to Jack’s dressing room. It’s empty, so I wait there, texting Mel what’s happening so far. A few minutes later, the door opens.

“Ah, there you are! I couldn’t find you,” Jack says.

“Sorry, I just felt weird sitting alone. Marcus and Sandra had to go.”

“That’s all right. How do I look?” he asks. He’s wearing dark blue jeans and a simple gray T-shirt.

“Cute.” I smile. Well, he’s a lot more than cute, but I can’t say what I really think, or I’m going to scare him away.

Instead of leaning into how adorable he is, I change the subject.

“So, from where will I be able to enjoy the show?”

“It’s up to you. Adrian and Kim usually stay in the corridor in front of the stage, or on the side. Blake and Marcus too. But you’re free to go in the pit, or take a seat at the back.”

“Okay. I guess I’ll go in the pit then, and maybe after to the front.”

“Sure. Just always keep this with you.” He gives me a lanyard with a pass saying *Backstage–All access*. I put it around my neck.

“So, what do you usually do now? Do you warm up?”

“Normally yes, but since it’s acoustic, sound check is all I needed to do. It warmed my voice, so I’m good. We can just watch some TV if you want or try the cake?”

“Both sound good, actually.” I eye the chocolate cake with envy.

He laughs. “You’re always hungry, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes.”

“I do love a girl with an appetite. The question is: where do you stock it all up?”

I shrug, trying to act casual, but the truth is I’m frazzled by what he said. A certain four-letter word just started a rollercoaster in my stomach.

“Mmm, delicious.”

“Yeah, not bad. I have to be careful not to stain my shirt, or Jody will kill me.”

We spend the next half hour snuggling on the couch, watching some reality TV. I’m not even paying attention to the screen. I just enjoy the company. It feels so good here in his arms. I wish this moment would never end. I almost forget that I’m backstage at a music venue, cuddling with the main act, when someone knocks on the door and says without opening it, “Five minutes to go.”

Jack sits up straight. “Show time. Let’s go.” He takes my hand to help me stand up and I follow him out of the dressing room.

The corridor is even more packed now, and the atmosphere is buzzing. Behind the stage, we can hear the loud cheering of the fans. This is very impressive. He stops to talk to a bald guy, who hands him a microphone and earpieces.

“I’ll meet you after,” he says, before giving me a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Break a leg.”

I make my way to the crowd and find a pretty decent spot, slightly on the side, to watch the show. There are mostly girls here, around my age or younger. They have Jack’s face on their T-shirts, caps, hats, glasses, and pants. When Jack takes the stage, the girls begin screaming, some of them even cry.

During the first song, a dozen girls have to be removed from the audience by security because they fainted. I did not think it

would be that crazy. Naturally, the show is a success. The songs are amazing. Jack is enjoying himself on stage and so am I—he's incredibly talented.

When I meet him afterwards, he's so pumped up. I can see he's also relieved by the fans' positive reactions. He takes me in his arms and kisses me in front of everybody. My stomach flutters as his lips brush over mine, slowly but with confidence. I'm a little uncomfortable because of the PDA, but I can't help feel like I'm the luckiest girl in the world. On the ride back, he asks me if I could please stay with him tonight, and honestly, how could I refuse?

He swipes his key card over the receiver. We barely take one step inside the room before his lips crash against mine. He grabs my neck and pins me against the door, continuing his assault with his cold tongue. My fingers travel to his muscular back and take his shirt off. I want to feel his body on mine. He's like a Greek god, his abs glistening under the moon shining from the window. He discards my top and bra and looks at me, his eyes blazing with fire. Normally I would be embarrassed with the lights on, but I've never felt this sexy in my entire life.

A MUCH-NEEDED PEP TALK

When I wake up, my eyes are glued together by the unremoved makeup from last night. It takes me a few seconds to adjust to the room and locate everything. When I turn to my left, there he is, so peaceful and so handsome, his gold hair shining with the small strike of sunlight coming from the window. What a night. Jack was so pumped up after the show that he couldn't sleep for hours, so we occupied ourselves numerous times, our bodies perfectly in sync, as if they were meant for each other.

I get up, careful not to wake him, and look for the bathroom. I can't find my clothes but I stumble on his T-shirt on the floor, so I put it on. I'm too self-conscious to walk naked around this vast room, especially now that the sun is up. I find the bathroom, empty my small bladder and almost shriek at my reflection in the mirror. Shit. I look like shit. I put some water in my hair and try to discipline it however I can, but I'm not very successful. After finding an amenity kit, I feel more refreshed after cleaning my face and brushing my teeth.

I tiptoe back to bed, but I accidentally jam my toe against a suitcase on the floor.

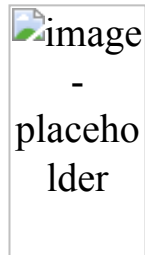
“Ouch, crap!”

“Sup?” Jack asks, eyes still shut.

“Sorry, I jammed my foot.”

“You okay? Get back to bed.”

I climb up next to him and he immediately takes me into his arms, making the pain in my toe disappear. The warm feeling of his breath against my neck is intoxicating, and it doesn't take long for us to be tangled in each other once more.



WE ARE CUDDLING IN bed, still a bit out of breath. Well, me anyway—he's in excellent shape when his phone rings. He talks for a few minutes and turns to me.

“It was Kim. She just told me that we leave at nine tomorrow morning for London?” There's a small hint in his voice. Is this a fact or a question?

“Oh,” is all I can say. I was so lost in the pure bliss of last night that I forgot it was his last day in New York. Knots are forming in my stomach.

“I want you to come with me, L, please.”

“What?”

“Please, Louise, come with me. I really enjoy your company. I don’t want this to end yet.”

I look at him, and of course, I want to say yes. But I’m not good at this casually enjoying each other’s company thing, and the fact that I never felt this way about anyone else doesn’t help. I’ve had boyfriends, I’ve been in love or I thought I was, but this is different, at least for me. I have to end it here. He’s a superstar and I’m, well, I’m me. I can’t just cross the Atlantic with him so we can enjoy one more week in this dreamy bubble when I pertinently know that the bubble will eventually explode, leaving me shattered.

“I can’t, Jack. I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

“I have to work. I can’t just throw everything away like that and go to London with you. It’s crazy.”

“No, it’s not, and you don’t have to work. You said it yourself. It’s just a temporary job before you find what you want to do.”

“I know. But still, I made a commitment to my boss. I’m supposed to work Thursday and Saturday. She just hired me. I can’t do that. It’s not right.”

Plus, I’ve been distracted and I really need to figure out what I’m going to do with my life.

“If I could move it to next week, I would, but I can’t. I can, however, call your boss. I am one of her biggest clients after all,” he pouts.

“You’re insane.” I smile. “I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

“Of course you can, and we could go to France and see your family too! You haven’t seen them for so long. Plus, I love France, French food, and French girls.” He grins.

He laughs when I hit him softly with my pillow. He doesn’t know it, but he just scored a major point talking about my family. I miss them a lot, and French food too, to be honest.

“It’s probably too late to get tickets, anyway.”

“I have my own plane.”

Of course he does.

“Just think about it, please?”

It’s like he saw the weakness in my eyes and he’s taking advantage of it.

“I will think about it, but no promises.”

He takes me into his arms again, turns on the TV and says, “let’s order food. It’ll help you think clearly.”

“No, I’m going home.” He opens his mouth to protest and I close it with my finger. “If I stay here, I won’t be able to think with you distracting me. I’m going home and I’ll call you later.”

“Okay,” he agrees. “I’ll call Blake with the car.”

“No, I’m taking the subway. It’ll give me more time to think.”

“Fine.” He sighs. “Can I at least have a quick hug before you go?” he asks.

Of course, the hug turned into more steamy sex and it's almost six when I push open the front door of my apartment. Mel is on the couch watching *Medical Drama*.

"Busted!" I say, taking off my shoes.

"Sorry, babe, I really wanted to wait for you but I didn't know when you'd be back, and I really wanted to know if Julia was finally going to kiss Craig. It's my only night off this week. And anyway, you watched the last episode without me so—"

"It's okay." I laugh. "Anyway, we have bigger fish to fry," I say, dropping my bag on the kitchen counter.

"We do?" she jumps over the couch.

"Jack asked me to go to London with him tomorrow," I say, leaning on the kitchen bar, head in hands.

"What? That's amazing!" she exclaims, leaning across from me.

"No, it's not Mel. I'm really starting to fall for him and that's a very bad thing."

"Wait, first, how was it last night?" she says, rubbing her hands together.

"Well, that was amazing actually," I say, unable to contain the big smile on my face.

"Okay, so now you really have to go. It's a no-brainer." She grins.

"Mel—" I start, but she interrupts me.

“Let me say this. We knew he was hot, nice, funny, British, and successful. The only thing potentially bad was if he was a total bust in bed. But, if he’s as amazing as you say he is, girl, you have to go! It’s like unheard of.”

“Mel, I can’t. You know I can’t. I have to work, and anyway, what good would it do? It’s just one week, and then he’s going back to his superstar life in L.A. And I’ll be back here. With nothing but memories, and probably a broken heart. You know how I am.” I sigh.

“Come on! I’m not asking you to marry the guy. But honestly, you could do with some fun after everything that happened lately. You got cheated on, dumped, and fired.” She enumerates. “You need to live a little! You always had serious and steady boyfriends and look where it brought you. It’s about time you try the careless relationship thing. It can be good sometimes. And may I remind you that not everyone gets a famous hot singer as a rebound. Think about it as an adventure. Have fun. Let loose a little. So what if you never see him again? You’re getting a free trip to London. That’s awesome!”

“And France,” I whisper.

“He’s taking you to France as well?” she exclaims, her eyes popping out of their sockets.

“Well, he said we could go since it’s so close, you know?”

“Oh my god, Lou. You have to go! You know you want to go. This is an amazing opportunity. You’ll regret it if you don’t.”

“Argh,” I groan. She’s right. I do want to go and I will regret it if I don’t. And after all, it’s the perfect opportunity to try my new resolution and make decisions based on what I want. “I hate you. you always make such good points.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” she boasts. “Now hurry up and surrender, because we have outfits to prepare, and I leave for work in an hour.”

“Clothes! I didn’t think about that!” I reply.

“Well, you can’t stay naked in bed with him all week! Not that you would complain, I’m sure.” She winks.

Once we finish laughing, we go straight to my closet. Fifty minutes later, my room is a complete mess. We literally emptied my entire closet, and despite our best efforts, we did not find any hidden marvelous pieces of clothing.

“That will have to do.” I shrug.

“It’s not that bad. As long as you don’t go to really fancy restaurants, you should be fine. But still, I suggest you ask exactly what’s in store for the week, so you can prepare. Worst-case scenario, you can still go shopping when you’re there.”

Twenty minutes later, I receive an email from Kim with the London schedule I asked Jack for in an attachment. And it’s a full schedule. I guess it was to be expected. He’s promoting his new album, after all. He has a label meeting and dinner on Wednesday, two radio shows, rehearsals, and a charity gala on Thursday, and a TV show and performances on Friday.

Saturday is free, and he flies back on Sunday. Outfit wise, I should be fine except for the freaking charity gala. I don't have any gala worthy options in my closet. Anyway, I'll probably not even be invited. The guest list must have been finalized weeks ago. The dinner with the label is a bit concerning too, but maybe I won't go to that either and, if I do go, I have two options that are elegant and should be fine for a business dinner.

I look at the schedule again, but I don't see where we could fit a trip to France in the middle of that. Maybe I could go on Thursday and Friday. He has so much planned, and that way I'm sure to avoid the damn gala.

Looking around for my phone, I find it buried in a pile of discarded clothes. Jack's name flashes repeatedly.

"Hey! Kim said she sent you the schedule. Did you get it? Are you coming?" His excitement is palpable.

"Well, yeah, I'm coming, and you have my friend Mel to thank for it. She didn't let me say no."

"Great! I'll be sure to thank her properly. We'll pick you up around nine tomorrow. Is that good?"

"I'll be ready."

"Great. See you tomorrow, L," he says, before hanging up.

I can't stop smiling. I could hear how happy he was. The butterflies make their way back to my stomach, but I shove them down. Butterflies don't go well with a fun rebound adventure, and that's all it's going to be.

LONDON CALLING

I WAKE UP TO the sound of my alarm buzzing. I jump out of bed, feeling in remarkably good shape for someone who slept less than five hours.

After getting ready and checking that everything is packed, I put my suitcase by the door just when Mel emerges from her room.

“Hey,” she mumbles, stifling a yawn.

“Hey! I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Don’t be. I wanted to say goodbye.” She takes me into her arms.

“Thank you, Mel. For pushing me to seize this opportunity.”

“You’re welcome, girl. I’m proud of you.” She looks at me. “Now, you better have fun and tell me all about it when you come back, okay?”

We’re interrupted by a knock on the door.

I open the door to find Jack, as handsome as ever, in casual blue tracksuit bottoms and a black sweatshirt, holding a big

bouquet.

“Hi Jack!” I say, hugging him. “Are those for me?”

“No, actually. Is your roommate here?” he asks.

“Sure. Come in.”

“Hey! Mel, right? I understand I have you to thank for L coming with me to London, so thank you,” he says, handing her the flowers.

“Oh. Thank you!” She smiles. “They’re beautiful! And you’re welcome. She deserves a break, that one! Show her a good time, will you?” She winks at me.

We say goodbye to a now fully awake Mel and get in the black van waiting for us. This is very luxurious for a van. There’s a small bar, the seats are made of thick leather and the floor is wooden. What surprises me the most, though, is the number of people inside. Everyone I met at the concert is here, greeting me warmly when I get in, except for Kim, who just gives me a quick smile, still looking at her phone. I thought only Adrian, Kim, and maybe Blake would be there, but I guess he always travels with stylists and photographers. Jack puts his hand on my knee during the entire trip, and I try to keep calm. *Casual and fun, casual and fun*, I repeat in my head.

About thirty minutes later, we arrive at a tiny airport. The aircraft is rather small, but not as small as I thought it would be, which is a relief because I’m not a big fan of airplanes. Let alone small airplanes, they make me feel really uneasy.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be a smooth ride. I have very experienced pilots,” he says, taking my hand and massaging it gently before leading me to the plane. Warmth takes over my body. I feel better already.

I follow him up the stairs and onboard the private plane. Well, it doesn’t exactly look like a plane inside. All the surfaces are made of marble, there is a big beige couch, a TV, several comfortable looking armchairs and a table that seats four. It’s bigger than I imagined too. It can probably accommodate fifteen people. We walk across the cabin, he opens a pocket door and we arrive in a small corridor with two more doors.

“This is my room,” he says, opening the one in front of us.

“Wow!” I exclaim. This is an actual bedroom, with a big bed, a TV, and some storage space. It’s not big, but still.

“Pretty cool, huh?” he boasts.

“Yeah! Definitely better than any airplanes I set foot in!”

“And here.” He goes back to the corridor and opens the second door. “Is the bathroom.” The bathroom is nicer than any bathroom’s plane I’ve ever seen. It features a small shower, a sink with a mirror and is fully equipped with bathrobes, products and styling tools.

“That’s really cool. Now I understand why you like flying.”

One of the reasons I hate flying is the use of the small disgusting restrooms, and with my small bladder, I have to endure it quite a few times.

We go back to the main cabin and find that everyone has taken their seats. I sit down next to Jack on the couch and realize that it actually functions as two airplane seats with a seatbelt and even a reclining position. The flight attendant offers us food and drinks out of her tray: fruits, pastries, brownies, orange juice, and water.

My stomach gurgles at the sight of all this food. Jack takes an apple and a brownie, while I take a glass of orange juice, a mini croissant, a brownie, and some grapes for good measure.

Jack smiles at the size of my plate but doesn't comment. He knows I'm a hungry woman. We chat with Marcus and Jody as we eat our breakfast, and a few minutes later, the pilot announces that we will be taking off shortly.

Jack puts his hand over mine. "Don't worry, it's going to be fine." He reassures me with a smile. And he was right. About fifteen minutes later, we've reached our cruising altitude, and I didn't feel a thing. It's actually very steady.

While Kim, Adrian, and Jack sit around the table for a quick meeting, I sit down next to Jody on the couch.

"So, how long have you been a stylist?" I ask.

"I've worked for Jack for five years now," she says, tying her pink hair into a ponytail. "I actually wanted to become a Broadway show stylist. It was my dream, and the reason I studied at Parsons, but I got this opportunity and I couldn't refuse! What about you? What do you do?"

"Well, I was worki—"

“Sorry to interrupt, guys. L, can you join us at the table?” Jack says. There’s worry in his tone.

I follow him to the table and sit next to him, across from Kim and Adrian.

Adrian starts the conversation. “Louise, we have to talk about safety while we are in London. You probably aren’t familiar with all of this, but when we travel with Jack, it’s always a challenge—”

“You have to understand...” Kim says, interrupting sharply. “...that Jack is very famous. He’s in the middle of promoting his album and this trip will be his first official international one since his last tour. His venue is highly anticipated.”

“What Kim means,” Adrian says. “Is that you can expect a lot of fans and paparazzi wherever you go. We will have another security detail, Eddy, when we get there, but it can get pretty hectic sometimes.”

“Always so dramatic,” Jack says. “They just want to scare you, but it’s not always that bad.”

“Yes,” Adrian replies. “That’s exactly what we want. It’s very important you understand that the situation can escalate quickly, so when Blake, Kim, or myself, tell you something, you have to listen.”

“Okay,” I say, trying to hide the oppressive feeling in my chest. “I totally understand, and I will listen to you.”

“Good. You’ll be staying at Jack’s apartment, so you should be fine there. It’s better than hotels because we have full

control over the security. However, when you are out of the apartment, it's another story," Adrian continues. "If you want to step out, go sightseeing or shopping, you have to tell us first. That way we can have Blake or Eddy accompany you."

"Even if Jack isn't with me?" I ask.

"Yes," Adrian replies. "After a few hours in town, every paparazzo and fan will know your face, and they can be aggressive sometimes."

Kim catches me wringing my napkin until it practically rips, then gives Jack a disapproving look. "I guess you didn't tell her everything, then?"

"Would you have come if you knew how crazy it would be?" he asks me.

I take a few seconds to answer. "It's definitely more than I bargained for, but since I didn't ask any questions, it's on me too,"

"Good answer," agrees Kim, giving a genuine smile for once.

"I understand you also want to go visit your parents?" Adrian asks.

"Um, yes, if it's no trouble? I could maybe fly there on Thursday morning and come back on either Friday night or Saturday morning," I suggest.

"No," Jack says. I look at him, puzzled. Did he lie to me about visiting my parents so I would come?

Adrian scratches his black beard nervously. "Like we said, you can't go anywhere alone on this trip."

"What? Not even to my parents?"

"I'm afraid not," he replies. "We'll be coming with you."

"I don't think I'll be in any danger in my hometown," I assure him.

"You'll discover soon enough that it doesn't matter where you are. If you're seen with Jack once during this trip, people will assume he's always with you."

"Okay. Anyway, it's no big deal. I don't have to go see them. I don't want to cause any trouble. It's fine, really."

"Of course we're going." Jack replies. "You were so excited."

"Yeah, I was, but I didn't know everyone had to come. I thought I would just make the quick trip on my own."

"We're all going. End of discussion." Jack insists.

"It's fine," Adrian says. "Don't worry about it."

"You don't get it. My parents live in a small village where there is absolutely nothing to do."

"We only need an internet connection to work. We'll be fine," Kim says. "The only slot we have is from Friday evening to Sunday morning."

"Perfect," Jack says.

"But what about your mom and your sister?" I ask. "When are you going to see them, then? I thought this day off was the

point.”

“Oh, don’t worry. We’re staying for a full week and they live close to London. We’ll see them for lunch or dinner.”

“Okay then, if everything is settled, I will go get some work done,” Adrian says, heading back to his seat.

“Should we go watch TV in my room?” Jack asks me.

“Sure,” I say, getting up.

“Wait, Louise. Can you stay one more minute? I need your parents’ info.”

I sit back down. “I’ll be right there,” I tell Jack as he disappears down the corridor.

I give her my parents’ names and address, their phone numbers and email addresses.

“Thanks again for making all of that happen. I’m extremely grateful for what you’re doing for me,” I say.

She looks at me for a second, brings her perfectly manicured hands together and leans toward the table. “Well, I work for Jack, so I’m used to it. Always going all out to impress girls. The ‘Jack Rose Experience’. That’s how he is.”

“Oh. Okay.” I force a smile.

“You’ll have a blast. The best time of your life.” She smiles, closing her laptop before returning to her seat.

So, I’m not the first girl he’s taken on a spontaneous trip? It was stupid of me to think otherwise, though. He’s Jack Rose after all, and going through such lengths to make his girl of the

moment happy is not that hard for him. He has a whole team organizing everything.

Before entering his bedroom, I take a few deep breaths. I'm fine. This is good. Jack is my friend, that's all. Well friend with benefits maybe, but nothing more. I promised myself I wouldn't get lost in another guy and Jack would be the worst choice for a boyfriend because of his life. The fact that this is everyday life for him and that there are no expectations makes it only easier for the both of us.

"Are you okay?" he asks when I enter.

"Em..." Did he overhear Kim and I talk?

"I'm sorry about all this. I know it's a lot," he adds.

He's talking about the pressure of travelling with him.

"Yeah, it's just a lot to take in." I sigh. I feel stupid too. Obviously, he can't go out without security, he told me numerous times. I experienced the craziness of the fans in New York, so I should have assumed it would be the same, if not worse. Still, I didn't think the same rules would apply to me.

"Is it okay that we're here while they're all next door?" I ask, changing the subject. "Shouldn't we be with them?"

"Oh no, it's fine. They're doing their thing. Kim and Adrian work a lot, the girls mainly listen to music or go online, Marcus works or sleeps and Blake mainly sleeps. Except for the occasional meeting like the one we just had, we're pretty

much all by ourselves. It's good for everyone to have some downtime," he explains.

"So, what do you usually do?" I sit on the bed next to him.

"It depends. I watch TV, go online, chat with my fans online, or write songs." He points to a guitar case latched on the wall.

"You write in here?" I ask, amused.

"Yeah, I wrote lots of songs here!"

"No way?"

"Yes way! 'Alone?' Wrote it here. 'Demons?' Wrote it mainly here. 'Troublemakers?' Wrote the chorus in here."

I laugh at his smug face.

"It's actually the perfect place to write. I have lots of time. I'm alone. I have nothing else to do, so I'm not distracted."

"Okay, okay. I believe you." I giggle.

"I'll show you."

"No, it's fine." I chuckle.

"No, but wait, I actually started a song a few days ago and I have some ideas. Do you want to listen to it?" he asks, taking his guitar case.

"Yes, of course." I'm intrigued. As he sits back down on the bed, a strand of his hair falls over his forehead and I just want to run my fingers through it. He plays the song for me on the guitar and I'm instantly captivated. It's only the first verse, but it's pretty good. I could listen to him sing all day.

“I like it,” I say.

“Thanks.” He smiles then asks me what are my thoughts of some words he’s chosen, and soon enough, we are deep in the writing process, making changes, adding sentences and replaying it over and over. We’re into it so much that we don’t hear the knock on the door.

“Sorry, guys.” Adrian peeks his head through the door frame. “I knocked, but you didn’t hear with the guitar. I just wanted to know if you wanted salmon or chicken for lunch?” he asks.

I go for the salmon and Jack the chicken. We keep going while the meals are being prepared and we actually come up with a pretty decent first verse and a catchy chorus.

“That was pretty good!” he exclaims.

“Yeah! I’m impressed with myself! I wrote you a great song,” I banter. “A gold record, for sure!”

He laughs. “First, I only have platinum records, and second, you only gave me the chorus!”

“Sure, but it’s what makes the difference, what people remember. I better see my name credited for that song,” I tease.

Adrian knocks on the door again to let us know that lunch is ready. The main cabin smells amazing. It has been turned into a restaurant for us. All the tables are set with tablecloths, real plates, and cutlery. It sure changes from the boxed plastic food we usually get in planes. We sit at the table and enjoy the food,

which is amazing, of course. It feels like it's been created on the spot by an actual cook.

After lunch, we go back to his room to watch some TV. I'm starting to fall asleep when I feel Jack's hand brushing my breasts over my sweater.

"Jack, we can't," I whisper, even though my rasped breathing is telling him otherwise.

"Why not?" He grins.

"They're right next door."

"Then I guess you'll have to be quiet."

There's no stopping him, and to be honest, I don't want to. He pulls me in, claiming my mouth over and over, his hands low on my back. I moan as I ruffle his hair, wanting more.

I guess I will really have to be quiet.

WHIRLWIND OF EMOTIONS

AFTER A MUCH-NEEDED INVIGORATING shower, we finally touch down in London. We barely have time to feel the cold biting air before Eddy, the London bodyguard, takes us to Jack's apartment in a black van. We speed through the streets, bustling with party goers clustered in front of pubs and nightclubs. I'm excited every time we pass by a double-decker bus or a black cab, and I even get a glance at the Piccadilly Circus screens. Jack and I are dropped in the parking garage of the building while the rest of the crew heads to a nearby hotel.

This place is very secure. We need to present both a pass and enter a code before entering the elevator, and again inside to be able to press the buttons. He presses P and up we go.

Of course, he lives in the Penthouse.

We get out of the elevator directly at the entrance of the apartment. He types a code one more time and we enter the living area. It makes me think of a loft, only bigger and more glamorous. It's divided into four areas. On the left are several musical instruments, including a baby grand piano, bookshelves showing off many trophies, and a dining table

seating at least ten people. On the right is a living room with three sofas, a coffee table, a lit fireplace, and a flat-screen TV. Behind the living room is an opulent open kitchen entirely made of black marble, and all the walls on this side are made of floor to ceiling windows, boasting a great view of the city.

“This place is incredible!” I do a small twirl, my arms splayed wide.

“I know. I love it here, especially the view; it’s part of the reason why I could never sell it. Let me give you a tour,” he says.

At the back, a modern staircase takes us upstairs, to a long corridor.

“Here is the gym.” He opens the first door on the left. It’s so breathtaking even I could conquer my laziness and consider working out in here. Especially with a view like this.

“Here is a bathroom.” He shows me the next room on the left. “Here, and here, are bedrooms.” He taps on the two doors on the right. “And here.” We walk back past the stairs. “Is my room, with a bathroom and a dressing room.” He smiles.

I could probably fit my entire apartment in the master bedroom. The bed is immense and there is a charming fireplace with a huge TV above it. Again, the right wall is made of floor to ceiling windows overlooking the city.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the dressing room, where he shows me an empty space. “I asked my housekeeper to clear this for you,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Thank you! You didn’t need to do that, though. It’s only a few days.” Good thing I had this conversation with Kim or this gesture would have meant so much, too much. Now I know this space is probably always empty for his house guests.

“I wanted you to feel at home.”

We promptly unpack our suitcases and slip into his comfortable bed.

I feel like I just fell asleep when something wakes me up. Someone is touching my hair. I open my eyes and see Jack’s face.

“Wassgoingon?” I mumble, jumbling all my words together.

“Sorry, you have to wake up,” he says.

I sit up, rubbing my eyes. “What happened?”

“Nothing, but if you sleep too much, you’ll be jet-lagged.”

“Argh okay.” I look at the alarm clock. It’s almost ten in the morning. We slept for more than nine hours. How can I feel so tired? Jack opens the curtains, and it’s like he just stabbed me in the eyes.

“Sorry.” He chuckles. “But I made coffee if you want some?” At the mention of coffee, I already feel better. We make our way downstairs, attracted by the delicious smell, and there is a lot of food on the kitchen bar: waffles, pancakes, French toast, pastries, and fruits.

“I didn’t know what you like in the morning,”

“So, you made every last possible thing?” I laugh.

“Right,” he replies, running his hand through his hair.

“You made all this?” I ask, sitting down at the counter and helping myself to some waffles.

“My housekeeper did. She just left.”

“Oh, okay! Well, please, don’t ask her to make that much food every day. Waffles, or pancakes, or French toast, or pastries, but not all of it together!”

“Yeah, I guess it was a bit much.” He grimaces, scratching his forehead.

“A little bit.” I tease.

As we’re starting to eat, Jack’s name comes from the TV.

“And to conclude this morning’s news, Jack Rose has finally landed in London last night, ahead of a promotion week for his new album WHISPER. Don’t forget to tune in on Friday because Zak has a special treat for you! Jack will sit down with him for an interview and you might even get an exclusive performance!”

“They already know you’re here?” I gasp.

“Yeah.” He chuckles. “Well, they knew I was coming this week, so they were probably waiting,”

It hits me again how crazy it is to be him; the scrutiny is even worse than I thought.

Jack hits the gym for about two hours while I email my parents about the change of plans and do some research for my book. After he’s done, we both get ready for lunch with his

mom. My heart is racing fast and knots form in my stomach as we go down to the building entrance to join Blake and Eddy. They'll be escorting us for the short walk to the restaurant.

“Jack! Nice to see you,” a gray-haired man says from behind a desk. “Nice to meet you, miss. My name is Ray, the concierge.”

“Likewise. I'm Louise,” I say, returning his smile.

“Hi Ray. Good to see you too,” Jack says, shaking his hand.

“Be careful out there. They've been waiting since six in the morning.”

Indeed. I can see a mass of people through the frosted glass front door, but it's only when I step outside that I grasp the craziness of the situation. Eddy and Blake escort us outside and we come face to face with about fifteen-twenty people with cameras and small groups of teenagers with their phones in hand.

Click. Click. Click.

“Jack, over here.”

“Jack please.”

Click.

“Jack, a picture.”

“Are you happy to be back home, Jack?”

“Who's the girl, Jack?”

“Jack, I love you.”

Click. Click.

The voices of the paparazzi are mixed up with the teenage girls screaming. As they swarm closer, my breathing becomes erratic in the confined space. Clutching my hand, he waves swiftly at them with his other hand. We follow Blake with Eddy behind us, and painfully walk away from the apartment. After a while, they stop following. Only a group of girls continues to, but Blake explains to them nicely that it's not a good time. Now, I understand the added security. We manage to blend in with the masses until we reach the restaurant.

Susan is already here, seated at a round table in the far-right corner. I recognized her as soon as we entered. She looks a lot like her son. She's smaller than him, but she has the same eyes and shade of blonde hair.

She takes him into his arms and when she releases him, Jack brings me closer to his side.

“Mum, this is Louise. Louise, my mum.”

“Louise! How wonderful to meet you!” She brings me into a tight embrace.

Lunch goes great. Jack and Susan are happy to be reunited, but I don't feel out of place. She asks a lot of questions about my childhood and has a lot of stories to share about Jack's.

“That's enough now,” Jack cuts in, putting his hand over his mom's. “You're going to ruin Kim's perfectly curated image of me.” He chuckles. “I'll be right back. No more moody

teenage stories, okay?” he kisses her forehead and dashes to the restrooms.

“You know? You’re only the second girl he’s introduced me to.” She gives me an enigmatic smile. “And the first one wasn’t as nice or interesting as you.” She winks.

I don’t know what to make of that. This contradicts everything Kim said to me in the jet. Maybe he didn’t want to leave me alone in the apartment? I do my best to smile and forget what she said, but this definitely doesn’t go with my fun rebound adventure plan.

Around three, we meet Adrian and Kim at the apartment. They will accompany Jack to his record label meeting. Jack insists that I tag along, but I’m really uncomfortable to sit down in a business meeting with his label, and after arguing a little, he finally agrees. I had Adrian and Kim on my side, so that helped. I’m relieved to be escaping that dinner. I enjoy a long bath, and I’m finishing eating dinner in front of the TV, when Jack comes back.

“How was it?” I ask as he sits next to me.

“Boring.” He sighs.

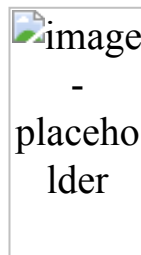
“Oh, come on.”

“No, it really was. At first it was okay, we talked about my album, they’re happy about the sales so far, but then it was pure business, and I really don’t care for that stuff, it’s all Adrian. They just like to show me off for a dinner in town,

remind their competition that they're representing me. It's all just a game really, and I was the prop."

"I'm sorry. I thought those things would be a bit boring, but not that bad. You should have stayed in with me." I grin.

"Definitely," he agrees, lying me down on the couch, then hovering over me. My fingers instantly move on his body with a mind of their own. He takes his shirt off, then mine, and my whole-body tingles when he covers me in soft kisses and light biting. We get lost in each other, over and over again, and end up sleeping on the couch, too tired to go to bed.



AN ALARM IS BUZZING.

Opening one eye, a quick glance at the clock tells me it's way too early. We're still on the couch and the sun is barely up outside. Rummaging for Jack's phone, I turn the alarm off and lie back down next to him, who didn't wake up, when I

remember that he has radio interviews in an hour. Shit. I shake him softly, urging him to get up so we can both get ready. Then we meet Adrian, Kim, Eddy, and Blake in the parking garage, and drive to the studio.

We are welcomed by paparazzi and fans, and Jack signs a few autographs before we enter. The first show is *L.O.U.K.* hosted by Jenson May. In the middle of the studio is a round table with five seats and microphones mounted on arms hanging over them. Jenson introduces himself and hugs Jack hello. They met a few times before, and he's probably around the same age as us. Three other columnists, Eric, Elsa, and Sarah, join us and they start the show while Adrian, Kim and I are watching on the side. They begin by playing Jack's new single "Demons" and ask him about the meaning of the song.

"It's a dark song, and you wrote it, right?" Jenson asks.

"Yeah. I guess it is. It talks about my struggle with drugs and alcohol in general, how it affected me and my family. I wanted to bring awareness to addiction in general, too."

"You've been really open about that. On social media, in interviews, you don't shy away from talking about this," Sarah says.

"This is really brave, mate," Eric adds. "Not a lot of artists are that open about their struggles, especially with addictions."

"Yeah, I guess it helps me deal with it, too. And I really want my fans to know how dark it can get, and that, first of all, it's a really bad idea, but also, that if they are in this situation,

they're not alone. There are people they can talk to. They can get help and it will get better," Jack says.

My mind whirls with thoughts at the news I'm hearing. I didn't know he was an addict. I remember seeing him doing stupid stuff on the cover of tabloids, or the media saying that he had a drug problem, but I never knew it was that deep. Kim's gaze bores into me, but I don't show her my emotions. I can sense she doesn't like me and I don't want to look surprised or affected by what I just heard. Laughing brings me out of my reverie. They now completely changed the subject. The rest of the interview goes a lot more lightly than the beginning. They talk about the album, London, and the upcoming tour.

"One more question, Jack, before you go," Sarah says.

"Shoot," he replies.

"We notice that you didn't come to London alone," she starts. "You came with a mystery girl. Can you tell us more about her?"

"And she's here now too," Jensen blurts. They all look at me, including Jack, who turns around to face me. My cheeks are on fire, but I manage a weak smile.

"Um, she's just a friend," Jack replies. "I brought her out here with me because she was going to see her family in France, that's all," he says matter-of-factly.

"*Oh! Parlez vous français?*" Eric jokes, and they all start speaking French, or at least attempt to. I try to laugh along, but

ouch, that hurt just a little more than I thought it would, or more than it should, anyway.

What he said is perfectly true, and it means we're on the same page. This is just a fun week between friends (with benefits), with for me, the added bonus of a free ride to see my parents. I should be glad he doesn't want more because this is all it's going to be, I know that. But then, why does it sting that much?

JACK ROSE, THE BRAND

ONCE WE'RE DONE, WE go back to the apartment and enjoy lunch with his mom and his sister. Kate is sixteen years old, just like Eva, and I think they would get along pretty well. She's a little less outgoing than my sister, though. She looks a lot like Jack too, except her eyes are blue. Kate and Susan are both so happy to see him. Susan keeps gushing over him and Kate hangs on Jack's every word. I feel like I'm intruding on this family reunion, so I pretend to have a call to make and disappear upstairs for a while, returning only when they're getting ready to leave.

After they exit the apartment, Jack offers me a glass of water and we sit down on the couch.

"I'm sorry I lied to you," he says out of the blue. "About my past."

"Oh... yeah. I wasn't expecting that," I answer truthfully. "You didn't really lie, though. I never asked."

"True. But still, I'm sorry. When I realized you didn't know, I should have told you. I guess it was nice to be with someone

who wasn't aware of my past. I didn't want to ruin your opinion of me. I'm much better now. It's in the past."

"Okay." Suddenly, something comes to mind. "Wait, is that why you were on a break from your career?"

"No, not exactly. I've been sober for a while now. What I said was true. I took this break to relax, think about the future, and write my next album. But it started with an imposed hiatus from my label." He sighs. "Two years ago, I was drunk, and I got into a fight with a photographer who kept following me around. I was at a club with some friends and he was very persistent, so I took a swing at him. I'm not proud of it. I wish it never happened..."

"But I've never seen you drink alcohol?"

"I don't anymore. When I do, it leads to bad judgements."

"Did you...?"

"Take drugs? No, I didn't. Thank God it didn't go that far. But giving my past, they still decided a break would do me good, and they were right."

"Thanks for sharing the truth with me." I smile. And I mean it. Knowing all this makes me feel closer to him. It's like I have the missing piece of the puzzle.

"Thanks for under—"

He's interrupted by a knock on the door.

Holding out his finger, he says, "I'll be right back."

It's Jody. She dropped by to fit Jack for the charity gala taking place tonight. Jack goes upstairs to try his suit on, and I stay in the living-room with her.

"What about you? Do you know what you're wearing?" she asks.

"Oh, I'm not going to that," I answer.

"Em, are you sure, honey? Because I overheard Kim talking about adding a seat to Jack's table, and I'm pretty sure it's for you," she continues.

"Crap. I hope not! We didn't talk about it, but I assumed I wasn't invited."

"Invited to what?" Jack interrupts, looking gorgeous in a black suit. He always is, of course, but the suit really... well... suits him. He looks more confident, more manly, too.

"To the gala. She thinks she's not going," Jody says, attaching pins to his suit.

"Of course you're going. It'll be fun," Jack says.

"What? But you didn't say anything about that. It's tonight! Jack, I don't have anything to wear for that kind of event, and what would I do there? I don't know anyone. I think it's better I sit this one out as well."

"Hell no! It'll be fun. And you'll know me. That's a good start." He winks.

"Jack—" I start, but he cuts me off.

“You’re not going to make me go by myself like a loser, are you?” he pleads.

Like he could ever look like a loser.

“And it’s for charity,” Jody says.

Not her, too. I need backup. Where are Adrian and Kim when I need them? Jody is no help at all.

“I’ll help you with your clothes, don’t worry,” she adds.

“Yeah. Anything she needs, okay?” Jack tells her.

“Sure, we’ll go shopping this afternoon, then?” she asks me.

I don’t reply. I’m not ready to surrender. I need to find something, anything, that would get me out of this.

“Anyway,” Jody continues. “You can’t say no now because I’m pretty sure they added that seat at the table, and it was probably a lot of trouble.” She winks at Jack.

She knows she won. She’s right, I can’t. I feel like I’m imposing enough on this trip. The last thing I want or need is to upset Kim or mess with her work. I don’t have a choice but to surrender and agree to go shopping with Jody while Jack will be at rehearsals for his performances tomorrow.

So, half an hour later, we’re out the door, Eddy following behind us through the busy streets of London. The paparazzi take a few pictures of me, trying to get my attention, but I ignore them on Jody’s advice.

We walk for about ten minutes until we’re reach the busy Oxford Street where she takes me to Selfridges, a vast

department store. She knows her way around the store pretty well—I can tell she comes here often. With the help of the shop assistant, she picks out two dresses and takes me to the fitting rooms, Eddy standing guard nearby.

“Don’t worry if it doesn’t fit perfectly,” she yells, “I’ll have time to fix it.”

I glance at my watch. It’s two o’clock. The gala starts in five hours. I don’t really see how she could have time to fix anything in such a short period of time. I try on the first one, a dark green strapless pencil dress that feels really tight on my body. Jody insists that I show it to her, even though I say I’m uncomfortable in it.

She studies me from different angles before saying, “You have a really good body. Your curves are fire. But pencil dresses are not for you. Maybe try the other one?”

Back in the fitting room, I slip into a navy-blue embroidered lace dress. This one is much more comfortable. I like the V-neck and the way it hides my curves while highlighting my chest.

“I like it, but it’s a bit long,” I say, exiting the fitting room.

“Stunning! I love it.” She turns around me. “I can fix the length, no problem. So, what do you think? Sold?” she asks.

I don’t really have a choice. I have to get something and we’re running out of time. Plus, I’m not going to lie. This dress is stunning. I change back into my clothes and notice the

tag on the dress: Just Cavalli, eight hundred and fifty pounds. This is insane!

“Um, Jody, do you think we could look at some other dresses?” I timidly ask when I get out.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“It’s a tiny bit over my budget.” I blush. I can’t splurge on an eight-hundred-and-fifty-pounds dress for one night when I don’t really have an income at the moment.

“Oh honey, don’t worry about that!” She chuckles. “It’s all taken care of. You heard Jack—*everything you need.*”

Most girls would dream of hearing these words, but not me. Especially since she probably said those exact words to a dozen girls before me.

“Right, I just don’t feel good taking his money like that. I’d rather pay on my own if that’s okay?” I reply.

“And it’s very honorable, but I’m afraid we don’t have a lot of time left. The gala starts in four hours, so we really have to get a move on. We still need shoes and accessories,” she adds.

“What? How much is this outfit going to cost? This is insane! It’s only one night.”

“You’re going to a charity gala with Jack Rose. You can’t just wear whatever you want. We have more free reins since it’s not televised or anything, but still, it’s important that you fit in. Tonight, think of Jack Rose as a brand, not a person. He has an image to maintain, and that means everyone accompanying him has to look the part,” she explains calmly.

“Don’t worry about the money. Jack is a multi-millionaire, eight hundred pounds is nothing for him. Trust me. Plus, you look amazing in that dress!”

I don’t know what upsets me more. The fact that I should treat Jack as a brand and not a person, or that I will basically be a prop on his arm. I’m also wondering if it’s why he asked me to come here with him. To have a date—arm candy. I’m a little defeated, but I’m torn because she made some valid points too, and I do want to fit in. What did I get myself into? Once again, I have no choice but to agree. I know he has a lot of money, but still, it makes me really uncomfortable to have him spend that much on me.

Jody urges me to the shoe department where we find silver strapped heels, which are “only” one hundred and seventy pounds, and a matching clutch for two hundred and ninety pounds. I insist on paying for the shoes myself and we go back to the fitting room. She puts numerous pins on the dress to adjust it later.

It’s after four when we finally exit the store and I’m exhausted. I thank Jody for her help. She did a great job finding me a stunning outfit, and I’m really grateful. She goes back to the hotel to work on my dress while Eddy escorts me back to Jack’s apartment.

Jack isn’t home yet, so I take a shower, then curl up on the couch to start reading a book on my e-reader, but someone interrupts me by knocking at the door. I’m frozen. What am I supposed to do? Should I answer? I feel weird alone here.

Who could it be? With all the security in this place, it must be someone who has the pass, and the code, though.

Knock Knock “Louise, are you here? It’s Sandra, open up.” Thank God. I unlock the door and let her in. She’s dragging a small suitcase behind her.

“Hi, Sandra. How are you?”

“I’m excited. I’m here to prepare you for the gala. I can’t wait, I never get to do girl hair and makeup.”

“Oh, really? You don’t have any female clients?” I ask as we make our way to the bathroom.

“I work exclusively for Jack,” she says.

“Really? That’s selfish of him.” I sit down in front of the mirror and she sets all of her tools on the desk in front of me.

“Haha. Well, it’s how it is for high-profile celebs. They want to make sure we’re always available, especially when they travel a lot.”

“Makes sense.”

“Okay, so what are we thinking for tonight?” she says, brushing my blonde hair with her fingers.

I let her work her magic, and she goes with a natural messy bun and a light makeup: some foundation, highlighter, and an intense, yet discreet, smoky eye in silver and dark blue.

“Wow!” Jack exclaims, entering in a bathrobe. “You look amazing!” he says, before hugging Sandra hello.

“Thanks.” Warmth fills my cheeks as Jack gives me a lopsided smile.

“Your turn now, big boy!” Sandra says, so I exit the room to let them work. In the closet, I find Jody sitting on the bench, my dress hanging behind her.

“Hey! You look gorgeous! Let’s try on the dress?”

The dress looks even better with my hair and makeup done, and Jody did a great job. The length is perfectly adjusted once I put my heels on.

“Do you like it?”

“Yeah! It’s perfect, thank you so much. You did a great job.”

She takes a few pictures of me and I go down to the living room while she waits for Jack. They come down, followed by Sandra, a few minutes later.

“Wow! You look smoking hot!” he says, stopping in his tracks when he sees me.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” I smile. He looks even more handsome than he did earlier, with his shiny blond hair perfectly slicked back.

We exit the apartment, escorted by Blake and Eddy. We have to go out through the front since the limo can’t get into the garage. The flashes of the paparazzi hit us as soon as we step outside, contrasting harshly with the dark sky. My stomach twists in knots when I hear them say, “*Who’s the girl, Jack?*” “*Is she your girlfriend?*” “*Is she the French girl?*” “*What’s your name Miss?*”

Ignoring their questions, we rush into the limo. Adrian and Kim are already inside, looking very professional in their suits. They both compliment us on our looks and Kim gives me a quick briefing on how to behave tonight. “On the red carpet, don’t say anything. Just smile and follow Jack. Stay behind him when he gives interviews. Inside you should be fine, there is no press allowed. Stay with Jack, and mingle, but do not ask any celebrity for a picture or an autograph.”

My stomach twists again and I take deep breaths to calm my racing heart. I knew it was going to be a lot, but this is really intense. There are so many rules to follow, and I hope I don’t screw up. Jack squeezes my thigh as we slow down and eventually come to a stop.

“Okay,” Adrian says. “Let’s do this.”

THE GALA

IT'S VERY INTIMIDATING, TO say the least. The red carpet must be thirty feet long. I didn't think it would be that big or that impressive. The photographers are lined behind some ropes, yelling and flashing their lights at their current target.

A woman holding a notebook and wearing a microphone headset greets us, exchanges words with Kim and Adrian, before telling us it's our turn. "Here you go, good luck," Kim says. I'm not sure if she's talking to Jack or me, but I'll take any luck I can get right now.

Jack takes my sweaty hand, and we follow Kim on the red carpet. She tells us where to stop and we're instantly swallowed by flashes and screams.

"Look here, Jack!"

"Jack!"

"Looking good, Jack!"

I don't dare let go of his hand, and do my best to smile and keep my eyes open with all the flashing lights. I'm still petrified, but I'm really grateful for Sandra and Jody, because

with this makeover, they've given me a lot more confidence than I would normally have. Kim whispers in my ear that Jack needs to take some single shots, so I wait next to her.

After what seems like forever, we follow Kim to another part of the red carpet, which feels more like a lineup of reporters interviewing the celebrities passing along. We stop at four of them on Kim's orders. They all ask about Jack's new album, his time in London and, of course, the charity and what it means to him. He's finishing his last interview when a reporter calls out for me.

"I love your dress! Can you tell our readers who made it?"

I'm not sure I'm allowed to speak to the press, so I turn to Kim, who gives me a sharp nod.

"Um, thanks. It's Just Cavalli," I reply, fidgeting with my bracelet.

"Nice choice," she agrees before adding a bit louder, "And nice catch, Jack. She's stunning."

He doesn't answer, so she insists, "You two are dating, right?"

She's looking back and forth between Jack and me, but he speaks first.

"We're friends. That's all," he says. Ouch again, twice in one day.

When we are finally done with the red carpet, we say goodbye to Kim and enter the high-ceiling circular ballroom. I feel like this is the kind of place royals would host events at.

Everything is either golden or marble and the painted ceiling boasts an impressive crystal caged chandelier. A hostess gives us a small booklet with auction items, and a sign with the number fifteen, before taking us to our table. It's a round table, beautifully decorated with chandeliers and flower arrangements, right in front of the stage.

Taking a peek at the seating chart, I notice Jack is on my right, and on my left is Dylan Woods. Dylan Woods? As in famous actor Dylan Woods? Husband of Elsie George Woods? Sure enough, Elsie's name is next to her husband's. My 14-year-old self is screaming inside me. I'm going to meet her! I was a huge fan of her girl band The Go-Go-Girls when I was a teenager. I think I still have a clock with their faces in my bedroom at home.

"Are you a fan?" Jack asks, catching me staring.

"Yeah! When I was younger. I can't believe she's going to be here!" I try to contain my excitement, but there are just too many emotions.

"Cool. They're nice, you'll see," he replies.

"You know them?" I gasp.

"Yeah, of course, we've been involved with this charity for a long time together, so we became friends,"

"Who else is at our table?" I ask, looking at the rest of the name tags. Singer Dexter Shaw is sitting next to Marlene Shaw, his wife, I assume. Next is Claudia Simmons, the famous actress and Terrence Simmons. I certainly didn't

expect this. I thought there would be other celebrities there, but I didn't think I was going to meet such big stars. The last two guests of our table, however, Reggie Mills and Jane Madden, don't ring a bell to me.

We move to the bar area where Jack gets me a glass of champagne. God, he knows me so well already. Many people come to talk to Jack, and he politely introduces me to all of them. And after the fifth time, the word "friend" doesn't sting anymore. I am his friend, after all, and this is a pretty cool event, so I really just want to enjoy it. I feel weird being served champagne and canapes when I was the one doing that just a week ago. It feels so far away already.

When she enters, I almost spit back in my glass: Elsie George Woods, radiant in a tight, long silver dress. Standing next to her husband, she scans the room, stopping when she sees Jack. She whispers something to her husband, then starts heading our way. "*Be cool,*" I tell myself, finishing my glass of champagne in one gulp.

"Hey, man!" Dylan says, shaking Jack's hand.

"Hi," Elsie adds, giving him a quick hug.

"Nice to see you guys," Jack replies. "Let me introduce you to my friend Louise."

They both hold their hand out for me to shake, and I feel like I'm going to faint.

"Hi," I mutter, shaking their hands.

“She’s normally way chattier, but I think she’s star-struck because of you, Elsie,” Jack teases.

We all laugh and Elsie replies, “Oh, love, really? Thank you.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I was a big Go-Go-Girls fan,” I manage to say.

“Yeah! Girl power!” she says, high-fiving me, making my teenage-self ecstatic.

As we chat about the Go-Go-Girls and girl power, my heartbeat slows to a normal pace.

“By the way, Jack, congrats on your new album! Our kids love it, it’s playing on repeat at our house!” Dylan jokes.

“Thanks, man. It means a lot,” Jack says, beaming.

“You guys have to come check out our new place!” Elsie says, and I have to pinch myself to make sure I’m not dreaming.

“Ladies and gents, welcome to the SMILES foundation charity gala.” A man is on stage, speaking into a microphone. “Thank you so much for being here tonight. We now kindly ask you to take your seats, as dinner will be served soon. Thank you.”

I didn’t notice how full the room was now. We move to our respective seats and I find myself between Jack and Dylan, which is every girl’s dream, to be honest.

By the end of the meal, I'm stuffed. I ate and drank (the waiter kept refilling my glass), too much. But I'm much more at ease now, and I enjoy the lively conversations about real estate in London even if I know absolutely nothing about it.

Once the conversation dials down a little, the host takes the stage again and announces that the auction is about to start. Everyone grabs their sign and directs their attention to the stage.

The first few items are contemporary art works and bottles of vintage wine and champagne, then there are a good number of luxury hotel stays around the world, yacht and luxury cars experiences or private dinners with celebrity chefs. The amount given for each item is unbelievable and I'm really glad they are raising that much money. Reggie Mills spent thousands of pounds for a few bottles of wine, and Dexter Shaw splurged on a piece of art for fifteen thousand pounds!

The auction finishes with the biggest items of the night, the one given by the celebrities sitting at our table. Every item is impressive, but the most exciting ones are from Jack, Dylan, and Elsie. Jack surprises me by giving the platinum record plaque for his second album, but he tells me he always gives something meaningful to charity, otherwise he doesn't see the point.

Finally, Dylan gifts the helmet he wore in his now finished movie franchise, as well as the original script of the first movie, while Elsie offers the famous rose gold dress she wore on the "Hey You!" music video, and I'm dying inside. I

remember that video like it was yesterday, and I actually dressed as Elsie at a costume party we had for my eighteenth birthday. Jack surprises me by raising his sign.

“What are you doing?” I ask, and he winks at me. He bids with five other people, and it’s a little chaotic. I’m not sure who’s winning until the host says, “Sold to number fifteen.”

“A memory of our week in London,” he whispers in my ear, sending shivers through my entire body.

“Jack—” I start, but he puts his hand on my knee and says, “You deserve it, L. Thank you for coming.”

I don’t have time to reply because Elsie is telling me how happy she is that I’m the one getting it, since I’m a true fan and I almost cry of joy. I can’t believe he did this for me. This is so thoughtful, so not a casual dating thing to do, or maybe it is in his world. Maybe all his dates are gifted a one-of-a-kind keepsake as part of the “Jack Rose experience,” but for me, it’s going to make things a lot more difficult.

CHAMPAGNE & RACLETTE

THE LAST DAY IN London went by in a flash. We spent the day in the studios between the *Zak Riley Show* and the *Wake-Up London* show, where Jack delivered three great performances, and had a quick last lunch with his mom in between.

It's dark when we finally arrive in Paris. As Jack's team secures the rental car, I breathe in the fresh Paris air as if it were any different from the one in London, but for me, it is. It smells like home. We separate into two groups: Adrian, Kim, Jody, Sandra and Marcus are going to a nearby hotel, and Jack, Blake, and I are going to my parents' house, forty-five minutes away. Blake won't stay, though; he'll drop us off and go to a close by B&B.

"My sister is going to go nuts when she sees you." I give his hand a quick squeeze, then turn back to the window.

"You didn't tell her I was coming?"

"She wouldn't have been able to take the suspense!" I say as we pull into my long, winding drive. My heart swells at the

sight of my childhood home. The one I hadn't seen since last Christmas, more than a year ago.

“Louise!” Mom shouts from the front door as I get out of the car and run toward her, tears well behind my eyes at the sight of her. Dad's hot on her heels, wrapping me in a bear hug before I have a chance to introduce Jack.

When he finally releases me, I say, “Mom, Dad, this is my friend, Jack.” He flinches when I say the word, and I can't help wonder if it's an ouch for him too?

My dad shakes his hand a little too vigorously, almost as if he was trying to break it, which is probably the case, actually; and my mom puts two swift kisses on his cheeks. He chuckles nervously. Kissing on cheeks to say hello is a French thing, and brought me a few awkward moments when I first got to the U.S.

We enter the house and bump into my sister Eva, already in her pajamas. She freezes completely when she sees Jack.

“Hi,” he says, trying to break the ice, but it has the opposite effect. She looks at him with horror and runs upstairs, shutting her bedroom door loudly behind her.

“So that's Eva.” I giggle.

“Right, big fan. I'm sorry.” He chuckles.

My parents take us upstairs to the two farthest rooms: mine and the guest room. She tells me in French that Jack can stay here, and of course I'll have my room. Jack looks at me, and at the rooms, not understanding why there are two of them. I

couldn't bring myself to tell my parents that we were sleeping together in the same bed, especially since I insisted on the fact that he is not my boyfriend, not that it wouldn't change anything, but still. I whisper to Jack to go with the flow, so he thanks my parents, and they leave us to get settled in.

After unpacking a few clothes, I sneak into his room. "Sorry about that. It's just a little complicated for my parents, you know. I didn't tell them that we—"

"Are having sex?" he suggests with a smile, and we both laugh.

"Yeah, I told them we're not dating. So, it would be weird for me to say that we sleep in the same bed."

"Don't worry about it, it's fine," he says, rubbing the back of his neck.

I know he means it, and I know it's fine, but I've never felt so much as a child as I do now. The weird thing is, he's actually two years younger than me, but he has such a grown-up life that sleeping in my childhood room across from him, when he's used to hotel rooms and penthouses, feels really silly.

Jack comes into my room, his gaze scanning every surface as if he's fascinated by my teenage self's room. His eyes linger on the posters of singers and actors covering my wall and on my Go-Go-Girls clock.

"Why is there a picture of Hayden Fraser above your bed?" he raises his eyebrows.

“Oh,” I blush, adjusting my pillow. “He was my celebrity crush.”

“No way.” He laughs. “I know Hayden very well.”

Of course he does.

“Though I’m not sure I’ll ever introduce you now that I know your feelings for him.” He smirks.

“Shut up!” I throw him a pillow and he catches it with ease.

My mom interrupts us, asking if we’re hungry and even Jack understands the question, nodding frantically as an answer. We are starving. Our last meal feels like it was a lifetime ago.

My sister is already seated at the table, fully dressed, and wearing makeup by the looks of it. Jack and I exchange a smile. He noticed it too, but he’s too kind to say anything. My dad asks Jack to sit on his right, and I sit next to him in front of my mother and sister.

My mom made raclette, which smells delicious. I love raclette, it’s one of my favorite meals. We heat specific cheese in a cooker in the middle of the table and then scrape it on top of potatoes and cold cuts.

“*Alors*, Jack. Zis is a bottle of *blanc de blanc* champagne. It iz made exclusively wiz chardonnay. ‘ave you ever tried it before?” My dad asks.

“No, actually, I’ve never tried it. Do you drink champagne while eating?” he frowns.

“Oh yes. Champagne iz first and foremost wine. ‘ere in the champagne region, we prefer to drink champagne at ze table, but it iz not true for the rest of the country. A glass?” my dad asks, bringing the bottle close to Jack’s glass.

“Oh,” Jack says, rubbing his neck.

“Jack doesn’t drink alcohol, Dad,” I say in French.

My mom’s mouth opens but only a gurgle escapes. I think she’s choking on her potato. She swallows hard and takes a large sip of her water.

My dad doesn’t say anything, but for a different reason. It’s how he usually bonds with people, around a nice drink. So, this definitely won’t help.

I clear my throat. “It’s delicious, mom. Thank you.”

“Yes, Mrs. Mercier. I love it. *C’est mon premier raclette,*” he says, helping himself to more servings.

“Oh, *merci,*” she says. I know she’s fighting a smile. She was probably set on hating Jack, but she loves it when people eat well at her table.

I don’t know if it’s the food or the atmosphere, but it feels like Jack lived there all his life. He’s engaging in lively conversations with my parents in a mix of French and English, and even my sister dares to participate a little by the time we get to the dessert.

We go to bed way past midnight, each in our own room, but it doesn’t stay like that very long as Jack creeps into my room half an hour later.

“I had fun tonight,” he says, once he settles next to me. “Your family is really nice.”

“Yeah.” I smile, even though he can’t see it. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

We stay in silence for a few minutes and I don’t know if it’s the darkness or the familiarity of having Jack here tonight, but I dare ask the question that’s been bothering me for a while now. “Are we really just friends?”

The bed shifts a little. I’m guessing he turned on his side to face me, but I don’t dare move.

“What do you mean?”

“In London, you introduced me as your friend to everyone.”

“Oh. It’s just easier. If they think you’re anything more, they’ll make your life a living hell. I was just trying to protect you. God knows what they’re capable of. I’m sorry if that hurt you. I thought Kim explained all of that to you.”

“Okay. No, she didn’t, but yeah, that’s what I figured. It makes sense. I see how they were outside your apartment. And we’re friends after all, so you’re not lying. Not that it matters, we’re free. And anyway, there’s no need to label it.” I let out a nervous laugh. “We’re just having fun and...”

“You’re gonna have to stop doing that, Louise,” he says, finding my hand.

“What?”

“Rambling,” he replies, stroking my fingers.

“Why?”

“Because.” He pauses. “I find that incredibly attractive.” He nibbles my ear, making me giggle.

“Jack, stop. My parents’ room isn’t far.”

But there’s no stopping him. He starts to tickle and kiss me all over while I do my best to stay silent, but it’s proving to be hard with him as a partner.

SURPRISE, DECEPTION, AND TEARS

The next day, I wake up to a banging sound and I feel like someone is crushing my head. Well, someone is, Jack. And the pounding on the door is my mom's fist, asking if she can come in.

Shit. SHIT. "Jack, wake up," I whisper, shaking him with no mercy, while yelling "*Une minute, maman.*"

"What?" Jack groans, his eyes still shut.

"My mom is at the door," I say, getting him up. "Quick, in the closet."

He rubs his eyes before looking at the closet door, then back at me. Jack opens his mouth, but I shove him in there, barely fitting in with all my clothes, then shut the door at once. I straighten up and open to my mom.

"*Salut ma chérie, désolée de te réveiller mais il est déjà onze heures et si on veut profiter de te voir il faut te lever,*" meaning that I should get up now if we want to enjoy each other in the short time we have together. I agree and tell her that I'll be right down. She insists on waking up Jack, but I tell her he's very grumpy in the morning, and that I should do it.

A few seconds after the door closes, Jack falls out of the closet. My childhood attires tumbling on top of him. "Jeez, how many clothes do you have in there?" he exclaims, shaking out of my clothes.

"You're one to talk! I've seen your closet in London, remember?" I tease.

He smiles. “So, I’m grumpy, huh? I’ll show you grumpy!” He lifts me under my knees, throws me on the bed, and starts to kiss and tickle me.

“Argh, stop!” I say, half giggling, half begging.

“Tonight,” he promises.

We settle down and each change before going to breakfast.

The light in the living room is blinding me, but I’m up now, thanks to Jack, and I’m happy to be here. We enjoy a big breakfast with my parents only, since my sister’s gone to her dance class.

After we both take a shower separately, and not without a bit of arguing from Jack, we play some board games with my parents, a Saturday tradition in my family, and we talk about life. Jack’s life, particularly, which interests my parents a lot. My mom asks “*if he does drugs?*” Very classy, mom, thanks. I know she’s concerned, but you don’t just ask people that. Jack takes it well and assures her that life is behind him.

His answer seems to calm my parents, though, and they seem a lot more relaxed now. Unfortunately, this new familiarity with Jack has its drawbacks, as my parents embarrass me with pictures of me when I was a child, and worse, a teenager.

The rest of the day goes by quickly and it’s already dark out when we’re finishing our last game.

“*Um, Louise,*” Mom starts with an unusually uncertain tone. This can’t be good. “*On a une surprise, pour toi, nous*

mangeons chez Tata Annie ce soir!”

“*Quoi?*” I exclaim.

“What?” Jack repeats.

“She says we’re eating at my aunt’s tonight! I didn’t know about it. I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine, I can call Blake.”

“I think it’ll be fine. It’s just dinner, but she could have told us.”

My mom is hanging on our every word, probably not understanding, because she’s relieved when I tell her it’s fine. I’m actually happy to see my aunt and cousins. I haven’t seen them in a very long time and we used to be close. I just hope they won’t be weird around Jack.

We get ready and all climb into my dad’s Citroën DS5. The ride takes about twenty minutes, and I’m so busy talking to Jack that I don’t notice that we’re not taking the usual way to my aunt’s house. When I get out of the car, I discover with horror that we are parked in front of a community center, and that there are at least another fifteen cars in the parking lot.

“Oh no,” I whisper, glancing at Jack, who understood the situation too, looking a little nervous.

“Surprise!” mom yells. “*Tout le monde avait tellement envie de te voir qu’on a décidé d’organiser cette petite fête!*”

I’m flattered that they organized this party because they all wanted to see me, and I want to see them too, but I’m really

anxious. I feel bad for Jack and I can hear in my head Adrian and Kim's voices scolding me for taking him to a party.

"I'm sorry. We can leave if you want. I understand," I tell Jack.

"Don't worry about it. It'll be fine," he says, squeezing my hand.

We follow my parents and sister into the dark hall, and the lights turn on when we enter. "Surprise!" A small crowd of my family members shouts. There must be about thirty people here.

There's uncle Richard, looking his usual groggy self, cousin Emma with her boyfriend and their newborn baby, my two-best friends from high school Karine and Lea, my aunt Annie of course, my uncle Régis and my aunt Marie, my cousins Lucie and Julien with their children, my uncle Michel who, by the looks of it, is already drunk, and my grandparents Odette and Marcel. They're all here and it's really overwhelming. I'm worried for Jack at first, but he's keeping his cool, so I keep mine.

I am greeted, hugged, and kissed by everyone, and once the small talk questions, "*How are you?*" "*How's your job?*" "*How's New York?*" "*Where is Jared?*" are out of the way, they quickly get to the subject that really interests them. Some know Jack, some know of him, some never heard of him, but everyone wants to know who he is, why he's here, and of course, if we're dating. I spend the next hour repeating over and over again how we met, and that we're just friends. Which

I have to remind myself is not a lie. Sure, we are a bit more than that, but it's still all very platonic—at least it has to be.

The evening goes great, the food is delicious, and naturally, the champagne is flowing. My cousin Julien, who is a DJ in the making, brought all of his equipment and fires up the room. I can't resist Karine and Lea, who drag me to the dancefloor, and it feels like we're sixteen all over again. I look around to find Jack, a little guilty to have abandoned him, but he's actually in an animated conversation, which is a first tonight since none of my family members speak English. I lean over and see he's talking to my cousin Cedric. Since he's done a few linguistic trips to the U.S. when he was younger, and is now studying to become a surgeon, he must speak a bit of English.

Lea interrupts my thought to tell me in French, “You know, we're not completely clueless.”

“Hmm?” I reply, avoiding the subject I know is coming.

“You can serve that ‘we're friends’ crap to your parents, but not to us,” she continues, Karine nodding next to her.

“You are totally smitten by this guy,” Karine says, over the music.

“And the feeling is definitely mutual,” Lea adds.

“No. Stop it, please. There's nothing between us.”

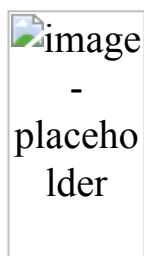
I try to sound firm, but my voice betrays me. I never could lie to them, especially when I'm drinking, so I have no choice but to tell them what is happening. It feels good to let it out,

though. I'm starting to struggle with all these mixed feelings. Like every good girls-talk, we have this one in the restroom. They tell me that they think he has feelings for me, judging by the way he looks at me, but when I tell them about the "friend" bomb, the conversation with Kim, or the fact that he lives in L.A., they're as confused as I am.

We've been talking for a while when we hear Jack's voice echoing in the distance. We rush back to the dancefloor and see Jack, on the small stage, singing one of his most popular songs. Scanning the small crowd, I'm surprised to see that quite a few of my family members know the lyrics and dance along. A smile builds on my face as my mom shakes her long brown hair to the music. Eva is front row, of course, with our cousin Penelope, screaming their hearts out. Karine, Lea, and I join in the crowd and I even fangirl a little when Jack points his finger at me, pretending to sing to me. He sings a couple of songs and ends up signing autographs and taking pictures after. I guess they didn't dare ask before, but his performance seems to have triggered it.

When he's done, he completely takes me by surprise when he plants a big kiss on my lips in the middle of the room. Time stops. People disappear around us and I kiss him back, running my hand through his hair. It's only when I hear the cheering and whistling that I realize we are still surrounded by my entire family. I look around nervously, but no one seems surprised by what just happened, not even my parents, who smile weakly.

When we get home, we go straight to my bed. Jack doesn't even bother to pretend to sleep in his room.



AFTER A FEW HOURS of sleep, my alarm clock drags us out of bed. It's already eleven. The morning passes by very quickly, but I still can't avoid my mom's lecture I knew was coming.

"Louise," she says, entering my room as I'm packing. "I'm glad you're having fun, but don't forget to think about your career."

"I know, Mom. I have actually. I think I want to write a book," I blurt. I've been thinking about this for a while now, but it's the first time I say it out loud.

Her eyes widen. "Write a book?"

"Yeah, I started a while ago and I think it's what would make me happy." I fidget with my ring.

“Louise, you have to be pragmatic! Writing a book is not a serious career! What do you even know about writing? You have a degree in marketing! That’s what you should do.”

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mom! I just shared one of my most deep and secret desires and she crushed it with one sentence.

“Yes, Mom, you’re right,” I agree, not wanting to argue since we’re leaving soon. But she’s not. And this time I won’t let anyone stand in my way. It’s about time I do what I want in life. She leaves me to finish packing and I meet them all downstairs for one last cup of coffee.

Soon enough, too soon, I am once more in my parents’ arms, and my childhood house is in the rear-view mirror. All of this just seemed so unreal, like it was a dream and it didn’t happen, kind of like this entire trip, or even my life, since I met Jack.

The journey back to New York goes smoothly, except for the fact that we get scolded, as expected, by Kim and Adrian for the impromptu party and performance, which was naturally all-over social media.

We don’t do much onboard. We mostly sleep and drink some much-needed detox tea after the week we had. We land around four and go straight to the now familiar hotel room. I can’t help but feel nostalgic. All of this is now over, and all we’ll have are the great memories of it.

“Hey,” Jack says, tilting my chin up, so I’d look at him. “Come here.” He makes me stand up from the bed and takes

me into his arms.

“Don’t be sad.”

“I’m not.” I lie. “It just went by so quickly. Tomorrow, you’ll go back to Los Angeles. I guess I’m just a little nostalgic.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way, though. You could come with me.” His eyes are full of hope.

“What?” I step back to look at him. Come with him? As in L.A.?

“You could move in with me. I have more than enough space, and I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

He’s saying everything I want to hear. My stomach tightens.

“Jack, I can’t just drop everything and move in with you. We’ve known each other for two weeks.” I’m not going to do this again. I need to think about myself and my future.

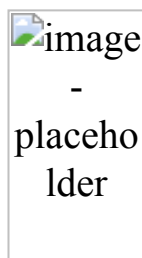
“But it feels like forever,” he adds, sending a shiver down my spine.

I feel it too. I’ve been feeling it since the beginning. Does he really mean it? Maybe his feelings are deeper than I thought. Maybe Kim was wrong and I am special to him. No, I can’t go there. It doesn’t change the fact that our lives are so different, and that I can’t just dump everything to follow him to Los Angeles.

“L?” he asks, looking at me expectantly.

“I’m sorry Jack. We had fun, but I can’t come with you. My life is here in New York.”

He lowers his eyes, and I know my answer hurt him as much as it hurt me.



THE NEXT MORNING, I’M awoken by some movements near the bed. Jack is fully dressed and his bags are packed, waiting by the door. He sits next to me when he sees I’m awake.

“Hey, I was about to wake you. I have to leave.”

“What? You should have woken me up.” My throat tightens.

“No, don’t worry. You can stay here as long as you want today.”

I can’t believe he’s leaving and I’m probably never going to see him again. Sitting up, I get out of bed and fall into his arms, doing my best not to cry.

“Thanks, Jack, for two wonderful weeks, and for taking me to visit my family. I’ll never forget it.”

“You’re welcome, L,” he says, kissing my forehead. “Thank you for listening to me and showing me that I’m still me underneath all the fame. I really needed that.”

He gives me a small kiss on the lips before picking up his bags and leaving through the door. And, just like that, Jack Rose is gone and so is my ability to hold in my tears any longer.

JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED

Readjusting to my everyday life was hard after that crazy week in Europe. Jack and I texted every day the first few days, then it turned into every other day, then every week, and the last text I sent, eight days ago, remains unanswered. I spent most of the last month feeling lonely and missing him like I knew I would. Thank God for Mel. She helped me see the bright side of it all, reminding me it was a really fun week, and that I knew what I was getting into before going. Of course, she is right. He never promised me love, only a fun trip and a chance to see my family, which I'm grateful for.

So instead of drowning myself in self-pity, I buried myself in my book. I figured out what was wrong with it: I was writing in French. So, I changed it to English, and the words started flowing. I did some tidying up, chatted with friends and family from France, and hung out a lot with Mel, now that our schedules were more in sync.

I really enjoy my new work life too, quickly forgetting the nine to five (who am I kidding? Eight to seven was more like it) job, and enjoying the perks of having most of the week off. I'm making decent money too, so I don't have to worry so much about rent anymore. Anna is giving me more and more events to work at since I sorted out a tricky situation with the French ambassador during a UN event, meaning that I now work three to four times a week.

March is almost over when I bump into a tall brown-haired guy on my way to the mailbox.

“Ouch, I’m so sorry.” I gasp, giving him his dropped books back, which fell to the ground.

“Hi,” he says. “Don’t worry, it’s fine. I’m Matt, by the way.”

“Hi, Matt. I’m Louise, the clumsy one.”

“It’s always good to know which neighbors are the clumsy ones, I guess.” His blue eyes are piercing right through me.

“Oh! You moved into the building?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says, flashing his big white smile. “Marta, my cousin owns one of the upstairs apartments. She’s lending it to me now that she moved to Norway.”

“Oh right. I never met her. But welcome to the building. Is it your first time in New York?” I ask, leaning against the banister.

“I visited a couple of times, but I lived in Ohio all my life. I came here to finish my studies and do my internship.”

“Cool, what field?”

“Medical,” he says, showing me his book.

“Wow, impressive! It’s always good to know which neighbors are the doctors, I guess.” I wink.

“Ha-ha funny.” He chuckles.

“Anyway, welcome again. Don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything. I could give you a tour of the neighborhood, if you’d like?”

“That’d be great, actually. I keep getting lost, and don’t start me on the subway. I had to change three times on my way from the library.”

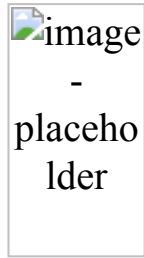
“New York is a very confusing city.” I giggle. “But you’re in luck, because I have to go grocery shopping. If you want, you can tag along and I’ll show you around.”

“Great. I’ll just put my books away,” he says, climbing the stairs two at a time.

And so, I give him the grand tour. We pass by the barber shop, the nail salon, the bakery, (even if by my French standards, it’s nowhere near a real bakery but I guess it’s better than nothing), the post office, and the little café which I loved to take my morning fix from, and now my afternoon one. Last stop is the grocery store, and after a quick hello to Joe at the newsstand, we’re back home.

“Well, thanks for the tour, Louise. I hope I’ll manage better now,” he says, once we reach our small building.

“If you don’t, you know where to find me.”



SPRING HAS ALWAYS BEEN one of my favorite seasons in New York. The days are longer, the flowers are blooming, leaving a delicate scent in the air, and it seems like the whole city is alive again. I spend most of my days writing, but I also see a lot of Matt. Even if we're really different, seeing him has been a breath of fresh air after the whole Jack debacle (whom I never heard back from). Still, dating a doctor isn't always an easy task. Like, for example, I had abdominal cramps last weeks because of my period. Matt was on my back all night, insisting I take some ibuprofen when cider vinegar and water worked for me my entire life (courtesy of Grandma Josette). It's a bit irritating sometimes. I mean, he's not even a doctor yet. I don't say anything though because he's nice. He tells me I'm beautiful, and frankly, I really need it now.

Mel has a new boy toy. His name is Josh. He's a dancer, and they are both working on Broadway. I find them very cute

together and keep telling her they are a perfect fit, but she says it's only a fling. I'm not so sure I believe her, though. She looks more into him than any of her previous boyfriends.

I still struggle a little when someone says the name Jack, or one of his songs is on the radio, and it doesn't help either that every time I speak to my cousins or my friends, they always bring him up, asking how he is, reminding me he's not in my life anymore.

My mom is thrilled, however. *"Oh, honey, that's great! I'm so proud of you for dating a doctor."* Catherine Mercier in all her glory. Only my mom can say how proud of me she is, but for something that has nothing to do with me. She has a unique gift. But I get it. Even I can feel my life is getting back on track. I'm focused on my writing and I'm in a normal relationship with a normal guy, and not fooling around with a pop star. At least she's off my back for not having "a proper job".

The weeks blend into each other until it's summer. Which is, apart from the stuffy, sticky air, truly my favorite New York season.

The streets are empty. Everyone is off to the Hamptons, Maine, or Canada, leaving only the true New Yorkers behind; and after five years of living in the city, I consider myself one. Fast is now my normal walking speed, I can fall asleep on the subway and wake up right before my stop. I get food delivered at least four times a week and it took me a while, but I don't even flinch at the sight of rats in the streets anymore.

Definitely a true New Yorker. My book is looking pretty good too. I get a lot of inspiration from people watching, so I mostly write at the café's terrace, in the subway, or while dipping my toes in Washington's square fountain.

It's late June. I'm on the couch doing some research for my book when Mel arrives, fresh from the shower.

"Season finale of *Medical Drama* tonight!" she exclaims as she takes a seat on the armchair next to the couch.

"I know! I can't wait," I say, closing my laptop. "Matt's coming over to watch, by the way."

She doesn't say anything, but her mouth twitches in disapproval. Not unlike my mother, which is a bit scary.

"What?" I ask.

"Uh, nothing. I don't like watching the show with other people, that's all," she says unconvincingly.

I raise an eyebrow. "Josh is still coming, right?"

She stays silent.

"So, you just don't want Matt here?" I press.

She sighs. "He's just a little annoying, that's all... I mean, you noticed it too, right? Always criticizing the show for their lack of *medical accuracies*."

I chuckle. "Yeah, he does that a lot..."

"You do realize Matt is just Jared number two, right?"

"What?" I blurt out. What the hell is she talking about?

She hesitates before continuing. “Yeah... He’s just wrapped in a prettier and better wrapped package, but one day, it will unwrap and you’ll see it’s just Jared playing doctor. Undermining and bossy, does that ring a bell?”

I open my mouth, then close it, and then I do it again. I’m trying to process what she’s saying, but I don’t even know where to start.

“Jared was an asshole. Matt is nice,” I state.

“Jared *was* nice at the beginning.” she counters.

“Well, I already invited him. So...”

“It’s fine, babe,” she cuts me off. “It was just the opportunity to say something. I don’t care if he’s coming.”

She gets up and goes to her room to finish getting ready. I fall back on the couch and close my eyes. Bickering with Mel is the worst, especially on this kind of topics because I know she’s always right.

A few hours later, Josh and Matt are here and everyone is getting along fine. What Mel said earlier is still at the back of my brain, but I’m doing my best to keep it there.

“Do you think they’ll finally get back together?” I ask as Mel settles down on the couch with a bucket of popcorn. I’m sitting between her and Matt, who has his arm around my shoulders.

“They better! I’m not watching the next season if they don’t.” She sits down next to Josh, spreading her legs over his.

“Same,” I agree

“Yeah, sure,” Josh says as Matt laughs. “Like you could ever miss an episode.” He’s right. They could torture us with this on-and-off relationship for three more seasons, and we’d still be watching.

“Shh, it’s starting,” Mel says, settling in her seat.

We’re barely ten minutes into the show when Matt huffs. “So inaccurate...”

Mel shoots him a glare.

A few minutes pass by and he tuts. “He should be dead already.”

I catch Mel’s gaze. I’m pretty sure she’s wishing he’d be dead right now.

“We don’t care, Matt,” I whisper, a bit louder than expected. “It’s a TV show, not a medical documentary.”

“You’re so *naïve*....”

I don’t hear the rest because I’m sucked in by the emotional scene in the show, but I’m pretty sure he’s saying something like “*it’s fine for people like you who know nothing about medicine.*” I shift my gaze to Mel; she’s deeply absorbed by the screen. Thank God she didn’t hear any of that.

The show just ended when my phone buzzes on the coffee table. I hesitate before picking up, but curiosity gets the best of me. It’s an unknown number.

“Hello?” I say, getting up to take the call in the kitchen.

“Louise, hey.” I stop dead in my tracks when I recognize my caller. Only he can make my insides burn with two little words.

“Hi,” I reply, my voice trembling a bit.

“It’s Jack. How are you?”

“Um, I’m good and you?” I glance over at my friends. Mel’s looking at me suspiciously and her green eyes widen, probably realizing who’s on the phone with me.

“I’m great. Are you in town next week? I have a few shows in New York and New Jersey, and I was hoping to see you.”

I’m a little taken aback by his question. I haven’t heard from him for months and now he’s asking to meet? The blood in my veins heats. Who does he think he is? I’m not going to be his New York sex buddy! Or am I? Because I’m pretty sure it’s my voice who says, “Yeah. I’m here.”

“Awesome! I’ll get there Monday. Can we do lunch?”

“Sounds good to me,” I say, leaning over the kitchen counter, massaging my temples.

“Okay cool, let’s say noon at the hotel restaurant?”

“See you then.” Part of me immediately regrets agreeing to this, but I can’t ignore my heart fluttering at the thought of seeing him again.

When I take my spot back on the couch, Matt doesn’t ask who called, and Mel doesn’t bring it up. I’d rather not talk about it in front of Matt, anyway. He doesn’t know about Jack,

not that there's that much to know, but still, it's a little weird. When he leaves, however, Mel is all over me for the rest of the night, excited that he asked to see me again. She keeps saying that it's going to be another week of fun, which I can't help feeling will turn into another month of misery.

On Sunday, Matt signed us up for a charity baseball game organized by his hospital. Obviously, he doesn't pay attention to what I'm saying because I told him I can't play sports to save my life. At school, I was always the one before last to be chosen in PE. The only one who was selected after me was Thomas, and he only had the use of one of his arms. Sport is not my forte, that's all. I would love to be one of these girls who do sports for fun, like running for hours in Central Park, or sweat at the Gym every other day, but the truth is, I tried it and I hated it. Sports is not a way for me to let loose or decompress, it just bores me. I don't even get the appeal of losing weight because to lose even one single pound, I have to work out a few days straight and eat healthy, which never lasts long, and I end up gaining one pound instead of losing it.

I only agreed to this because he kept insisting that they needed me to complete the team. So here I am, in the only sport outfit I own, surrounded by a bunch of doctors who look straight off a Nike commercial. There are way more people than I expected too. It's a full event with food stands, craft sellers, and a big bouncy castle that kids are already enjoying.

I take a deep breath. It's too late to back down now, anyway. Might as well do my best.

Turns out my best *really* sucks and there's nowhere to hide. I just can't seem to hit the damn ball. My teammates are showing signs of frustration and exasperation. I'm pretty sure I saw one kicking a bottle of water on the ground. It might be for charity, but they're competitive as hell. I'm sweating more and more, making the grip on the bat looser and looser. I spot Matt in the corner of my eye. As always, he doesn't show any emotion. If he feels the same as his colleagues, he sure as hell isn't showing it. I appreciate that, but I sometimes wish he'd say what's on his mind instead of holding it in and being so nice all the time. Finally, I miss my third ball and I can go back on the bench under the glares of my team. They do the best they can, but we lose. No surprise there.

"Hey," Matt says, approaching. "Ready to go?"

"Sure." I stand up, not wanting to spend another minute in this hell hole. "I'm sorry about my performance."

"Uh, it's fine," he says, scratching the back of his head. "I thought you were a bit better, but it's fine."

"I hate sports, actually."

"Yeah, I didn't know." He shrugs.

"I told you, though," I reply. He still isn't getting frustrated, but I am. I did tell him I didn't play any kind of sports and it wasn't my cup of tea. I guess he didn't listen.

"Oh, yeah..." he says, looking away. Right, Mr. No Emotion or Confrontation, I forgot.

It's in a complete and awkward silence that we make our way back to the apartment. When we turn into our street, I immediately notice the black Escalade in front of our building. My heart is pumping hard in my chest as we approach. Jack is sitting on the steps of my building. He stands up and comes toward us.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi," I reply, not hiding the surprise in my voice. "What are you doing here?"

It feels like the air has gotten thicker and hotter. I hate that he still has that effect on me.

"I just landed and I couldn't wait until tomorrow to see you, so I thought I would just come by."

"We were at a baseball game," I reply, smoothing my pants, suddenly feeling self-conscious about my appearance.

Jack doesn't answer, but his mouth twitches in an almost smile, and I know exactly why. He knows me so well that the mere thought of me playing any kind of sports is funny to him. I almost smile in return, but I keep myself from it. I have to keep up a front. He ghosted me after all.

"Anyway," I say. "This is Matt. Matt, Jack is the old friend I was telling you about," I explain.

Why does it feel like a justification? I can't look him in the eyes. They're burning me more than the blazing sun.

"Nice to meet you, man," Matt says, jaw clenched, shaking Jack's hand.

“Yeah. Anyway, sorry for the intrusion. I’ll go now. I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, L,” Jack says.

After he gets into his car and drives away, Matt breaks the ice first. “So, *this* is the old friend you’re meeting for lunch?” he asks with a little edge to his voice.

“Yes,” I reply, lowering my eyes.

“You didn’t see fit to mention that he was a superstar, or that he is clearly still into you?”

Nope. I admit I was a coward on this one. I didn’t even want to bring it up at all. I only did because Matt wanted us to have lunch tomorrow. I had no choice but to tell him I was busy.

“I’m sorry, it’s just—it’s kind of complicated.”

“Well, you know, if you explain, I’ll probably understand,” he replies, sitting down on the steps.

“Okay,” I agree, sitting down next to him. I tell him everything.

“Louise, I really like you. We’re having a lot of fun and I’d like to keep going, but we didn’t talk about exclusivity. I think that now is a good time.

“Um...”

I don’t know what to say. I like Matt a lot, but I’m not ready to commit to any kind of relationship right now. I thought he understood that.

“That’s what I thought. There’s still something going on between the two of you. I can feel it. Maybe, you—”

“Matt—”

“Louise,” he cuts me off. “Just take a few days to think about all of this, and then you can decide what you want.”

“Yeah... okay,” I reply.

And just like that, he enters the building, leaving me alone on the burning steps. He’s right. Of course he is. He could feel the tension between Jack and me. Who couldn’t? I can’t deny that there are indeed a lot of unresolved feelings between us, and seeing him reminded me of how deep they are.

REVELATIONS

As I'm making my way to Jack's hotel, I can't help but remember the first time I met him for lunch and how stressed and excited I was. Today is no different. If anything, I'm even more anxious given our encounter last night. I'm really happy to see him though, I can't deny it. Even if I was pissed yesterday, seeing his face brought back a lot of memories and feelings.

I enter the familiar lobby and make my way to the restaurant. The hostess takes me to the same table as the one in February. Jack is already there. He gets up when he sees me and gives me a long hug. I breathe in his musky cologne, and I'm transported back to a few months ago. I don't want this hug to end. It feels so good to be in his arms again.

We enjoy a light lunch, completely ignoring the elephant in the room. We talk about his tour, how he prepared for it, how happy he is to be back on stage, and I tell him about my life, my book, and how I met Matt because he asks. He also tells me he would love for me to attend one of his shows this week and that I can bring anyone I want backstage with me, which I can't deny, seems like a lot of fun.

"Thank you for lunch. It was nice to see you. I'll text you about the shows," I say, standing up.

"Wait!" He takes my hands into his, sending a wave of heat through my body. "We still have a lot of things to talk about. Please come up to my room."

“Jack, I don’t think—”

“No, I really mean talking. There are just too many people here,” he says, looking around the room.

I accept, because after all, this is why I came today and follow him to the familiar hotel room.

“Do you always get the same room?” I ask, sitting on the bed.

“Oh, yeah. Since I started traveling a lot when I was a kid, Adrian always made sure that I got the same room when we come here to give me some kind of consistency, you know?”

It makes sense actually, and this revelation makes me like Adrian even more. I can see why Susan trusted him with his boy. He really cares for him.

“L, I’m so happy to see you. You have no idea,” Jack says, sitting next to me. “I’ve been thinking a lot about you since London and I’ve missed you so much.”

“Jack—” I start, but he doesn’t let me finish.

“Don’t please. Can I speak first?” I nod and he continues.

“I know you probably don’t feel the same way, but I promise you that not one day went by without me thinking about you. You don’t know it, but meeting you has been one of the best things that happened to me in a very long time, and I realize I was dumb not to make more efforts to show that to you. I should have come back to tell you in person when you stopped answering my texts, but with tour prep and then touring, my schedule was crazy.”

What is he talking about? He's the one who ghosted me. "When I stopped answering your texts? I don't understand."

"Yeah, and I get it. It's not a criticism or anything," he says, rubbing his hands on his jeans.

"Jack, you were the one who stopped replying to me. Not the other way around."

"What? Of course not. I sent you so many texts, but then you stopped answering. I figured the long-distance relationship was too much for you, or that maybe your feelings weren't the same as mine."

"Saying goodbye to you was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. But when you stopped answering my texts, I thought that you were too busy with work and your life."

"Yeah," he says, looking absently for a second before shifting back his focus on me. "Anyway, the most important thing is that we're both here now. And I hope that you'll let me do everything in my power to make you see how special you are to me."

I open my mouth to reply, but he's not done yet.

"Please don't say anything now. I know it's a lot to process. I know you have a boyfriend now, and we said that we would just be friends, but please take some time to think it over and consider this."

"What exactly do you want me to consider?" I ask.

"Come with me on tour. Move to L.A. with me. I want to give us a real try. I don't want to be without you anymore, L,"

he blurts, taking me by surprise.

“Jack, I can’t do that. You know I can’t.” I don’t want to get drawn back into this. My life is starting to feel normal again.

“You know, when I’m on stage, I’m the happiest guy on earth, and the only one I want to share this with is you. Your face is the only one I see in the crowd.”

My heart is pounding hard at his words. He is saying everything I wanted but also dreaded to hear. This is going to make things a lot more difficult.

“I’m sorry, Jack, but I can’t do this. You can’t just come back into my life like that, asking me to follow you around the world!” I say, standing up.

“Please, all I ask is that you think about it, that you’ll consider it at least, and if your answer is still the same, I will never bother you again,” he pleads, taking my hand.

I can feel his pain, his hope, his sincerity, and before I realize what’s happening, I hear myself agreeing to think about it further.

When I get home, I’m relieved to see Mel isn’t at work. She takes one look at my face and understands something is wrong. I pace around the apartment while I tell her everything: Jack showing up at the apartment, the conversation with Matt and, of course, Jack’s request.

“Damn, girl, that’s intense. Sit. Calm down.” She pats the couch, and I fold into the cushion next to her, covering my face with my hands.

“Mel, what am I going to do? When I see Jack, I forget everything else. I’m blinded. The feelings I have for him consume me so much it hurts. But with Matt it’s simple, it’s easy, it feels good—”

“But...” she cuts me off. “It’s not right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Lou. I know you so well. I see how you act with both of them. Do you want my two cents on this one?”

“Please,” I beg.

“With Matt, you do what you always do. You’re playing it safe. It’s easy. He lives in the building. He’s a nice doctor. Husband and dad material for sure, really. He pisses me off sometimes, but I have to give him that. He’s the perfect boyfriend for the perfect boring picket fence life.”

“Matt’s not boring!” I interrupt.

She pins me a glare.

“Okay, fine, maybe a little boring, but what’s wrong with that?”

“Is that really what you want?” she answers. “You’re young. You have a lifetime to settle with a Matt and have the house, the kids, and everything. You came to the U.S. to live the American Dream. Stop—” she says when I open my mouth. “I know what you’re gonna say. *I came here for my studies and to learn English,*” she says, doing an annoyingly good imitation of me. “Bullshit. You came here because you wanted an adventure. Something big, something special. Come on,

Lou! Haven't you noticed how much free you were with Jack? You took risks, and you had a blast. Tell me those aren't your best memories so far since you got here?"

I don't deny it. As much as it hurt me, I would never erase my time with Jack. She takes my silence as an agreement and continues her rant.

"Exactly! So please, Lou. You owe it to yourself. Take a leap. Let loose. Be free. You deserve it and so much more! All you did since we met, aside from the occasional party, is study, work, and then plan your life with fucking Jared. And now you're gonna do the same with Matt, the perfect doctor. But I can see you disappearing behind his shadow already, like you did with Asshole Number One! Don't you want fulfillment? Don't you want passion like the relationships in the novels you love so much? Don't you want the love that consumes you over the one making you feel safe?"

"Are you done? Can I speak?" I cross my arms and look at her. She's very good at this.

"Yes," she says, a little out of breath.

"First of all, great pep talk—"

She gives me a little bow.

"I hear you, Mel, I do. But with risky adventure and passion also comes greater pain, heartbreak, and disappointment. Honestly, I'm not sure I'll be able to handle it. It already took me a month to get over what happened in February, and we weren't even together. Plus, he's not just any guy, he's Jack

freaking Rose, and that complicates everything. You have no idea the amount of pressure there is around him. I'm not cut out for this."

"I can imagine, Lou, but all the more reason for it! This is an opportunity for a great life experience and maybe a great love. You shouldn't turn your back on that, and if it hurts, it will pass and I will be here for you, always. Plus, you always talk about fate, how you believe your entire future is decided. Isn't that a sign that Jack came back and asked you to move in with him? If I believed in that kind of thing, it'll be crystal clear for me. Please, don't make a decision based on what you think will make you happy, but on what actually does. Anyway, that's just my opinion. You have to make your decision on your own."

"That's the problem, isn't it? I don't know." I sigh.

"Let me put it this way: if Jack wasn't famous, who would you choose?"

I don't have to think about it long. "Jack."

"Exactly." She claps her hands like the problem is solved.

I shake my head. "But he *is* famous, and that's the problem."

"If anyone can handle it, it's you. You're the most grounded person I know. Sure, you might need a minute to get used to it, but you have to at least try. You don't know what it's really like before you try it."

"I got a taste in London, you know?"

“Sure. But he was there only for a few days, and everyone knew about it. It has to be different in L.A. That’s where he lives.”

“Maybe. He still said he can’t go grocery shopping, so I’m not sure. And anyway, I can’t imagine leaving New York, leaving you.”

“Oh, babe, but we’ll talk all the time. And you can come back whenever you want, and I’m definitely coming to L.A. if you’re there! It doesn’t have to mean we won’t see each other again. Sure, I’ll miss you, but I want you to be happy, and if that means moving out across the country to live with a superstar, so be it! Please don’t make any decision based on that. And don’t worry, if you ever need to come back, your room will be here waiting for you. I don’t think I will take on another roommate, anyway. It worked with you because you’re my best friend, and I would never imagine it any other way, but now that I’m making enough money, I don’t really see the point of having a roommate.”

“So basically, you’re kicking me out so you can have the place to yourself, aren’t you?”

“Busted.” She grins.

We laugh hard and it sends me back to when we were in school. Everything was so much easier then. There were no boys, no famous pop stars or cute doctors, just us girls having so much fun.

“Oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you. Jack has invited me to his shows this week. I can bring whoever I want. He’ll give

me backstage passes. So, I thought you would like to come, and Josh, if that's his thing? There are two shows in Madison Square Garden tomorrow and on Wednesday. Then on Friday there's one in Jersey, and Saturday's it's in Philly. Maybe we could ask your mom too?"

"Okay. So now you really have to say yes. If it means I'm getting backstage passes for me and my friends whenever I want, it's a no brainer! Then you can invite me to your Californian mansion and take me to all sorts of fancy events and award shows."

"Right." I laugh. "Keep on dreaming."

A SHOW-STOPPING PERFORMANCE

THE NEXT DAY, WE arrive twenty minutes late at Madison Square Garden. We didn't think this through. The subway was jam-packed, mostly by teenage girls wearing T-shirts, caps, and bags with Jack's face on it. They were all so excited, laughing, singing his songs, disrupting the morosity of the New Yorkers' Tuesday evening commute. We fight our way out of the station and to the back entrance, where we're supposed to meet Adrian.

"Hi, we're here to meet Adrian Braxton," I tell the bouncer at the backstage entrance.

He laughs. "Please, clear the area."

"Excu—"

Josh pulls me back. "You're probably the hundredth girl telling him that today," he whispers, and Mel nods. Looking around, I realize they must be right. There are a lot of fans waiting around, probably hoping to meet Jack.

"Why don't you call Adrian?" Mel suggests.

He answers at the fourth call, and ten minutes later, he's at the door. He brings us inside, making a lot of girls scream of jealousy, and leaving the bouncer a bit surprised.

"Sorry," Adrian says. "It's a bit crazy here. New York is always so intense. Here, take this," he says, giving us lanyards bearing a pass with Jack's album cover, saying VIP-ALL ACCESS with a QR code. "Always put this on. It's valid for the entire tour, for any dates. That way you can come and go as you please, just don't lose it and don't give it away."

Mel beams at me. She's excited, and well, I must say, I am too. It's so big, so hectic. I never felt like such a fangirl before. I can't wait to see him do a full-blown performance with dancing and everything. There's a lot of action backstage too, crew pushing carts, or passing by with racks of outfits, and dancers are rehearsing on the side.

We follow Adrian to a quieter part of the backstage area in a long, well-lit corridor with many doors. He stops in front of the one marked *JACK ROSE* and knocks. Jack answers the door in his usual jeans and T-shirt. His eyes light up when he sees us. After he gives Mel and me a hug, we introduce him to Josh, who's still in shock by the looks of it. I get it, though. Even me, who saw one of his performances before and traveled with him, am impressed. Tonight is different. There are twenty thousand people here just for him. This is absolutely unreal.

We hang out with Jack for a while, but we keep being interrupted by people coming to congratulate him, wishing

him luck, or bringing him flowers. We also meet some of the Knicks basketball team. For Mel and me, most names and faces don't ring a bell, but Josh is so excited and takes a bunch of pictures with them. We, however, literally scream when singer Skylar Barker and actor Evan Reed come by the dressing room. Time flies, and soon enough, Jack has to go get ready.

“Good luck,” I tell him.

“I don't need any luck—you're here tonight.” He winks before giving me a hug.

Damn, he's hot, and the whole fandom craziness around him makes him even hotter.

We bump into Kim.

“Louise! Hi!” she says, wrapping me in a warm hug. “How are you?”

“Hi, Kim! I'm good thanks, and you?”

“Oh, you know, crazy busy, as usual.” She seems genuinely happy to see me. I definitely didn't see that coming. “So, you can go sit in the VIP section if you'd like, watch from stage-side, or even go on the floor, on the side next to the front row seats. It's your choice.”

I glance at Mel and I already know what she'd prefer. “We'll go on the floor then.”

“Great choice! You won't regret it.” She gives us a last smile before walking away.

She's right, this is a prime spot. It's so awesome to be so close to the stage, which is absolutely huge. In addition to the main stage, there's a long ramp linking to a smaller one, the B stage, in the middle of the venue.

When the lights dim, the crowd animates at once, screaming and stomping their feet on the ground. The music starts, and the dancers appear on stage. The audience cheers and dances, and it's a beautiful sight. Then, Jack pops out of nowhere on stage, looking so powerful, larger than life, and I'm transported into the Jack bubble.

He starts to sing one of his famous tunes and the crowd is loving it. The crowd fades away, and for a moment, it feels as if it is just him and me. Girls are crying and some of them even have to be evacuated before the end of the first song because they fainted. He notices us when he comes to the left of the stage and winks at me. He's in full pop star mode, so confident, making my heart race.

Taking advantage of the small hiatus where only his dancers are on stage, we find our way backstage and have something to drink. We are sweating and our throats are a little sore from all that cheering and singing. As we mingle at a stand with water, juices, and teas, Jack appears in the corner of my eye. Walking back up on stage, he catches my gaze and waves at me with a rare big smile. As blush heats my cheeks, I wave back, and Kim, who I didn't realize was next to me, says, "Can I talk to you for one second, Louise?"

The warmth on my cheeks spreads to my chest as she pins me with an intense glare. The only time we had a one-on-one conversation it wasn't very pleasant. I want to go see the rest of the show, but I'm curious about what she has to say, so I nod as she takes me aside.

"He's really happy you're here, you know?"

"I'm happy to be here too."

"Do you really mean that? You guys haven't talked for months." She's staring intensely at me, like she's trying to look into my brain.

"Yeah, I do."

"Well, I'm glad," she says, flashing a big smile I rarely get to see. "You know, I had my doubts about you at first. I didn't think you were a good idea, and I wanted him to focus on work, but I was wrong. I've never seen him this happy except when you came to London with us and today."

Offering a smile, I'm not exactly sure what to reply. This is huge, conflicting information. So, Kim actually likes me now? I make Jack happy, like really happy? My heart starts racing, but I need to calm down. Pulling in a few deep breaths, I try not to let feelings overpower me.

Once I regain my composure, I join Mel and we go back to the front to enjoy the rest of the show. It gets more spectacular with pyrotechnics, lasers, fire, holograms, and there's even a trampoline on which he performs a couple of songs. After an encore, he finishes the show with the song that made him

famous— “Firebolt” — and the whole place is lit. It feels like the walls of Madison Square Garden are dancing along with the crowd.

When the show is over, we meet Jack backstage. He’s dancing and jumping around with his dancers, a towel on his shoulders. He asks us what we thought of the show, and beams when we obviously tell him it was amazing and that we had a great night. He gives me a sweaty hug.

“I’ll be right back. I have to take a quick shower,” he says, adding in my ear, “You’re more than welcome to join me.”

“I’m good.” I giggle quietly.

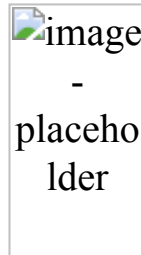
He pouts, pretending to be sad, but I can see that nothing could kill his buzz right now.

In the meantime, we chat with Marcus and Sandra, drink, and eat some sandwiches. Everyone is so excited—so happy. It’s a great environment to be in and I take in every moment. Jack comes back and we talk some more with him. He’s so pumped about the show, the best one of this tour yet, apparently.

Soon enough, it’s time for us to leave. Most of the crew is gone and Jack has a tight schedule to follow when he’s on tour and is due back at his hotel. We say goodbye and when he asks me to go with him, it takes all the strength in my body to turn him down, but I know I have to. I can’t let myself be carried away by the euphoria of tonight to make any decision.

We all go back home, including Josh, who is staying the night. Before going to bed, Mel comes to my door and says, “Babe, I don’t know how you could say no to him after tonight.”

I sigh, asking myself the exact same question.



THANK YOU AGAIN FOR coming yesterday. You made it the best performance of the tour so far! Xxx

It’s an unknown number, but there’s no doubt about the sender. My heart melts. How does he do it? He’s not even here, and he’s sweeping me off my feet with a simple text. I tossed and turned all night, thinking about the amazing time I had yesterday.

That was all your doing. You were amazing. Can’t wait for another one tonight, x.

A few minutes later, his number appears again on my phone.

I can't either. Come early for soundcheck today? Around three p.m.?

Of course. I reply, without having to even think about it.

A few seconds later he texts me again, this time only the emoji with hearts instead of eyes.

I lie on my back with stars in my eyes and loops in my stomach. I feel like I am the heart eyes emoji right now. How could I say no, honestly? Yesterday was amazing. I know I'd be crazy to turn him down. How many girls would kill to be in my place? But that's not even why I said yes. I said yes, because I can't wait until tonight to see him again.

"I'll meet you later with Gwen. It'll give you guys some alone time," Mel says, winking at me, when I tell her the new plan. Josh is yielding his place to Gwen tonight. One night, as good as it was, was enough for him. Gwen is our only remaining friend from NYU, and we still hang out with her every month or so for coffee or girl's night.

So, it's alone this time that I arrive at the backstage entrance of Madison Square Garden. It's quieter outside of the venue since the doors won't open for another few hours.

I show my lanyard to the bouncer and he lets me in. I'm a bit confused at first. I followed Adrian so blindly yesterday that I don't fully remember the way. Thankfully, I recognize

one of the dancers and follow him. The atmosphere is much calmer today, probably because it's so early.

I arrive in the familiar hall and am greeted by a long hug from Jody.

“Hey, Louise! Glad to see you! We didn't get a chance to catch up yesterday. How are you?” she asks.

Jack arrives behind her, putting his finger on his lips to let me know he wants to surprise her, but it doesn't work. She turns around and says, “If you want to do that, get someone else as your partner in crime. Her eyes light up when she sees you.”

I blush hard, and Jack chuckles. “Good to know, Jody.” He high-fives her, and greets me with a hug, teasing me a little about my lit-up eyes.

We have a really good time backstage. Everyone is relaxed and I watch Jack rehearse with his musicians and his dancers. The venue is almost empty, except for the crew and staff, but no one is really paying attention to what's happening on stage. I'm pretty much the only one watching and they give me a good show. I try to be a good crowd by myself. I cheer, I scream a little, and sing along. At the end, they even get me on stage, show me the steps and ask me to dance along. Boy, Mel would have loved this!

Moments later, it's full mayhem again, and Mel, and a very impressed Gwen, meet us in Jack's dressing room. We have another great night, and this time when he asks again if I can come with him, I'm unable to refuse.

The front of his hotel is crowded with fans and paparazzi, but he tells me that this time, it's fair game. That's part of the tour life, he says. I wait for him in the lobby and watch him take pictures with his fans and sign autographs.

When we get into his room, I get why tour life can be so hard. It's so quiet here. We talk about it a little. The adrenaline rush on stage, the cheering, the noise, the fans, and then the quiet and the loneliness. I understand better his struggle with this life now that I've seen it firsthand. I don't know if it's the show, my understanding of his life, or his intoxicating smell, but I forget all about self-control and completely let myself go in his arms.

Jack: 1–Louise: 0.

Only Girl

ONLY GIRL

I OPEN THE CAB'S door. I can't take it anymore.

"We'll just walk the rest of the way," I say, seeing the stadium closing in.

We pay the driver and Mel and I exit right in the middle of the busy traffic. Getting to New Jersey is always such a pain, and tonight is even worse with the concert going on. We should have left earlier, but we've been slow all day. It probably has something to do with last night. Mel, Gwen, and I went to the local pub for a girl's night. Jack wanted me to stay with him, but I'm glad I didn't. I can't think straight when I'm around him and I needed this time with my friends. They really helped me weigh the pros and cons about me entering Jack's world. Gwen even said, "If a guy looked at me the way he looks at you, I would follow him to Hell." Well, I don't know about that, but maybe Europe and California.

Fighting our way through the hordes of girls and honking cars, we find the back entrance and it's half past seven when we finally get to the backstage area. Adrian seems happy to us, relieved even, and leads us to Jack's dressing room. Jack is

pacing, his fists clenched tight against his body. I've never seen him like this before.

"You're here," he blurts when we enter the room, his shoulders relaxing.

"Yeah, I'm sorry we're late. It's kind of a field trip to come here from the city, you know?" I reply.

"Right, so they said. I should have sent a car. I didn't even think about that. I'm sorry,"

"Oh no, it's fine, don't worry. We took a cab," Mel says.

"I'm still driving you back," he says.

We agree, not wanting to upset him further.

"Mel, do you mind if I talk to Jack alone for one second?" I ask, wanting to understand what's happening.

"No problem, I'll wait outside." She gives me a soft smile before closing the door behind her.

Turning to Jack, I ask him, "Is something wrong?"

"I just thought you weren't coming, that's all," he mumbles, sitting down, rubbing his palms on his jeans.

"What? Why would you think that? Of course, I was coming. I told you so." Taking the seat next to him, I rest my hand on his shoulder.

"I know," he says, taking my hand in his. "Sorry, I got anxious. I really wanted you here tonight."

"Well, here I am." I smile, squeezing his hand. Someone knocks at the door saying it's showtime, so I give him an

encouraging hug and meet Mel outside.

We decide to watch the performance from stage-side this time, which is almost as if we are in the actual show. It's a lot of fun too, even if we don't see Jack and his dancers when they're on the B stage. We are, however, in the way when they're getting on and off stage, which means I get a kiss every time Jack passes by.

The noise is deafening in a venue that holds eighty thousand people, all cheering to see Jack perform. Talk about pressure. The crowd quiets as Jack comes back alone on the stage with his guitar. He looks so tiny in the middle of the crowd, so vulnerable.

“How are you guys doing tonight?” he asks.

Fans scream.

“Are you enjoying the show?” He bides his time while he strums his guitar, adjusting the pegs until he's satisfied with the sound.

More screaming.

“I'm so happy to be here with you tonight. Thank you so much for coming,” he says. “Actually, I have a bonus track for you guys.”

More and more screaming.

“I just wrote it for a very special girl and it happens that she's here tonight. It's called ‘Only Girl.’”

Thunderous applause pulses through the air as girls in the crowd scream even harder than before. I whisper in Mel's ear, asking if I can go to the front to see him closer. She smirks at me like she too, knows who this only girl is.

As we approach the stage, my hands shake. The song starts. It's an acoustic melody talking about how this girl is the "only girl" for him. How she changed his life and he can't imagine it without her, and that he prays she will never leave him. He closes his eyes for most of the song, but he opens them near the end, and sees me right underneath him, tears rolling down my cheeks, Mel's arm around my shoulders. He smiles, and after the last note, comes to the forefront of the stage, sits down on the edge and jumps down next to me. He cups my face in his hands and kisses me with passion. His lips are warm and tasty, making my entire body tingle. The crowd goes berserk, so Mel, Jack, and I have to quickly evacuate, escorted by Blake and two other security officers.

Tonight, he doesn't even have to ask. Of course, I'm coming back to the hotel with him. How could I not? He wrote me a freaking song! And the words—there was so much emotion while he sang it. I loved it so much and I just want to listen to it over and over again. After dropping Mel at home and grabbing some clothes, we get to his hotel.

"I can't believe you wrote me this beautiful song," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck.

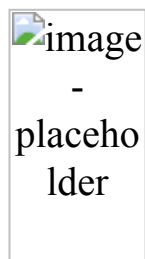
He pulls me in tightly. "I could write a thousand more about you, babe."

Babe? I could get used to that. His words ignite my body and I press it against his. He starts to kiss my neck gently while his fingertips leave a trail of fire all over my body. My hands find his broad shoulders, acting with a mind of their own.

“I missed you, L. You have no idea.” His deep-green eyes are full of meaning—desperation.

“I missed you too,” I whisper in his ear.

Clothes are flying around the room as he leads me to the plush bed where I melt into him.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up so relaxed in his arms that I'm tempted to suggest we never leave this bed. But I know he'd say yes, and that would mess with his tour routine. I know how important it is now. I saw the amount of energy he

delivers on that stage. I don't want to interfere with his preparation.

So, we hit the gym first. Well, he does. I'm just here for moral support, watching him while drinking my coffee. At one point, he asks me to participate and be his sparring partner, which is actually a lot of fun. Boxing with Jack is a sport I could see myself practice on a regular. Seeing him throw punches shirtless is *very* entertaining. After the gym, we do some laps in the pool, mess around a little, and end up in the hot tub. Thank God for the snacks everywhere around the pool, or I would have already died of hunger. I don't know how he can do that much exercise on an empty stomach!

We are cuddling in the hot tub, and it seems like the perfect time to let him know I decided to accept his offer. I will give our relationship a chance, and follow him on tour, and move to Los Angeles. Mel's pep talk, and our talk on girl's night, already had me leaning toward the yes, but after hearing the song he wrote for me, I never want to leave his side. I'm sure of it. I've never felt more alive than when I'm with him.

"So, I made up my mind about L.A. and the tour," I start.

He looks very concerned. I could torment him a little, but I don't like to see him this way, so vulnerable—apprehensive.

I smile. "And, I accept."

"Really? You do?" he says, sitting up straight, beaming.

I'm really doing this. Dating Jack Rose, moving in with him, and following him across the globe. I can't believe that

just six months ago, I was dating Jared, working at LMI, and Jack Rose was just a celebrity I saw on the cover of tabloids or heard my sister fantasize about. Now I can't imagine being without him. It's funny how life works. It's like we were meant to be. Like it was fate.

"I do," I reply.

He pulls me over him, kissing me gently, and the temperature rises in the bubbling water.

"You just made me the happiest man alive right now," he whispers, nibbling my ear.

Our make-out session is unfortunately interrupted because another couple joins us in the hot tub. I take the opportunity to ask if we can finally go grab something to eat. It's almost noon, for God's sake!

At one o'clock, it's time to leave for Philly. When we exit the hotel, a small crowd is gathered out front, and Jack takes a few minutes to sign autographs and take selfies with his fans. However, he doesn't want to let go of my hand, and even if that's a little awkward, I'm happy because I really don't want to let him go either. Of course, the paparazzi don't miss it, and spend the whole time talking directly to me, asking, "*Are you Jack's new girlfriend?*" "*What's your name?*" "*Are you a New Yorker?*" I don't answer, and Jack lets me in the van first before waving a last goodbye to his fans.

The Philly arena is enormous, and backstage, everything looks a lot like the New Jersey one. From the color of the walls, to the layout and even his dressing room. I can imagine

how weird it must be, day after day, to be in different cities but in almost identical arenas. There is a nice welcome basket on the coffee table with candies, flowers, chocolates, and even champagne. Once again, he takes only a few items, asking me what I want, before giving it to Adrian to share with the crew.

After soundcheck and a bite to eat, Mel and her mom, Patricia, join us. She's very excited to meet Jack. Apparently, she even knows some of his songs. This time, we decide to enjoy the show from the VIP section in the bleachers. Jack kisses me long and hard before we go, which makes me a little uncomfortable because I can tell that everyone backstage is watching us.

The VIP seated area is very close to the B stage. Actually, these are the closest possible seats to the front. We are the only ones seated in the small section. We get a visit from Marcus, who takes a few pictures of the stage and of the three of us. I make a mental note to ask him for the pictures. He already took so many since Tuesday.

Viewing the show from here is truly amazing too. We can really take in the ensemble, with the lightings, the visual effects, the dancers. It's actually even more impressive and grand.

Only a few songs are left, and the moment I have been waiting for is here. Jack arrives alone on stage with his guitar.

“So, guys, here is a new song. I wrote it for my girl, the only girl for me.”

Fans scream.

“She made me so happy today. She knows why, and she’s here tonight. So, babe, this is for you,” he adds before starting to strum his guitar, making the crowd go wild, and my heart melt.

I know the lyrics now, so I sing along. I close my eyes and I feel like it’s only the two of us. His voice and the words are so beautiful they transport me elsewhere. Patricia takes me out of my reverie, telling me that if she had a hot guy, singing a song for her in front of thousands of people, she would go anywhere with him. So, I take the opportunity to break the news to them, and they’re both ecstatic and happy for me, reassuring me about my decision.

The rest of the night goes by very quickly. We eat and drink, chat, and then it’s already time to say goodbye to Patricia and Mel, since she’s sleeping here tonight as well, and for us to go back to the city. I fall asleep in the car, and I’m a little groggy when we pull up in front of the hotel, so I’m relieved to see that this time there is no welcoming committee.

NEW YORK, I LOVE YOU

WE'RE HALFWAY THROUGH A delicious breakfast: toasts for me, and eggs and bacon for Jack, when Adrian joins us to go over next week's schedule. I understand that Jack never knows his schedule in advance. They usually meet up on Sunday to review what's coming for the following week.

I learn they are due to leave on Monday, tomorrow, for Spain with a Madrid show on Tuesday, then Portugal for a show in Lisbon on Wednesday. On Thursday, they go to Germany for two Berlin shows on Friday and Saturday, and on Sunday they travel to Rome.

He wasn't kidding when he said his tour schedule was always crazy. This is also a lot sooner than I expected, too. I still have things to do before I leave on a two-month tour and move across the country. Adrian excuses himself to answer a call, and Jack must sense my panic because he asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. It's just that I thought I'd have longer to prepare. I have a few things to do before I go, and I also wanted to hang out with Mel a bit—"

“I’ll tell you what,” he says, putting his warm hand on my knee. “How about you meet us in a few days? In Berlin or Rome? That way, you have time to do everything you need? We’ll get you a ticket. Don’t worry about it.”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“Of course not. I get it. It’s a lot. I don’t want to rush you. I’m just so glad you’re coming, that’s all,” he says, playing with a string of my hair.

I’m surprised. I thought he would insist that I come right away with him. Adrian is impressed too and agrees it’s the mature decision. He also promises to add me in the loop of emails about Jack’s schedule, and will send me the tour itinerary. I’m relieved to see the organization side of all of this.

As always, the rest of my time with Jack goes by extremely fast and it’s with a heartache that we say goodbye the next day. We’re in the lounge of the hotel lobby, Blake standing out front waiting for Jack, keeping an eye on the paparazzi amassed on the sidewalk.

“I’ll miss you like crazy,” Jack says, engulfing me in a warm hug.

“Me too. It’s going to be a long week,” I mumble against his chest.

“I’ll try to call or text every day. I promise.”

“Oh, by the way,” I say as I break the embrace. “Which one is your phone number? I have like three potential numbers for you.”

“Oh yeah. I have to change number every six months, it’s a security issue. The one I texted you with a few days ago is the current one. But wait, you should have my number already. I texted you so many times from that number. I changed phones in March. Didn’t you get them?”

“No, Jack. I told you, that’s when you stopped replying to me.”

The realization hits him at the same time as me and a light shines in his eye.

“So, that’s why you stopped answering! I probably didn’t have the right number.” He buries his hand in his pocket to retrieve his phone. He scrolls through his contact list. “Is this your number?”

I look at the screen. “Yes, it is. I don’t get it. Wait, but how come you called me last week to tell me you were coming then?”

He pauses for a second. “I borrowed Kim’s. My phone had just died. She was charging it for me.”

At once, everything unfolds before my eyes. Kim telling me she had doubts about me, her glacial behavior toward me, and this whole phone mess.

“Who’s in charge of changing your phone?”

“Fuck,” he says, sitting down on the couch and I do the same. “It’s Kim. She probably put a wrong number in when she gave me my new phone. She kept trying to cheer me up and get me to focus on rehearsals, but my heart wasn’t in it.

She tried to set me up on dates, get me to go out, but I didn't want to. But then, you stopped answering, so I put all my energy into the tour."

"Exactly what she wanted," I say, leaning against the backrest. "I knew she hated me."

"Why would you say that?" he asks, turning his head toward me.

"She didn't exactly hide it from me. She was always cold, and when we were in the jet, on our way to London, she made me understand that I wasn't special and that you did these kinds of things for every girl you met. The 'Jack Rose Experience', as she called it."

His jaw clenches. "What? No way!"

"Yeah. I believed her because we decided we were only friends. And, during the first NY show, she told me that she was happy to see me, that she'd had her doubts about me in the past, but that she now believed I could be good for you. It all fits." I sigh.

"Fuck." His elbows slide on his knee as he buries his face in his hands. "I'm gonna kill her."

"Jack, man, we really have to go," Adrian says, coming back into the lobby. I completely forgot about them. They've been waiting in the car for a while now.

"You have to go, Jack. It's fine. I don't want you to tarnish your relationship with your publicist because of this. Plus, she likes me now, I think." I smile, taking his hands in mine.

“It’s fucked up, though. I can’t let that slide.”

I sigh. “I’ll talk to her then. I think it’s best. I’ll do it when I meet you guys on Sunday. In the meantime, forget about this and enjoy the tour. Please.”

“Okay. If that’s what you want, I won’t say a word.” We get up and he takes me into his arms. He lifts my chin up and kisses me on the forehead, then on the lips. I breathe in his intoxicating, musky smell as much as possible, so I can carry it with me once he’s gone.

“See you in Rome.” I smile as we break the embrace.

“*Ciao, Bella.*” He kisses me one last time and joins Blake on the steps outside.

Once the paparazzi have cleared out of the area, I exit the hotel and take the subway back to my apartment. This revelation didn’t shock me as much as it shocked Jack. I knew she didn’t like me from the start. I hope he keeps his word and doesn’t talk to Kim. That way, I can have an honest conversation with her. She won’t be able to prepare her speech in advance. She’s a publicist, after all. They’re good with words.

The first order of business in my pre-departure checklist, and not the easiest one, is to go to Matt’s to tell him my decision. I guess I didn’t even think about him since Jack arrived, and frankly, my doubts about following Jack were never about Matt. He’s very sweet and I like him a lot, but there is definitely no passion or fireworks when I’m around him. Plus, we have absolutely nothing in common.

“I’m moving in with Jack. I’m sorry, Matt. The last thing I wanted was to hurt you,” I say, putting my hands in my jeans’ pockets.

He scoffs. “Well, I can’t say that surprises me. It’s not like I heard from you since the night he showed up here.”

“Right. I’m sorry, Matt. It’s just—”

He sighs. “I know. I saw the way you looked at each other. I know I can’t compete with that.”

I lower my eyes.

“I hope he makes you happy, Louise.”

“Thank you, Matt. Take care,” I say, before exiting his apartment and closing the door on our brief relationship.

The rest of the week is spent sorting my stuff out and packing for Europe and L.A. I also receive an email from Adrian with my flight ticket and the tour schedule. It’s very intense, to say the least. I count a total of forty-six shows over the course of two months. We’ll go to almost every European country, with generally two shows in the same city, and even a full week in London with five shows. I’m excited he’s playing two nights in Paris as well. Hopefully, I’ll be able to see my family and friends again.

I can’t believe I’m going to go to all of these places. I know the schedule is tight and security is a problem, but I hope I’ll be able to get out a little at least.

It’s Friday night, and this is it. My last night in New York. When I get home, I’m surprised to see that Gwen and some

girls from NYU are here. Mel put together a small party, and we go for one last New York girl's night out at the local bar. The tequila is flowing, and soon enough we are completely drunk, dancing on counters and singing loud. At the end of the night, however, I don't know if it's the alcohol or the realization of it all, but the melancholy hits me so hard I can't hold back my tears. I'm so grateful for them, especially Mel, who has been such a rock for me my entire time here.

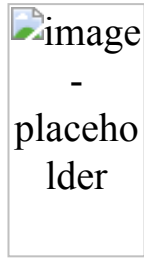
"Lou! Don't you dare cry. This is a party," she says, her eyes sparkling.

"I love you, Mel. Thanks for being my best friend," I say, falling into her arms, unable to hold my tears.

"Thanks for being mine," she mutters through my hair. "Promise me you'll call me? And that we'll see each other soon?"

"Of course we will," I say, tightening my grip.

Damn, I'll miss her so much. Our friendship is truly one of a kind, and no number of miles could ever separate us. We'll always be there for each other.



ON SATURDAY, I WAKE up early afternoon with the craziest hangover. I haven't felt this bad for a long time. Sure, I've been drinking quite a lot lately with all the surprise parties and concerts, but it was champagne, and that I can handle pretty well. Tequila, not so much. I still don't regret last night one bit. I really needed that last moment with my friends.

After some much-needed detox tea and a long shower, I go over to Joe's newsstand to say goodbye. We both tear up a little, and he makes me promise to stop by next time I'm in New York. I'm really going to miss him. I'm used to seeing him almost every day, and he always has amazing stories to tell.

When I come home, I can't avoid it anymore. I have to video call my parents. I've been, as always, delaying the moment, but I can't anymore. They need to know that I'm moving to Los Angeles.

“Hi, Mom, Dad,” I say in French, waving at the screen.

“Honey! How are you?” Dad asks.

“How’s Matt?” Mom adds.

I refrain from rolling my eyes and ignore her.

“So, there’s something I want to tell you.” I pause, my pulse quickening.

“Is everything okay?” my dad asks, his brows drawing together.

“Yes, yes! It’s great actually! I’m moving to L.A. with Jack.”

Nothing. They say nothing. My dad sighs, and my mom looks frozen on the screen.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, Louise, we heard you,” Mom says, taking a deep breath. Oh God, here we go.

“Are you sure this is a reasonable decision? You don’t even know this man. And he’s a *celebrity*.” She wrinkles her nose, like it’s a disgusting job or something.

“Yes, Mother, I am sure, and I do know him. He’s the most kind, funny and romantic person I know. And, yes, he is a celebrity, but it doesn’t change the fact that I want to be with him. I really, really like him and I want to follow my heart.” Tears are building, and I do my best to contain them.

“Pascal, say something,” Mom urges my dad.

“Los Angeles is even further away from France than New York is,” he says.

“I know, Dad, but we’ll be in Europe all summer. We can see each other. Actually, he’s playing shows in Paris, so maybe you could come? Eva would be so thrilled!”

“I’m sure she would.” Mom rolls her eyes, not bothering to hide her disapproval. “What about your career, Louise? I thought you were getting back on track?”

“What? I’m still writing my book. I told you that months ago. I’m not giving up. This is what I want to do. And I still have my savings.”

“I thought this was over. I thought by you dating a doctor, it would put you back on track. I’m—”

“Mom! This has nothing to do with who I date or not date! I like writing, and now that I have the time to do so, I really want to focus on it. Could you be supportive just once?” I yell, my lips trembling.

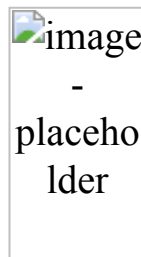
My mother physically recoils as if she’s taken aback by my outburst. I never talk to her like that, but honestly, she deserves it. She always wants to control my life. Nothing I do is ever good enough. And she’s really pissing me off with the Matt thing.

“We’re happy for you, honey,” Dad says, but something in his tone tells me he doesn’t mean it.

Great.

“Well, I have to go. I just wanted you to know. I guess I thought you’d be happy for me. At least be excited to see me this summer, because I was. I’m so lucky to be able to travel to all of those places with Jack and I hope you’ll be a part of it. I’ll send you the tour itinerary. I hope you’ll come. Bye.”

I shut the screen at once. That’s the great thing about living so far away from them. I don’t have to talk to them any longer than I want to. I wasn’t expecting them to jump with joy, but a little support wouldn’t hurt once in a while. Especially from my dad. He’s usually on my side.



FINALLY, THE WEEK IS over. My boxes are packed, my suitcases are by the door, and after a tearful goodbye with Mel, I’m checked in at JFK, anxiously waiting for my plane. The apprehension of flying is mixed with the anticipation of the start of a new adventure, like I’m the main character of a book at the moment where her life shifts completely.

It takes a long time to board the plane, and I'm surprised when the flight attendant directs me to the first-class cabin. I should have expected it, though. Of course, he got me first-class tickets. I'm starting to think that it's too much and unnecessary, but when I see the size of the seat, I'm glad to be here. It even seems a little safer for some reason, and when the crew member offers me a glass of champagne, I'm sold.

CONFRONTATION RHYMES WITH FRUSTRATION

FLYING FIRST CLASS IS a completely different experience. The cabin fits only six passengers; the seats are wide and lie flat, and we get a little amenity pack with hand cream, socks, an eye mask, and lip balm. The food is delicious, served on plates with real cutlery, and you can drink as much champagne as you want. And, let's not forget, the private restrooms just for the cabin, stocked with deodorant, perfume, and hand lotion. They are always clean, which is a real plus for me and my small bladder.

Blake comes to pick me up and drives me back to the hotel. I knock on Jack's door and he swallows me in as soon as he opens the door. His musky smell takes over my whole body and I feel at peace.

"I missed you so much," he says, taking a step back to look at me. He kisses me all over my face, before stopping on my mouth.

"Me too," I say against his lips.

He moves backward to sit on the bed as his eyes rake down my body. I suddenly wish I was wearing something else.

Lounge pants and a loose top aren't very sexy. But his look tells me otherwise. He's starving and I'm his favorite meal. I come closer and his arms wrap around my waist. I straddle him and bury my face in his neck, kissing him gently. My fingers travel underneath his T-shirt until I take it off, revealing his perfect abdomen. My hair brushes over it as I push him backward against the bed, finding his mouth again. Jack's phone vibrates in his pocket, igniting my body further. He sighs. "It must be Kim."

And just like that, the temperature in the room goes down. I roll over next to him as he gets his phone out of his pocket and brings it up to his face. "I gotta go. I have an interview downstairs."

His arms fall back beside him and he turns on his side to face me. Scooting closer, he tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Tonight."

He gives me a peck on the lips before we both get out of bed.

"I'll come with you. I have to talk to Kim."

We meet Kim downstairs. She's with reporters from Italian magazines. In each city, there are interviews scheduled with local medias at the hotel. We all follow her to a meeting room where Jack and the reporters enter first.

"Wait, Kim. Can I talk to you?" I ask, before she can enter the room.

She turns around and looks at me in disbelief. "Now?"

“Yes, please. It’ll only take a minute, and it’s important.” Now that she’s here, in front of me, I want to get this over with.

She excuses herself from the room, closes the door, and directs her attention to me.

I take a deep breath. No backing out now. We need to talk about this, especially since we’re going to spend the next two months together. “Well, I wanted to know why you meddled in my relationship with Jack?”

“Excuse me?” she says, looking down at her phone, pretending to be busy.

“I know about the fake phone number you gave Jack.” I cross my arms.

She sighs before locking her phone and directing her clear-blue eyes to me. “Look, I was trying to protect Jack. He’s my client, that’s my job. The tour rehearsals were going horribly. He wasn’t in it, because he was texting and pining over you. His popularity started to go down. He wasn’t the young hot pop star everyone wanted to be with anymore. He wasn’t smiling as much and wasn’t connecting with his fans on social media. I had to do something. You made it clear you didn’t want to move in with him, so what other choice did I have? When it was time to renew his phone, I just put in my old cell number instead of yours.”

“You had no right. Jack knows, you know. I asked him to hold his tongue, but he was really mad at you,” I say, putting my hands on my hips.

“I’m sorry my measures seem extreme, but it worked. When you didn’t reply, he focused back on his job and the first half of the tour was a success, which was the most important thing at the time.”

I frown. “So, you view me as a side-thing, a distraction?”

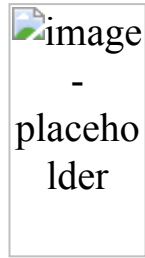
“I said this ‘was’ the most important thing. When he told me he was about to call you to invite you to the shows in New York, I realized how desperate he was to see you again and that he was really into you. So, I pretended to charge his phone and gave him mine, which had the correct number in it. When you said yes, I put back your number in his phone during the show. I meant what I said the last time we spoke. I’m glad you decided to give him another chance. I’m sorry it took me so long to realize what you mean to him. I hope you can forgive me.”

Kim Wilson is apologizing? This has to be a first in history. I casually zip my sweater and say, “As long as you don’t do it again.”

“Of course not. I hope that you’re here to stay,” she says, arching her perfectly plucked eyebrow.

“I am.” I smile.

She puts her hand on my arm and squeezes it softly. “Good.”



WE MAY BE IN Rome, but the backstage area is very similar to the ones in the US. Everyone around us mostly speaks English and are the same familiar faces. Really, except for the occasional Italian flag, or the food basket in Jack's dressing room, you wouldn't even know you're in Italy. Jack just finished rehearsals and we're hanging out in his dressing room. I'm trying a cannolo, an Italian pastry made of fried dough filled with creamy ricotta and chocolate chips (it's delicious), while he's playing a new melody for me on his acoustic guitar. We're interrupted by a knock on the door, then Kim's head pops through the door.

“Sorry to disturb you guys. It's the meet and greet,” she says, looking at Jack. He nods at her and she opens the door larger, revealing Blake and a dozen girls behind her. Jack puts down his guitar and a big smile on his face.

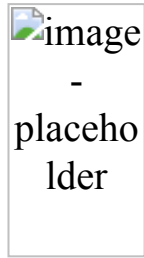
“Hey! How are you guys doing?” he says, making all the girls squeal. Their eyes are sparkling with joy, and some are even filled with tears. One by one, they all fall into his arms, gripping his back tightly. I shift in my seat, a pinch of jealousy in my heart. They’re his fans. I know that it shouldn’t matter, but I can’t help it.

They tell him how happy they are to be here and things like, “I can’t believe it’s really you!” or, “You’re my favorite singer ever.” Jack takes selfies with them and sign their posters, making all of their dreams come true.

“All right, girls, it’s time to say goodbye,” Kim says, opening the door. Everyone says goodbye to Jack, and before she goes, a twenty something girl turns around and yells, “I love you!”

“I love you too, baby,” Jack says, making the girl giggle as Kim is escorting her out.

I’m taken aback for a second. It’s not that we’re at that point in our relationship yet, but it’s more how easy it is for him to say it. Like it’s nothing. Saying “I love you” to someone is a very big deal, at least to me.



TOUR LIFE IS A bit different from what I imagined. Each day we get up, go to the gym, eat, and get ready, then Jack has his press interviews while I get some writing done, and we all leave for sound check and rehearsals. Then there's the meet and greet with lucky fans, which is truly bizarre. The second time, I left the room before they entered and hung out with Sandra the entire time.

As we are leaving Rome to go to Bologna, I understand what Jack meant when he said his tour schedule was crazy and that he never had time to visit the cities he was performing at. We've barely been outside the last two days, except during the concert which took place in a stadium.

After the Bologna show, I ask Jack if we could try to leave the hotel tomorrow for a bit. We'll be in Milan, the last day in Italy, and we haven't seen any of it.

“I know it sucks sometimes, but I don’t really see how we’re gonna be able to do anything.” He sighs. “Even if we make the time for it, you see how it is outside. If I’m in a disguise, someone will end up recognizing me, in a store or in the street, and I’ll be putting you at risk, too.”

“Yeah, I know.” I sigh.

“We’ve tried before, you know? But in the end, it wasn’t worth it. Too much stress for everybody.”

“I get it,” I say, before rolling over to fall asleep. “It’s just so frustrating.”

The next day, during rehearsals in Milan, I spot Adrian sitting in the bleachers, so I decide to talk to him about all this.

“Hey,” I say, sitting down next to him.

“Louise. What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of doing some sightseeing every now and then?”

“Ah.” He sighs. “I understand. Trust me. But it’s always a hassle when Jack is out and even more on tour. You’ve noticed the fans. There are always a lot of them in front of the hotels. They easily find out where he’s staying, and it makes it hard for us to do anything. And between interviews and rehearsals, there isn’t much time, you know?”

“I understand, Adrian, I do. But honestly, being cooped up inside all the time is not healthy nor right. He deserves a breath of fresh air once in a while, and so do I.”

He tilts his head and looks at me intensely. “I can’t promise you anything, but I will talk about this with Blake, okay?”

I nod and smile vigorously. “Yes! Thanks a lot. I really appreciate it.”

“No worries. By the way, is your family attending one of the Paris shows?” he asks.

“Yes, the second night. It’ll be my parents and my sister and her friend.” We haven’t spoken since I told them I was moving in with Jack, but they’ve been reaching out by email and asked to come. I’m still a little mad but I’m always happy to see them, and I hope seeing Jack perform will change their mind about us officially dating.

Next day, we leave Milan and we’re off to Paris. The flight is really short, but being back in the jet is so much better than the big scary planes I took to get here. We go directly to the stadium and it’s so weird, but cool, to be able to speak French with people other than my parents. During the show, the French fans are very vocal, and even more when Jack can’t help himself to sing the chorus of “Lady Marmalade,” and, when singing “my song,” to announce that it’s about a French girl. He’s been singing it at every concert since New Jersey, and I still get goosebumps every time I hear it. It’s a huge success with the fans too, who always go crazy at that point in the show.

It’s finally the day my parents are coming. They will be staying at the same hotel as us, courtesy of Jack. Lunch is marked by the giggling from my sister and Jessica, her friend,

but we also talk a lot about my move to L.A. and they seem a bit more supportive than before. Baby steps.

Jack leaves us for his usual press interviews, and the five of us go out for a digestive walk on the border of the Seine. It's great to be outside, walking in the street. I haven't done that since I said goodbye to my neighborhood last week. I forgot what the outside air actually smells like, and the feeling of the wind blowing through my hair. The atmosphere is very serene with the *bateaux mouches* cruising along and couples and families picnicking on the grass.

My dad takes me aside. "*Ma chérie*, are you okay? What's going on with you?" he asks, putting his arm around me.

"I'm great, Dad. I promise. I'm so happy with Jack," I say, smiling.

"You do look happy. I just hope you're making the right choice. *C'est tout*."

"I am. I've never been more sure of anything in my entire life."

"That's all I'm asking," he says, squeezing my shoulder. "Now the *Stade de France*, huh? I can't say I'm not a little impressed. I saw huge bands and singers perform there."

We get to the venue an hour later, and my dad really is excited to be here. He's speechless, looking everywhere with his mouth slightly agape. Backstage, Eva and Jessica act like they are the superstars, taking each other's pictures, or recording videos of themselves like they're in a music video.

It's funny but also a little disturbing to watch. Jack is adorable with them, of course. He invites them on stage during rehearsals, takes pictures with them, signs autographs for them and their friends, and they even get T-shirts, caps, hoodies, and pins from Adrian. When I joke that even I don't have a Jack Rose *WHISPER* tour T-shirt, they are even more ecstatic.

All of this is scoring Jack major points with my parents, but the show is really what changes their mind. We watch from the VIP seats, as they scan the crowd with wide eyes as if they are stunned by the amount of people in the audience, the visual effects, the dancing and, of course, Jack's singing. During the hiatus, I give in to the pleas of the girls to go watch the show from the security corridor (the area between the stage and the standing pit) since there are only three songs left.

"*Merci, Paris!*" Jack shouts, arriving on stage with his guitar in hand.

Fans scream.

"Comment allez-vous?"

The crowd goes even wilder.

"Actually, it's the only thing I know in French." He laughs. "I have to work on that, though, because I have someone special in my life, *une française*, and this next song is about her. It's called 'Only Girl.'"

For a moment, all is silent as he holds my gaze, and my pulse quickens. The crowd fades into black and it's like we're the only ones in the stadium. Strumming the guitar, his

shoulders sway in rhythm, and mine with him. And when he finally opens his mouth to sing, my heart melts into a puddle.

She's the only girl for me.

Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.

If only she could see.

Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.

What she really means to me

Jessica and Eva's eyes widen, asking me if the song is about me, and when I say yes, I become the coolest sister in the world.

BIG WORDS

WE'RE ON THE BUS to Anvers, Belgium, having the weekly schedule meeting with Adrian and Kim when Blake joins us to talk about the possibility of visiting the cities. Jack seems a little surprised, but I know he's grateful that the subject is back on the table.

"My only concern, though," he says. "Is that I could really put you at risk."

"I know, but I'll go insane if we don't do anything all summer, thus putting my mental health at risk," I reply. It's true, I'm going crazy being cooped up inside working on my book. It's not how I expected a European tour to be.

"Okay, we talked about a few strategies," Adrian says. "Blake, do you want to explain?"

"Yes. So, first of all, you will be escorted by me and either Eddy or Clay from tour security. If you want to visit specific places, we will call them and arrange that they close the place for the time you are there, or that they let us use a back entrance. The other concern is getting you out of the hotel without being followed. If there's an underground garage, it's

easy. We can just get a car and go. If there's not, we'll have to use a back door and create a diversion with a similar car at the front entrance."

"Also," Adrian adds, "If Blake has the slightest doubt that you are being followed, or if people start to recognize you at any point, you will have to go back to the hotel."

I'm shocked by all of these measures and it makes me feel like a brat having all of them to go to such lengths to make me happy, but in the meantime, we can't keep going like this.

When we get to Anvers, we put our plan in motion. I'm relieved to see everything go smoothly. The hotel had a parking garage, and we are not bothered as we walk around the streets of the old town. It's Monday, late morning, and the streets are empty, which helps a lot. We can't resist the taunting smell and indulge in a Belgian waffle, even though it's almost time for lunch. Then Jack helps me choose my souvenir key chain (I collect them) and we buy some Belgian chocolates as a thank you to Adrian, Kim, Blake, Clay, and Eddy. I haven't felt that free and refreshed in a long time.

In Amsterdam, we have to try the other plan since there is no underground parking. We succeed once again, even if we were worried for a bit because the same car seemed to follow us, but really, they were just going to the same place as us. The city center is much more crowded here, and we have to be careful because there are a lot of Jack Rose fans, recognizable by their T-shirts, bags, caps, with his face on it. At some point, we're looking in a shop window and we find ourselves next to

a group of fans. They don't realize they're next to their favorite singer, even though Jack is not in any particular disguise except for a cap. What helps too is that Blake and Eddy are dressed like normal people instead of their usual black attire. They're wearing casual jeans and T-shirts and are walking a few feet behind us, making it less obvious.

I enjoy Amsterdam a lot until we reach the red-light district, which I find absolutely disgusting. Even in the middle of the day, prostitutes are dancing behind glass windows, trying to attract customers. How degrading is that? There are also girls in the street, in front of those shops, wearing little clothing, accosting men when they walk by, and Jack is no exception. A tall blond girl touches his arm, inviting him to come inside for a good time, even though I'm right there next to him, holding his hand.

“Seriously, I'm right here!”

“I'm definitely coming back here after the show. This place is dope!” he teases.

“Shut up,” I reply, shoving his arm playfully.

“Oh come on, babe! Don't be jealous, it's just for fun.”

“Fine,” I say, pretending I don't care anymore.

Jack stops and takes me into his arms, laughing.

“I'm sorry. I was kidding. Anyway, why would I want any of these girls when I have you?” He places a big kiss on my lips.

“You know, this would have been really romantic if it wasn’t for all the prostitutes around,” I joke, kissing him back.

On our next day off, we land early afternoon in Iceland and we get to do a proper visit of the famous Golden Circle. We embark on a minivan driven by a local tour guide who takes us to the different sights. We are going with Adrian, Kim, Blake, Eddy, Marcus, Sandra, and Jody, and it’s like a little vacation.

After stopping at the impressive and surprising Strokkur Geyser, we get to Thingvellir National Park. The ground is wet and mist floats all around us. Jack wraps his arm around me as we stare at the water gushing from the cliff. Resting my head on his shoulder, I sigh. This is everything I’d imagined it would be, and I’m thankful for Jack and his team for making it happen.

“Let’s take a picture,” Jack says, beaming with excitement like a child in front of a rollercoaster. It’s contagious. We pose like a couple of teens at prom and nothing could wipe the big smile on my face.

The hotel is by far the most magnificent of the tour. It’s brand new and decorated in a mix of wood and dark gray stone with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the mountains, and more particularly, the famous Blue Lagoon geothermal spa. Since we can’t possibly go in the Blue Lagoon with all the security needed, we get a spa suite with a deck directly on the water in a private area of the lagoon. Before we get into the water, we do the recommended ritual in which you cover your body in silica, algae and minerals, to purify, renew and

exfoliate your skin. Of course, Jack can't help but fool around, massaging thoroughly the products on my body. It feels amazing and I realize how much I needed that after three weeks of touring. I definitely appreciate this nice break.

The next week is crazy busy as we have six shows and only one day off. We still manage to take a little time to visit each city. In Oslo, we take a walk along the shore and eat some krumkake, which is a waffle shaped like an ice-cream with whipped cream and strawberries inside. In Copenhagen, we pay a visit to the little mermaid's statue, and in Helsinki we go to an ancient cathedral where Jack sings a few words, his voice echoing around us so beautifully.

The fandom around him is insane and even more intense than I expected. During each show, girls would scream that they love him or want to marry him, to which he always responded with humor and kindness. I've gotten used to the meet and greets now, even if it's still a bit weird to witness them declare their love to him or fall into his arms. I've never been in a relationship where I have to share my man with the world.

I'm thankful for the week in London. The familiar apartment is exactly what I needed. I get to meet some of Jack's family, we spend time with Susan and Kate, and I even go shopping with them while Jack is doing interviews. The paparazzi in London are on another level, though, so it's complicated to get out with Jack. Each time we're out, whether it's at St Paul's Cathedral, Big Ben, or Piccadilly circus, he is always recognized either by fans or paparazzi.

Unfortunately, the German paps are as bad as the English ones, making it impossible to get out of the hotel in Frankfurt. Prague and Krakow are better, allowing us to see the Astronomical Clock and Wawel Castle. And before getting to Vienna, we stop at the Auschwitz Birkenau memorial and it completely overwhelms us. We can't stay long because fans recognized Jack, and even in a place like this, they can't help but scream and ask for pictures and autographs. Not wanting to disturb the peace of the mourning visitors, we decide it's best for us to leave.

Everyone can now feel the tour is almost coming to an end. We're all exhausted. The band, the dancers, the crew, and even Jack is starting to feel it. Thankfully, we only have five days and four shows left. I'll be glad when it's over, but in the meantime, it's been a truly amazing experience. Each show has been wonderful. I got to be with Jack every day. Seeing him come alive on stage each night, hear him sing my song, and then visit all of these places has been such a blessing.

The end of the European tour also takes place in London. They had to book two additional shows with Jack being so popular here as their local boy. This time, we don't go to his apartment because it's complete mayhem. The place is surrounded by paparazzi and fans. It sucks because I'm now used to his apartment, but we all appreciate the peace and quiet when we check in at the hotel. Since no one expected us here, we even take the opportunity to go for a walk along the river banks.

After the show, however, we are followed and for our second day there's no way we'll be able to go out again. Today happens to be my birthday, and I completely forgot about it until now. I don't tell Jack, though, because I don't want him to make a fuss about it. He needs to focus on his last show. But when we get downstairs for lunch, I have a big surprise. My parents, my sister, my cousins Emma and Lucie, and my friends Karine and Léa are all seated at our table.

“Jack?” I say, turning to him. “What is this?”

“Did you really think we wouldn't celebrate your birthday?”
He smiles.

“How did you even know?”

“We had a copy of your passport, remember? When we booked your tickets. We've been planning this for more than a month now.”

“I can't believe you did this for me! Thank you so much. This is the best present ever!”

They all sing happy birthday for me in French, which, of course, attracts the attention of everyone in the restaurant and leads to a few fans stopping by our table to ask for pictures with Jack.

After lunch, they all come with us to the arena, and I'm excited to share the tour experience with them. I'm happily surprised to learn that Adrian, Kim, and Jack organized all of this with the help of my parents. They made plans while they were there for the Paris show. We all sit in the VIP section,

and we even get some drinks and canapes. They really thought of everything.

But the biggest surprise comes at the end, when Jack is about to sing my song. I don't notice at first that this time he's on the B stage. He finishes explaining what the song is about, and instead of his traditional, "This is for you," he walks to the edge of the stage and says, "Babe, where are you? Are you in the bleachers?"

Everyone is looking. The crowd goes wild as the light technician is scanning the stadium to find me. What the hell is he doing? I get up and the light crew finds me. The spotlight burns through my cheeks and I'm torn between wishing to disappear and not wanting to miss a second of it.

"Babe, can you please come on stage?" Jack asks.

What is he doing? Encouraged by my friends and family cheering on me, I get down the bleachers with the help of the spotlight on me. Blake is waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs to guide me to the stage. Jack takes my hand, kisses me, and asks me to sit on the stool.

"I just wanted you guys to meet my girlfriend," he says, trying to cover the screams of the crowd. "Tonight is her twenty-fifth birthday, and I was wondering if we could all sing together for her?"

And they oblige. I'm overwhelmed by the thirty-two thousand people singing me *Happy Birthday*. As heat continues to fill my face—I must be tomato red by now—I don't know what to do with myself, nor where to look. So, I

look at Jack who says, “Happy Birthday, babe, I love you, and this one’s for you.”

I’m frozen, paralyzed, stunned by his words. He said *I love you!* Does he really mean it like that? I heard him say it to his fans before, but it feels different somehow. I don’t even pay attention to the first part of the song because those words hit me hard. In a good way, but it was really unexpected. His gaze holds, as Jack sings directly to me, and it’s truly a magical moment that I’ll remember for the rest of my life. Being on stage is overwhelming, but empowering at the same time, and I even sing along. When the song is over, I jump in his arms before we head backstage.

Most of the crew and dancers are waiting for us. When we enter the room hand in hand, they cheer, applaud, and sing me “Happy Birthday” again. And at that moment, I’m so grateful for them. They truly have become a second family to me now. As Jack goes back on stage to perform his last two songs, Kim and Adrian bring me in for a warm hug before I rush through the security corridor, so I don’t miss the end of the show since it’s the last one. With Sandra and Jody by my side, we enjoy it one last time.

After the show, another surprise awaits. They decorated the catering room, and there is an enormous cake and a champagne fountain. They all sing to me again, and put on some music, making it a little party, celebrating the end of the tour as well. I hold back my tears, putting a big smile on my face. The selfish part of me is glad it’s coming to an end, so I’ll have Jack all to myself again, but these last two months

have been the best of my life and I'm going to miss them all like crazy.

Jack comes toward me with a small blue Tiffany's box. I open it to discover a white gold necklace with a diamond encrusted heart locket at its end. The locket contains the silliest picture of Jack and me in Iceland.

Tears are flowing this time. "Thanks, Jack. It's beautiful," I say, melting in his arms.

He lifts my chin up and says, "You're beautiful, babe, inside and out. Thank you for being here."

WELCOME TO L.A.

THE FIRST COUPLE OF weeks in L.A. are quite an adjustment. Jack's house is enormous. Eleven thousand square feet perched on the height of Beverly Park. It has seven bedrooms, eight bathrooms, a movie theater, a music room, a state-of-the-art gym, a den, a library, several living rooms, a formal dining room, and a grand family room featuring a kitchen opening into the living and dining room. The outside space is equally spectacular. It boasts a nice patio with a living/dining space, a hot tub, an infinity pool, a basketball court, and even a gazebo for receptions. All of this with a breathtaking view of the mountains on the horizon.

It takes me at least a few days to make my way around the house alone, and get used to having not one, but two housekeepers. The house is tastefully decorated and homey for being so big. It's modern, but the exposed beams give it an ancient vibe as well. The initial charm is preserved, and the ensemble works great together.

Jack does everything to make me feel at home, and Kim takes care of the administrative part of me moving here. My

boxes arrived a few days before I did, and they look so small compared to the immensity of the house. Jack gave me an entire side of the closet for my clothes, but really, they only take about one fifth of it.

The good thing about L.A. is that we can actually drive to places. By that I mean, Jack can drive us to places, because I'm not sure I'll ever dare to drive his million-dollar car fleet. Lamborghini is his favorite brand; he probably has five different models. He has also several Ferraris, Porsches, and Range Rovers. As much as I love cars, I don't think I'll ever dare drive any of them. The other cool thing is that Beverly Park, being a gated community, we can freely take walks outside without risking an encounter with fans or paparazzi.

After I adjust to my new surroundings for a couple of weeks, Jack realizes that we've known each other for seven months and he never actually took me out on dates. So, the next two weeks, he makes up for it by taking me out every single night. I get to try the best restaurants of Beverly Hills and Malibu, making the foodie in me so ecstatic.

Since we started going out, the paparazzi have been all over us—not one date was missed. You would think that since it's L.A., they have a lot of celebrities to follow, but apparently Jack having a new girlfriend is the talk of the town. This backfired on Jack's reputation because his fans are still hoping he and Taylor Thompson, pop star and former girlfriend, get back together. Even though it's been over for more than two years, their romance was very popular with the fans and they don't accept that he's seriously dating someone else. As a

result, they take their anger out on me on social media, which deeply annoys Jack, but I tell him not to say anything. The last thing I want is to be in the middle of a fight with his fans. I try to stay as far away as I can from social media. I've never been a fan and I hate how easy it is for people to get under your skin even though you can't even see their faces.

I've now been in L.A. for a month, and Jack decided it was time I get a welcome party with a "few of his friends," so that I can meet them. Apparently, a few friends for Jack means about fifty people and a huge party in the backyard, with catering, fair games, and a trampoline.

When I get downstairs, I realize just how different our definition of a "small party" is. Adrian and Kim are here, of course. They organized the whole thing, and Marcus, Jody, Sandra, and Blake too. I also notice some of his dancers and band players, but the rest of the attendance is mostly famous actors or singers. He wasn't kidding when he said he only has celebrity friends.

Jack parades me around to meet everybody, and most of them seem really nice, but I still feel out of place. They all are so glamorous, while I—I stop to scan my simple black dress—am not. I do hit it off naturally with Candice Anderson and Sabrina Evans, though. We have a nice and normal conversation. They are so grounded and a lot like Jack and me. Not that the rest of them are all shallow or mean, but a girl needs girlfriends. It's how we're made, and the only other girls in my age range here are either models or the reality TV bimbos who are most definitely shallow.

I also appreciate talking with Hollie and John. They both know Jack very well and have been around him since the start of his career. He calls them his fairy godmother and godfather because they did so much for him when other media weren't so kind.

I feel a little dizzy from all the glamor and I really need to pee, so I make my way to the upstairs bathroom. When I enter the master bathroom, giggling comes from the other side of the room, which is weird since the adjacent room is the dressing room. Curiosity gets the best of me. I carefully move across the room and stop dead when a voice says, "Louise." *Who the hell is saying my name?* I take my heels off and press my ear against the door.

"Ugh, I mean, look at this closet. So pathetic," says a feminine voice.

"And so ugly," says a second voice, also female.

"I really can't believe Jack has reached such a low, to be honest." Is that a third voice? I'm not sure. I take my chances and slightly open the door to discover Shantell and Kayla, the two reality TV bimbos, and model Lamia Bohkria.

"I know," Kayla says. "But look at the bright side. She'll probably be gone by the end of next month. Have you ever seen Jack more than a few weeks with the same girl? She only moved in because she must be homeless or something."

"True. Except Taylor," Lamia says. "He's probably doing this to catch her attention. He was all over her at Kiello's party, remember?"

“Yeah. But after what he did to her, she’s through. Dating a nobody ugly French girl is not gonna change anything about that, it’s just pathetic,” Kayla says.

Another chorus of laughter before Lamia says, “Well, she’s not that ugly, just ordinary I’d say.”

“Well, ordinary doesn’t cut it for Jack Rose. Look at his dating history, it makes no sense at all,” Shantell replies, pressing her fake lips together. “This is just not acceptable.”

“Agreed,” Kayla says. “Taylor was worthy, at least. A bombshell, talented, and even I didn’t accept it at first—”

“Only because you wanted him to yourself, that’s all,” Shantell cuts off.

“Shut up! I sometimes still think there’s something between us, you know? You weren’t there when we kissed that night.”

“Oh please, Kayla!” Lamia chuckles. “It was years ago, and he was so drunk I’m not sure he even remembers.”

“Anyway,” Shantell argues. “It doesn’t change the fact that she doesn’t belong here, and that her and her crappy clothes need to go back ASAP to whatever French hole she crawled out of.”

“Preach,” Kayla exclaims. “Now let’s go downstairs and kiss her ugly ass one more time before we can get the hell out of here.”

Those bitches! I can’t believe they got into our closet and insulted me the way they just did. They’re supposed to be his friends. I’m furious, but most of all, I’m hurt. What they said

hit a sensitive spot. Taylor Thompson really is a bombshell, and a famous pop star. They are perfect on paper. Even the fans are still rooting for them. I never really thought about their relationship and how it ended, or any of his previous relationships, for that matter. I know I would find answers online with a few clicks, but it's just not who I am. I like to keep the past in the past. Anyway, I know most of the things I'll find online will be lies and make me paranoid.

"But still," says an annoying voice in my head. *"They said he tried to get her back. When was that? After or before he met you? What if he really is with you to make her jealous?"*

Shut up. No, I can't go there. Even if I didn't say it back yet, Jack said he loved me. It has to count for something.

"Does it? He said that to dozens of different girls this summer."

There were his fans. It's different.

"Is it?"

"L, are you in there, babe?" Jack knocks at the door, startling me.

"Yeah, I'm in here," I reply, putting my heels back on and opening the door. "Sorry, I was taking a break." I give him a weak smile.

"Okay, babe." He kisses me on the forehead. "Some of my friends are leaving and they wanted to say goodbye."

"Oh yes, sure, let's go." As I trail behind him, my heart sinks to the pit of my stomach.

As always at parties, when guests are going, it starts a domino effect and not before long, everyone is gone.

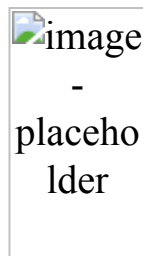
“Thank you for the party. I had a lot of fun.”

“You’re welcome. But don’t lie, I saw you were a little overwhelmed.” Concern washes over his handsome face.

“Well, yeah.” I smile. “A little. I mean, meeting the boyfriend’s friends is always unnerving, but when they’re all celebrities, it just adds another layer of pressure.”

“Don’t worry, they loved you, babe! And I couldn’t care less if they didn’t. Now let’s go to bed so I can show you how much I appreciate you.”

I scream as he throws me over his shoulder and carries me to the bedroom.



IT’S BEEN A FEW days since the party, and I can’t concentrate on my writing. I’m still thinking about the

conversation I heard in the closet. I can't bring myself to ask Jack, or to look online because I'm terrified to find out if they're right or not. So, while he's working out, I slip upstairs and call Mel. Thankfully, she answers at the first tone.

"Mel," I say, relieved.

"Lou! I was about to call you."

"Telepathy." I laugh, toying with the edge of the cream duvet.

"Definitely! Anyway, I got an audition for The Michael Jackson Experience in Las Vegas!"

"What? That's amazing!" I exclaim, completely forgetting my troubles.

"Yeah, they regularly come to Broadway shows to watch performances. They were looking for more dancers. They liked me and want to see me again. I go over there on November tenth. "

"That's awesome, Mel! I'm sure you'll get it."

"Thanks, babe. I hope so. Working in a Las Vegas production is one of my dreams, and it's Michael Jackson! I mean, it's amazing," she continues. "And I was thinking that I could stop by to see your new L.A. lifestyle before going back East?"

"Oh, Mel, I would love that," I say, unable to repress a tear. It makes a wet circle when it falls to my jeans.

"Lou? What's wrong? Are you crying?"

“No, nothing. It’s just a silly conversation I heard.” My voice is thick with emotion.

I don’t want to ruin her moment, but she insists anyway, so I tell her.

“Skanks. They’re just jealous, in my opinion. You shouldn’t worry too much about that. If he wasn’t serious about you, he wouldn’t have done everything he did: the tour, your birthday, the moving in together, the party and the song. That’s just not possible. No way, Lou.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It just got into my head and it hit my insecurities. I feel so out of place here. It’s so big, so bright, so glamorous, so different. His friends are all celebrities. I just don’t see myself fitting in, and I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too, trust me, but they can’t all be that bad. Come on. You’ll fit in. Give it time.”

“No, they’re not,” I admit. “I really liked Sabrina Evans and Candice Anderson. They’re actually a lot like us.”

“Except for the part that they are huge pop stars.” Mel chuckles.

“Yeah, except that.” I smile, drying my tears.

“See, there’s good news too, Lou. Focus on that and have fun, please. Don’t listen to those cheap skanks. Trust me, it’s only jealousy.”

“I guess,” I reply. “Thank you for being your awesome self. I miss you so much.”

“You’re welcome, babe. We’ll see each other soon.”

After hanging up with Mel, I’m feeling a little better. She’s right. After everything Jack has done for me, it seems impossible that it’s only for show.

Bzz Bzz. My phone buzzes. Maybe Mel forgot to tell me something? I pick it up and see I received a text message from an unknown number. It’s part of a group text message and it reads:

Hey, babes, still down for clubbing this week? Tomorrow? Dinner at Nobu at Eight thirty? Then Vice?

Sabrina, I’m guessing? She mentioned clubbing at the party last Saturday. I don’t dare reply, but a few numbers are responding that they’re coming.

Okay then, only Louise and Jack are missing then.

I reply. **Hey, it’s Louise. Jack is working out right now, but I think tomorrow’s good for us.**

Awesome, girl. We’re gonna have so much fun.

MONEY AND NEW FRIENDS

I'M SO EXCITED ABOUT this. I'm not much of a clubbing girl—Mel always had to drag me out—but I'm happy to hang out with Candice and Sabrina. They seem like a lot of fun. Jack is pretty stoked, too. It's been a while since he hung out with any of them because he was on tour most of the year. I'm a little depressed standing in front of my closet, though. It looks ridiculous. That they were right about. I don't have a lot of dresses that would be fit for dining and clubbing with an array of pop icons. The only decent one I have is the one I wore to the party, and even I know that I can't wear the same dress I did a few days ago, especially with the same people.

Jack catches me in my moment of desperation and asks if I want to go shopping. I tell him to take me to the mall, but of course he doesn't, and takes me to Rodeo Drive. I protest, but it doesn't change anything. He knows that if we go to luxury stores, I won't be able to afford anything and will have to let him pay. We already had this conversation, that's why we didn't go shopping yet, but we're having it again, anyway.

“You have to take me to a mall, Jack. I don’t want you to buy me stuff,” I demand.

“L, please. I don’t want you to spend your money on clothes because we’re going out.”

“But I won’t be spending too much if you’d take me to a freaking mall!”

“Babe.” He sighs. “I know that dating me comes with a bit of pressure clothing wise, so I don’t see why I shouldn’t be the one paying for it.”

“Ugh, you’re very frustrating sometimes.” I cross my arms.

“I know,” he says, kissing my forehead. He won, and he knows it.

He parks his car and we enter the first store, Chanel, of course. Nothing here is priced under a thousand dollars, and the one dress that catches my eye, retails for five thousand dollars. There is no way.

We go to a couple more stores and it’s the same everywhere. Dior, Auguste Brunet, Gaia, Louis Vuitton, Hermes. Jack is getting frustrated. In each store, he finds stuff that he likes for me, but even though I like them too, I turn them down.

“Babe, you’re gonna have to say yes to something, you know?” He sighs, stopping dead in his tracks. “I saw you look at the red one at Dior. You put it back when you saw the price tag.”

“Seven thousand dollars, Jack! Really? For one night out? You can’t be serious?”

“I’m dead serious, actually. Look, I know it’s difficult to understand for you, but it’s nothing for me. I don’t mean to brag, but it’s the truth. Look at my clothes today.”

He’s wearing jeans and a white T-shirt, like usual.

“I don’t even know how much they were, but since this is Balenciaga, and the jeans are Auguste Brunet, I’d guess around the same as the things we saw today.”

“It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t change anything. These are your clothes.” I turn around to look at the passing cars.

“Louise,” he pleads. “I beg you. I don’t care about a few thousand dollars’ worth of clothes, and you will need a lot of them because we are going to go to events and go out with my friends, and I want you to feel comfortable. You won’t if you don’t wear the right outfit.”

“Fine,” I say, crossing my arms again. I give in. First because I’m tired and want to go home, second because he’s right, I do need clothes and since I don’t have a car and he won’t drive to a place where I can afford something, I’m out of options.

We go back into the Dior store and get the red strapped dress with the assorted shoes. Then we go to Gaia, Gucci, and Auguste Brunet, and he doesn’t let me get out without a few items each time. In every store we are treated like, well, celebrities. Attendants are waiting for our needs, showing us stuff, offering us champagne. It’s a very cool experience, but also a little overwhelming. Once we’re done, Jack is happy

and I'm exhausted and embarrassed by the amount he spent on me today.

When we get home, I put my new purchases in the closet and even though I won't admit it, it makes me feel a little better. I now have a few outfits to go out, starting with the red dress that I'm wearing tonight.

At Nobu, we dine in an elegantly decorated private room which is very cozy. We're meeting Jack's rapper friends and Candice and Sabrina. Everyone arrives one by one. Bronislaw first, then Candice and Watson, her boyfriend, followed by Sabrina, Islay-J, and Marvin-P. Needless to say, the girls look stunning. Their hair is shining, their makeup is flawless, and their dresses amazing. They're both tall and slim, with long glowy legs. Thank God for Jack and my Dior dress. It gives me enough confidence to stand next to them, though I have attributes they don't, like love handles and normal-size non-shimmering legs.

Once the pop star effect is gone, however, we have a great time. The food is exquisite, the cocktails made to perfection, and the conversation fun and casual. Apart from all the glitz and glam, it really is a typical night out for a group of twenty something friends. It's well fed, and as far as I'm concerned, a bit drunk, that we go to the club.

The word must have gone out that we were here because when we exit Nobu there are a bunch of paparazzi on each side, and when we arrive at Vice, they're already there, lining the pavement like it's the red carpet. *How do they know where*

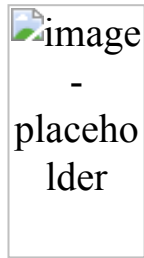
we're going? That always fascinates as much as annoys me. Blake, as well as Candice and Sabrina's bodyguards, meet us before entering. There are a lot of people out front, but with the help of the club security team, we get in quickly.

We are taken upstairs to a VIP balcony next to the DJ where buckets of ice, each containing Dom Perignon champagne await us. I'm not a fan of commercial brands, but as far as they go, it's one of my favorites. We enjoy the privacy while still seeing the entire club below at the same time, and we have a fabulous night. We laugh, we sing, we take pictures, and of course, we dance a lot. The girls are as amazingly nice as they are beautiful, and keep saying how hot I am and that they don't see enough curves in L.A. Well, thank God, because there's no way I'm losing them with the amount of alcohol we drink here.

I'm used to being the less sexy, less thin, less good dancer of the band, being friends with Mel, but my dress, and the way Jack looks at me, make me forget all my insecurities. With one look or one touch, he boosts my confidence and makes me feel like I'm the most beautiful, and sexiest girl in the room, even though I'm standing next to gorgeous, bright stars, literally glowing next to me. He takes my hand and I'm lost in his moves. He's such a great dancer, he's making me dizzy. He brings me close, and his hands travel to my thighs and tug at the hem of my dress. I want him to rip it off so I can feel them on my body.

“You're so sexy, babe. You have no idea. Can I please take you home?”

I nod frantically, unable to produce any more words.



A FEW DAYS LATER, I receive another group text message. It's from Candice this time, asking Sabrina and me if we're free for shopping and lunch. We decide to go the next day, and I ask Candice, who lives a couple streets away from Jack, if she can pick me up, so I don't have to drive one of Jack's outrageous cars. She comes around at eleven in a light blue Ferrari, naturally, and we meet Sabrina at a restaurant near Rodeo Drive. Jack insisted on giving me his credit card so I can buy a few things for myself since he knew that we would go to luxury stores. I took it to make him happy, but I sure as hell won't use it.

During lunch, I brace myself to bring up the conversation about Taylor.

"First of all..." Candice starts. "they're skanks and you should never listen to what skanks say because it's bullshit."

And second, Jack is definitely not into Taylor anymore. If I'm not mistaken, he hasn't seen or spoken to her since New Year's Eve at Kiello's party. He did ask her to get back together, that bit is true, but Taylor said no. And while he was a bit depressed for a few weeks, he didn't even mention her since his birthday party, which, if I recall correctly, is the day you guys met."

"Yeah, it was." I can't help but fidget with my bracelet.

"So, you see, he doesn't care about her anymore. Trust me, Jack would never do all of that, just for anyone. It's true that he dated a lot of girls, and I know it's hard to forget about his past, but it was just flings, nothing like what you two have."

"Agreed." Sabrina nods. "We saw you at the club. You guys are so into each other, it's insane. I've never seen him give a girl that much attention. Plus, you're the only girl we've seen him with this year."

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah, really." Candice smiles. "We would have known if he dated someone else. News travel so fast, especially in our circle."

"Okay," I say, a little relieved. "Can I ask you something else?"

"Shoot," Sabrina says as Candice nods.

"Em, it's a little weird. Have you ever told a fan you loved them?" I feel stupid for saying that out loud, but I had to ask. It's been bothering me for months.

They both chuckle. “Of course, we do,” Candice says. “All the time. But not in the way you’re thinking. The love we have for our fans is different from the love we have for our families or boyfriends, but it’s still love, and it’s still strong. They’re the reason why we do all this.”

“Are you bothered by this with Jack?” Sabrina asks.

“Yeah,” I say, fidgeting with my necklace. “He said it a few times during the tour, on stage, or during meet and greets. It just felt weird. I’m not used to saying those words so easily.”

“But it’s not the same, though. And just because he says it casually to his fans, doesn’t mean it won’t be special when he says it to you. It’s totally different,” Candice says.

I grimace.

“Wait, did he say it already?” Candice asks, taking my hand, her blue eyes gleaming.

“Yeah.” I blush.

“Oh wow! This is huge!” she says, squeezing my hands tighter, as Sabrina gasps.

“That’s the problem. If I hadn’t heard him say it to dozens of girls already, maybe it would feel like it was a big deal.”

“Oh, honey, it is. Jack is very private with his emotions, as most guys are. If he said he loved you, he really meant it,” Sabrina says.

“I’m so excited. Did you say it back?” Candice asks, her eyes widening.

“No. It’s hard for me to say it. I need more time.”

“That’s totally okay. Say it if and when you’re ready,” she says.

“Thank you for this.” I smile. “You guys really helped me see clearly.”

“Of course, girl, no problem. But you know, you can talk to Jack too. He’s a good listener,” Sabrina says.

I’m relieved I had the guts to talk about that with them. They’re right, though. Talking to Jack about this would have been the mature thing to do, but I chickened out. Plus, I didn’t want to drive a wedge between him and his friends. I know how protective he is of me. As for the L word, I don’t want to draw more attention to it, reminding him I haven’t said it back yet. The fact that he didn’t say it again makes me think he might regret saying it that early in the relationship. I don’t want to hurt his feelings because I’m incapable of saying those words. What I feel for him is beyond anything I ever felt before in my life. It’s so intense sometimes I feel it’s going to swallow me entirely.

After paying for our lunch, we walk to Rodeo Drive. Shopping with Jack was something special, but shopping with Candice Anderson and Sabrina Evans is a unique experience. They are so into clothes, and try half of each store. They tell me that they don’t do this often since their stylists bring them everything, but sometimes they just need a time out with their girlfriends and I couldn’t agree more. We try on a lot of clothes and they, of course, buy most of it, but I keep Jack’s

card shut in my wallet. We were just here last week. I don't need more clothes right now.

We're at Gaia when Ryland, Candice's bodyguard, comes to let us know that paparazzi have popped up in front of the store and that we should go. We're about to leave when a cute bag catches my attention.

Sabrina sees me looking. "It's dope, Louise, you should definitely get it."

"No, I'm good," I reply.

"Fine, then you don't mind if I do?" Candice asks.

"No, of course not," I answer, and she adds it to her already big pile that will be sent later on to her house.

"I'm sorry about that," Candice says on the way back.

"What about?" I ask.

"The paparazzi." She sighs. "I can never go out more than a few hours before being noticed. It's really frustrating. That's why Brina and I never go shopping, especially not together."

"Oh, it's not your fault. I know how it is. It's the same with Jack. I had fun though, so thank you for thinking of me, and reassuring me about Taylor," I add.

"Of course, don't worry about that, I swear. And are you sure you had fun? You didn't get anything," she asks as we pass the front gate of Beverly Park.

"Yeah, I did. I just didn't find anything that popped my eye, that's all." I try to sound convincing, but I'm not sure I was.

“Not even that Gaia bag?” She smiles.

“Okay, I’ll admit that one was cute.” I chuckle. “But to be honest, I’m not really comfortable using Jack’s credit card to buy myself a thousand dollars’ bag I don’t need.”

“You never need fashion, girl! It’s pure pleasure, but it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t indulge. And honestly, don’t worry about money,” she replies, pulling into Jack’s driveway. “Your outfits are going to be more and more scrutinized the longer you date him, and it’s only logical that you let him buy you stuff since they complement his image too. It’s how it works here,” she adds.

“Yeah, so I’ve heard. It’s just hard for me to wrap my head around that.”

When I come home, I feel a lot lighter and Jack is stoked to see that I had fun with his friends. He apparently received text messages from Candice and Sabrina saying that they had a good time with me, and hope he “doesn’t screw it up.” I’m excited because I thought I wouldn’t find any girl friends in his world, and they’re both so adorable. We really clicked and I feel like I’ve known them for years.

Later that day, someone is at the gate with a delivery for me. I open the box and find the Gaia bag I saw earlier, as well as a gorgeous black lace top, and on top of it a note saying:

*Thanks for the good time we had today. Brina is right, this bag is totally dope and you should definitely have it. Also, I really liked this cute top, and I think you’ll look smoking in it,
xxx Candice*

MUSIC VIDEOS AND RED CARPETS

The next day, Adrian comes for a meeting with Jack and asks me to sit with them, making me a little anxious.

“We want to talk to you about the song ‘Only Girl,’” Adrian starts.

“I want to release it as a single,” Jack says.

“Really?” I ask.

“Yes, but we wanted to see if you were okay with this since it’s about you, and you’re now officially dating Jack?” Adrian adds.

“What would that entail?” I ask.

“Nothing really. It’s just that I would properly record it, make a music video, and do a few TV performances to support it. But I will get asked if it’s about you, and I want to say yes. It makes no sense to release it otherwise,” Jack explains.

“Right,” I reply.

“We’ll give you some time to think about it,” Adrian says.

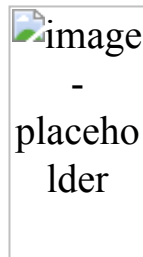
“No need. It’s a great song, and I think you’ll have a lot of success with it, so you should definitely release it! Anyway, most of your fans know about it now and the response has been fine.”

“Okay then, but just to be clear,” interrupts Adrian. “You did see the online critics, right? Because you will get more after the song is released.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen them.” I sigh. “But honestly, how worse can it be? Anyway, I have to get used to it, right?”

“That’s my girl!” Jack boasts, kissing me on the cheek.

“Well, that’s settled then. The label already approved it, so we’ll get you in the studio tomorrow to release it ASAP.”



WITH THE RELEASE DATE set for next week, Jack immediately starts promoting it to his fans on social media. In his one-of-a-kind music room, I filmed him singing it for Instagram and Facebook live. The comments are mostly good, except for a few mean ones that I choose to ignore. It’s the only way.

Adrian calls to say that they’ve scheduled some TV promotion, and that Jack starts rehearsals tomorrow for his performance at the MTV *EMAs Music awards*. It will take place in Milan on September twenty-fifth and he’s nominated

for six awards. I didn't know about that one. He mentioned the *AMAs Music awards*, but I'm pretty sure that's in November.

I'm excited to go to Milan, but that means another red-carpet event, and this time, the entire thing will be on TV. Bronislaw will be there too, and so will Candice and Wat\$on because he's nominated. I'm relieved that at least I'll know some people there.

On the release day of "Only Girl," Jack is so excited, and it seems the fans are too. It's his fifth best debut single ever. I know I didn't write it, but it still makes me a little proud. He receives a lot of praising comments on social media from his celebrity friends.

Listen to it, it's fire, and so is the girl it's about—Candice

Yo, listen to my boy JR's new dope song—Marvin-P.

Always a banger—Kayla. Ugh, this one I could've done without.

Congrats, JR, on another smashing record—Sabrina

Jack also receives flowers and a food basket from his label. Jody calls to congratulate him and to schedule a fitting for our MTV *EMAs Music Awards* clothes.

"What? I don't need outfits, Jack," I try to interrupt while he's making plans on the phone, but he doesn't let me talk.

"You need it, babe," he says when he hung up. "It's red carpet, on TV, and anyway, we don't pay for it, so don't even worry about it, okay?"

I agree, hoping it's even true.

The next day is the start of promo week for "Only Girl" and it starts with the *Hollie Barker show*. I'm so excited because I've been watching her show for so long. She's very nice too. I met her a few times and I like that she has such a close relationship with Jack even though they have a big age difference, Hollie being forty-seven years old. The set is intimidating, with all the lights and cameras everywhere, but Jack is perfectly at ease. He's used to it.

Naturally, the first question she asks is what the song is all about, or rather, who is it about?

"Well, it's about my girlfriend Louise. We've been dating for about three months now."

The audience cheers.

"Three months and she gets a song?" Hollie exclaims, shaking her shoulder-length black hair. "I've known you, what? Seven years, give or take? Where is my song, Jack?" she jokes. "What will she get for six months then? You've placed the bar high!"

"I know," he shrugs and offers one of his killer smiles. The kind that makes me want to sink to my knees. "She inspires me. What can I tell you?"

The audience cheers.

Hollie leans forward, resting her elbow on her thigh. The gleam gone from her eye. "But seriously, though, this is a very expressive song. About love. You're really into her, then?"

“Yes, I guess I am,” he answers, blushing, making the audience cheer louder.

“See how smitten he is?” Hollie teases. “I’ve never seen you like that! But I understand why. She is an amazing girl. I’ve had the pleasure of meeting her a couple times, and I have to say, well done, Jack!”

I’m forever grateful to Hollie. Thanks to her, I finally erased the closet conversation. There’s no way he would go to such lengths to make some other girl jealous. It’s time to accept that Jack Rose has genuine feelings for me.

The rest of the week, he does it all over again on different TV shows and, of course, just like Hollie, they ask about me and tease him a little. We also have several meetings. The first one is with Adrian and Kim for the travel to Milan, the second for a weekend in Miami on our way back. Watson will be performing and Jack wants to attend and see some of his friends. And the third one is for the “Only Girl” music video. Marcus joins us with Julian Clarke, the artistic director of Jack’s music videos.

“The first thing that we have to decide is whether we’ll have you, Louise, in it or not?” Marcus asks.

“Um,” I’m a little taken aback. I know the song is about me, but putting me in a video is a totally different thing. I’m no actress.

“Personally, I think it’s dope, but it’s up to you, babe.”

“We could use an actress, though,” Julian suggests, “but it’s true we won’t have the chemistry I’ve seen in the two of you.”

Jack and I look at each other, not sure what he means by that. Julian adds, “Show them Marcus.”

Marcus casts the screen of his computer on the living room TV and here we are, Jack and me, backstage during his tour, out in Amsterdam, eating ice-cream in Norway, in front of the little mermaid in Copenhagen, fooling around at the Gullfoss National Park in Iceland.

Jack and I are both speechless. We knew Marcus was filming some of these moments, but not that there was so much footage.

“So, what do you think?” Marcus smiles.

“It’s perfect,” Jack says.

“Yeah, it’s great! Is that really enough for a music video?”

“Of course it is. The song is about a girl and love, so that’s exactly the kind of footage we are looking for. And the fact that it’s really you in it makes it more real. We could recreate this with an actress, but from an emotional point of view, it will never be as good as that,” Julian explains.

“Um, okay then. Let’s do this,” I say before I change my mind.

We’re interrupted by Jody, coming for the *EMAs* fittings. Since they still have to select the footage they want for the video, I let them work and join Jody first in the closet. She

selected seven options for me to try on, each more amazing than the others.

“Okay, first of all, let me explain how this works,” she starts. “Each of these options is one-of-a-kind. Only one model has been created, and it comes with a purse and shoes. If you say no to any of them, it will be offered to other celebrities who might wear it at the same event. I would advise that if you like several of them, you select them now and keep them in your closet for future events. You have the *AMAs* next month, and I don’t know what’s scheduled next year, but I’m pretty sure there will be at least four events,” she says, counting on her fingers. “*People’s Choice, Grammys, Music Gazette* and *Brits*.”

“What? All that? Are you sure?” My mouth falls open.

“Oh no, actually. *Billboard Music Awards* probably too. So, five, but no, I’m not sure. We only know about a month in advance if he’s nominated, but given the success of his album, it’s almost certain.”

“Okay, but how much are these? I can’t take several of them.”

“You don’t have to pay for them. They are generously rented by the designers for the events. You just have to give them back after.”

“Why would designers lend one-of-a-kind outfits to someone like me? I’m not even famous.”

“Maybe so, but you’ll be at the arm of one of the most famous pop stars in the world. It comes with some perks. Now, let’s try them on!” She winks.

I try them all on and it’s overwhelming, to say the least. Carolina Herrera, Versace, Auguste Brunet, Maison Gaumé... I can’t believe I actually get to wear these amazing gowns. I slip in each of them and show Jody to get her opinion.

“Don’t worry if it doesn’t fit perfectly. We will make the necessary adjustments,” she says.

“Okay. But still, the gold dress is a no,” I say, once I took it off. “No adjustment in the world can make this one look good on me! I look like a prostitute!”

“Well, yeah. It’s a little intense.” She laughs.

“It’s not the dress. It’s more my body in it!” I chuckle.

“What about the rest?”

“I really like them all except maybe the black one, which is a little tight, and I’m not sure about the turquoise.” It’s a little over the top, with a plunging neckline and a large slit over my left leg.

“What? I love that one on you!”

“It’s just the slit. It’s a bit much, I think?”

“Have you seen what celebrities wear at these events? This is exactly the kind of dress that would perfectly fit in at the *Grammys* or the *AMAs*.”

“I guess so. What do you think I should get then?” I ask.

“Honestly, they’re all gorgeous and they fit you very well. I would definitely pick the silver one for the *Music Gazette* party or the *AMAs*. Then the turquoise and the purple ones for the *Grammys* and *People’s Choice*, and the black, the red, and the jumpsuit for *Billboard*, *Brits* and *EMAs*. *Billboard* is in Vegas in May, so maybe not the red, it’s a bit heavy. And, if the turquoise is too open for you, I’ll make it less, but I think it’ll be perfect for the *Grammys*.”

“Wow, okay. Well, I do really like them all, except for the gold one, but can I really take them all even though he’s not nominated yet?”

“I’ll be nominated, babe,” Jack says, entering the closet.

“So cocky!” Jody rolls her eyes at him.

“Well, yeah, but you know I will.” He smirks.

“Yeah, that’s what I told her.” She smiles.

“So, I should really take them all, then?” I ask.

“Show me?” Jack asks.

I put on a mini fashion show for him, explaining what would be altered and what I like, or don’t like, in each of them.

“I like them all, especially the gold one.” He smiles widely.

“Of course you do. My boobs are out in this one.” I laugh.

“You’re smoking in it, but this one is only for the after party with me.” He winks, wrapping his hands around my waist.

“Okay then, I will take them all. *Except* the gold one,” I tell Jody.

“Great! Now your turn, cocky boy!”

ITALY, MIAMI, MISERY

It's our first day in Italy, and since Watson and Jack are at the *EMAs* venue to rehearse their performances, Candice suggests that we do a little shopping. And by little, she means a lot. We are escorted by her two bodyguards, and we hit the golden rectangle where all the famous Italian designers are. The prices are naturally crazy high, but Candice gets stuff from Valentino, Gaia, Ferragamo, and insists on buying me a dark green cocktail dress from Prada, and a Fendi black and white jumpsuit. I know I won't win the battle since she'll just buy it and send it to me later.

Of course, Candice's fans and paparazzi are following us, but they don't tarnish our great time. We end up having a coffee, and they even close up the famous Duomo for us, so we can safely go inside. I wish I'd be doing all of this with Jack, but I'm also glad to be creating memories with Candice, who is really becoming a true friend.

At night, the four of us and Bronislaw go clubbing in the most famous place in the city. The next day is mostly spent doing interviews for all of them. Me being the only non-celebrity of the group, I'm free and I hang out with Jody and Sandra at the hotel as they help me get ready.

When we arrive at the *EMAs* in a limousine, the red-carpet frenzy begins. I love my Gaia dress. The taffeta is really smooth on my skin, and even though the train is quite long, it flows around me when I'm moving, making it really comfortable. I get called out by my name for the first time,

which is a little disturbing. Kim tells me to keep calm and I do my best. I wave and smile next to Jack. Inside, the backstage area is buzzing with celebrities, and as Jack is performing, he gets a dressing room where we hang out before mingling at the bar.

The venue is enormous and has a concert vibe because of the huge pit filled with enthusiastic fans. We are escorted to the front row of the seated area, which has direct access to the B stage, where they will give out the awards. I'm sitting with Candice, Wat\$on, and Bronislaw since Jack is the opening act, and when the lights go off, we loudly cheer for him. Candice and I dance as he delivers a great performance, a medley of two of his most famous songs, and his new single "Only Girl." I'm still not used to it; it always gives me chills. It takes me back to the first time I heard it, and how special and wanted it made me feel. After changing back into his Valentino suit, Jack sits next to me as the first award he's nominated for is called. His legs are shaking as he takes my hand in his.

"And the award for *Best Male* goes to Jack Rose!"

He gives me a kiss, hugs his friends, and dashes to the stage under the applause and cheers of the audience.

He thanks Kim, Adrian, his label, his mom, and me. "And last but not least, I just want to say to my stunning girlfriend, Louise, who's here tonight, and isn't she stunning, guys?" he boasts, the crowd rewarding him with cheers and whistles, making me tomato-red. "That I love her. I love you, babe. You make my life so much better each day, and you're such a

source of inspiration, thank you.” He smiles, as I’m wiping the tears coming down on my cheeks.

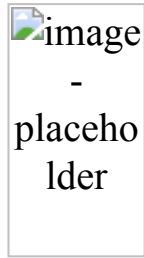
Damn him! He’s so good at these romantic gestures. How can I have doubted him? And how could I not love him back? He’s perfect, caring, funny. But yet, I didn’t tell him that I do. Why is it still so hard for me? He’s giving me his heart; I should be brave enough to do the same.

After the show, we’re in his dressing room getting ready for the after party. I’m sitting in front of the mirror, but I’m not looking at my face. Jack’s behind me on the couch, plucking his guitar, looking so perfect. I turn around and take a seat next to him. His smile makes my heart melt.

“I love you,” I say, feeling the red coming to my cheeks.

He looks at me for a second and his eyes sparkle. I scoot closer to him as he puts down his guitar.

“I love you too, babe,” he says, cupping my flushed cheeks before kissing me passionately. The space closes around us and everything goes black. I’m lost in his scent, the movement of his cold tongue against mine, his arms gripping me tightly. No matter how many times we kiss, it still consumes me. It still makes my heart explode in my chest and I hope it always will, because this is the best feeling in the world.



TONIGHT IS WAT\$ON'S SHOW in Miami. We all rented a penthouse in the city and Islay-J, DJ Daffle, one of their friends who lives in Miami, and less pleasantly Shantell and Kayla join us. Apparently, they coincidentally were in Miami at the same time. How (un)lucky is that? We spend the whole day at the beach, and I have to use my best acting skills to hide my bad mood. Candice, who is the only one who knows about the closet conversation, is doing her best to keep me away from them all day. I know they're his friends, and have been for a long time, so I have to suck it up.

They make it difficult for me to hide my annoyance at their presence. During the show, I can hear them making fun of me, whether it's my hair, or my clothes, I'm not sure, and at the after party, they're muttering under their breath and giggling while looking at me. *Subtle*. Instead of causing a scene, though, I decide to toy with them. I kiss Jack, dance with him,

shake my body against his, taking him a little by surprise. It's definitely not the way I usually act, but they've enraged me all day, and it's how I choose to release my anger, to Jack's utmost pleasure. He grabs my waist to intensify the grinding and kisses my neck. I know I've won when I see them snorting in a corner, eyes blazing with hatred.

A few days later, we're back in L.A. and we are shooting the music video for "Only Girl." The footage they already got is great, but they want additional scenes where Jack is singing. We are filming on the beach in Malibu. I'm wearing a sheer white dress, revealing a little too much of my curves for my taste, but it was the best look of the four and it goes well with Jack's outfit, a white shirt and beige chino pants.

"Okay. So just walk along the beach and look at each other. I want to see pure love," Julian says.

"It shouldn't be too hard," Jack whispers in my ear, making me giggle like a teenager.

"Yes! Like that. Perfect. Let's roll," Julian says, giving a signal to the camera crew.

We start our walk, glancing at each other while holding hands and Jack lip syncs.

"Louise, smile." "Now give him a kiss on the cheek," Julian's orders fly in on the side. It's a little awkward, but I do as I'm told.

"Cut!" he calls. "Good job. Now the make out scene. I want to see passion, eagerness, desire."

Jack and I sit down on the sand. I look around and see about thirty faces looking at us. I smooth out my dress and look at Jack.

“It’ll be fine,” he says, smiling. His lips press against mine as he brings me down on my back.

“Cut!” Julian shouts. “Louise, you’re looking at us! Look at Jack, or close your eyes.”

Right. Crap. I readjust my hair. I nod to Jack and he starts kissing me again. He’s lying over me, kissing my neck, when Julian cuts the scene once again.

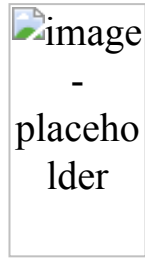
“Louise, do something with your arms. Don’t just lie there.”

“I’m sorry.” I blush. I have to get a grip.

“Babe, it’s fine. Don’t worry about them,” Jack says, gesturing toward the crew. “Pretend they’re not here. It’s just you and me, okay?”

I nod and he kisses me on the forehead. He lies me down on the sand once more, his lips crashing against mine. “I love you,” he says in my ear.

I kiss him back, running my hand through his hair, giggling when the water reaches our feet, but not breaking our moment. I almost forgot there were people around us until Julian calls “cut” for one last time.



WE ONLY HAVE TO wait a few days before seeing the results, and I'm really proud of how it turned out. The mix of the beach footage and the one taken on tour blends perfectly together. It all seems really natural, like it was the easiest thing in the world. I guess my acting skills are not that bad.

The critics are equally praising. I received flowers from Adrian and Kim for my "official debut," a lot of messages from my family and friends. Mel also calls to tell me she can't believe I agreed to that dress, but is glad that I did because it's so "bomb," and reminds me that she'll be there on the twelfth after her audition. I shamefully realize I forgot about her visit with everything going on. I'll have to make up for it by showing her a good time.

The next morning, I'm getting some writing done and Jack is playing on the piano when we get a surprise visit from Kim.

She looks worried and even hesitates before speaking. It's the first time I've seen her nervous since I've met her.

“Hey, guys, I'm so sorry to disturb you like that, but this couldn't wait.”

“What's up?” Jack asks, as we're sitting around the kitchen counter.

“Well, this came out today,” she says, handing us a printed article with my face on it.

SHOCKING NEWS

LOUISE MERCIER: THE GIRL WHO STOLE JACK ROSE'S HEART

All around the article are small bubbles, each baring a sentence:

“From French waitress to millionaire’s girlfriend.”

“Jack’s friends are deeply concerned.”

“Gold-digger?”

This is clearly an extract from a tabloid’s website. Below, the article reads:

We all know Jack Rose is not a bachelor anymore. He made that pretty clear during his Philadelphia show in July by telling the audience the inspiration behind the no 1 song “Only Girl” had agreed to move in with him. He said it again in Paris, Louise Mercier’s hometown, and even serenaded her on stage for her birthday in September. But even if you missed any of this, you’ve now had plenty of opportunities to see them together out in Beverly Hills, Milan, or Miami more recently. While we understand love can be a complicated thing, fans and friends of the pop star are getting concerned about this growing relationship.

“We don’t understand it. To be honest, we’ve all been taken by surprise. We think it’s an attempt to make Taylor Thompson (Rose’s former girlfriend, Ed.) jealous, but it doesn’t seem to be working,” says a close relation of the singer, adding that, “She’s not even his type, I mean look at Jack’s dating history.

He's only dated amazingly beautiful women, and only models and singers, never an ordinary waitress." The same source also tells us that Louise has "no income whatsoever since she lost her waitressing job when leaving New York, meaning she's living at Jack's expenses."

Another source is equally concerned about the singer's financial situation. "We constantly see her shopping on Rodeo Drive, and even at Milan's golden rectangle, which is one of the most expensive places in the world to shop." A lot of fans also reposted pictures of the Frenchie shopping in Beverly Hills, with titles like "Shopping! again?" "WTF? Don't you have enough?" "Jack, open your eyes. She's milking you at the Rodeo Drive creamery!" A lot of them retaliated by overflowing social media with pictures of Rose and Thompson together, and the #Jaylor. Now Let's just hope that our favorite pop star will open his eyes before it's too late and too much damage is done.

After putting the paper down, I think I'm going to be sick. Jack's a little green too. After a moment, Kim breaks the silence.

"First, we don't know who the sources are, and since they won't tell us, we will sue them. There is no way someone in your circle is saying that to tabloids."

"Definitely—" Jack starts, but I don't let him finish.

"Actually, I think I know who it was." I've tried to be the bigger person and let it go, but this is too much.

"What?" they ask, with incredulous looks on their faces.

“Kayla, Shantell, and probably Lamia, too.” My heart hammers against my ribs, but I fight against it. He needs to know.

“What?” they both shout. “Why would you say that? This is a very serious accusation,” Kim adds, concern pulling her brows together.

“Well, it’s the quote of the article. I’ve heard them say stuff like that, almost word for word, at my welcoming party.” I fold my arms.

“What the hell?” Jack pounds his fist on the table, making Kim and I jump.

I tell them everything I heard that night, and all the little things they did during all of our encounters. The more I say, the more Jack’s face turns a shade of red I’ve never seen before, and I can help but feel guilty, like it’s my fault somehow. Deep down, I know it’s not, but I can’t shake the feeling. I hate to be the one breaking the news about his longtime friends, and I hate that I lied to him about it.

“Why on earth would they do that, though? Who are they to decide who I should or shouldn’t date?” he continues. “And let me get something straight. Kayla kissed me. I didn’t kiss her. And it was six years ago, I was hammered. I only know about it because she kept texting me afterwards. I’m gonna have a talk with them,” he adds, his voice rising with each word.

“No Jack!” I plead. “It’s fine. Who cares? It’s just stupid gossip. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“No way! That’s unacceptable. Now I can’t even trust my friends? What the actual fuck?”

There’s no stopping him. He spends the next half an hour on the phone with them, and they finally admit that they are the anonymous sources. They try to explain that they really are concerned about him and his finances, but he doesn’t let them speak, telling them that their friendship is over. I’m a little relieved, but it sucks overall that this happened to begin with. I don’t want him to be in an awkward position with his fans or friends. I already feel guilty about the things he bought me, and the fact that I’m living here for free just adds up to the pile of anxiety. He doesn’t stop there, though, and posts a message on social media.

“I’m completely disgusted by what I read in tabloids and on social media these last few days. My financial situation is perfectly fine and none of your concern. I understand that some of you are not happy with my choice of girlfriend, but please keep your opinion to yourself if you can’t express it without being mean. I was so proud to have an amazing fanbase as I said at the EMAs two weeks ago, but today I’m really disappointed in you guys. I’m allowed to buy my girlfriend whatever I want, and even if it’s really none of your business, she doesn’t ask for any of it. I just do it because it makes ME happy! Stop spreading the lies of jealous, clueless, pathetic ‘sources’ who are not friends of mine anymore.”

He finishes his statement by unfollowing Lamia, Shantel, and Kayla on social media, which is another statement in

itself, revealing who the “Jealous, clueless, pathetic sources are.”

Over the next few days, Jack’s post is widely reposted by other celebrities claiming that even if they are in the public eye, they have a right to their privacy. Candice even posts: *“Before any of my fans worry about my bank account, let me tell you that I bought Louise some stuff, too. And I did it willingly, mostly because she’s an amazing girl, but also because she never wants to use J’s credit card. Take that, haters.”* The fans’ comments on his post are also improving and Jack shows me some of them.

‘C’mon guys, J. can date whoever he wants. Stop with that Jaylor nonsense, it’s been over for a long time.’

‘Sorry, Jack, we love you!’

‘Those of you who say that girl is not pretty, open your eyes. That’s what natural beauty looks like.’

‘The article was right tho; Louise has nothing in common with J’s former girlfriend: she’s not fake!’

‘As long as you’re happy, Jack, we support you! #Jouise.’

I’m blown away by so much love and support and it doesn’t stop there. Candice and Sabrina call to comfort me, and Hollie Barker suggests that I come to her show so I can talk about me and show his fans who I am. I’m not sure I deserve such an honor, but she insists and Kim thinks it’s a brilliant idea, so I agree.

But, as I lay in bed the night before the show, I can't help thinking, why the hell did I agree to this?

THE LOUISE MERCIER APPRECIATION
GAUGE

We're at the *Hollie Barker show* again and this time it's my name on the dressing room door. When a gentle knock comes through the door, I stop my pacing. Hollie wants to go over the things we'll be talking about so I can prepare myself. Kim is there too, giving me some pointers while Jack is boosting my confidence, as always. By the time she leaves, I'm a ball of nerves. Pulling deep breaths deep into my lungs, I wait for her to make my introduction.

"My next guest has been the subject of numerous critics on social media and tabloids lately but was equally fiercely defended by many celebrities, including her beau, pop star Jack Rose. Please welcome my first French guest ever, Louise Mercier!"

The audience cheers.

Entering the studio, I give a little wave to the crowd. *Don't fall, Louise. Just don't fall, please.* Finally at destination, I take a seat in the armchair next to Hollie.

"Hi, Hollie." I smile, my lips trembling as I try to hide my nerves. I've been to the set before, but sitting here is a completely different thing. The audience seems bigger than when I was here with Jack, the lights brighter, and I'm pretty sure there are more cameras, if that's even possible?

"First of all, I want to thank you for accepting my invitation. I know this is your first interview, so we'll be nice to you," she jokes.

“Thanks for inviting me.” My voice shakes.

“My pleasure. So, do you want to tell us what happened?” she asks as the article appears on the screen behind us.

“Well, this article happened,” I say, pointing to the screen. “It was a bit of a shock when it came out.”

“I can imagine, it’s a really mean article,” she says.

I nod. “It really is. And it’s wrong, too. It’s just unfair because no one knows me, so how could they say such horrible things?”

“I agree with you. Which is why you’re here today... so we can get to know you before we can judge you,” she jokes.

The audience laughs.

“Exactly.” I chuckle, a little more at ease.

“Because that’s what happens when you date Jack Rose. People want to know who you are and if you are good for him. I’m protective of him myself. So, to help us decide if you are worthy, we came up with this.” She points at the screen behind us. “The Louise Mercier appreciation meter.”

The audience claps and cheers.

“Oh God,” I let out. I wasn’t aware of this, but this looks really funny. It looks like a big thermometer with a picture of me and Jack kissing at the top.

“Our audience has been equipped with a special emotion sensor that will fill this gauge. You’re going to talk about yourself, and if they have a positive reaction, the gauge will

fill up. If it's negative, it will go down," she explains. "If, at the end of the conversation, it reaches the top, that means they approve. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, okay." I smile. "Well, the only thing that's true in the article is that I am French. I come from the Champagne region in France,"

The audience applauds and the gauge fills.

"See! Champagne! That's a good start! Everyone loves champagne!"

"Yeah! I love champagne too, definitely my favorite drink!" I continue, "I've had a pretty normal childhood and five years ago I moved to New York to study marketing at NYU."

The audience cheers and the gauge fills a little more.

"Oh, look! Clever and reputable university. They like it."

"Yeah." I chuckle. "After I got my bachelor, I started working for a top marketing company in New York, and they even helped me get a Green Card while I was working for them."

Audience cheers and gauge fills a lot more.

"Green Card holder! That got you a lot of points!" she exclaims.

"Yeah, but unfortunately, a few months after that, I was fired."

Audience boos and meter goes down.

"Oh! They don't like that."

“But I didn’t do anything wrong though,” I quickly add, “I was the last one in, so I was the first one out when they had to make cuts. That sucks, but that’s how it is. After that, my best friend Melanie got me a job at the best event agency in New York, where she was also working, and that’s how I met Jack at this birthday party. I didn’t really know him that well then. I wasn’t a fan or anything, but we kind of bumped into each other and yeah, that’s how we met.” I smile, a little out of breath for having said that almost at once.

“But how, though? Because you were a waitress at that party, right?” she asks.

“Yes, I was,” I reply.

“So, was this a movie-like moment where you spill drinks all over him and had to help him *clean up*?” she teases.

“No! Nothing like that.” I laugh. “I actually met him while I was taking my break. We chatted and really hit it off. We became friends pretty quickly because we had so much in common, but then he asked me to move in with him and I said no.”

The audience boos, and the gauge goes down.

“Come on, guys!” I say. “I knew him for two weeks! I couldn’t just follow him to the other side of the country!”

“Ah! Reasonable and not impulsive. You’re back on track.” Hollie chuckles.

“Jack and I kept in touch, and one day he called to invite me to some of his shows in New York. We saw each other again,

and he eventually sang ‘Only Girl.’ It brought back all the feelings I still had for him after all this time, so I eventually accepted to move in with him,” I explain as the audience cheers.

“So basically, what it took for you to move in with him was a song?” She chuckles.

“Exactly! I’m a tough girl to convince.” I laugh.

“There’s just one thing I think everyone wants to know about: your financial situation. Jack is a very generous man, and you’re not working now, are you?”

I knew that was coming, so I’m not surprised. I smile and say, “Yes, he is very generous. I never asked him for anything. It’s not my style. I don’t really care about material things. It’s true, however, that I have to dress a certain way for the events we go to. And, no, I’m currently not working, but I’ve been writing a book for a few years now and I’m going to focus on that.”

“Author? That resonated well with the audience. It puts you right at the top! So—”

“Sorry to interrupt, guys.” Jack enters the studio, and the crowd goes wild. “I couldn’t stay away. I was watching from the dressing room and I just had to come in and say hello.”

“Of course, Jack!” Hollie smiles and gives him a hug. “You’re always welcome here. I’m very lucky. You were here not so long ago. Should we bring you a seat?” she asks as I stand up.

“Nah, it’s fine. She can sit on my lap,” he says, wrapping his arms around my waist before bringing me down on his lap, making the audience whistle and cheer.

“I think you just broke the meter, Jack,” she says, and everyone laughs. “By the way, congrats on your record win at the *EMAs* in Europe last month. And on your nominations for both *AMAs* and *People’s Choice Awards*. It’s a big year for you!”

“Yeah, it is. Thanks for the support.”

“And are you going back on tour?”

“Yes, I am. In December, for the rest of the U.S. tour, and then next year I’ll go to Asia, Oceania, Africa, and South America.”

“Wow! That’s a complete world tour. Well, thank you, guys, for being here, and to you, Louise, for being honest and such a good sport. I can’t wait to have you back to talk about your book! Stay with us. After the break, Anna Holiday will tell me all about her new movie, *Blind Spot!*”

We give Hollie a hug and thank her before going back to the dressing room. Kim is beaming. She thinks it went perfectly and that I’m such a natural at this. I don’t know about that, but I’m glad I got to tell my side of the story. I hope this will finally put the critics to rest so we can go back to normal, whatever that is.

SHOPPING FROM HELL

Finally, the day of Mel's arrival is here. I don't have a choice but to pick her up at the airport because Jack is back at rehearsals for his tour. He took great pleasure in telling me to take whichever car I want. He's been trying to get me to drive ever since I moved here.

I put on my big girl's pants and tell Miguel, Jack's car manager, (yes, he has a car manager to clean, do the maintenance on his cars, get them ready for him, and God knows what else he does), that I will take the Lamborghini SUV because it feels the safest. I loved being in the passenger seat and I don't see myself driving those supercars. It's still huge, don't get me wrong, bigger than huge actually. Probably one of the biggest cars I've ever been into, but it's the less crazy looking one. All black and not yellow, orange, or neon colors the other ones boast.

I try to remember every little detail as Miguel explains how to operate the engine, set the GPS, and adjust the seat. Even though it's really comfortable, I feel a little weird leaving the driveway. It's so high, like I'm driving a tank as I pull into the airport pick up lane. I spot Mel immediately and hop out to greet her.

"Louise, babe! I'm so happy to be here!" Mel exclaims, taking me into her arms.

"Me too!" I say, squeezing her tightly.

“Wait, that’s the car you came with?” she asks as I unlock it, her eyes popping out.

“Trust me. It’s way low-key compared to his other cars.” I laugh.

“It’s fab though,” she says, as we’re driving out of the airport and on the busy freeway.

On the ride home, she tells me how her audition went great and that they told her before she left that she got the role. She will be part of a thirty-dancers show retracing Michael Jackson’s career, through his songs, music videos and, of course, iconic dance moves.

“Oh my God! This is unreal. How big is this place?” she asks as we enter the house.

“Big.” I chuckle.

I give her the grand tour. Downstairs first, and in each room, she says things like, “what?” or “no way,” and “that’s insane,” but the place she loves the most, naturally, is the gym. It’s huge and has a complete wall made of mirrors, which makes it perfect for dance rehearsals.

“Okay. Wow! Now that’s the dream. Imagine having this all to yourself! It’s—well, you do, actually.” She laughs. “But I bet you never come in here, do you?”

“Um...”

She shakes her head. “Such a waste.”

We continue the tour with the backyard before going upstairs.

“Dear God! How many living-rooms do you guys have?” She gasps.

“I know, I don’t get it either. There’s one at every corner, I swear,” I say, leaning against the doorframe.

I show her all the rooms and let her choose the one she wants. She goes for the one farthest from ours.

“That way, I won’t hear you guys during the night.” She winks.

“Babe, you here?” Jack yells.

We join him downstairs to find him laughing.

“What’s up?” I ask, puzzled.

“That’s the car you took to get Mel at the airport? Hi, Mel, by the way,” he says, hugging her swiftly and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

“Yeah, why? It was the less extravagant one.” I shrug.

“That’s hardly the least extravagant one!” He laughs. “That’s one of my most expensive cars. But I’m glad you like it. It’s one of my favs too.”

“I had no idea. Visually, it’s one of the most low-key ones you have.” My eyes widen in horror. Thank God, I didn’t crash it!

We spend the first day of Mel’s visit at Universal Studios. Since Jack insisted on VIP tickets, Mel and I are treated like

royalty. We have a knowledgeable guide who takes us around the park in a golf cart. We never have to wait to get on rides, and we even go behind-the-scenes. The second day of her visit, we mostly stay in the house. We look at apartments for her to rent in Vegas, and prepare her move to this side of the country. The third day of her visit is also already the last. We are going clubbing tonight with Jack's friends—well, my friends too, I guess—so we go out to do some shopping. After a debate with Jack on where we should go, (he wants us to go to Rodeo Drive because it's safer in his opinion, and I want to go to the mall because we need to be able to afford stuff), we settle for Beverly Center which is a mall in Beverly Hills. We look it up online and see that, even if there are a lot of luxury brands, they also have some more affordable ones like Aldo, H&M, Forever 21, or Uniqlo.

It's after a short drive and not without difficulties, (the SUV seemed way too big for that underground parking garage), that we make it to the mall. It's refreshing to finally go to stores where I can afford clothes. After a few hours, we're tired and having a drink at Starbucks when I hear someone say my name.

Click. Click.

"Louise? Where's Jack, Louise?"

"Who's your friend, Louise?"

"Are you enjoying your coffee?"

Click.

Paparazzi are standing at the entrance of the open-style Starbucks, taking pictures of me and Mel. *What the hell is this?*

“Don’t answer,” Mel advises. “They’re just trying to get your attention.”

We move to the back of the café and hide behind some decorative plants.

“Sorry, I didn’t think I’d get recognized or that they would care about me when I’m not with Jack or Candice, especially here in L.A. It’s very annoying.”

“Yeah, I bet. I’m sorry too. It’s so unreal. Your life has changed a lot in the last few months. Are you happy though? Because I’ll have space for you in Vegas as much as I did in New York. You know that, right?”

“Yes.” I smile. “I’m extremely happy here, even more than I thought I would. Being with Jack feels so right, like I’m at home. The only annoying thing is this.” I gesture to the paparazzi. “I don’t even know how they knew we were here.” I sigh.

I suspiciously eye the employees, but they seem even more annoyed than I am by their presence, so I really doubt it was them. There are now more paparazzi in front of the store and they are clearly blocking the entrance for the customers.

“We should go,” I say, standing up. “I’m just not sure how but—”

“It’s gonna be fine,” Mel says. “We’ll just speed walk. The elevator is right there.”

We have a hard time making our way through as they blind us with their flashes. I can’t hear anything over their shouting, and an aggressive one even hits me with this camera as he steps in front of me to put it in my face. Thank God for the mall security who helped us to the elevator.

“Gosh, Lou! Are you okay?” Mel gasps.

“What?” I shriek.

I look at my face in the mirror. I’m bleeding on my left cheek. The cut is not too deep, but it still bleeds a lot.

Naturally, when Jack comes home a few hours later, he already knows.

“Babe, are you okay?” he says, panicked.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I wave away his concern.

“Thank God!” He hugs me. “I saw the pics. It looked brutal. Does it hurt?”

“No. It’s just a small cut. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m really sorry, babe.” He runs his hands through his hair. “It’s so unfair. I hate that I’m putting you in danger like that. We’re going to have to improve security again. We can cancel tonight if you want, okay?”

“No, of course not. I want to go. I’m perfectly fine and it’s Mel’s last day here. We’re going out,” I insist.

“Well, if Lou wants to go out, we have to go.” Mel winks.
“In the five years I’ve known her, this must be a first.”

When we meet Candice, Watson, and Bronislaw at the restaurant, of course, the paparazzi are waiting for us, only this time Blake is there to protect us. Mel looks incredible in the white dress she bought today, showing off her long legs and her flamboyant red hair contrasting nicely with her outfit. She looks like she belongs. She doesn’t look out-of-place like I do when I’m next to Candice or Sabrina. Mel immediately likes Candice, and Candice likes her back. She tells us how happy she is that we’re here because she’s usually the only girl in the group when Sabrina isn’t here, so she rarely goes out with them.

Too soon, it’s time for me to take Mel back to the airport, but not without making future plans. Since she starts early December in Vegas, Jack suggests we do New Year’s Eve there this year, so I’ll see her sooner than expected.

CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

WE SPEND THE NEXT month and a half touring the Middle East and Africa, and we have a blast. We don't get to get out much, but when we do, it's breathtaking. The monuments, the colors, the smells, the food. Everything sparkles here. It provides great inspiration for my novel and I spend most of my time writing. The rest is spent shooting behind-the-scenes footage of Jack and the crew for my newly created Instagram account. Kim suggested it, saying it'd be a good way for me to connect with his fans. Jack used to give them a glimpse of his tour life, but it's so time-consuming he had to stop. I'm having fun with this. Even if it was a lot to digest at once, I think I've gotten the hang of it and my account even reached one million followers.

It's now Christmas break and we're travelling to Colorado to spend Christmas with Jack's family. Adam, Jack's travel agent, rented us a cozy chalet by the slopes.

At least, that's what he said. Because when we get there, "cozy" isn't the word I'd pick. Sure, it has a warm woody comfy feeling, but given the fact it has five bedrooms and

bathrooms, a movie theater and a hot tub, it's more of a wooden mansion. It's been decorated with numerous garlands and lights, and a massive Christmas tree sits in the living room.

Since Jack's family is coming the next day, we have a bit of much appreciated alone time. We enjoy the hot tub, take walks, and go on the slopes. Of course, like everything he does, Jack is a terrific skier. I swear, this boy can do it all. I, on the other hand, am not that great. I haven't skied for about eight years. Needless to say, that a few spectacular falls are necessary before I find my rhythm again.

The next day, Susan, Kate, and Leo, Jack's stepdad, join us. It's the first time I meet Leo, and he's a very nice man. He's a bit gruff, and I don't always understand his thick Scottish accent, but he's fun to be around. Later that day, someone rings the bell and I'm shocked to see my parents and my sister on the porch.

My jaw drops. "Why do you always have to do that?" I ask Jack.

"Because it's way more fun when it's a surprise." He cups my face in his hands and kisses me. "And I love to see your face light up like that," he adds, kissing me again.

The other surprise I get comes this time from my family. They secretly took English lessons these last few months, and even if they're nowhere near fluent, they can understand a little what's going on.

After dinner, we're all sitting in the living room, enjoying a last cup of tea before going to bed.

"So, how is your book going?" Susan asks.

I feel my mom's body tense next to me. She crosses her legs and leans against the backrest.

"Oh, it's going good. I mean, it's a lot of work, but I love doing it." I smile.

"I'm so proud of you, babe. You wrote a book. That's fucking fantastic!" Jack says, putting his arm around my shoulders.

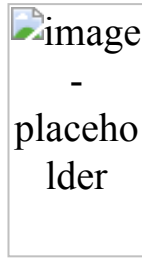
"I am proud of you, *ma chérie*," my dad says, leaning over the coffee table to squeeze my knee.

"Aye, it's very impressive, Louise," Leo says.

"Indeed, dear," Susan adds, sipping her tea.

"Don't you agree, Catherine?" Jack asks, turning to my mom. "Writing a book is a big deal."

"Oh yes. I suppose. I will tell you when I read it." Her sharp words slice into my skin. I know Jack was trying to help by offering my mother a chance to tell me what I want to hear, but it just shows how little he knows her. Catherine Mercier is not one to praise easily.



ON CHRISTMAS EVE, WE all dress up, me in a red mini dress, Jack in a black and white tuxedo, and a local restaurant is catering for the night. The food is exquisite, and they also brought a lot of champagne, to my father's pleasure, and mine, let's be honest. When the clock strikes midnight, we exchange Christmas presents.

Finding Jack a gift has been really difficult for me. Because what do you get someone who has it all? So, with the help of Marcus, I got him a large frame with a picture in black and white of the two of us on the beach, which was taken during the "Only Girl" video. It's a tasteful picture and I love the way we look into each other's eyes. There's a lot of passion and tenderness in it. The package is very impressive and gets everyone excited about what's inside.

I can't help but smile as Jack unwraps the paper carefully, practically buzzing with excitement. He runs his hands over

the frame, his eyes are a little wet. *Mission accomplished.*

“We’ll put it in our bedroom. I love it, and I love you, babe,” he says, kissing me tenderly. “Now it’s your turn!” he gives me a small Tiffany package once again. When I open the box, however, I don’t find a piece of jewelry as I was expecting, but a key chain, in white gold I believe, with a car bangle and a question mark in diamonds.

“Wow! I definitely don’t have this one in my collection. Thank you so much,” I say before kissing him.

Everyone chuckles at my comment, but Jack is laughing. “It’s not just for your collection, babe. The bangle is your gift.” He winks.

“Wait, what do you mean?” I look again at the bangle. It’s a car. “Wait a minute, you got me a car?” I gasp.

“Look again.” He gives me a pressing look.

The question mark. “An unknown car?”

“Well, it’s unknown for now. You have to choose it.”

“No way, Jack,” I exclaim.

“Yes, way, babe. You said it yourself, you’re not comfortable driving my cars, you need one of your own.”

“No, but I’m good now with the black tank.” That’s what I call it.

“The *Lamborghini Urus*, you mean.” He rolls his eyes. “Right, because that turned out well the last time you took it.

Anyway, it's a gift, so you can't turn it down," he says, settling the argument.

The rest of the holidays go great. We play a lot of board games by the fireplace, hit the slopes, and enjoy the fresh mountain air. As I guessed, Kate and Eva are two peas in the pod, always giggling in a corner. Christmas has always been my favorite holiday, but since I moved to the U.S. it was also a difficult time since I couldn't spend it every year with my family.

Back in L.A., we get a surprise visit from Jody, who has been shopping for us during the Christmas break. I get an elegant black lace bustier, a pair of black skinny leather pants, a sheath mini dress in light gold, a silk red dress with a plunging neckline, a velvet little black dress, high boots, a metallic gray dress with a squared neckline, a bunch of jeans and tops from different designers, some leather jackets and black blazers. She also got me accessories. Shawls, scarves, hats, sunglasses, some jewelry, four pairs of shoes, and five bags.

"Wow! That's a lot of stuff," I tell Jody.

"Of course not! You need it. I even got a lot of this stuff for free from the brands. They know you now and they want you to wear their outfits. Get used to it." She smiles.

The fact that brands are actually giving me clothes and accessories for free is beyond belief, but also very exciting. It's definitely every girl's dream, and now my closet looks really full. I'm like a kid on Christmas morning all over again.

During our Vegas trip, I get to wear my new clothes. and appreciate Jody even more because a good look gives you a lot of confidence, especially when you're next to bombshells like Sabrina, Candice, or Mel, and constantly get your picture taken. There's even a small red carpet at the New Year's Eve party we're attending and there is a lot of frenzy. Fans are mixed with paparazzi who keep shouting at us.

"Jack, when are you gonna propose?"

Click. Click.

"What were you doing at Cartier, Jack?"

Click.

"Did you buy an engagement ring, Jack?"

What? My head spins. I feel drunk with what I'm hearing. Glancing around, it seems as if neither Candice, Mel, or Sabrina seem to have heard them. and Jack is completely ignoring them, too. Did I imagine this? No, I know I didn't. It would be way too soon for us to get engaged. We've barely lived together for four months. I try to quickly forget about it. Anyway, they probably just wanted his attention, right?

ROMANTIC GESTURES AND LIES

AFTER THREE WEEKS ON tour, I decided it was time I surprise Jack with a romantic gesture of my own—performing one of the dance routines on stage with him for his birthday. Since Jack hasn't been in Oceania and Asia for years, he is really busy, making it easier for me to rehearse with the dancers. They are very helpful and patient with me. Gideon, one of the dancers, is playing Jack, and Elena, who is Jack's usual partner, is showing me what I'm supposed to do and it's a little awkward because the moves are sexy. I know it's going to be even more uncomfortable on stage, but I am determined to do this to surprise him.

Japan is one of my favorite countries so far. The fans here are a little extra, but also very respectful, and Jack can interact with them a lot more than in other countries. We visit a lot of places and temples, and even go to a cat café to play with adorable kitties. This fun day out really helped me take my mind off tonight's big performance, but now the stress is starting to build up again, and since the song is the last one before the Encore, I have a lot more time to be nervous.

On the big night, I put my costume on and when the music starts playing; the dancers take their spots behind him, allowing Elena and me to switch places. Swallowing my nerves, I count my breaths and wait for my cue. Jack doesn't see a thing since he's got his back to me. For the first moves I have to do with him, I only have my hands on his body, so he doesn't realize anything yet. He turns around, sees me, and he's so surprised he forgets a few words. After he composes himself, a smile stretches across his face, his eyes shining brightly. We perform the rest of the routine to perfection. I don't miss any of my cues and don't shy away from the sexy parts. When the song is over, he takes me in his arms and kisses me under the screams and cheers from the audience.

"Happy birthday!" I say in his ear. "I love you."

"I love you too." His eyes fill with tears, making my knees wobble.

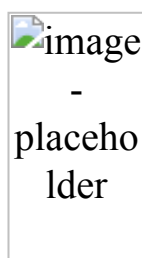
"Look at this, guys," he says into the microphone, shaking his head. "Look at this girl and how amazing and crazy beautiful she is! And she managed to pull this off without me knowing. She's incredible," he adds, giving me a swift kiss on the cheek as the audience cheers louder.

"Exactly one year ago, I met this girl and my life completely changed. She made me see the world differently, and God, I didn't know it could be so amazing. She makes everything better." He's really emotional and I'm on the verge of tears myself. "Babe, thank you. I love you so much. You inspire me every day and you're the best part of me," he

finishes, taking me into his arms. Only Jack can end up sweeping me off my feet when I'm the one doing the romantic gesture.

Kim and Adrian bring him a huge birthday cake on stage. He blows his twenty-four candles and then decides it would be fun to start a food fight, with me, then the dancers, and, of course, the audience who loves it. Even Kim ends up with a big chunk of cake on her blouse.

After going backstage to clean up, he makes me come back on stage to perform "Only Girl" with me by his side.



AS SOON AS WE land in L.A., it's time for not one, but two red-carpet events. I now get why this time of year is called award season. I swear, there's one each month. We're going to the *Grammys*, which is followed by *Music Gazette Magazine* annual party. It's Valentine's Day too, and Jack, always being so romantic and thoughtful, surprises me when I wake up with

a trail of rose petals, leading me to an amazing breakfast he prepared for me.

I get to wear two amazing dresses today, which is another gift itself. At the *Grammys*, it's the magnificent turquoise ball gown with the lace plunging neckline from Auguste Brunet and a lot of magazines interview me about it. Jack wins his first ever *Grammy* award, calling me his lucky charm again as he's accepting it. I'm already exhausted from all of these emotions and glamor, but we have to change and get to the *Music Gazette* party.

Each year, the magazine throws the most exclusive party, filled only with celebrities and A-listers, held right after the *Grammys* to celebrate the night and the winners. It's the first time I got my own invitation to an event. I wasn't just invited as Jack's plus one and it adds an extra layer of pressure. I'm not sure why they would invite me to such a high-profile event. Kim thinks it's due to my Instagram reaching thirty million followers, and because a lot of celebs and designers are now following me.

I'm wearing a silver V-neck mermaid dress made of lace and tulle, cleverly hiding my curves, from Maison Gaumé, another French fashion house. I'm really proud to be representing the French haute couture once again tonight.

The party is different from any party I've been to in my life. Even if it's filled with celebrities, it has a really low-key ambience, far from the usual glamor, and they only serve street food. There are no tables, mostly couches everywhere, and

little bars scattered around. Waiters are passing by with *Dom Perignon*, but also hot dogs and burgers trays, which is an odd pairing. Seeing all these girls in designer dresses eating fast food is really unique.

I spot a mall-like photo booth, so I grab Candice and pull her inside, forcing a tiara on her head before we pose for the camera. We're waiting for our pictures while the guys are getting some drinks when Candice nudges me in the stomach.

"Ouch! What?"

"Taylor, two o'clock," she says.

She's gorgeous. One of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen in my life. She looks radiant in a midnight blue ball gown, and I can't help but imagining her and Jack together. They would look so perfect. My heart sinks at the thought.

"Don't worry about it," Candice says. "We can avoid her."

But it looks like Taylor has other plans. She's coming directly toward us. Shit. I scan the room, looking for the nearest exit.

"Candice!" She smiles, taking her into a swift hug.

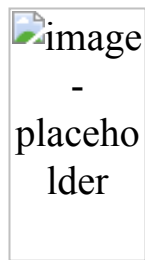
"Hi, Tay! How are you?"

"I'm great, and you?"

"Good. This is Louise, by the way. Jack's girlfriend," she says, gesturing toward me.

"Oh, hi," she says, raising her eyebrows.

The guys join us and we all chat for a few minutes. Well, I don't say much, I can't hardly breathe properly. The only thing keeping me standing there is Jack's arm around my waist. He doesn't seem that thrilled to see her, and when he starts scrolling on his phone with his other hand, I can't hide my smile.



SINCE WE HAVE A full month at home before going back on tour, Jack insists that we finally order my Christmas present. I've been trying to postpone it because I still feel weird accepting a car as a present. But my back is against the wall now.

Of course, the first dealerships he takes me to are Lamborghini, Ferrari, and Bugatti, and I really don't find anything that would suit my classical style. But since he only agrees to take me to luxury dealers saying that he "can't have just any car in his driveway," I settle for an Aston Martin

Vanquish in silver gray. It's an amazing car, and the most classical supercar I could find. It's so luxurious and it's like the car and I blend into one when I drive it. I get to choose everything in it and they tell us it'll be ready in six months, which is supposedly early for a car like that. They are making it a priority since it's for Jack.

After another month of tour (Africa and Middle East), and one award show (*Billboard Music Awards* in Las Vegas where Jack wins six awards and Mel and I get to meet pop icon Lesley Murphy), we enjoy a quiet week at home.

"Babe, I'm going out," Jack says, knocking on the office door where I'm writing.

"Where are you going?" I ask, turning my chair around.

"Just some errands."

"Can I come with you? I need the fresh air. My head's going to explode." I chuckle, getting up.

"Um, actually I'm going with Adrian, so..."

"Oh okay. That's fine, I'll just take a walk outside then. Have fun." I smile as he kisses my forehead.

I can't help but have a weird feeling inside me. Jack's behavior is a little off. Usually whenever he goes somewhere, he always wants me to come. And what kind of errands would he run with Adrian? That's a bit weird. No, what am I even talking about? We do stuff separately all the time, especially when it's work related. I dismiss the thought from my head and go downstairs. I'm putting my coat on when I notice

Jack's phone on the bench. He's going to look everywhere for it. I call Adrian.

"Hey, Louise, what's up?"

"Hey, Adrian. I'm good, thanks. Listen, Jack forgot his phone, so tell him not to worry when he arrives," I say, sitting on the bench to put my shoes on.

"What are you talking about?" Adrian asks.

I sit up straight. "Jack. When you meet him, tell him that he forgot his phone at home. It's here and not lost somewhere."

"I'm not meeting Jack. I'm in New York until tomorrow."

"Oh, okay. Maybe I misunderstood, then. Sorry I disturbed you," I say, putting down my boot.

"No worries, Louise. See you."

I know I didn't misunderstand. I'm sure he said he was meeting Adrian. What's happening? I'm sitting here, trying to make sense of any of this, both phones in hands when Jack enters the house.

"Hey! Have you seen my—" he asks, his eyes landing on his phone in my hands.

"Thank God, I thought I lost it for a second," he says, as I'm giving him back his phone.

"I just called Adrian to tell him you forgot it, but he told me he's in New York," I say, looking him straight in the eye, hoping to get a strong reaction from him. But I don't.

Instead, his shoulders drop, and a wide smile spreads on his cheeks. “Did I say Adrian? I’m meeting Kim. I gotta go. You know how she gets when people are late.”

The weird feeling now transformed into a pit in my stomach. I’m pacing in the corridor, only one boot on, fidgeting with the keys in my hands. He’s lying to me. I can feel it. Why would he meet Kim outside? And where? He didn’t even say. This doesn’t add up. I sit back down on the bench and sigh. I need to calm down. He never gave me a reason not to trust him before, so why shouldn’t I? He’s not like other guys. I can’t let my insecurities get the best of me.

STARRY DINNER AND WRONG TURN

A WEEK LATER, HOWEVER, I'm taking a break from writing, so I pop into the music room where Jack is composing, only to find it empty, music still playing in the background. *Where is he?* I call his name and check every room of the house, but he's nowhere to be found. Why wouldn't he tell me that he was leaving? Where is he? Now that I think of it, he's been acting a little weird lately, taking calls in other rooms and having a lot of meetings with Kim and Adrian. That, plus our misunderstanding the other day, I know in my gut he's hiding something from me. Part of me wished I'd looked at his phone the last time he left it out, but I'd never forgive myself for invading his privacy.

I go back into the house and grab a bottle of water. Sitting down on the kitchen bar, I scroll through my phone, trying to distract myself, but it doesn't work. All I can think of is *where is Jack? And why is he lying to me?* I come across a picture of Candice and Watson walking on a beach in the Caribbean and I know how to get the answers to my questions. I take a deep breath, open the web browser and type in "Jack Rose." This is the first time I'm doing this, ever. I always thought it was best

to steer clear of the internet and tabloids, but desperate times come with desperate measures.

More than one billion results. Of course. I look in the pictures section, but I see a lot of official pictures of him and some of the two of us. I go back to the main browser, type in “Buzz tabloid,” and enter the website. It’s flashy, every article is trying to get my attention. I locate the search bar and type in Jack’s name. Three thousand results, but they are listed in chronological order, newest to oldest. The first one has my heart sinking. It’s a picture of Jack talking with a girl on a street. The title says, “*Jack Rose Seen on Rodeo Drive with Mystery Girl.*” I close my eyes. No, it can’t be. I know what *mystery girl* means. I *was* the mystery girl last year.

I open the article and see four pictures of Jack with a tall blonde standing on the sidewalk. They’re not doing anything. They’re only talking. I feel a little better, but still, who is she? I look at the date. This was the day he said he was meeting Kim after he said it was Adrian. Something is definitely off and I won’t let him make a fool of me. I take a screenshot of the article and wait for him to come back.

“Hey, babe?” Jack says, when he enters the kitchen, fifteen minutes later. He comes toward me and leans to kiss me, but I step back, holding my phone with the article in front of his face.

“What’s this?” I ask, doing my best to keep my composure.

“What are you talking about?” he says, taking my phone into his hands to look closer at the picture. He’s trying to hide

it, but worry flashes across his face.

“Well?” I add, crossing my arms.

“L, it’s Lara. Kim’s assistant,” he says, matter-of-factly. “Kim couldn’t come with me to the meeting, so Lara came. The question is, what are you doing looking me up on *Buzz*?” he says, arching an eyebrow.

I do feel a little silly now. I know Kim has an assistant named Lara. I haven’t met her before, but Kim mentioned she was about the same age as me.

“Sorry.” I sigh. “I guess I got paranoid. Between Kim and Adrian the other day, and today, you just left without saying goodbye. Where were you?”

“I was in the neighborhood. Miguel brought the new Ferrari from the garage,” he says, shaking his keys in front of me. “I just wanted to take her for a quick spin. I did yell where I was going, though. You probably didn’t hear me. I didn’t think to come up and tell you. Sorry if that upset you.”

He comes closer and takes me into his arms. Shaking my head, I let him because I do believe he’s telling the truth. My book has been keeping me up at night lately. I decide to go watch a movie in the movie room to relax.

The movie is almost over when Jack’s head pops in.

“Hey, babe. When you’re done, can you go get ready for tonight? I want to take you somewhere. Wear something nice, okay?” He closes the door behind him.

Here we go. Romantic Jack is back again. I'm glad I love him way more than I'm-hiding-stuff-but-not-really-lying Jack. When the movie is over, I hurry to the closet. I brush my hair, do an evening makeup look, slip in the Maison Gaumé red satin dress that I got as a gift from Valentin Guérin, the designer himself, and join him downstairs.

I gasp. Jack is in a tuxedo, holding a flower bouquet in his hands.

“What’s all this?” I ask.

“I just want to celebrate you. I don’t need any special occasion for that. I’d do this every day if I could. Plus, you’ve been so stressed lately, even paranoiac.” He smiles. “I want to do something nice before we go back for another crazy month on tour.”

We hop into Jack’s new Ferrari and drive for about thirty minutes. I have no idea where we’re going until we get there: The Griffith Observatory. We get into the building and are greeted by a gentleman in a suit who directs us to a room. Well, it’s not exactly a room. It’s a planetarium. It’s circular, with a lot of seats which I’m guessing are usually for public showing, and in the middle of the room is the most romantic setting I have ever seen. There’s a white blanket with rose petals all over it, and a basket of food and drinks. Our host turns on a machine, and the stars start to shine above us. The entire room is moving, showing the different planets and the Milky Way.

“Wow Jack, this is amazing!” I exclaim.

“Picnic under the stars.” He smiles before serving me a glass of champagne. We clink glasses and share a moment of silence. Enjoying the beauty around us.

This place is so unique and peaceful, I even forget we’re in a building in the middle of Los Angeles. We enjoy the mouthwatering food, and we’re finishing dessert when Jack takes my hands and stares into my eyes.

“L, since you came into my life, you made me see it differently. You made me see it through your pretty hazel eyes, and damn, it’s beautiful. You make everything better, easier. You calm my nerves. You lift me up when I’m down, and get me like no one else does. I can’t even for one second imagine my life without you. I don’t want to ever have to live it without you,” he declares, taking out a small dark red box of his suit.

My heart jumps to my throat. Oh dear! This is happening. I pull in a deep breath, but my lungs seize as he opens the box to reveal the most incredible, exquisite, bright diamond ring I have ever seen in my entire life. The band is in white gold, I assume, with little diamonds encrusted on it, and the rock is a square full of diamonds, sparkling even more under the stars.

“Louise Mercier, will you please make me the happiest man of the entire universe and become my wife?”

I don’t even have to think about it. Even though it’s crazy, even though we’ve barely known each other for a year, even though his life is complicated, I can’t imagine my life without him either.

“Yes, of course I will,” I exclaim, falling into his arms. Brushing my hair from my neck, he cups my face in his warm hands and our lips collide. I run my fingers through the thickness of his hair, never wanting to let him go. I’m sure that we’re the happiest couple in the universe right now.

“That’s why I’ve been lying, by the way. The girl was from Cartier,” he says, serving me another glass of champagne.

“I knew you weren’t honest with me.” I laugh, then shove him playfully.

“I know. I’m a bad liar. You should be glad. I just wanted it to be a surprise. Kim offered to get it for me, but I wanted to choose it myself, and obviously they couldn’t come at home because you were there.”

“Makes sense,” I say, taking a sip of my champagne.

“I actually designed it with Cartier. I went there after Christmas.”

“What?” I say, looking at the ring once more. “Jack, it’s so beautiful. Thank you so much. It’s perfect.” I fall into his arms again and kiss him passionately.

“Let’s go home?” he says against my mouth.

Jack holds my hand tightly and kisses my neck and mouth all the way to the car. I feel so silly for doubting him, even for one second. Jack is an amazing man, and he keeps proving it to me every day. I guess I was right to think there was someone wonderful out there for me. There was, and he’s right next to me.

We got into the Ferrari and make our way back home. But as soon as we reach Loz Feliz Blvd, we are ambushed by paparazzi in cars and scooters. They were waiting for us. Jack speeds on the empty boulevard to lose them, but they're ready for it. More are there when we reach the 101. They're on both sides of the car and the engine roars loudly as we're trying to escape. We are now close to Universal Studios, and the bridge is the last thing I see.

WELCOME BACK

WHEN I WAKE UP, my head is pounding and I can't seem to move or even open my eyes. My senses are all blurry. Hearing is the first that comes back. *Noises, steps, and someone talking.* Smelling is next. *Is that perfume? A flower, iris maybe?* I finally manage to open my eyes, but all I see is white, bright white. Almost too bright to be true. *Am I in heaven? I must be. I died and I'm in heaven. But what happened?* I remember Jack waiting for me with a bouquet, the stars, and his proposal. It was a magical night. A flash appears before my eyes. The wild paparazzi, the speeding up, Jack telling me to hold on, a bridge, and a flash of light. I must be dead then. At least I was at my happiest when it happened. *But what about my parents? How are they going to cope with this?* I don't want to cause them that much pain.

Something doesn't feel right, though. There are more and more noises, and they're clearer too. People are yelling and machines are beeping. Surely, there are no electronics in heaven. The noise is becoming more intense and even hurts a little. I try to move to see around me, but I can't. *Did they tie*

me up? I'm not sure, I can't feel anything. All of a sudden, a face appears over me.

“Welcome back, Louise,” says the woman with a smile. She holds a blinding light over my face, making my eyes water with pain. I want to scream, tell her that it hurts, ask where I am and where Jack is, but I can't.

I start to regain feeling in my body and everything hurts. My eyes, my head, my back, my legs, my stomach, my face. The fact that I can't move or express myself is frustrating me. I need to sit up. I'm not comfortable like this. There's something in my throat, burning and irritating. *Can someone please take it off?* No sound is getting out of my mouth. The woman leaves and tears fill my eyes. *Please don't leave me alone! I'm so scared. Where am I? Where is Jack? What is happening? Can someone please make that striking sound stop? Anyone? Help me!*

I don't know how long I wait, but it seems like forever before I see any action. Finally, here he is: the love of my life, his face hovering over me. He has multiple bruises and burns on his face and a bandage around his head.

“Oh, babe, I'm so sorry!” he says, tearing up. “I love you so much. Please be okay. You have to fight this,” he pleads.

I want to reassure him, tell him that I'm not leaving, that I'm here. I want to ask if he's okay, what's with the bandages, and what's wrong with his head, but I can't. More tears flow out of my eyes and he wipes them with his finger before kissing me on the forehead.

“It’s gonna be fine, babe. You’ll be fine. You have to. The doctors are gonna look at you and you’ll be fine. You will, babe, I promise.” I can see the worry and the fear in his eyes, telling me that something must be terribly wrong with me. I try to communicate with him with my eyes, but they fill with more and more tears. Two doctors approach my bed. They ask me to follow a light with my eyes, and to blink if I can feel when they touch my hands, my knees, and my feet. I feel everything and I hear people gasping in relief, even though I can’t see them.

“Now please, Louise,” one of the doctors says. “Stay very calm and do not move. I’m going to withdraw the tube in your mouth, okay?”

I blink yes. It’s not like I can move, anyway. When he takes it off, it’s like he’s tearing up every single tissue inside my throat and mouth, but I feel a lot better when it’s out. Like I can finally breathe again. The nurse comes back and asks me if I want to drink some water. I try to say yes, but nothing comes out, so I blink my eyes again. She takes a remote in her hand and presses a button. The backrest of my bed moves a little until I’m in a semi-sitting/lying position.

“I can’t go further than that but it should be more comfortable,” she says, then gives me a glass of water. “Drink it very slowly, okay?”

Now that I am sitting, I can see my surroundings. I’m indeed in a hospital bed, in a very big room, filled with many familiar faces. Jack, who also has his arm in a sling, Adrian

and Kim, Mel, my sister, and my parents. I don't get it. How can they all be here already? They all have the same scared expression, but I also detect a glimmer of hope, or relief, I'm not sure in their eyes. They all look at me, waiting for me to say something, so after three small sips of water, I try speaking.

"Hi," I say, but nothing comes out. I take another sip and try again.

"Hi." This time it came out. It was weak, but they visibly heard it because they're all smiling and greeting me in return.

"I can't move," I say.

"Don't try to move, babe," Jack quickly says. "They say you shouldn't yet. They strapped you to your bed after the surgery,"

"Sorry about that," Kim says with a reassuring smile. "But you will recover better if you don't move."

"Surgery?" I ask.

"We were in a car accident. Do you remember?"

"The paparazzi, the bridge," I whisper.

"Yeah. They chased us and we crashed into the bridge," he says, wringing his hands.

"Are you okay?" I murmur.

"I'm fine." He smiles weakly. "It's just a minor concussion, some burns, and a shoulder sprain. I don't even need this anymore." He shows me the sling. "But they insist."

“What? How long has it been?”

“You were in the coma for six days, babe.”

Six days. I’ve been out for six days? “What’s wrong with me?”

“You suffered from a severe concussion. Your collarbone and right leg were broken, but they repaired them in surgery. You also have some burns on your skin because the airbag melted the dress,” he explains.

Oh no! The dress! Valentin’s gift. It must be ruined. Oh no, his new Ferrari!

“The car?” I ask.

“Wrecked.” He shrugs.

“I’m sorry,” I say, which makes everyone chuckle.

“Who cares about the car, babe?” Jack smiles, stroking my forehead.

“We thought you were dead,” Mel says, barely able to speak, holding back her tears.

My parents, on the other hand, can’t hold them. I move my fingers to take their hands, but I can’t lift my arm. *Broken collarbone, right.* My sister, who is smaller and closer to the bed, notices and puts her hand over mine. When I finally start crying, so does everybody else.

The nurse comes in and asks that they all let me rest. When she says only Jack is allowed to stay, I’m relieved. I don’t

want to be alone. He gives me a soft kiss and sits on a chair next to me, his hand over mine.

When I wake up, it's dark out and Jack is asleep in his chair. I'm really hungry but I don't want to wake him, so I fall back asleep. The next time my eyes open, it's daylight again and Jack's not here anymore. I panic a little. *Did he leave me? Am I damaged beyond repair and he couldn't handle it?*

"Hi, Louise," says the nurse as she enters holding a food tray. *Thank God, I'm starving.* "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. Thanks for the food."

"I'm going to feed it to you, okay?" she says, drawing a chair next to my bed. "It's better if you don't move your arms yet."

"I'll do it," Mel says, entering the room. She looks so different from the Mel I know. She's worn out, her green eyes are puffy, and she seems even thinner than before. She still has that terrified look on her face.

"You look awful," I say, which makes her light up for a second.

"You're one to talk."

"*Touché.*" I smile. "I was in a car accident. What's your excuse?"

"My best friend was in a car accident."

"Are you okay?" I ask. It hurts me so much to see her like that.

“It’s me who should be asking you that!”

“I’m good, but I’m starving,” I say, looking at the food.

“Right.” She giggles. “That’s my girl.”

She feeds me some apple sauce, fruits cut in small pieces, cereals, and yogurt. It hurts a little when I eat, but it gets better after a few bites.

“Where’s Jack?” I ask.

“He’s getting checked up. They’re taking off his head bandage today,” she says.

“Is he okay?”

“He is now that you’re awake. You really scared us, Lou. We really thought you were dead.”

“I’m sorry. What happened after the crash?”

Mel sets the spoon down, then leans back in the plastic chair. Quiet, as if she needs a few minutes to collect herself, she finally says, “The firemen took forever to pull you out of the car because it’s so small and it crashed on your side, against a pillar,” she continues. “Jack was already at the hospital and you were still unconscious in the car. When they finally managed to get you out, you were unresponsive. They brought you in, but with the number of injuries you had, they weren’t sure you’d make it through. They tried a lot of things but nothing was working, and you rejected the pain killers. Jack literally fought with his doctors to come by your side. He insisted that they do everything to save you. He wouldn’t let it go, even though they said they were out of options. As a last

resort, they put you in an artificial coma so they could work on your physical injuries.”

“Were you there?” I ask, a little confused.

“I got here two days after the accident. Kim and Adrian were amazing. They called me when you were in surgery and arranged for me to come here. Then your parents came the next day, and they were a big support for Jack through all of this. He was furious, enraged. He couldn’t handle the pain. They even had to sedate him for a few hours because he was frantic and risked injuring himself even more.”

“Wow,” I reply, taking it all in. “I don’t get why the paparazzi were so aggressive?”

She shakes her head. “Well, they guessed about the engagement. They wanted the exclusivity.”

“My ring!” I gasp.

“Don’t worry. It’s safe. Jack got it. Congrats, by the way.”

“Thanks.” I smile, remembering Jack and me under the stars. “Are the paparazzi okay?”

“Only you would care about them.” She sighs. “Three of them are severely injured and one of them is dead.”

“What!” If I could move, I’d cover my mouth with my hands. A tear slips down my cheek. When Mel notices, she takes the napkin from my tray and dries my wet cheeks.

“It’s not your fault, Lou! It’s theirs. Plus, Jack has been a total gentleman in all of this, because he’s paying for the care

of the three that are injured. I wouldn't have been able to if I were him, but he said that's what you'd want and that, as crazy as they are, they are like this because of their jobs."

"True. How long before I can move?" I ask.

"I'm not sure. I think one or two more days," she says with pity in her eyes again.

"Stop looking at me like that! I'm not dead." I pout.

"I'm sorry, it's just so hard seeing you like this." Her face is a thick mask of concern.

My gaze skips away.

"Show me. It can't be that bad," I demand.

She hesitates a little but goes to grab the bathroom mirror. I couldn't be more wrong. My head is completely covered in a bandage, my face is bruised and my entire upper body is in a strapped bandage. I look like a mummy. She lifts the cover to show me my right leg, which is also in a bandage. I look even worse than I feel, and seeing the extent of my injuries makes me aware of the gravity of the accident.

LIFE IS NOT FAIR

AFTER MEL LEAVES, I get a visit from my parents. They fuss over me and talk quickly in French, asking if I'm okay and if I need anything.

"You scared us so much," Dad says. "It was such a shock when Adrian called to say he was sending the jet for us. Everyone on the news kept saying you were dead."

"The news?" I ask, perplexed.

"Yes, here and in France. Every news outlet was talking about it," he replies.

I don't get it. Why would I be on national news?

"I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say. It hurts me to have inflicted them with that much pain. They look so different, like they aged a few years.

"Where's Eva?" I ask, peering around Dad toward the door, as if she'll just walk in any moment.

"She stayed at Jack's house with his family. They arrived late last night. It's good for her not to be in the hospital too

much, but I can get her if you want,” Mom answers, grabbing her phone.

“No, no, it’s fine. She’s better at home,” I reply.

“You look better, babe,” Jack says, entering the room with a huge flower arrangement.

“You too,” I say, smiling. His head bandages are off and he seems more refreshed than yesterday.

“You do look better, Jack. Did you finally get some sleep?” Mom asks.

“Yes,” he replies, kissing my forehead.

“You weren’t sleeping?” I ask.

“Not really. Not since we got here.”

“But, Jack, it’s been a week!” I say, trying to sit up.

“I know, but I couldn’t,” he says, putting the flowers, peonies, this time on my bedside table.

“So, you’re the one bringing me all these flowers! I love peonies!”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “Apart from roses, I wasn’t sure which ones you liked, so I got a bit of everything. But I’m not the only one, though. You got a lot of well wishes from other people, too.”

“You have to show me,” I say, but we’re interrupted by the nurse, who says it’s time for me to get cleaned up, asking them to leave.

The next day, they take the binder out. It hurts when they do, but I'm relieved. I feel a lot freer. I still can't move my arm much since they put it in a sling, but at least I can do some movements and I'm not trapped anymore. They also remove my head bandages, replacing them with smaller ones in the bruised areas. These two changes have a positive effect on everybody. Jack spends most of his days by my side, and my parents, Eva, and Jack's family, are there most of the time, too. Mel had to go back for a few days to Las Vegas, but she said she will come back to see me for the weekend. Kim and Adrian pop in every day to see how I'm doing, and to check on Jack. I get a lot of other visitors too and many well wishes cards, baskets, flowers, and chocolates. Some were expected, from Bronislaw, Jody, Sandra, the dancers, and some a lot less. I receive a get well soon card from the Go-Go-Girls, courtesy of Elsie who asked her ex-band mates to sign it, and a Julia Moore scrub cap from *Medical Drama*, with a note signed from all the cast, saying that if I wanted so bad to be in the show, I should have just asked.

The most prestigious gifts I receive are from the designers. Auguste Brunet himself sent me a pair of shoes, saying that he can't wait to see me walking again, Cartier sent me a broach and said it, "Will go well with your ring for your wedding day," and Valentin Guérin, creative director of Maison Gaumé, sent me the same red satin dress I wore the night of the accident, with a note saying, "*Since you ruined the last one, I worked around the clock to make it again for you. Please don't ruin it this time!*"

I can't believe all these people sent me presents. I don't even have time to look at them all that Adrian says there are more in another room, but since they were sent by strangers, they need to be verified by security before.

It sounds a little extreme, but it's nothing compared to the amount of security this place has been given because of me. I learned that Jack hired a special security team for the hospital. There are guards at each entrance. He privatized the entire corridor where my room is, and it's guarded like a hawk. Only specific personnel are allowed to come in, and he flew two specialist surgeons from Switzerland to work on me. The best in their category: orthopedic surgery.

"It's a little over the top, Jack." I sigh. "Honestly, I don't need that much security."

"Really?" he asks, falling into the chair beside my bed, then turning the TV on. A news anchor is talking, but it's on mute. I can, however, read the title: *Louise Mercier Still Hospitalized at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center*. He changes the channel to show me exactly how many of them are in front of the hospital, reporting on the news. On one channel, we see Adrian and Kim arriving, escorted by security through the mass of people standing outside.

"That's insane," I say.

"It's been like that since we got here. Except the titles changed from '*Jack Rose and Louise Mercier die in tragic Car Accident,*' to '*Jack Rose Survives Car Crash but Fiancée Louise Mercier Perishes,*' to '*Louise Mercier Placed in an*

Artificial Coma, Fighting for Her Life, to *Louise Mercier Reported Awake and Well,* and now this.” He points to the television.

“It’s crazy.” My gaze is transfixed on the screen.

“Yes, it is,” Kim says when she enters the room, followed by Adrian. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.” I smile.

“Good.” She smiles back. “When you’re ready, I’ll show you the articles, if you want. And whenever you can, think about posting on Instagram, your fans are really worried,”

I’ve never thought of them as my fans, though. They’re more Jack’s fans, following me to see more of him.

“But now, Jack, we really need to talk about the tour,” Adrian says, folding his arms, a stern look on his face.

“Oh! I completely forgot. You’re missing your tour!” I gasp.

“What about it?” Jack groans, cradling his face in his hands.

“Well, we already canceled the first two weeks, but you could do the remainder of it. Your arm is healed now,” Adrian suggests.

“No fucking way!” Jack yells, giving me a startle.

Wincing from the pain, I move to put my hand on his wrist, then give it a gentle squeeze.

“Jack, you have to be reasonable about this. You are losing millions of dollars for each missed show,” Adrian continues.

“Plus, the fans have been waiting a long time to see you. It’s not fair,” Kim says.

“It’s not fair? Are you fucking kidding me?” When Jack stands up, clenching his fists, my hand falls back to the bed. “What’s not fair is that my fiancée has half her body broken because of me. What’s not fair is that she didn’t ask for any of this. What’s not fair is that my life sucks and that there’s always something, or someone, to take things away from me!”

“Jack, man,” Adrian whispers, waving his hands, asking Jacks to tone it down a little.

Jack doesn’t budge. “No way, Adrian. I don’t give a crap about the millions. I’m not leaving her side.”

My heart hammers against my ribs. I’ve never seen him so mad, so hurt, and definitely never seen him talk that way to either of them. I feel it’s my turn to intervene.

“Jack,” I say, softly.

“Please.” He shakes his head. “Don’t get into it too. End of discussion.”

I give an apologetic look to Kim and Adrian, who take this as their cue to leave the room. Jack is pacing like a caged lion.

“Come here,” I say, patting the side of my bed.

“What?” He stops pacing, his chest rising and falling quickly, as if he can’t catch his breath.

“Come next to me, please,” I prod.

He looks furious, but he sighs in defeat when his eyes meet mine.

“I love you,” I say.

When he lays his head carefully on my stomach, I stroke his hair in silence for a few moments

“I’m so sorry,” he finally says.

“Don’t be. I’m okay. I’m great actually,” I say, with all the enthusiasm I can gather.

He looks at me, then puts his head back on my stomach.

“You have to go, Jack.” Even if I know it’s the right thing to say—the right thing to do. My heart still twists when I say the words.

“The hell I do.”

I can’t help but smile at his defiance. His unwavering love. “Of course you do. Your fans need you. You already cancelled two weeks over this. It’s time.”

“I’m not leaving you alone.”

“I won’t be alone. My parents are here, your mom, Leo, the girls, Mel comes every week to see me, Candice and Sabrina both said they’ll be back soon.”

“Cool. But I’m still not leaving you.”

“Be reasonable. I’m okay. You have to go back out there. The doctors said that I have to stay here for at least two more weeks before being able to go back home. And even then, I’ll be doing physical therapy every day. I won’t be capable of

doing much for a while. So, you might as well go and we'll see each other when I'm better. How does that sound?"

"That sounds fucking awful and crazy. That's what it sounds like," he growls.

"I know, but think about when you asked me to move in with you last year. I found the idea crazy too, but I said yes anyway, and that's what you have to do. I promise I'll be here when you get back."

"Promise?" he asks, lifting his head up to look me in the eye.

"Of course. I love you."

"I love you too," he says, sitting back up. "It's time I give you this back," he says, getting the ring out of his pocket and putting it on my finger.

"Thank God! I thought you didn't want me to have it anymore," I joke.

"You're the only girl for me, Louise Mercier," he says, before singing "Only Girl" to me. I've never felt better since I got here. Hearing him sing my song is all the medicine I need.

GUESS WHO'S BACK?

TWO DAYS LATER, JACK goes back on tour as promised. He video chats with me several times a day, and every night, he sends me a video from the stage. I miss him like crazy, but I'm relieved that at least one of us is getting back to normal. I also share, as Kim suggested, a picture of myself on Instagram. I look awful, but I tell them not to worry about me and thank them for all of their prayers and wishes. Because I did. I received a lot of support on social media. From strangers and from celebrities, even some I never met. Kim also sends me, upon request, the articles about the accident.

I'm looking at them now with Mel. She was right to warn me because they really are traumatic. The worst thing is seeing the pictures. We can see the wrecked car on most of them, and in some we can even see me unconscious, being evacuated by the firemen. And then there are also the headlines. As terrifying as Jack told me. Most of them stating that I was dead. And I could have been if it wasn't for Jack. It makes me realize the trauma my friends and family must have gone through.

As expected, I don't have a lot of time to myself during my remaining weeks at the hospital. Mel is here half the time, Sabrina comes by several times, Candice, who is in the middle of her tour, calls me a lot, and my parents and Jack's family are here every day. After a week, the doctors say that I can start moving a little, so I get to be pushed in a wheelchair around the hospital, and on the hospital's grounds. It feels really good to breathe some fresh air. I've been inside for almost a month now. I begged my doctors to let me go home every day, and they finally grant my wish on June twenty-third.

"You'll be able to go home tomorrow, Louise," Dr. Engel says. "You will still need to keep your casts on for two more weeks, though, and then we'll start physical therapy. Everything has been arranged at home, and either me or doctor Zeller will check up on you every other day. You will also have Nurse Emily here." He gestures to a small brunette. "Visiting you every day to help you out."

"How long do you think it'll take before I completely recover?"

"If you follow all of this and commit to physical therapy, I'd say you'll be in shape at the end of the summer."

"Okay, thank you so much for everything."

"The only way to thank us is to get better." He smiles.

"Of course! I'll do everything you say."

"She better!" Dad exclaims, who was listening carefully.

“I see you’re well supervised. I’ll take care of your discharge papers, get you a prescription for pain killers, and you’ll be on your way in the morning.”

The next day, it’s with a crazy escort that I finally get out of the hospital. I’m in a wheelchair, pushed by my dad and my mom. Eva and Mel are next to me, carrying the numerous presents they haven’t brought home yet, and we are, of course, protected by six scary-looking security details.

Jack’s staff has transformed the formal sitting room downstairs into a bedroom. Because all the bedrooms are upstairs, it would be hard to navigate the upstairs-downstairs situation since I’m not allowed to use crutches yet. The house is also more crowded than usual since everyone is sleeping here to give me a hand. For once, it’s actually useful to have so many bedrooms. I really appreciate their company. They all help me a lot and boost my morale, especially my dad with his bad jokes and Susan and my mom with their delicious home-cooked meals.

Emily, the nurse, comes by every day and Dr. Engel and Dr. Zeller, every other day as promised, and on June twenty-eighth, Jack is finally back. I missed him so much. A lot more than I let him realize. We have never been separated since we got together, so I’m glad it’s all over.

When they finally set me free from my casts, I feel like I lost twenty pounds. I still can’t go crazy, though, and I must remain in my chair until I regain more strength and ability. But I can now start physical therapy with Jennifer, my therapist.

She comes every day for a few hours and makes me do a lot of exercises. My favorites are the ones in the pool. It seems easier, and it's good to be in the water with this steamy weather.

The great thing is that I can start writing again, but when we say goodbye to our families, I'm glad that my mom bites her tongue about my career choice. She hasn't mentioned the book once. Good thing too. I'm starting to have serious doubts about my ability to actually write something decent.

Two weeks later, we're getting ready for bed when Jack gets a phone call from Kim.

"Oh yeah." He raises his eyebrows. "When? Okay. Then you have to say no. Yeah, I know. But bad timing. Maybe another time," he adds before saying goodbye and hanging up.

"What was that about?" I ask, turning to him.

"*VMAs*. I'm nominated, and they wanted me to open the ceremony at the end of August. Don't worry, I'm not going," he says, lying down on the bed.

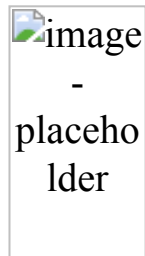
"What? Jack, of course you're going!"

"I don't want to go without you. I'll just do it some other time."

"Nonsense. We're going and I will walk that red carpet." I smile, sitting up as straight as I can.

"It's in just over a month, L."

“I’ll be ready,” I assure and I mean it. I will do everything to be ready. I don’t want him to miss this because of me and I always do my best work when I have a deadline.



CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

“Jack, over here.”

“Looking great, Louise.”

“How are you feeling?”

I’m blinded by the lights and confused by all the commotion around us. The photographers are yelling, cheering and I still have to be careful not to trip. Following Jack, I pose and smile next to him as he puts his arm around my waist.

My doctors officially declared me in full recovery yesterday and gave me the green light to attend the *VMAs*, in wedges. Jody found a great silver pair that goes perfectly with my

Maison Gaumé red dress, the one I was wearing when Jack proposed.

We're done with pictures and moving to the interview section when Candice calls for us. She just stepped on the red carpet in a celeste blue ballerina dress, Watson right behind her. We join them under the sound of the cameras clicking.

"I'm so proud of you, girl!" she says, wrapping her arms around me.

"Thanks, Candice." I smile.

"Let's take some shots together."

We take some of the two of us and then with the guys. Minutes later, Bronislaw and Sarah Kimmons join in. And then Opal Davis, Hannah Hayes, Hollie Barker and John Greenway, making the paparazzi go even wilder.

I'm back.

PARTY, PRESSURE, POLYNESIA

THE NEXT DAY, WE'RE in the living room having a meeting with Kim and Adrian. They've been putting everything on pause because of the accident, but now that I'm fully recovered, it's urgent that we go back to business.

"First of all," Kim says. "Congrats on your first ever media booklet! Here it is," she adds, placing a leather folder on the table. It contains all the interviews I did last night and, of course, the red-carpet pictures. The one we took with everyone was called the best red-carpet moment of the night and I have to pinch myself to realize it's me in the middle of all these celebrities.

"I have several requests that need your attention," she continues, looking at both of us. "Jack, *GQ* wants a cover and an interview, and *Fashion Warehouse Magazine* approached me for a cover and interview for the both of you."

"What, with me?" I gasp.

"Of course." She smiles. "Hollie also wants an interview with the two of you, and I also received requests for you alone. A lot of Instagram contracts, but we'll have to talk about that

in another meeting, and two French magazines want to interview you. One is just asking for an interview while the other one would like a bridal cover for the month of the wedding whenever you figure this out.”

She continues talking about the other requests she received for Jack, but my brain is buzzing with all the information. Instagram contracts and magazine covers? This is unreal. Hollie asked for an interview with the both of us this time.

“L, what do you think?” Jack says, squeezing my knee under the table.

“Hm, what?” I say, stretching my neck.

“The Ivory campaign? We need an answer ASAP. I can’t put it off any longer,” Kim says.

“What campaign? Sorry,” I say, throwing her an apologetic look. “It’s a lot of info.”

“I was saying, Ivory, the clothing brand, wants both Jack and you for their spring campaign. Jack has been a brand ambassador for a few years and this time they want you as well. They loved your chemistry in the ‘Only Girl’ video and they contacted me just before the accident. They’re even been more interested now. Because the message of the campaign is strength and overcoming obstacles, they believe you’re an even better fit.”

“Oh, okay.” I know they expect me to say something more, but I’m at a loss for words. It was already hard to wrap my

head around doing magazine covers. Now they want me to model for one of America's most famous brands?

"You'll be great, babe."

"I'm not sure," I say, fidgeting with my engagement ring. It's a bit loose because of the weight I lost.

"You are so beautiful, babe, and I won't do it without you," Jack says, boosting my confidence, as always.

"They're willing to hide your scars, if that's what you're afraid of. You don't have to, though, they're fine either way," Kim says.

What? The long scars on my leg and collarbone? I don't know what you're talking about.

They're all looking at me expectantly. I sigh. "Okay then." I agree without thinking about it further. She said they've been waiting for a long time and I don't want to disappoint them. If they can make my scars disappear, it will be fine. I've never done a photoshoot; it sounds like fun.

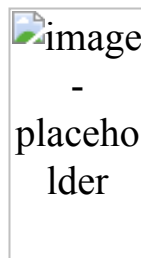
"Great!" Kim closes her folder promptly. "That's all for me. Adrian?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah, we need to talk about your next album, J. You said you finished writing your songs. We should get you in the studio to record them. You're going to have to choose wisely when to launch it, too. Did you think about it?"

"Not really. When is it due?" he asks, rubbing the back of his neck.

“The label wants it out by next June. But then promo and tour will follow, so you have to think about your wedding in the middle of that.”

I’m overwhelmed. There are so many decisions to be made in such a short time, but even if I can tell he’s tensed too, Jack keeps his cool and tells them we’ll think about it.



TWO DAYS LATER, WE'RE meeting Liz, the party planner, and she is a God send. That woman has a sparking creativity and came up with a complete party proposal for our engagement party. We go for a white elegant party, (since no one can dress in white at the wedding, it's their opportunity,) and we'll do it at home in three weeks. We also talk about the wedding, but it's all blurry. We have to figure out the guest list, and of course, the location. The only thing we know for sure is that we want it to be somewhere near the water and

either in France, Italy, or the U.S. Another set of decisions to be made. My head is going to explode.

I see Liz out and I'm pouring myself a glass of water when Jack enters the kitchen wearing only shorts and funky sunglasses.

"What's that?" I ask, amused by his goofy look.

"This is our outfit for the next two weeks. Well, mine anyway. You're gonna have to wear something on top. Or you don't, it's up to you." He winks.

"Jack—" I start, but he kisses me.

"We are going to Bora Bora, baby," he says, breaking into a little dance. "We leave in a few hours."

"Jack! What? Why? Really?" I throw my arms around his neck, planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Yes, I want to take my baby on holiday. Between work and the accident, we didn't have time to relax much. We deserve a break. And I want you all to myself for once, especially on your birthday," he says, wrapping his arms around my waist.

"But, Jack, do Kim and Adrian know about this? They've been flooding us with work lately. We have so much to do. You have so much to do." I search his face.

"Yes, they know. I didn't give them a choice. With all the pressure I'm under, I'm allowed a holiday once in a while with my girl."

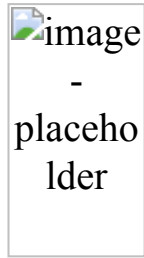
What can I say? I have the best fiancé in the world.

So, the next morning, we land in Bora Bora, greeted with flower necklaces and cocktails by the manager of the resort. It's entirely over the water and so beautifully decorated it really feels like we're in paradise. Our villa is at the far end of a strip, it has its own pool, hot tub and direct access to the ocean.

For my birthday, I find red rose petals everywhere in the villa and we're treated to a romantic dinner on our deck where Jack gives me his gift. Another song. It's called "My Inspiration" and is about how my strength inspires him, and how even if I'm the one suffering, I make everything better for him. I didn't think he could write a more beautiful song than "Only Girl," but he proved me wrong.

It feels so good to connect with each other again without any distractions. The fact that we are on water gives us a sense of privacy, but also freedom, and we'll never forget the hospitality of everyone around the resort. We enjoy great food, a few massages, but we mostly snorkel in the crystal-clear water with the thousands of fishes. We also take that time to think about what's ahead, specifically the album's launch and the wedding.

We decide to get married in May or June, and release the album in March or April. That way, we don't have to wait too long to get married or to release the album, and he can start touring after our honeymoon.



WHEN WE COME BACK home, we pay for our impromptu get away. During the next weeks, Kim and Adrian call or come by every day with more and more work. I don't know how Jack can handle it all. I can see it's starting to take a toll on him, too. He's been a little grumpy lately.

Finally, it's the day before our engagement party and our families arrive from Europe. Thankfully, we have a little break so Jack is back to his normal safe. It's so exciting to see my friends, aunts and uncles I haven't seen for almost two years. This time, everyone is staying at The Maybourne Beverly Hills hotel, which is about fifteen minutes away. It's great timing because I just received my car and it's absolutely amazing. I've never loved to drive that much in my life. My dad is a big fan of cars, so he's ecstatic to see it, even if he prefers Jack's extensive Lamborghini collection.

For the party, I'm wearing one of Valentin's gifts. An old rose lace bustier dress making me feel like a ballerina. Sandra helps me to hide my collarbone scar and Jody gave me a large matching necklace. Since I'm still only allowed wedges, she brought me a pair of velvet pink sandals to go with it. I struggle a little to put them on, as always when I have to bend down, but she helps me with a warm smile.

The backyard looks sensational. Liz has outdone herself. Hundreds of white candles are floating in the pool and around it. The usual big patch of green grass near the pool has been covered with a white floor, separated into two areas: a dance floor and a stage with a DJ table, and a dining area with high tables scattered around. The dinner will be served as a cocktail party and there's even a candy bar, but the candies are not your typical ones. There are "*Lolouise*" pops, muffins with our faces on it, "*Cupjacks*," and on the napkins, several quotes from "Only Girl." The flower arrangements are magnificent too, and one of the best features is the white chocolate fountain that I can't wait to try. She also thought of a game. A board has been installed, asking guests different questions about the wedding: the date, the country, the designers for our outfits, and the location of our honeymoon. Which is amazing since we don't even know the answer to these. They will each receive an undetermined prize during the wedding.

All our guests played along and respected the dress code and this is truly a vision to see. Kim is in a dress, which is a first, my dad is in a black and white suit, another first, for me at least, I believe he wore one at his wedding, but it's Candice

who wins best dressed as always, with a long sleek sparkling dress that could easily pass as a wedding dress.

During the night, we're treated to a few surprise performances from Sabrina, Candice, and Islay-J, and Jack even sings some of his new material. And even though we specifically said no gifts on the invitation, everyone brought one. We're opening them in front of everybody.

"*The Survival Book on How to Live with a Boy*," I read. The cover shows some dirty laundry and a toilet seat up. It's from my friends Karine and Léa. "Thank you, girls. I kind of already know, but I will definitely read it just in case," I joke.

"*How to Sex Things Up in the Bedroom and Avoid the Routine, The game*," Jack reads. "I like the sound of that, thanks, Mel." He winks at her.

"Oh My God! Hollie!" I scream as I open the next one.

"Show it!" Hollie shouts.

"There's no way." I laugh.

But of course, they insist and I have to cave. It's a *Hollie Barker Show* dildo. Everyone laughs and I'm probably as pink as the prop. It's not like most of my family is here or anything.

"Wait, I'm gonna give you my gift now then," John calls. "It'll go well with that."

Oh God.

"Here you go, Jack," he says, coming back with a blow-up doll.

“Oh yes!” Jack exclaims. “That’s very nice,” he jokes, and I hit him with the dildo.

Next, I open a sexy lingerie outfit from Candice and everyone whistles, including Jack.

“Thanks, Candice, it’s more of a gift for me. Can’t wait to see you in this, babe.” He taps my butt slightly, making everyone laugh.

“*Monogamy Board Game—a hot affair with your partner,*” he says. “Thanks, Daffle, man. You guys are all very concerned about our sex life. It’s really touching.”

“Yeah, you guys really are,” I say, showing Sabrina’s gift. “*A very sexy kit for spicing things up in the bedroom.*”

Thankfully, the rest of the gifts are a little more PG.

“Well, looks like we have work to do!” Jack chuckles. “I just want to say thanks to all of you for coming. I am the luckiest SOB alive. This girl is everything to me and I get to share the rest of my life with her. But now, you’re gonna have to excuse us. We have to get down to business.” He lifts me up over his shoulders, pretending to take me back in the house under the cheers and whistles of our guests.

IS THIS REAL?

THE DAY AFTER THE party, I'm a little sore. I was on my feet all night and my back hurts. Jack, being the awesome man that he is, massages my shoulders as we review the answers from Liz's game. For the date, we have a lot of proposals ranging from February fourteenth to May thirty-first, the only date written twice being Valentine's Day.

For the location, they went a little crazy as some of them proposed Dubai, or Antarctica, but we got several England, New York, Italy, France, and L.A. too.

For the outfit designers Jack got Dior, Gaetan Gachet, Auguste Brunet, Versace, Lucacci, and Armani, while I got a lot of Maison Gaumé, but also Dior, Auguste Brunet, Vera Wang, and Chanel.

For the honeymoon, they pretty much put the whole world there: road trip in the USA, private island in the Pacific, ranch in Wyoming, Australia, France, Italy, European tour, Bahamas, Hawaii, Canada, and several islands in the Caribbean.

This game was a great idea and it'll definitely help us figure all of this out.

Soon enough, it's time to go back to our crazy schedule. Jack was in a foul mood this morning and he's sweating it out in the gym. I hope he'll be able to get some work done.

I couldn't come with him because I have a meeting with Kim about the publicity opportunities she received for me. We sit down in around the dining room table.

“So, as I said before, I got a lot of promotional requests for you. This is due to your Instagram account blowing up, your recent engagement to Jack, and, well, your accident, which was mediatized pretty much in the entire world. So, I'm going to do my best to explain everything you need to know and if you have any questions, please ask me.”

I nod and she continues.

“First, the Ivory campaign. Maybe Jack told you about it?”

“Shortly. He said that we receive clothes from the brand, and we have to wear it whenever possible,”

“That's roughly it, yes. The collection is underwear and casual wear, so it shouldn't be a problem. It can be swimsuits, pajamas, or jeans, for example. Try to wear them whenever you can. Post pictures wearing the clothes on your Instagram, that kind of thing. For this, plus shooting the campaign, you will earn four million dollars,” she says, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

“What?” I scream a lot louder than intended.

“Yes. Well, it's not as much as Jack's ten million, but that's a good amount.”

“That’s a lot of money! And I just need to wear their clothes whenever I can? It sounds too easy.”

“You have to wear the clothes whenever possible, yes, and do the shooting for the campaign. The pictures will be used on their websites and in their stores. They’re more paying you to use your image than to wear their clothes.”

“Okay,” I say, still astonished by the numbers she mentioned.

“Speaking of that, now that you have big deals coming your way, you need to officially allow me to sign contracts for you. I normally only represent Jack, but I think we all agree that it would be easier if I managed your publicity as well? I can ask someone else from the office if you prefer, though. That’s not an issue at all.”

“No. Of course, not. I want you to be my publicist.”

“Okay, great. So, here’s my contract. Take time to read it thoroughly later and send it back to me,” she says, giving me the documents.

“So next, we have a lot of other requests for Instagram publicity, but before we talk about it, I just want to ask you some questions about your interests, your values, etc. That way, we can target only the ones that could match with your life,” she says.

“Sounds good. How does Instagram publicity work, anyway?” I feel a little stupid for asking that, but I really don’t know anything about this stuff.

“Good question. You will enter a contract with a brand to advertise their products on your profile. Sometimes it’s very precise. Sometimes they just ask that you show yourself using anything of the brand. You will earn money for each post. In your case, the amounts range from two hundred thousand to six hundred thousand for a single post.”

“Dollars?” Maybe she’s talking about some virtual money I never heard of.

“Of course, dollars,” she replies with a smile.

Oh dear. This is insane. People are actually willing to pay me hundreds of thousands of dollars to post a picture on Instagram. I feel light-headed. This is an even more different world than I thought it was.

We proceed with the questionnaire and it turns out my interests are animals, books, France, perfume, and makeup, clothes and accessories, champagne, and cars.

“Okay. So that’s quite wide, actually,” Kim says. “For the animals, we will definitely find an organization. As you know, Jack is involved in PAWS, but I think it’ll be better to find a different one. That way, you guys can support two charities. I don’t have anything for perfumes, but I do have some makeup opportunities, MAC and GLOW. So, I don’t know if you already use any of them?” she asks.

“Yes! GLOW is what Sandra uses most of the time. It’s really good.”

“They’re offering an ad contract of two hundred thousand per post. They also talk about exceptional events. I haven’t said anything about that yet. In all the contracts, there’s an ‘exceptional event’ policy. It means that if you choose to showcase the brand during a unique event, your wedding or a high-profile event, for example, you get additional earnings. If you use GLOW products for your wedding and show it on Instagram, they will increase the revenue up to five times, depending on the length and quality of the post.”

I’m speechless. This is just too much.

“Ivory also provides you with additional revenue in that case. I don’t have the exact amount here, but I think it’s about one million. For example, you could post a picture of you in Ivory pajamas the night before the wedding, or in a bathing suit during your honeymoon. The possibilities are endless and it’s really up to you.”

“Wow! Okay. And all these contracts are for how long?” I ask.

“Ivory will only use your image for that campaign, and GLOW is for one year, renewable. It’s important that you don’t take too many contracts, because if your Insta becomes only product placement and publicity, it will lose its authenticity and both the fans and the brands will lose interest.”

“Yeah, it makes sense.”

“For food and drinks, I have a request that is perfect for you: champagne. Since you’re French and from the

Champagne region, we received quite a few. The most interesting ones being Veuve Clicquot and Moët & Chandon/Dom Perignon.”

“Definitely the latter, then. I love their champagne.”

“Okay.” She laughs. “Well, they’re offering three hundred thousand per post and five hundred thousand for exceptional events. They actually also asked to be showcased at your wedding. They would give you free champagne, and five hundred thousand if you post a picture online.”

“That one is easy,” I joke.

“Exactly.” She smiles. “And then for cars, Lamborghini and Ferrari contacted me, probably because Jack owns so many and already has deals with them, but seeing that you just got an Aston Martin, I will get in touch with them to see if they’re interested. So anyway, that’s all for now.”

“Okay. That was a lot,”

“It can seem like it, yes, but it’s only the beginning. And there’s more I didn’t talk to you about: fitness, health, electronics. But you can’t force yourself to take stuff that doesn’t interest you. So, from now on I will refuse them, and let you know only about the ones we talked about. I will look for a few organizations as well and come back to you with that ASAP. Also, Jack told me you finished your manuscript, so I was thinking I would start looking for book agents if you’re interested in having it published?”

“Yeah, sure. I haven’t really thought about that yet. But I guess this is the next step. “

“Great. And by the way, don’t post anything online yet. I’ll let you know once the contracts are signed.”

“Okay, and do you need my bank account number? Or do you put it on Jack’s?” I ask.

“Oh no, it’s your work.” She smiles. “I already have it, from the music video, remember?”

“What? I never knew I was paid for the music video. And anyway, I didn’t receive anything.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not sure. You should talk to J. about that. He’s the one who set it up.”

I’m going to kill him. I live here for free and he’s paying me because I appeared in his music video? This better be a joke or a mistake.

40

DIFFERENCES

“Jack!” I shout, entering the sweaty gym, after Kim left. Jack has been back from the studio for a while and barely said two words to us before dashing to the gym. “Are you kidding me right now? I live in your multi-million-dollar mansion for free, you gave me a freaking car, and now you’re seriously paying me for a music video?”

“Well,” he says coolly, putting down the weights he was lifting. “I have to pay you when you work, babe. It’s kind of the law, you know?”

“The hell you have to! I’m giving you every cent back!”

“That’s not how it works.” He snorts, drying his neck with a towel.

“Well, if I’m gonna be your wife, then I’ll buy you half of this house with my money. That way, it’ll be mine as much as yours.” I cross my arms.

“Fine, babe.” He sighs, his nostrils flaring. “But anyway, after the wedding, all of what’s mine will be yours.”

“No, it won’t. We’ll do a prenup.”

“No, we won’t.” He gulps the rest of his water at once.

I swear, this boy can be a pain in the ass sometimes. So damn stubborn!

“Of course we will, Jack. I have nothing and you have hundreds of millions. I don’t see why we wouldn’t do one. I’m

not marrying you to share your fortune. You have to protect yourself.”

“I know you’re not, and that’s why no prenup is necessary. I believe in marriage and love. Contracts don’t fit in that scenario,” he says raising his tone.

“You should talk it over with your financial advisors. It’s not practical what you’re doing here, and it doesn’t matter. I’ll still buy half of the house,” I snap.

He stomps his foot on the ground. “Fine.”

“Fine.”

Argh! Every time we talk about money, there are tensions. I don’t want him to be put in a position where he would owe me anything if something goes wrong between us. Why doesn’t he get that?

For the next few weeks, we are swamped with work. Jack is under a lot of pressure and I know it’s hard on him. He’s getting more and more moody and he looks exhausted, so I don’t bring it up again, but I’m not letting this go.

Today, he starts recording his album and I tag along to the studio. The room is much smaller than I imagined, and much darker too. To preserve the acoustics, there are no windows and many carpets on the floor, but also on the walls. There’s a glass divider behind a long console full of small buttons. Sitting in front of it is Cody, the producer. He’s a good-looking man, in his forties, but dresses like a twenty-year-old, which is a little weird. It doesn’t take long before they’re in some kind

of “zone”. Ideas are bursting and Jack goes into the second room and starts playing guitar. This goes on all day. They stop only to eat some sandwiches or ask me my opinion when they’re hesitating.

I wish I could go back the next day because I loved seeing Jack in his element, but today I’m meeting the book agent Kim found for me. To say that I’m stressed would be an understatement. As I told Mel on the phone this morning, I’m not sure I’m ready for this, nor for what he’s going to say. If it’s complete garbage, will he say it? And what the hell will I do then?

He arrives at one o’clock on the dot and I’m impressed by his height. That man is as tall as he’s thin. He has the dull skin of someone who doesn’t go out much, and judging by his small wrinkles and early gray hair, he must be in his late thirties. His smile is warm and friendly, so I’m much more relaxed as we’re sitting in the living room. He introduces himself as Griffin Graham. He has been a book agent and an editor for ten years and he specializes in contemporary romance novels, which is the genre of my book. We sit across from each other in the formal dining room.

“I’m going to start by telling you what I tell every author that I meet. Less than one percent of submitted manuscripts make it to publication,” he says, opening his notebook.

This is going great.

“But I’m also going to add something that I don’t tell just any author I meet. You are probably going to be that one

percent.”

“Why would you say that? You haven’t even read it yet.”

“Yes, but I don’t need to read it to tell you that. This is true. You will probably get published because you are Louise Mercier, future Mrs. Jack Rose. Your name is already known widely around the world because of that relationship. Just look at your Instagram account. Forty million followers, meaning forty million potential readers, and for any publishing agency, that is gold.”

“Okay, but that doesn’t mean it’s good.” I raise my eyebrow.

“Exactly!” he exclaims, pointing at me excitedly. “Because with the possibility of selling forty million copies, most agencies will sign you without caring what’s behind the cover. But that’s why I’m here. And if I work for you, I will tell you the harsh truth and will only represent your book if I believe it’s good. So now it’s really up to you. If you want to be published, you don’t need me frankly. Just send your book to the biggest agencies in the country and they probably will all respond positively. If you want an opinion on your book, and getting it published, I can do that for you. If there is potential. I haven’t read it yet, so if there’s nothing I can do for you, I will tell you.”

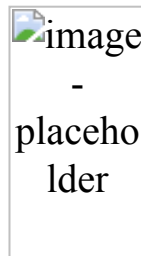
“Okay,” I say, rubbing my palms on my jeans.

“So, which one is it going to be?”

“I want you to read it, and give me an honest opinion.”

“Okay, Louise. Then I will.” He smiles. “You just have to sign here and here. It’s a small contract, saying that I cannot do anything with your work other than read it and send it to publishers. Here’s a USB key. You can upload your manuscript on it, and I will give you my feedback in about a month.”

So that was brutal. I’m still shaking a little as I close the door behind him. I didn’t think that it would go like that at all. But I’m glad and reassured by his honesty. Now let’s just hope he’ll like what he reads.



A FEW DAYS LATER, it’s time for the Ivory photoshoot and I’m a ball of nerves. I’ve never done an actual photoshoot and I don’t know what to expect. It takes place in what looks like a huge warehouse, but inside you can’t be mistaken that this is indeed a studio. There are several backdrops with cameras mounted on tripods, mobile lighting, and umbrellas on both sides. There are also many people here, a lot more than I

expected. We're greeted by Sophia, who takes us to our respective changing areas. My room is a mess. Clothes are scattered everywhere and three outfits are drawn out on hangers.

"Hi, my name is Lucy, the stylist," a tall black-haired girl says. She's so pretty she could easily be mistaken for a model.

"This is your first look," she says, showing me a pair of jeans and a white crop top boasting the Ivory logo. "Put it on and meet me outside? I'll take you to hair and makeup."

I get dressed and follow her into a smaller room where I meet Diana, the hair and makeup artist. She has strict guidelines on what she has to do, which is really not much. She only applies some foundation, a little mascara, and transparent gloss. She shakes my hair a little and just puts some hairspray on it. The look is very natural. Then I'm taken to the shooting area where Jack is waiting for me in a similar outfit. It's been designed to look like we are in front of a gas station. There's also a picnic table and some vending machines.

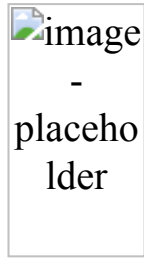
They ask us to do different poses, teasing each other, kissing, sitting at the table. Thank God for Jack whispering silly things in my ear and making funny faces, because they could sense I was tense. They kept telling me to relax and have fun. After some takes alone, we get to watch the pictures and the videos, and I'm impressed. We look so natural, so genuine.

Next, we do the same with the two other looks. My first one is a pair of high-waist denim shorts with a brown belt, and a

white T-shirt with the logo. For this one we are shooting in a diner setting. We are eating, playing with the jukebox, holding hands, and it's really fun.

The last one, the daunting one, is a shot in a bedroom. I'm only wearing a white bralette and panties. I feel naked, so naked, and it takes me a while to relax in front of everyone. I'm a little self-conscious about my body, too. I decided with Diana that we wouldn't hide my scars, but I'm starting to regret it. I know I shouldn't be ashamed of my body, but it's still difficult to relax. Jack, on the other hand, is very comfortable even though he's simply wearing white boxer shorts.

They ask us to fool around a little, jump on the bed, and make out. It's really weird, but Jack makes it so comfortable for me that after a while, it feels like it's only the two of us. To conclude the photoshoot, they put us in front of a light gray backdrop, and take some shots of us alone. It wasn't so bad after all. Plus, the fact that I was so stressed out brought back the old playful Jack. Bonus points for that.



UNFORTUNATELY, JACK QUICKLY WENT back to Irritated Jack after the photoshoot. The next two weeks, I've heard him snap, snort, and raise his tone more time than I can count. Every time I try to get him to relax, he dismisses me. I miss being close to him and I'm literally counting the days until our trip to London for the holidays.

Today, Jack is at a photoshoot and I'm meeting Griffin again. I've been anxious all morning and when he arrives, I'm barely able to speak.

"So," he starts, sitting down across from me in the living room. "I have some good news. Your book is good," he says.

"Really?" I blurt.

"Yes, I can even say really good, which I rarely say. I couldn't keep it down." He smiles widely.

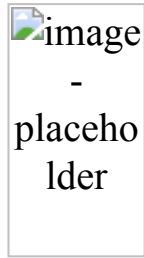
I'm stunned! *He couldn't keep it down.* I can't believe it. I thought he would have thousands of notes!

"I still have a lot of notes, of course," he adds, reading my mind.

"You'll find them all in the margin. I want you to make all the changes and email it back to me when it's done. I'll review it again and we'll go into modification mode once more if needed," he explains.

As soon as he's at the door, I plug in the USB key and I'm astonished by the number of comments. A few comments? A really good manuscript? Goodness, I can't imagine when it's bad. All across the document there are comments like: "*Rephrase.*" "*Explain better.*" "*Who is he?*" "*Describe this character better.*" "*Show, don't tell.*" "*What do you mean?*" "*Is this relevant?*"

This is a lot. So, I get to work. I spend most of my days on my computer, making the modifications he pointed out. I work every day except the day we shot the cover of *Fashion Warehouse Magazine* (which was super fun! I can't wait to see the February cover), and after six weeks, I am finally done with it, and I must say it was really necessary. The story is a lot better. The voices of the characters are clearer and it makes much more sense.



FINALLY, WE'RE IN LONDON. We'll spend a few days here before going to France and Italy to check out some wedding venues. And since Christmas is around the corner, our families will join us in London for the holidays. Some peace and quiet at last.

My phone is ringing in my bag as we step into the apartment. I take it out and press it to my ear.

“Louise! *C'est* Valentin Guérin, creative director of Maison Gaumé! How are you?”

We exchanged words online, and he sent me a few dresses, including the famous red satin dress I wore when Jack proposed, but I never talked to him on the phone before.

“Hi, Valentin, I'm good and you?”

“Superb! Listen, I wanted to ask you if you'd be willing to model for me for the Designer Charity Gala next spring?”

“Me? Are you sure there’s no one more qualified?” I ask, plucking at my coat. It’s a themed fashion show held in New York and each designer has to choose a model to represent the brand. The outfits are custom made and put to auction that night to raise money for The Fashion Cause, is a charity dedicated to stop modern slavery and improve garment workers’ workplace conditions. The event itself raises millions of dollars and is often called the third most important fashion event of the year, after Paris’ and New York’s fashion weeks. I really don’t see how I could be a good fit at such a high-profile event.

“I’m sure there is, but it’s you I want! You’ll be fabulous, you have such a natural charm, I just love it. Plus, I’d really love to have a French girl represent me there. What do you say?”

I’m really flattered by his offer. I mean, this is a huge deal. I can’t refuse.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll do it.” I breathe, the excitement filling me.

“*Merveilleux!* This year’s theme is ‘Fairytale inspiration: Timeless Tales.’ We’re going to have so much fun! Are you available to meet? I would love to show you the sketches I have and take your precise measurements.”

“Sure. I’m in London, though. Do you want me to come to Paris? I could maybe after the holidays.”

“Not necessary. I’ll be in London this week, too. When are you available?”

“Oh great.” I glance at the schedule on my phone. “We’re busy the next two days, but I’m available on Friday if that works for you?”

“Parfait. A vendredi, Louise.”

We spend our first day at Susan’s house in the suburbs of London. I’m very surprised to learn that this is Jack’s childhood home. Even though he offered many times, she never wanted to leave her house and I can understand why. There is a bucolic charm to the little cottage that I immediately like. As I already know from her fantastic meals over the summer, Susan is a fantastic cook. She prepared a sumptuous Sunday Roast with all the trimmings: roast potatoes, vegetables, gravy, and, of course, delicious Yorkshire pudding.

After lunch, Jack is finally starting to relax. The edge in his tone is still here, but he’s not as tensed as he’s been these past months. We go for a digestive walk around his neighborhood and he shows me his elementary school, and the basketball field where he used to play with his friends. Just as we’re passing the local music store where he got his first guitar, someone shouts his name.

“Oy! Rose! Mate, is that you?”

We turn around to see a tall, young man striding toward us. He has wild, brown hair and looks rather disheveled. He’s smoking a cigarette at the corner of his mouth, revealing his bad denture.

“It is you! Shit!” he says, shaking Jack’s hand. “How are you, man? The fuck are you doing here? Who’s this?” He

looks at me with interest.

“Liam!” Jack says, a dazed look in his eyes. “Good to see you, man. I’m visiting my mum, and this is my fiancée, Louise. How are you doing?”

“Good! Same old shit, you know? I work here now,” he says, pointing at the music store.

“Oh cool,” Jack replies, pulling my hand to continue our walk.

“So, fiancée, huh?” Liam asks, looking at me, then Jack. “That’s some crazy shit!” he exclaims, making us laugh.

“Yeah man, it is,” Jack says as an unusual tight chuckle escapes his mouth.

“So, we should get together before you go. One last night with the gang. I’m seeing Freddie, Max, and Dylan tomorrow night. You should come. We’re gonna play video games, hang out.”

“Oh man, I can’t I’m sorry,” Jack replies quickly, clutching my hand tightly.

“Why the hell not?” he says, taking a long drag on his cigarette. “You don’t mind, miss, do you?”

“No, of course not. You should go.”

“Exactly, listen to the girl. She’s got some sense.”

“I don’t know, man. We’ve got a lot to do. We’re flying to Italy in three d—”

“Ah, I get it,” he cuts off. “You’re the famous Jack Rose now. You don’t have time for your old mates. It’s fine really.” Hurt hugs the corners of his eyes like wrinkles.

He runs his fingers through his hair. “No, man. Don’t take it that way. You know it’s not true. We just have a lot to do and —”

“Jack, you should go,” I interrupt. “It’ll be fine, really.”

“Okay then.” Jack sighs, looking away. “I’ll come by.”

“Yeah?” Liam smiles. “Cool, mate, Cool. See you tomorrow then. Miss,” he says, bowing to me, before disappearing into the store.

CATCHING UP & MYSTERIES

WE SPEND MOST OF the next day doing some Christmas shopping in the busy London streets. The great thing is that, since no one knows we're here, we're pretty free. We can blend into the crowd of people and are not bothered. Eddy is still accompanying us, just in case. After dinner, Jack goes back to his hometown to spend the night with his friends and I give a call to Griffin. He says he's happy with the rewrite of my book and he selected four publishers to send my book to. Now we just have to wait.

The next morning, I wake up before Jack, which is a first. He's usually so meticulous about his routine. That has always amazed me. He never sleeps late and works out every morning without exception. Given how late he came back last night, I'm not surprised, though. I let him sleep and meet Valentin at his hotel. I'm excited to finally see him in real life. He's smaller than I thought he would be judging by the pictures, but otherwise, he looks exactly the same. He styled his long black hair into a ponytail and he's wearing blue jeans and a colorful sweater. He's French too, so it's always nice to speak in my mother tongue.

“So, you know how this works,” he says, ushering me into the living area of his hotel room. “All of us designers drew a look at random. I got Aurora, sleeping beauty.”

“Oh! Cool.” I do my best to stand still, but I can’t believe he’s going to dress me as a princess!

“Here are the sketches.” He unfolds sheets of papers rolled up on the table. I’m once more amazed by his talent.

“So, it’s a mermaid gown. We’ll do a long train and three-quarters sleeves. I already found the light pink tulle fabric and I’m thinking of thousands of sparkling beads everywhere!” he claps his hands, eyes gleaming with excitement. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s going to be a work of art.” I smile and he beams at me.

“Okay. Time to roll up our sleeves then!”

Minutes later, Arthur, one of his stylists, joins us and they take all the necessary measurements while I shift uncomfortably in my underwear.

After we’re done, the two of us go for lunch and we get to know each other. He’s a really fun guy to be around. He’s only five years older than me, but he’s already very successful. He stepped in as creative director a few years ago and completely rebranded Maison Gaumé, targeting a younger crowd.

When I come back home, Jack is eating cereal. In the kitchen.

“Hey!” I exclaim, entering through the doorway.

“Hi, babe. Where were you?”

“I was meeting Valentin, remember?” I ask, taking my shoes off.

His phone beeps and he checks it, quickly sliding his finger over the screen. “Oh, right. I forgot. How was it?”

“Great. How was last night? Did you have fun?” I question, leaning against the counter.

“I did, yeah. I’m going back tonight actually, if you don’t mind?” he asks, putting his cereal bowl in the sink.

I was hoping we would stay in together, but at the same time, I’m glad he’s reconnecting with his old friends. He never sees or talks about them. I thought they lost touch.

“No, of course not! That’s great,” I say, kissing him.

Jack is in a very playful mood today. He insists that I get into the shower with him, and then pulls me on the bed. He’s insatiable and doesn’t let me put my clothes back on all day. I’m a little surprised by his attitude, but I love to see him so happy and feel close to him. At night, he leaves once again for Liam’s house and I take the opportunity to call Mel before going to bed early.

The next day, I wake up before Jack again. He came back home really late last night. I’m a bit annoyed because we were supposed to go shopping today. We’re leaving in two days for Italy and we still have a few presents to buy before we go. I get ready as quietly as possible, and curl up with a book on the couch until he wakes up.

“Hey,” Jack says, coming down the stairs.

“Hey, how was last night?” I try to hide the annoyance in my voice.

He groans in response. *Okay, I guess this is Cranky Jack.*

I let him eat breakfast in peace and keep reading my book. When he’s done, he comes crashing down on the couch next to me, still looking half-asleep. I rest my head on his shoulder.

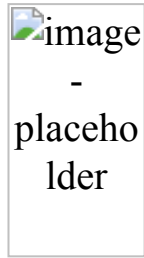
“We should get going soon. I told Blake and Eddy we’ll go before lunch.”

“What? Where?” he says, sitting up straight. I move my head back to get a better look at him.

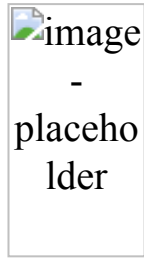
“Christmas shopping, remember? We said we were going this mor—”

“Shit, L. Can’t you go alone? I’m tired. I don’t want to go walking around in fucking London,” he says, not hiding the edge in his voice.

I guess I’ll just go by myself, then.



WHEN I COME HOME, however, I'm surprised to see the lights are out. Eddy, who escorted me on my shopping spree, tells me to wait outside while he checks the apartment. Something doesn't feel right. My pulse quickens. What if someone's there? What if something happened to Jack? A few minutes later, Eddy gives me the all clear to come in. No one is here, not even Jack. I discover a note on the kitchen counter saying: "*Went back to Liam's tonight. Don't wait up. Love you.*" I know I was the one telling him to reconnect with his old friends, but really? Three nights in a row. My skin prickles with anger. This time he didn't even tell me and ditched our day together. I'm beyond pissed, and when I go to sleep, my mind wonders about the possibility of him not really being at Liam's, but somewhere else. Or with someone else.



WHEN I WAKE UP the next day, Jack is not back. His side of the bed is untouched. Bolting up in bed, I grab my cell off the nightstand. *What the hell? Did he stay over there last night?* I try to call him. But it goes straight to voicemail. Great. Now I'm really pissed and worried. He could have at least texted to let me know he wasn't coming back. At least tomorrow morning we're leaving and we'll be back to normal.

After eating breakfast and getting ready, however, Jack still hasn't showed up and I'm starting to really worry. What if something happened to him? What if he was in an accident?

Pictures of Jack's wrecked car flash before my eyes. This can't be happening again. I quickly check online. Nothing. Surely if he'd been in an accident, it would be on the internet by now. I call Susan, but she hasn't heard from her son either. Not wanting to worry her, I try to sound cheerful on the phone, and promise to let her know as soon as he comes back. But he

doesn't. After a few hours, I call Adrian, who immediately takes this seriously and tells me to stay at the apartment while Eddy goes to Liam's house.

An hour later, Eddy comes back alone.

"Louise, I didn't find Jack. But I found his phone, and a letter addressed to you," he says, giving it to me. Avoiding my eyes, he adds, "I'll let you read it in private. Call if you need me."

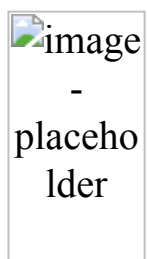
A letter? It takes me a few seconds to open it because of my shaky hands. Why would Jack write me a letter? What is happening? The letter is more of a note, scribbled in a barely decipherable writing.

I'm sorry. I can't do this. I thought it would work. I thought I changed, but I didn't. We're better apart. I'm not good for you. I'm not good for anyone. I don't want to break you. I'm too young to be tied down. Please don't try to find me. I will always love you. Don't hate me.

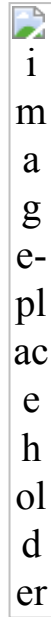
-Jack-

To be continued...

DID YOU ENJOY ONLY GIRL?



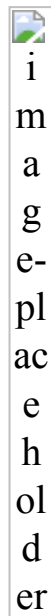
Don't forget to [leave a review.](#)



Frustrated by the cliffhanger ending?

Don't hate me.

Broken Boy will be released on March 2 and is available on [pre-order on Amazon](#) at a special price. In the meantime, [sign up for my newsletter](#) to receive two bonus scenes from Only Girl (Jack's POV): their meet-cute and their first date.

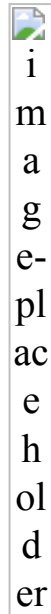


ALSO BY MARION DE RÉ

ONLY GIRL TRILOGY

#1: Only Girl

#2: Broken Boy. Available for [pre-order on Amazon](#) at a special price. [Subscribe to my newsletter](#) for an exclusive sneak peek!



#3: Only Love. Stay tuned for more information!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this book has forever changed my life and it wouldn't have been possible without all of you.

First, I have to thank my husband, Etienne. It's the right thing to do even though he didn't help me one bit. Dou, I apologize for all the sleepless nights because of this book. They weren't the kind you expect when you're freshly married. I'm sorry. I love you.

To my lovely Calico, Caline, thank you for lying next to me, doing absolutely nothing. You're such a great companion.

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To all my ARC readers, thank you so much for your interest and incredible support.

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A mes parents, Martine et Patrick. Ça y est, vous pouvez le dire, votre fille a écrit un livre! Même si c'est en Anglais et que vous ne comprenez pas tout, n'hésitez pas à vous vanter. C'est le moment. Merci de m'avoir toujours encouragé à croire en mes rêves. Un des plus fous s'est réalisé.

Last but not least, thank you my wonderful readers who picked up this book, or downloaded it to their e-readers. You have no idea how much this means to me. I hope you enjoyed it. If you didn't, I promise I'll do better next time.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marion De Ré is a French national with an American heart. She lives in the French countryside with her husband, Etienne, and her cat, Caline. Growing up with books and being passionate about the English language, she naturally started to write stories in English. She's always been a huge fan of laugh-out-loud rom coms and tropey romance novels. When she's not reading or writing, you can find her on a plane to a far-away destination or in a Champagne cellar, indulging in a tasting of her favorite drink.

Marion loves hearing from her readers. Visit her website www.marionderewrites.fr and sign up for her newsletter to be the first to know about her upcoming books and for exclusive content.

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