



*Our*  
**NEW**  
*Song*

*For Love and Rock Book Four*

**EMILY C. CHILDS**

# OUTR NEW SONG

Emily C. Childs



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# CONTENTS

[Fullpage Image](#)

[1. Vienna](#)

[2. Vienna](#)

[3. Vienna](#)

[4. Rees](#)

[5. Vienna](#)

[6. Rees](#)

[7. Vienna](#)

[8. Rees](#)

[9. Vienna](#)

[10. Rees](#)

[11. Vienna](#)

[12. Vienna](#)

[13. Rees](#)

[14. Vienna](#)

[15. Rees](#)

[16. Vienna](#)

[17. Vienna](#)

[18. Rees](#)

[19. Vienna](#)

[20. Rees](#)

[21. Vienna](#)

[22. Rees](#)

[23. Vienna](#)

[24. Rees](#)

[25. Vienna](#)

[26. Vienna](#)

[27. Rees](#)

[28. Vienna](#)

[29. Vienna](#)

[30. Rees](#)

[31. Vienna](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue 2](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)







One

# VIENNA

NOPE.

One look in the bathroom mirror and I'm a solid, absolute *nope*. What even is this in my hair? I tug at the clip-in rainbow hair extension. A ribbon of pastel pink, soft blue, and pale lavender. The colors are a stark contrast against the icy blonde of my straight, no-frills hair.

But that's the other thing.

How, I want to know how, Marti pulled off the curls. Long coils drape over my shoulders when most days this hair is more concerned with hanging around like a dead thing on my head than taking any kind of shape.

It's fine. The world doesn't need more flashy people anyway. I'm comfortable being a background color. Colors that help make the beautiful painting, but never try to overpower the focal point.

I start peeling off the black sequin cocktail dress which—if I'm honest—hugs my body like it was designed for me. But

nope. This thing tonight, it's not happening.

“Stop. What. You're. Doing.”

I swear, Marti, my best friend and roommate, is omniscient or has hidden cameras tucked in the peeling psychedelic wallpaper of our 1970s apartment.

Both options are equally unsettling.

Good thing it's Marti. Any secret footage of my background-color-life will only be kept and used for my benefit, never for nefarious purposes. She's eccentric, but loyal to the end.

“I'm not doing anything.” I slip my arm back under the strap.

The door bangs against the wall and my roommate fills out the space. Now Marti, she is voluptuous; she has an exotic beauty about her. Emerald eyes, hair that loves her, and bounces in lush, silky tresses.

Martina Fresco is one of those stand-out, focal point people.

When we both moved the fifty miles from our one-horse town of Clayton to Las Vegas together, she fit in like part of the flashing lights on The Strip. Me, I faded into the dull brown of the mountains and sandstone.

As if she can see the wheels careening out of control in my head, Marti levels me in a narrowed stare. Those eyes can stop any man, any woman, dead in their tracks. “Be honest. You want to slip back into your fuzzy socks and cardigan, and insist you have essays to grade, don't you?”

I cross my arms over my chest, mouth tight. “Well, I do have essays to look over, but I wasn’t doing anything weird. I’m getting ready, aren’t I?”

Marti points a stiletto nail at the hair extensions. “It stays in.”

I’m moments away from stomping. I’m quite versed in foot stomping after three years as an English teacher at Valley High School.

“Why are we doing this again?” I allow Marti to slide the clip-in rainbow hair back in. “Do you even like rock music?”

She checks her reflection in the mirror once, loops her arm around mine, then pulls me out of the bathroom. “I told you, we’re going to scope out the band.”

“Why? They don’t have anything to do with us, and if I’m being honest, I don’t think it’s a great decision on Karla’s part. It’ll be loud and busy and distracting.”

Marti rolls her eyes. “This is one of those unforgettable life things the kids get to experience. The chance to be in a music video, meet rock stars, be inspired. *All* the things. So, turn your bad-attitude frown upside down and just enjoy.”

I blow out my lips. “Come on, the band is probably doing it for the publicity.”

“Or they’re really good guys who happen to play rock music and want to have an impact on a few kids.”

Ugh, my retorts are useless against Martina. She will always be the cheery, glass-half-full arguer, and who wants to squelch

optimism?

In truth, this is a *little* exciting. The Valley High band students have been in an uproar since the announcement, but more than that, the football players, baseball, track, all the sporty kids have a sudden desire to join drumline and orchestra.

Fine—I'll concede on one point—it might be unifying the school.

Starting next week, Perfectly Busted? Faded? Broken. Yes, Perfectly Broken will be invading the halls of our school. Am I whining? Yes. But I need logic in my life. Which is why I need to understand, when this project at school has nothing to do with me, I'm being forced into the wilds of Sin City. Because currently my comfort zone is screeching to abort and retreat inside a good book with a dash of chocolate cinnamon bears on the side.

Marti slings her glittery purse over one shoulder. “Vi, we have free tickets in a private box.”

The woman can read minds since such a simple statement involving two of my favorite words—free and private—has me utterly sold on the idea. “Meaning?”

“Meaning we’ll get free food and drinks, all with a lack of sweaty people bumping into us. I’m not turning down a night out, and neither are you, my friend.”

“Isn’t one of your kids the nephew of these guys?” Her kids. My kids. Marti is one of the district speech pathologists, and

has become the favorite in my unbiased opinion.

“Yeah. Mason Walker. Had him since eighth grade.”

“Your favorite.”

“I don’t do favorites, Vi.” Marti smacks her lips as she smooths on a bit of gloss.

“But if you did ...”

“But if I did, I might pick him. The big, little cutie has just grown so much. Went from a kid who hated life to a baseball star, new family, kid who smiles, and doesn’t mind if he stammers sometimes. He’s a pumpkin.”

I know who he is, and she’s right. He does strut the halls with a grin on his face.

“Anyway,” Marti goes on, “the drummer is Mason’s uncle, and his dad is the band’s producer. A total look-but-don’t-touch.”

Meaning, the kid’s dad is a delight to the eyes, but he sports a big, hands-off wedding ring on his finger.

I snicker at that. “I get it now.”

“Hey, don’t be going there. Is the man beautiful? Yes. But this is not about him. It’s about the wife.”

“Umm ... okay?”

Marti fluffs a few of her curls, then snatches her keys out of an oblong glazed bowl one of her students made her last year for Christmas. “Jazmine, the cousin-mom.”

“Oh, right.” I vaguely remember when Marti came home crying happy tears that her not-favorite speech kid was getting adopted by his biological cousin and her new husband.

“Anyway,” Marti says, “she always brings me delicious carbs and sends me emails about how much she appreciates me.”

“Unicorn.”

“One hundred percent. She supplied the tickets for us, so I’m not going to snub niceness and lose out on awesome-mom treats, m’kay? Besides, Blake really wants to go.”

Now I can’t complain. Blake Hess is the band teacher and the most heavily invested in this process. The least we can do is support him.

Marti draws in a deep breath, then sighs through a smile. “Well, let’s do this. By the end of the night, I’m going to prove to you there is life outside your nineteenth century romance books.”

“Take it back.”

She drapes her arm around my shoulders. “Not a chance. I have a feeling tonight is going to be exactly what you need, Vi.”

Two



# VIENNA

I DISAGREE ON MARTI'S assessment. Flashing lights, loud music, and noisy fans are not part of any night I need.

It's out of the safety zone and brings out the flash of a girl who wants to take risks. And she, well, she can't be trusted.

Alas, there is no chance to protest before I'm plopped into Marti's black sedan. Blake and Tabitha—the choir teacher and another interested-in-the-band party member—take up the backseat, probably more excited than Marti is about this concert.

Frankly, I think my fellow school district employees are merely desperate for a night out.

"I love these guys," Blake says once we arrive at the convention center that has transformed into a bustling hub of colorful hair and dark clothing.

A black and white banner of the band hangs over the front entrance. They're somber, alluring, and a little mysterious in a way.

Blake pauses to study the banner for a minute. “I’ve come to their first responder concert five years in a row.”

“For your dad?” I ask.

“Yeah. It’s a fun show. They’re pretty giving to the community.”

Blake comes from a long line of police officers. He’s the first in nearly four generations to bend the rules and take a different path.

Sometimes I wish I had the guts to rock the boat like that, but I’ve found my lane. It’s quiet. Simple. Comfortable.

Inside the building, we take a dank stairwell up what feels like a thousand flights to the private suites. Blake holds up the tickets to the bulky security guy standing like a silent sentinel outside the first suite. The guy scans the tickets, looks us up and down once, then stands aside and opens the door.

Once we’re released into the private box, Tabitha squeals and clings to Blake’s arm. Marti clings to mine. Against one wall is a table stacked in chocolate cheesecake bites, fancy cherry truffles, mini-party sandwiches, and a few dips with too many artisan breads to count.

“Bar’s open,” the security guy tells us. He gestures to a fully stocked minibar in the opposite corner. “Enjoy the show.”

Then we’re alone.

Marti releases me and beelines it for the truffles. “This is *amazing*.”

It takes a total of three breaths before the other two hit the table and minibar. Like I'm living a version of teachers gone wild, I wring my hands and tentatively sample one of the cheesecake bites.

It's a nibble made of bright colors and smooth, rich decadence in my mouth. I'm only slightly ashamed I down three more in the next thirty seconds.

Halfway through the fourth, my heart jolts. A rumble shakes the ground. The glass panel separating us from the crowd in the arena and floor seating does nothing to stop the smooth, steady thrum of a bass guitar. My fingertips tingle when the lights fade. The crowd starts to cheer in the inky pitch.

Marti cups her hands around her mouth and whoops. Blake and Tabitha hold up glasses of wine and join in.

I smile. More excited to experience this than I care to admit.

It's out of character.

It's a little wild.

It's probably a clue I need to get out more.

When a flash of flames—yes, real spouts of fire—burst from the front of the stage, I shriek and drop my cheesecake. The smooth bass erupts in a collision of drums, guitars, and a raspy, roar of a voice.

The band of Perfectly Broken materializes behind the blaze.

My hands clamp over my ears, but I'm mesmerized in the same breath. The truth is growing up my house was quiet, and

conversations even more so. Music was kept to classics, Broadway, soft rock, or piano concertos and symphonies.

Hard rock meant screaming and too much eyeliner.

Still, I absorb it all.

The lead singer leans over the edge of the stage, one foot propped on the ledge, his arm reaching for the fans stretching back for him. A shiver dances down my spine when I scan the drummer's face. He has it painted like a skull. It's dark, a little wickedly thrilling.

My eyes drift over the stage. On one side of the lead singer, a guy with a guitar peels up the fretboard, and something about the squeal of his solo starts churning people on the floor. They spin around and around, opening a wide circle where—to me—it looks like they take a sort of pleasure in slamming into each other.

Strange.

My attention falls to the bassist—the first, smooth sound that woke up my pulse. He's tall, with arms covered in more tattoos than the lead singer.

Lights, smoke, guitars, the energy of the space collides in one busy, shuddering burst of adrenaline. I'm not screaming like my friends. I'm not drinking. I'm simply standing back, hands on my ears, and my heart won't stop racing.

Nearly two hours later, when Perfectly Broken waves before they abandon the stage, I've had a bit of an epiphany. I've discovered this harsh, loud style of music is multi-faceted.

Rife in emotion and sharp edges. But Perfectly Broken didn't only play songs that rang in my ears. No. There were some slow, melancholy songs so raw I had to blink through the sting of tears more than once.

Twenty-four, and I feel as if I'm discovering an entirely new side of life with entirely new people.

I came in with one opinion about rock stars and I'm leaving with something different. Their songs mean something. Pieces of a broken heart that each guitar string, each beat of the drums puts back together again.

More than wild hair and black fingernail polish.

"That was ... that was amazing." Marti hiccups and slings her arm around my shoulders, giggling.

Blake and Tabby are much the same, sort of swaying on their feet, holding what's left of their drinks. I guess I'd been too focused on the stage, dissecting every meaning beneath painful lyrics, I didn't indulge like my friends.

Not that I drink much anyway. My mom was never one to hold back on her opinions over losing one's inhibitions, and I simply never took a liking to it. By the state of my fellow educators, it's probably a good thing.

"So, none of you are driving." I hold out my hand to Marti. "Cough up the keys."

"Oh, we can't go yet," Tabitha whines. "We still have half the table left."

As if it's his cue, Blake hits the fancy artichoke dip, scooping like it might disappear once the crowds clear out

The door groans open, and the security guy returns. His face is like stone, but his voice hides a hidden smile. "Have a good time?"

Marti whoops, mid-bite in a cherry truffle, and stumbles in response. Oh, there was a twitch to his cheek. Almost a smile.

"I'll take that as a yes," he says. "Mrs. Walker didn't know if you'd be driving yourselves tonight, so the label's car is here when you're ready."

"We get to drive in a car with the band?" Blake's eyes widen.

Security Guy shakes his head. "Not tonight, man."

"Ugh. We get the chance to take some ritzy ride home and I brought my own car." Marti pouts out her lips.

"Marti, you guys take the label's car," I say. "I'll drive yours home."

"What? No way," she says, words slurring a bit. "We're not making Vi drive home alone."

She's addressing me in third person. Great. "Really, it's fine," I insist. "I'm ready to get home, and this way you can stay a little longer, right?"

I look at the security guy for confirmation.

"I can walk them out when they're ready," he says.

"See? Stay. Live large. I've had all I can take."

Marti gives me a hug. “I don’t know, Vi. I think it might be a jerk ... a jerk move of us to make you go alone.”

“It’s not. Want to know something? I even had fun.”

She cheers, squeezing my neck. The others join in, and after five more minutes of convincing them that I’m capable of going to the parking garage and driving home on my own, I leave them in the hands of the meaty guy who probably would crush hearts if he’d let that smile go.

“Miss,” he says before I head for the stairs. “There’s an elevator down the hall that’ll be less crowded. It’ll take you straight to the garage.”

“Oh.” I look over my shoulder and turn on my heel. I hate elevators, but it’s probably better than crowded stairwells. “Thank you. You’ll keep an eye on them? They’re all lightweights.”

There it is. My theory is correct, and the man is delightfully handsome when he smiles. “I’ll make sure they get to the car safely. In case you want to check up on them, here is my card. Feel free to call.”

He hands over the business card, and I hold it up with a smile. “Will do, *Quinn*.”

He’s right about the fewer crowds. The corridor to the elevator is nearly empty but for a few people who look like staff members.

By the time I’m at the elevator a strange, unexpected grin curls in the corner of my mouth. In the gleam of the silver

doors, my fingertips trace the sequins of the tight, too-flashy dress; I take in the black stilettos, the glimpse of color in my hair.

“You, Vienna Shaw, are officially a rebel.” I snicker, holding my smile when the elevator door dings open, and I step inside.

The smile fades.

Another rider is in the back of the elevator, and I have half a mind to hurry my way right back out. I’m too slow and the doors close. There’s no leaving the tight, compact space without making it horribly obvious I’m fleeing since tight, compact spaces are a thousand times worse with strangers.

A guy in a black ball cap lifts his gaze from his cell phone.

Oh. Change of plans. I’m fascinated, unable to blink away. Two different colors stare back, and I can’t decide if the icy blue eye or the golden brown is my favorite.

Too soon, he drops his attention back to his screen, almost recoiling. Shoulders curve, he pulls on the brim of his hat a little, and leans against the wall as if barring me away.

I’d be wise to take a hint, except like a child with no manners I can’t stop staring.

Blame it on the rock concert, maybe the rebel inside who can’t be trusted, but I’m wholly fascinated by the black and gray tattoos lining his arms. Even the scary skulls inked on the tops of his hands.



Why skulls? Does he have a fascination with death? Does he want to scare people? Maybe he's just a fan of Halloween.

What I'm sure he's not a fan of is some nosy woman ogling his skin, wondering if he's been to prison or not.

My stare is interrupted when the elevator jolts.

In seconds my heart is nothing but an empty hole as it falls out the bottoms of my feet.

Hands on the wall, stomach tied in knots, a little shriek scrapes like sharp glass from my throat.

"Rough ride, huh?" Tattoo guy says, his voice a deep timbre.

This is great, just *great*. I must look ridiculous. It's only an elevator. They jolt sometimes as they dangle precariously over a gaping hole of death.

Is it getting hotter?

I lick my lips and can't manage to find my voice to laugh off the bump, but his eyes are back on his screen anyway.

We're fine. This is fine.

Until nothing is fine.

A violent shudder rocks the car. The lights flicker. I stumble forward, slamming into the wall. The car buzzes; there's a clear you're-going-to-plummet sound, then my mind spinning off its axis.

All I can focus on is a sudden, tight grip of hands around my waist, and all the things I thought I'd do before I died.

Three

# VIENNA

I'M NOT BREATHING. A heady panic grips me. Yes. It's definitely hard to breathe. My mind whirls for point five seconds until I realize the source of my clogged airway.

My face is burrowed against warm, stubbled skin. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. This isn't happening.

But when I crack one eye, the nightmare is in full force. My arms are clinging to the guy's neck like he's the only source of oxygen left. Truth be told, he smells delicious, a little spicy, a little homey, like cinnamon and pine trees. But that's not the point.

I'm strangling the man.

I might be all limbs and bony points, but I'm stronger than I look, and he is sort of coughing under my hold. *Let go. Just let go.* Why am I not letting him go? I'm going to kill him before the elevator finishes plummeting downward and kills us both.

Then in the haze of terror a smooth, soft, deliciously deep voice carves through the fog. "Hey. We're good. It's good."

The tattooed, suspiciously sexy stranger is talking to me. Well, he's trying to. His voice is a little strained due to my elbows hooked around his neck like a Christmas bow.

I find a bit of brain power to deconstruct what's happening. The elevator ... okay, it's not plummeting. It's simply dangling over four stories of nothing but empty space. Likely we'd have a fifty-fifty chance at survival from this height.

For now, I can be grateful the car is stopped.

I shiver when a soft touch runs the length of my spine.

He has one arm curled around my waist, holding me against him, sort of rubbing my back in long, gentle strokes. Like my mom used to do when I had a nightmare. No offense to my mother, but I like this guy's touch more. It's stirring something besides panic inside.

Until the stupid, evil elevator shudders and jolts again.

All at once I'm trying to claw my way into this guy's skin. I'm practically monkey-hugging him, and my mouth is on no-filter mode. "It's falling. We're falling. Oh my gosh, not like this!"

"We're not falling," he says. How is his tone so grumbly yet so soothing? He draws a deep breath in through his nose and reaches out for a button on the wall. "I'm going to call the technician."

He presses the maintenance call button and waits. Thirty seconds. One minute. Nothing.

A whimper slips out of my throat. They're not there. We're trapped and no one is there to help us! "Where are they?"

The question comes out more to myself, but his arm pulls me closer.

"Hang tight. I'm going to press the alarm." It's like he's asking my permission. Probably because I'm a maniac, two seconds away from snapping his neck from my death-grip, and he's treating me like a wild animal that might strike if he moves too quickly.

He presses the red alarm button. The shrieking bell locks up every muscle in my body. I shake my head, burrowing my face back into his woody skin. At this point, I don't even care.

"It could fall." Each word comes out disjointed and rough. "It could just snap and fall. We're still too high!"

"We're stuck, that's all," he says. "Happens more than you might think. It's going to be fine."

"There's too much to do. I haven't checked it all off!" My shaky breath hits his neck, and his body sort of shivers. I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, but he doesn't let me go. Doesn't stop me when my fingers start mimicking his strokes to the back of his neck. His hair is wavy, and twirling my fingers in it keeps me grounded.

"What things?" he asks, surprising me. "What do you need to do?"

I shouldn't be chatting when my life is about to end, but if he's asking ...

“Everything!” My thoughts drift to my personal bucket list, and my panicked tongue keeps spilling. “Drive the West Coast, swim in the ocean at night. I need to try sushi. Everyone should try sushi before they die, right?”

“It is good.” His fingertips keep running across my skin.

A weird, ugly moan-sigh comes out of my throat. Unattractive. Unsexy, but he’s a magician. His touch soothes. His growly voice excites something inside. No doubt, the man is irritated to have a class-A clinger on his neck, but he’s decent enough to keep me there, to keep me calm.

“I need to ride a roller coaster,” I whisper.

“You sure you want to do that?” he asks. Is he laughing at me? There is definitely a bit of amusement in his voice. “They sort of feel like this elevator.”

“Then, I’ll count this as my coaster.” My teeth grind together as I move on down the list. “I-I need to have the eighties movie marathon. I promised my dad I’d watch his list.”

Dad! He’ll be devastated if they have to peel my corpse off the bottom of an elevator. I should call my parents more. They don’t live far, but I need to make more of an effort. I’m their only child and was their world for eighteen years. They deserve some phone calls.

“Is your dad a movie buff?”

“Understatement. He says I need more culture and I haven’t even touched his list because I don’t like trying new things,

but that's the problem, isn't it? I'm trapped in this dangling box, glossy images of my life flashing by, and I haven't *done* anything!"

"What movies?" His voice is like a gentle wave. Sort of slow, then strong enough to grip me and hold me steady until it's gone again.

"Uh ... eighties hits. You know, *F-Ferris Beuller's Day Off*, um ... *Rain Man*. *The Goonies*."

"You haven't seen *The Goonies*? That is probably my second ... no, I'd have to say it's my favorite movie of all time."

"My mom said it was scary!" I'm too shrill, and frankly, sound pathetic. "I hate scary movies."

He laughs. At least, I think it's a laugh. More like a growl with a bit of sunshine.

In truth, I wouldn't mind if he made the sound again. Something about a half-grin, and that sound brightens his eyes until they look like a bit of ocean and tilled soil mingled together. I decide right here—if anything is going to pull me off the ledge it's this man's happiness.

"If we get out of here, we'll for sure watch *The Goonies*," he says. "Life does not begin until you meet Chunk and Sloth."

"If?" My voice cracks. "*If* we get out?"

He frowns, clearly regretting his horrid, horrid word choice, and quickly shifts gears. "What else? What else do you need to

do?”

I shake my head, the tension building, and the best, most embarrassing thing slips before I can stop it. “My romance novel kiss.” *What have you done?* My eyes lift, he’s studying me, breaking me. If this elevator doesn’t kill me, sheer mortification will. “Please tell me I didn’t say that out loud. I’m claustrophobic and a nervous talker and ... I’m shutting up now.”

But I slump against him when his hand reaches the back of my neck. He squeezes the spot, kneads my tension until I’m clay in his hands, ready to mold. Magic fingers. This guy has impressive anti-panic skills. “Explain a romance novel kiss?”

Oh. Well, then.

Before stepping into this elevator I did not know the grumpy, demanding type was my sort of thing, but my body is tingling. For crying out loud, it’s practically screaming *again, again, again!*

I lick my bottom lip, cursing my traitorous eyes for dropping to his mouth. As if inspecting if he’s got the goods to do the job.

He does.

Full, totally book-hero-style, kissable lips.

The very idea of it has me signing for him to leave. I’m a loose cannon, there is no telling what is going to come out of my mouth, so my hands do the talking.

“Are you signing?”



I clench my fists. “Habit.”

He smiles, hand on my waist. He’s so close, and a huge part of me wouldn’t mind if he took up a permanent place right here, this close, until we fall to our deaths.

He tilts his head, voice rough. “Tell me what a romance novel kiss is?”

I’ll tell him anything if he keeps looking at me like this. “One so powerful it makes it hard to stand, hard to breathe.” My gaze bounces between his interesting eyes. “A kiss that gets permanently stamped there. Like a tattoo.”

From where we’re standing, it takes less than half a step for him to press my back against the wall. Noses close, mouths inches apart.

How did this change so fast?

I don’t like change. I don’t like new things or stepping out of my comfort zone. But I’m a sucker for those eyes, those tattoos, this voice that calms the race of my pulse and rushes blood to my head at the same time.

My mom would remind me of the dozens of risks being so up-close and personal with a strange man. She’d tell me to pull out the pepper spray.

My dad would wink and tell me I only live once. The man is the epitome of *when in Rome*, and the Shaws complement each other in a wonderfully perfect dance of give and take.

I’m a muted color. The quiet, bookworm schoolteacher. This guy is wild, raw, inked, and mysterious.

The Yin to my Yang.

When in Rome, right?

“If that hasn’t happened to a woman like you,” he whispers in a deliciously husky voice, “then you aren’t kissing the right guys.”

My tongue dances behind my teeth. “I’ve had a bit of a dry spell.”

*What?* Have it be known that Vienna Shaw is the worst sexy-talker on the planet.

His palm traps one side of my face. “Maybe we could knock at least one thing off that list. We don’t know what’s going to happen here.”

I smile, a person I don’t recognize. My body arches into him. “You said we’d be fine.”

“Ninety-nine percent sure. But there’s always that one percent.”

“Very true. Wouldn’t want to miss an opportunity.”

“Couldn’t agree more.” A glimmer of heat shines in his eyes.

Are we doing this? Uh, we’re doing this. There is an allure about this tattooed stranger I can’t ignore.

He dips his chin, but I press a hand to his chest, gaining a little clarity. “I don’t even know your name.”

“What sort of romance books do you read?”

My throat tightens, feels like sandpaper, but I rasp out, “Uh ... Austen. You know, re-regency period.”

A sexy grin curls half his mouth. “Then I’ll be Darcy and you’ll be Eliza Bennet tonight.”

He knows *Pride and Prejudice* is written by Jane Austen and even uses *Eliza* when he’s talking about Elizabeth. Like he’s read it. My heart flips over and convulses; it can’t tolerate another word. The way I see it, if we’re going to die, might as well go out with a smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Darcy.”

He hesitates, one thumb tracing the edge of my lip. “Do you want to do this? There’s no pressure here.”

My chest tightens, and if I don’t take a piece of this guy, I might combust. Still, he’s asking for my permission. My eyes jump between his. I can back up. Be sensible. Be cautious. Or I can be someone different, someone reckless, even for a moment.

“Yes,” I whisper.

One small grin is all I get before he kisses me.

Worries and fears fade when his arm tightens around my body, pulling me harder into his chest. I don’t even bother stressing over the embarrassing shudder dancing under my skin, and curl my arms around his neck again.

This time, I don’t strangle him. The way he tugs on my hair, I’m going to guess he likes it.

The kiss is raw, deep; it’s sensual and sweet. His lips are soft and demanding like his voice. One night. I gave myself

one night to be someone bold. But now, I'm not sure how I'll be able to do this only once and walk away.

Each touch spurs a new need, a desire impossible to fight. My hand grips his shirt. He pulls on my curls, inching me closer until there isn't a sliver of space between us.

Time doesn't exist here.

My legs tingle. It's happening. A life moment where my knees knock because a man is rushing too much blood to my head from his touch.

The calluses on his fingertips brush over my cheeks, they trace the line of my jaw, they claim me like I'm irrevocably his.

For a moment, I am.

I don't know how long I stay tangled with my Darcy. All I know is my head is locked in a fog, I'm greedy for more, and in the back of my mind I know it'll all be over too soon. After this, we'll go separate ways.

As if fate heard my thoughts, crackle spurs on the speaker. "Hello."

We snap apart, breathless. My hair is tangled around his fingers, and I want to spew curses at the maintenance guy. Odd, since moments ago I was in a full panic about dying.

Darcy clears his throat and presses the call button. "Yeah. We're stuck on the fourth floor."

"Hang tight. We're going to get the doors open."

Our eyes meet. More painful than anticipated, I know the moment is over.

Tattooed Darcy smiles, presses a sweet, soft kiss to my lips, then takes a step back. He looks ready to say something, but a clicking sound interrupts. The squeak of the outer doors rolling away, followed by a little sway of the car, has my muscles tensing again.

“We’re good,” he whispers, and his hand reaches back for mine.

I take it without a second thought.

The man delivered an earth-shattering kiss. He’s changed my life, my expectations forever, and still manages to keep my head in a calm.

More clicking, metal clanging on metal, then the heavy inner doors pull back to reveal the floor at our hip level, two guys in black jackets, and three firemen.

Darcy pulls on his ball cap, shadowing his face again, releases my hand, and inches into the corner.

One of the firemen reaches into the car. “All right, Miss. Let’s get you out.”

“What if it falls and chops off my legs?” Yes, my mind always goes to the worst-case scenario. I’m working on it.

“It won’t. I’m right behind you,” Darcy whispers with a nod.

“We’ve got you,” says the fireman.

Truth be told, it's Darcy's blue and brown eyes I'm watching as I nod and step to the doors.

The Las Vegas Fire Department is masterfully skilled at hauling people out of an elevator. Every muscle wants to collapse in relief when I walk free. I lace my fingers behind my head, take a few deep breaths, and hurry to answer a few procedural questions from another fireman. We're fine. No injuries, blah, blah.

Darcy is still in the elevator. I can't see him, but he's whispering something to the two maintenance guys in black jackets.

One of them nods, and I swear he says something like, "No problem, sir."

Is Darcy a sir? What kind of sir? Businessman with a hundred tattoos? A boss of some kind here? Maybe he's part of the maintenance department. It could be why he knew all the things to say to keep me from spinning out of control.

My next thought is these guys might know him. The real him. I could ask, but part of me likes the mystery of not knowing. Part of me doesn't want to know because this is the one night we'll have.

If I don't go and ruin it with real names, then he can simply be my own Mr. Darcy.

I hold my breath until he's out. He brushes his hands down his shirt. Those hands that knew what they were doing a few

minutes earlier. My stomach twists in heated knots all over again.

What do we do now?

As if he can read my mind, he smiles. “Watch *The Goonies*, Lizzy.”

I flip my gaze to the open elevator. His hands are in his pockets, and he’s grinning like he’s delivered up the challenge of my life.

This guy is blueberry pancakes with whipped cream and a side of spicy chili sauce. Sweet, and sure, and bossy, and beautiful. Be still my little, romantic heart. Play. This. Cool.

“We’ll see, Darcy.” I hold his stare, and smile. “Maybe someday I can repay the favor.” My glance drifts to the elevator, a wash of heat filling my cheeks. “For keeping me calm in there, I mean.”

“It was my pleasure.” He looks at me with the same heated stare as the moments before he ruined all future kisses in my life.

But one night means one night.

If he saw me tomorrow, I wouldn’t be this girl. The sparkly, black dress would be replaced with cardigans and pencils in my bun. I’m not the girl he thinks I am, and for all I know he’s not the guy I think he is.

I take a step in the opposite direction, a soft smile on my face. “Bye, Darcy.”

His smile flickers a bit, but he tilts his head. “Lizzy.”

There is a finality in his voice. He knows as well as me this night will be burned into our memories and nothing more.

A sweet, incredible moment when two strangers left a lasting mark on the other.



Four

# REES

“REES HAYDEN!”

Adrenaline floods my body. I bolt upright. I’m a bit of a wild sleeper, so half my body is already hanging off the edge of the bed, and the rest of me sort of follows in a frenzy of pillows, sheets, and a corner of my down comforter.

I’m on my knees, chest tight, breaths sharp, and leaning across my bed in the next ten seconds.

“Alexis.” My chest tightens. Noted—being roused by a shrill shriek and adrenaline surge does not sit well. I draw in a long breath and try again. “What are you ... what are you doing in here?”

I gather my comforter and wrap it around my waist, you know, since I’m in my underwear!

Alexis Knight-Cole doesn’t bat a lash. In fact, those lashes are so pinched in her infamous glare, I can’t see the color of her eyes. Hands on her hips, her pregnant belly heaving as she breathes sharp, jagged gasps of air through her nose.

She says nothing.

I'm not one to shy away from a fight—certain fights—but with any one of the Perfectly Broken ladies a man would be wise to proceed cautiously.

I learned the hard way to not mess with them.

Especially not Alexis. In my bedroom. With a hefty case of lockjaw.

Slowly, I back toward my attached master bathroom. “Lex, what’s up?”

“Don’t *Lex* me.”

A chuckle echoes up my hallway. Bridger appears, eating a bowl of my cinnamon flakes cereal. The lead singer of the band finds a lot of amusement when his wife goes wild on his bandmates.

Honestly, I’m still trying to figure out why my bandmate is in my house. Staring at me. While I’m ninety percent naked.

“Morning,” Bridger says through a big spoonful. “Rough night?”

“What?” I drag my fingers through my dark blond hair. It always stands on end, but today is especially wild. “No. I just got in late, and now I’m wondering why you broke into my house.”

“Oh, you’re wondering? Are you just as curious as a little, stupid cat?” Alexis clears her throat—my cue to stop talking.

This is my last day on earth. No doubt about it, this woman is going to make me disappear in two seconds.

I watch, unmoving, a little afraid, a little amused, as she fumbles with her phone in her hand.

Alexis narrows her eyes again. “Allow me to quote our conversation after the show. I wrote, *Three things: Our house, tacos, game night.* To which you replied, *I’m there.*”

“Of course, I responded most punctually, *Are you good getting out? The crowds are wild out here.*” Her cheeks turn a flame red and I think my countdown to death has officially begun. Alexis returns her gaze to her phone screen. “You responded, *I’m good. Letting some crowds die down, then I’ll head up to the south elevators and get to the private garages through the security offices. My battery is going to die soon, and this way out might take a bit, so don’t wait for me. See y’all soon.* As if your little Southern accent is going to butter me up.”

Bridger slurps the milk from the bowl, wholly unbothered that his wife is about to cut me.

“Twenty minutes,” she says, voice rough. “Then thirty. Then no response to my million texts, no sight of you leaving the building. Motorcycle untouched. No sight of Rees flipping Hayden.”

The back of my neck prickles. This woman who is a solid five inches shorter than me makes me feel smaller than a flea.

I hobble over to my bedside table where my phone is charging. The screen is littered in text messages from Alexis, Ellie, all the guys. Even Tim, our band manager.

I wince. “Oh.”

“Oh?” Alexis props her crossed arms over her round belly like a little perch. “*Oh?* We went hunting for you. I thought you’d been mauled, or kidnapped, or chained in a groupie’s basement.”

“I’m sorry. My phone died, and some ... stuff happened last night, I totally spaced everything and came straight home.”

The truth? I’d spent the aftermath of a broken elevator recalling the heated, passionate, perfect kiss with my Lizzy all the way to bed. I hardly remember unlocking my door, stripping down, and plugging in my phone.

I look up again. Is Alexis’s chin quivering?

Oh, no. Nope. I’m not starting my Sunday off by making a pregnant lady cry.

“Lex.” I take a step closer to her, but she holds up a hand, stopping me.

“You are officially on my bad list, sir. You leave us after the show because you need to take an alternate escape route to avoid being mangled *and* refused an escort. Already, that made me nervous. Then, to have you stop texting! Just dead silence. I’ve been attacked by a fan and I’m not the one on stage! We had no idea what to think.”

Okay, now I'm a flea on a flea. I should've pulled my head out and at least let them know I was okay.

Nothing sets Alexis off more than thinking one of us has been harmed by exuberant fans.

She was assaulted by a woman before I was in the band. But she's also dealt with people breaking into their house, and aggressive paparazzi between being married to Bridger Cole and being the sister of Vegas Kings pitcher, Parker Knight.

I did need to leave in a different direction than the guys last night. Smoke machines from the stage and too many cigarettes outside were too much. All of it was exacerbated by the crowd waiting for us being larger than normal, many of them looking for me.

I blame my twin brother for that part.

Ever since Noah and his Netflix show took off, everyone—including groupies—wants a few peeks at his wilder, rocker twin brother. Either to get close to him or—no, getting close to me is almost always to get closer to Noah.

“The elevator got stuck, and it was a little wild after that. I didn't even think of my phone.”

She pauses. Silence. Awful silence. “The elevator?”

“Yeah, and I wasn't alone. There was a woman and she sort of ... panicked.”

She did a lot more than panic. My lips are still burning with the succulent taste of her.

“Are you lying?” Alexis asks.

“I’m not. We had to have the fire department get us out and everything.”

She sniffles. Part of me wants to retreat. I’ve never liked tears, never been great at emotions in general. The other part stays still, taking it like a friend ought to.

“We ... we were so worried about you. Enough to set Greyson and Quinn on the hunt. Pops was about to call the police until Quinn saw your bike parked in the driveway.”

“We told him to break in and make sure you were okay,” Bridger says, grinning. “But he was worried you might not be alone, so.”

I glare at him. *Really?*

Alexis shakes out her hands, drawing in a deep breath. “Okay. We’re good. He’s alive.”

“He’s alive,” I repeat, then gesture at the blanket wrapped around my waist. “So, do you think I can shower and get dressed without an audience?”

All I get is a finger pointed at me and another sharp glare before Alexis wheels out of my room as furious as she walked in.

Bridger chuckles. “She’s been a little more emotional lately.”

“Because I’m carrying *your* offspring, Cole! Appreciate it.” Alexis’s shout echoes through the hallway.

I grunt, letting the blankets drop now that Alexis is gone, and dig into my dresser for clean clothes. “Didn’t mean to freak y’all out.”

“You really got stuck?”

“Yeah. It was wild. We were probably there for thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes with a girl from the concert? Bet that was awkward.”

What’s awkward is the way I force a laugh. My face is hot, and my chest tightens. The feel of her body in my hands, the way she kissed me back unguarded, unashamed. I’ve never had anything come close to it, and if I have any brains, I’ll bury it quickly. It’ll become a thought to pull out only when I need something sweet to think about.

“She, uh, she didn’t recognize me,” I admit. “I got the feeling she wasn’t a regular at rock concerts.”

“That’s a tragedy.”

“Agreed.”

Bridger points the spoon at me. “Well, glad you’re alive, but we did come over for a reason. We promised to help unload some of the equipment at the school before kids come back tomorrow.”

I think my mind must’ve been wiped by a pair of sweet, pink lips and coconut shampoo. I completely forgot about that. “Thought we were famous and could pay underlings to do all this for us.”



Bridger scoffs. “Me too. But Al has informed me we haven’t reached douche bag fame yet.”

“Bummer.” I rub a hand through my messy hair again. “I probably shouldn’t tick her off twice in one day, huh?”

“I wouldn’t. But we promised everyone dinner at our place again, so that’s something.”

“Am I invited?” I raise my voice intentionally for Alexis who sounds like she’s slamming cupboards in my kitchen.

The clatter stops. “Of course you’re invited, dummy! But I will give you the smallest slice of cheesecake, you will sit at the kid table, and I will not speak with you until you finish the cleanup. Be warned.”

“Fine.” I laugh and take a step toward my adjoining bathroom. “Meet y’all at the school.”

Bridger waves and when I catch the click of the front door closing, I lean against the wall and let a long breath escape. It’s been nearly three years since I signed with Perfectly Broken. Being a fan before I became their bassist, I knew they were close. But it wasn’t until my contract was signed that I discovered how close.

The band means family.

It’s the motto we live by, and they mean every word. Family doesn’t equate to blood to Perfectly Broken, but it does mean loyalty.

They have my back, and honestly, I hate being responsible for all the upset last night. While in the same breath it sinks

into my bones knowing they *were* upset. Over me. It's a bit foreign, a little uncomfortable, but it matters.

Still, doesn't help knowing I'm slowly becoming the trouble child of the band.

Again, I blame my brother.

I rarely spoke with the media before Noah hit it big in Hollywood, and now I talk to them even less. The drawback of looking like I do while my brother masters the boy-next-door image is the media sort of makes up their own theories about me.

If it makes him shine, I guess that's a good enough payout.

Let the tabloids speculate. I'd rather keep the rumors going. Means people stay away. Means they don't dig too deep.

Somehow all the thoughts about avoiding people reel back around to the clear lack of avoidance between Lizzy and me. For a short moment, I was able to be me. No comparisons. No judgment. No fake words said all to steal a night with a rock star.

Last night was not the norm for me. While tabloids paint all rockers as party-going, bed-jumping, wild guys, I do all I can to avoid people. I don't meet random women. I don't like being used because of my job, because of fame. It's shallow and hollow. None of it appeals to me.

Something about her, though, pulverized any reservations. Any thought of consequences. She gave me permission, and I took it.

A smile teases my lips.

Maybe we'll never see each other again, but that won't stop me from thinking of her.



I talk a lot of crap about fame and fortune, but in truth, I enjoy working side by side with Enigma's crew. They're the backbone of making sure all our events go off without a hitch.

The least I can do is make sure they know we appreciate them by helping them out a bit.

A large, white canopy is set up at one side of the school where our equipment will be stored while we shoot part of the video. The security around the thing is practically government spy level, but it'll save time to have it all accessible while we're here working.

I let out a long breath of air when Mason, Ellie, and Tate help me lower a heavy amp in the back of the tent.

Ellie brushes back a lock of robin's egg blue hair and stretches her back. "I think Mase could use a break."

She ruffles her nephew's hair to annoy the kid. Honestly, he's not so much a kid anymore. We all met Mason Walker when he was fourteen, now at sixteen, on the varsity baseball team, with Parker as his conditioning coach, he looks like he's about to graduate college.

"I need a b-break?" He scoffs. "How many cuss words did you just say walking that thing over here?"

Tate laughs and kisses the back of Ellie's head before grabbing a few boom mics with me.

"Masey," Ellie says, aghast. "I've never said a bad word in my life. I merely think you look parched, and we have a tab at that cute little café across the street."

"I could go for food and something to drink," Tate says, perking up almost instantly. "Whose turn is it to pick up?"

"Rees." Alexis tosses back the flap and steps inside, her arms laden in folded banners with the Perfectly Broken raven logo printed on one side. "It's his turn, and it'll be his turn for at least a month."

Ellie snickers and goes to help her stack the banners.

Tate nudges my ribs. "Dude, make sure you bring Lex something with chocolate. Lots of chocolate."

I pride myself on being a fixer. A guy who solves problems in the background, and this problem with Alexis has gone on an hour too long. After a quick perusal of the online menu of The Fix Café a block away, I smack Tate in the chest with the back of my hand. "I've got this."

I saunter across the tent, ending at Alexis's shoulder.

"Here to grovel?" she asks through her teeth.

"Would you like me to?"

Alexis spins around to face me. "I will never be above watching any of you get down on your knees to beg for my forgiveness."

“I’m not getting on my knees, Lex.”

“Huh. Stupid of you.” She turns away and starts folding the banners even though they’re already folded.

“I’m not getting on my knees because I have a better idea.”

A pause. But for Alexis Knight-Cole it’s a shoo-in to get her to listen to your plight. “Go on.”

“Come with me on the café pick-up and I will buy you not one, not two, but seven of these chocolate swirl cheesecake brownies.” I hold up the image from the menu, taking too much cocky pleasure in the way Alexis’s eyes practically melt onto my screen. “Seven, Lex. One a day for the next week, and every day you have one you’ll get to remember how sorry I am for freaking you out.”

Her answer doesn’t come easy, but that is the superpower of this woman. She knows how to get us all to bend with a simple look.

But the moment she relents, a bit of the tension in my chest fades.

“Fine,” Alexis says. “I’ll come help, but you will add a white chocolate strawberry on top of the brownies. The baby loves white chocolate strawberries.”

“This negotiation depends on a few clauses. Are you going to name him Rees?”

“Not a chance.”

I chuckle and hook my arm around her shoulders. “Fine. Deal. Come on, let’s get that little guy fed.”

Five

# VIENNA

THERE IS SOMETHING TO be said the morning after a woman experiences a life-altering kiss.

I'm not even over exaggerating. My nan always told me if we're lucky we get a few romantic moments that sweep us off our feet and never put us back down. I don't think last night in the elevator was one of those moments.

I know it was.

Instead of my typical sulky, I hate mornings grumble, I practically skip into the kitchen, spinning like I've landed the role in Swan Lake, and greet my half-existing roommate with a loud, "Gooood morning!"

Marti groans and winces. "Shhh. Loud noises. No good. No good."

With expert care she slurps some of her coffee and sighs like it's her new lover. I snort and take the mug out of her hands. Marti follows it, whimpering like a wounded kitten.



“Nope, I’m going out to get us good coffee and some quiche. My treat.”

Marti’s face wrinkles. “Who are you? I want my anti-morning best friend back.”

I shake her shoulders, laughing. “Last night was fun. I want to keep the weekend going, and it’s been forever since we’ve done a Sunday brunch.”

“Ugh, fine. I’ll call Blake and Tabs, but I’m ordering an expensive latte.”

“Deal.”



When Marti and I first moved to the area, we’d always have Sunday brunches—a way to gear up for the school week. Soon enough it expanded to Blake and Tabby. We haven’t done this for a few weeks, but there is a constant thrum of excitement in my belly from last night.

I want to keep it, and The Fix is the perfect place to keep a smile.

The husband of Hadley Forester, a biology teacher, owns the place. He’s a bottle of good things, and strategically placed his café a block away from Valley High so teachers could get ‘their fix’ before school, midday, and after school.

The man makes a mean cup of coffee, and he always has a teacher special that knocks off a solid three bucks the regular patrons just don’t get.

The bell over the door dings, announcing my arrival. I draw in a long breath of the sweet vanilla and caramel musk hovering around the bougie dining room. Pastel chairs and tables line the edges, with lounge chairs and sofas in the center.

Brunch draws out all walks of life. No one makes an egg white quiche like our guy, Atticus.

I head to the counter, waiting for a few couples to make their orders. Their cute hand holding, the nuzzling noses to cheeks, shocks a wave of heat and longing to my chest.

I smile, happy for them, with a piece of me wanting to lean over and whisper, “I know what it feels like.”

I won't be weird, but the thought is there swimming in my head, replaying the way Darcy touched, the way he held me close, the deep command of his voice. For a little longer, I'll revel in the night in the elevator, then mourn the day it becomes a tale I tell my future grandkids about the mysterious man who swept me off my feet.

“Well, look who's here.” Atticus Forester beams at me. He's what one might call a silver fox. The dust of salt and pepper whiskers across his jaw and the storm cloud eyes makes him as attractive as he is personable. He wipes his hands on his rusted orange apron with the running coffee man Fix logo on the bib. “Took you long enough to get back here on a weekend, Vi.”

“A mistake I'll never make again, Teek. I'm going to need you to pull out all the stops today. Marti, Tab, and Blake had a

night.”

Atticus chuckles and types a few things on his till. “Got just the stuff. What about for you?”

Any other day I’d be a plain cream and sugar sort of girl. Not today. This Vienna is still the bold, unafraid woman from a rock concert. Tomorrow I can curl back up in my safe shell and find my equilibrium once again.

“You know what, Teek? Surprise me. But make sure you add four croissants and at least a dozen of those mini quiche.”

He lifts his brows for half a breath, then cracks a grin. “You got it, honey. Now, for your latte how do you feel about vanilla bean and some spice?”

“I think you are a perfect human and should marry me if you keep talking like that.”

“I keep asking Hads, but she just won’t give me up, girl.”

I snicker. “Is she feeling any better? Heard she went home sick on Friday.”

He winces. “Nasty stomach bug. Seems to be passing, though.”

“Ah, tell her we’ll send her some goodies tomorrow.”

“Will do. Now go on, have a seat, I’ll bring it on out to you.”

“Thanks, Teek.”

He gives me a wink, then moves to the next in line as I grab a few napkins and stand aside.

It's a crowd today. Atticus deserves it. The man knows how to meet my every palatable need which makes him the perfect man. Each visit I suffer his refusal to marry me and stay with his smart, scientific wife we all adore because she's probably nicer than he is.

Not ten minutes later a big booming, "Vi!" comes from the counter.

Atticus holds up a thick paper sack, grinning that boyish grin, and places my order off to the side.

"Thank you, sir." I drop a five-dollar bill in the tip jar and turn to leave. But my perfect morning tilts, like the rug is pulled out from under my feet when a young couple steps through the door.

A woman, innocent looking, long dark hair, and the cutest baby bump in the desert steps in first.

She is not my problem.

No, it is the man with his hand on the small of her back. The man with aviator sunglasses, a ball cap, and a plethora of gray and black ink across his toned, delicious arms.

Those same arms that held me close not twenty-four hours ago.

Darcy is here. *My Darcy*. How?

In all the places, in all of Las Vegas, how is he here?

Worse—he's with a woman. An adorably pregnant woman.

My legs give out for an entirely different reason than an earth-shattering kiss, and I practically leap behind the counter.

“Vi, honey, what the—”

“Got a little dizzy, Teek. I’m ... I’m just going to run into the bathroom.”

“Vienna, you’re beet red.” He wrinkles his brow with concern. “Lemme grab you some water.”

“No.” I wave him away, my heart about to pound its way out of my throat. I set my food bag on the ground. “I’ll be right back.”

Atticus looks ready to retort, but before he can I scurry to the restrooms at the back of the café. Out in the dining room, the deep, sexy rumble of a familiar voice sends a shiver down my spine before the door closes.

“Hey, Atticus.”

The door shuts off any response from my coffeehouse fiancé, but they know each other. Clearly. First names mean people have met before, right?

I push away the image of my mom’s horrified face over germs and disease, and kneel on the bathroom floor, then crack the door. The barista counter is about ten feet away. The café is filled with low, easy conversation. All of it combines to allow me to catch a few words of the back and forth with Darcy and Teek.

“How’s the setup at the school going?” Atticus asks.

The school? He's at the school?

"Slow, but getting there," Darcy says. "Brings us here with a pretty big order for you."

"All good," Atticus says. "That's why we set up the band tab. Figured the crew would be needing some pick-me-ups during this whole thing."

"Well, Perfectly Broken is thanking you, trust me," says the woman.

The crew. The band. Perfectly Broken. My eyes go wide, and I tighten my grip on my mouth. That was why he was at the concert, that was why the maintenance guys recognized him—he's part of the crew for Perfectly Broken.

Our Friday staff email mentioned Enigma Records was sending a crew over to the school to setup for the arrival of the band and the music video shoot.

He's at the school. And because it is delicious and only a block away, he's at The Fix.

Does he run the setup crew?

And if so, does that mean... oh, no. Will he be at the school tomorrow? Never before have I wanted to be a wallflower more than this moment. I'd disappear, fade into the background, and try to unravel this reckless mess I've gotten into.

I'm sick. A little disgusted. Did I make out with a married man? I shouldn't assume people are together, but they're standing close, his hands were on her in a loving way.

I let the door close and press a hand to my chest.

Think this through. I refuse to jump to conclusions. If I think Darcy is a dirty, rotten scoundrel who dips his toe in infidelity on the weekends, what does that make me?

Exactly. Basically a scoundrel-ess. I'm not ready to weave my way down that road yet. Odds are I'm reading into this, and I have much bigger problems to puzzle through. The first being if he is on the crew, how will I avoid the man at the school? Second, how do I get rid of the luck of a cursed woman?

I take an elevator. Meet a stranger. Then, discover said stranger will now be pushing and hauling big equipment in my place of employment for the foreseeable future.

The idea of catching sight of those strong, lean muscled arms moving sound equipment is trouble enough. I don't need to stack on the potential of me kissing a guy in a relationship into my knot of anxiety.

It's been ten minutes. My knees are numb, and my back aches from remaining in my weird crouch on a bathroom floor. A public bathroom. I will bathe in hand sanitizer when I get home. I'm about to relent that at the speed Teek gets orders out, it'll be safe to emerge from hiding. But karma is a testy one, and the door swings open, slamming into my knees and forehead.

“Oh, gosh. Sorry about that.”

No. No, this is not happening. Pregnant walks in. She's beautiful and bright and I hate myself if I did something to mess up that smile.

"No, I uh, lost a contact." I don't wear glasses, but it was the first lie I could conjure up.

"That's the worst. Let me help."

"No, no, it's fine. You probably shouldn't get down here."

She snickers, and gets on her knees anyway, and starts looking for a contact lens that doesn't exist.

It isn't long before she's wiggling and biting her lip. I would laugh, really, if this had been any other circumstance. "Um," I start softly, "you really can use the bathroom. It's not the end of the world if I don't find it."

She breathes out a sigh of relief. "Sorry, this little guy is pushing hard today, and my guy out there is in the doghouse, so he's filling me with all the fresh squeezed orange juice and brownies to make up for it."

My heart sinks. A harsh sting of tears pulses behind my eyes. So, it's true. *Her guy* out there is in the doghouse. She knows he's a total pig and he's making it up to her here. I bet that friendly smile would change if she knew I was the reason he was in the doghouse.

She's pregnant and stopped to help me search for something on a bathroom floor.

Would it make me feel better if she were awful? Probably not, but it makes it a thousand times worse that she's sweet.



With a few grunts she picks herself up off the ground and hurries to one of the stalls. I wait for a few wretched heartbeats, then say, “Oh, I found it.” My voice is weak; it trembles.

She chuckles in the stall. “Yay!”

“Now, I can take care of business too.” Ugh, gross. I’m spinning and words are just flowing out in awkward jumbles.

At least she has the decency to laugh at my stupidity as she says, “Get ‘er done, girl.”

Maybe in another life we’d like each other. We might be friends. She seems the type to enjoy weird humor, and those people are my people.

Behind the stall door, I blink and a few tears drip onto my cheeks. I clap a hand over my mouth to muffle any sobs and wait for her to call out a goodbye before she slips out of the bathroom.

There I wait, alone in my stall. I don’t know how much time passes, but my shoulders slump in exhaustion as adrenaline abandons my body by the time I peek out into the dining room. It’s clear of pond scum, devious men. I take my first real walk of shame, a little feverish, and probably on the verge of a good sob-fest any second.

Floor, open and swallow me whole, burn me to smithereens because I am a terrible, terrible, homewrecking human. Obviously, the man fessed up to his piggish ways, or maybe

she found out, but the point is she knows, and he came here to apologize for the ultimate regret in the elevator.

This is what I've become—a slimy regret.

I should've stayed in my lane, listened to the stranger-danger warnings my mother rammed into my head growing up. What I did was reckless, dangerous, with real consequences.

“You okay, Vi?” Atticus slips out from the back of the kitchen, face riddled in concern.

“Yeah. I'm good.” I smile to appease the man. “Thank you.”

Atticus shakes his head. “Man, I hope you're not coming down with that bug Hads got. It comes fast, and it's rough.”

If only it was a stomach virus.

No, I'm the virus. A piece of poison who took what she wanted without thinking of any ramifications.

Darcy is a jerk, no mistake. Any man who is so carelessly disloyal, who thinks buying his expectant girl a few brownies is enough to make up for it, is not a man. He's a coward, and a cheat.

“Vi, let me drive you.”

“No, I'm feeling much better. Must've been low blood sugar.”

“You sure?” He studies me like he doesn't believe a word I'm saying.

“I'm fine. I swear. See you later.”

“Okay.” The word is slow, and I think Atticus is battling with his chivalry and need to run a business. “Take care, honey.”

I wave over my shoulder and hurry out to my car, singing praises to the hot morning sky that the coast is clear.

So, this is how my delightful weekend turns into a nightmare.

Scandal, and a whole lot of disdain for the man who made my heart float, my body sigh, and my dreams of romance come true.

Should’ve known. When something seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Six

# REES

HER LIPS ARE STILL scorched on mine. And I'm getting resentful.

My Lizzy was supposed to be a reckless bit of fun. Crass? Maybe. The point is by now I didn't expect to be replaying each curve, each taste. But here I am. Moping over the solid, beautiful relationships of my band and wishing I knew a stranger's real name.

I'm grateful when a cheerful jingle chirps from my laptop, announcing an incoming video call. I smile at my brother's name. Noah will be enough of a distraction—for at least fifteen minutes—to get a woman I don't know out of my head.

I lean forward and click the green button. Two seconds later, an eerily similar face greets me.

“Glasses today?” Noah lifts a brow. “Is Reesie reading?”

I glare at him, but take off the glasses I've needed since third grade. Is it fair that we are identical and only one of us has poor eyesight? I think not.

“Hey, Golden Boy,” I say. “I was just forced onto social media and was stalking you.”

Noah snorts. “And were you blown away by my impressive following?”

“Not at all.” I lean back in my chair. “What’s up?”

“Calling to check on you since I haven’t heard from you in almost a week, D-bag.”

“Intentional. I’ve decided I don’t like you anymore.”

“Too bad. We’re clones.”

“Doesn’t mean anything.”

Noah chuckles. “What are you reading? Restarting *Wicked Darlings* for the tenth time?”

I’m the one who got hooked on the book series that was adapted into his Netflix show. Noah didn’t really get into it until he snagged the part.

“Not a bad idea,” I tell him. “I like to critique how much your performance ruins it for fans of the book.”

“Hey, I have Chase’s approval on my performance, thank you.”

“Oh, right. I forget you’re buddies with my author hero and have yet to introduce us.”

“Sorry, but it’s impossible when both you and Chase are content to stay in your houses for six months straight between public sightings.”

I'm pretty sure he mutters something about introverts under his breath.

Noah attended the wedding of Chase Thorn, aka Rex Blade, author extraordinaire, last year. I've been invested in the *Wicked Darling* universe since I was sixteen. More than my brother snagging the leading role in the show, I'm more envious he gets invited to events with the guy behind the books.

"So." Noah scrubs his hands together. "Did Dad talk to you?"

I lift one brow, wanting to laugh. When was the last time our dad called me to shoot the breeze?

"No," I say flatly. "Why?"

My brother hesitates. He gets a bit shifty.

Oh, no. He's going to ramble. It's never good if Noah Hayden rambles. Like clockwork, my brother takes a deep breath, and his voice takes over.

"Okay, I thought maybe you might've talked to Dad, or at least Mark. But if you haven't, I guess I'll be the one to work it out with you. It's really no big deal, seriously, it's not like we didn't know it was happening, and it doesn't matter anymore, right? We've all moved on, and—"

"Noah," I interrupt. This right here is why I clicked with Alexis so quickly. She's a talker like Noah. She felt a bit like home the first time she went off on a rant. But he mentioned

Mark—our stepbrother. This is going to be bad. “What’s going on?”

He scratches the back of his neck—same as me—and lets out a long sigh.

I scoff. “I wish you’d spit it out, Nancy.”

He takes a minute to glare at me for using the name I used to tease him with growing up. I don’t know when it started, but he called me Regina, so we’re square.

“It’s about Mark and Adrienne’s wedding”

Oh. No wonder he’s being weird. This is my least favorite subject. I wish I could say it wasn’t a punch to the solar plexus, but it takes a solid three seconds for my lungs to remember how to draw a breath.

“What about it?” My voice is flatter than paper and I hate it.

“Well, Mom decided since we all rarely get together we should make it count. Mark and Adrienne agreed.”

“What does that mean?” If changes are being made to a wedding happening next week, then my stepbrother is officially more of an inconsiderate tool than I thought. “I have the video shoot coming up, remember? My schedule doesn’t just flip even if Adrienne and Mark think I do nothing all day.”

Noah bites his lip, probably to keep from smiling. “It shouldn’t mess with your recording schedule if your dates haven’t changed. Since Mark and Adrienne moved out here to LA, Mom thought instead of the one-day thing, we’d make it a multi-day thing. I guess she wants to help them set up their



new place. But before that she wants us all together. She rented this cottage on the beach, but not like a tiny cottage, more like a five bedroom thing with six bathrooms, you know?”

“Wait. We need to go earlier for the wedding to have, what? Family bonding time?”

“Not earlier,” he says with a bit of a wince. “After. Mark and Adrienne are staying with us for a few days after the ceremony.”

There are a few things wrong here. First, what newlyweds want to hang out with family after the ceremony? Second, why? I’d like to think Adrienne isn’t so petty to want me around her simply to flaunt Mark’s gaudy, ridiculous ring on her finger for an entire weekend.

Noah scrutinizes me for a few breaths. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s just annoying they think we can all cater to their schedule.”

“But we will, right? I think it means a lot to Adrienne and Mom that we’re all there.”

I want to refuse, want to admit the idea of hanging out with Adrienne, Mark, and Justine for an extended weekend sounds as fun as no water in the Vegas desert. But I’ll keep quiet, bury it down.

It’s how Haydens work. We don’t dig, don’t make things too uncomfortable

“I’ll be there,” I say after a long pause.

In my head, I start reeling through any inconveniences this might cause the band. When it comes to family, Pops, the label CEO, will insist I stay for a month if that's what my stepmom wants. The man lives and breathes the people we call ours, and does not take work as an excuse to miss out on moments like weddings and beach vacations with newlyweds.

I'm wholly disappointed I won't be able to use the band as an excuse to cut this vacation short. Maybe I'll develop a strange rash. I think I could pull that off with some of Noah's makeup supplies from his show.

"It'll be a good time," Noah says. "Mom's going all out on this."

He always uses that word. Justine isn't my mom. She's not Noah's mom. She's Mark's mom.

But somehow my brother formed enough of a bond he gives her the title. I have good memories of our real mother, but when we were only blessed with eight years of her, it's hard to keep a clear picture. Two years after Mom died, Justine and her twelve-year-old boy healed my dad's broken heart, and took on his opposite identical twins.

Then, she fell in love with one, but not the other.

"It'll be fine," I say.

"Good." Noah's easy smile returns. "Do you have any shows coming up? I'd like to come to another one if you do."

Look at him, thinking of others while I stew over something I should've let go a long time ago. This is why Noah Hayden

is the darling of our hometown, and I'm the guy who never smiles because of my sinful ways.

“We have one coming up at Caesar’s Palace. A cover concert. It’ll be awesome. We’re covering a bunch of songs from the seventies all the way to today.”

“Cool. I’ll be there.”

A text from Tim, our manager, comes in with an hour warning that we need to get to the school.

“Hey, I’ve got to get going. We’re adding kids to the chorus of *Breaking Walls*, so we have this thing at the high school. They’re making me talk in public and I might quit the band over it.”

Noah laughs. “Deep breaths, big brother. You’ll be fine.”

“Oh, and the girls are gearing up to start season two—send me a list on which episodes I can’t watch—you lied last time. It’s basically torture, Noah.”

“But I love the texts Ellie sends me of your face turning bright red.”

He’s a tool. Love him, but he does this on purpose to make me squirm.

The ladies of Perfectly Broken are obsessed with the show, and insist I watch with them. I’m fine with it—supporting my brother, and all. But there are too many love scenes for my liking, and he revels in it when one sneaks up on me, trapping me in a room with women who know the man on the screen is my *identical twin*.

“Oh my—fine. Don’t be a baby about it. I’ll give you a heads up,” Noah says.

“Thank you.”

Noah and I quickly wrap up the call, and as much as I like talking to my twin, I feel heavier.

When Perfectly Broken came into my life, I couldn’t leave Baton Rouge fast enough. A chance to find my own place, to forget what others thought and said about me most of my life.

Unfortunately, I’ve discovered you can’t run from things for very long before they catch up anyway.

Like always, I won’t let show how much it bothers me. Showing weakness or cracks in the surface doesn’t do any good. A lesson I learned a long time ago and never forgot.

Seven

# VIENNA

VALLEY HIGH ISN'T THE school it was last week. The halls fill with cameras, reporters with recording devices, and a few people I'm almost positive don't have a child at this school.

It's mayhem.

From the inside of my classroom, I peek out through the glass in my door. My thumbnail is nearly chewed down to my skin. The tick of my pulse hasn't slowed since before lunch, and I have no idea how we're supposed to keep order with all these extra bodies shoved around teenagers I'm supposed to watch over every second they're in this building.

Look, I saw Perfectly Broken perform. They're good. They certainly put on a thrilling show, but I'm irrationally irritated with the lot of them.

We get it, you're famous, but look what you're doing to this school.

My attitude is sour against the band, and it isn't their fault.

It's mine. I crossed a line with someone on their crew and now I will have to live with it for the rest of my lonely life because I am never reaching out for a bit of romance. Ever. Again.

To make it worse, I'm not sure any of my kids have sat still all day. Overnight my class decided they're the number one fan of the local hard rock superstars. I start sending mental vibes to the entire band—whatever their names are—on all the ways they're making my day astronomically harder.

They should have some consideration for all the non-famous, bothered-by-crowds people.

With a heavy sigh, I turn to my class. "All right guys, we need to get in there."

"We gonna be able to talk to them?" Allie, a junior, asks.

"I think there will be meet and greets after," I tell her. "But, friends, there are a lot of people trying to shove into the gym today. I realize this is exciting, but we need to stick with our partners and sit quiet in there, okay?"

"Got it, Miss Shaw." A kid named Nate gives me a thumbs up. He's one of the school's top football stars, popular, the class clown, but makes all the other students in my room feel like a million bucks.

I love these kids. They are different. Some love theatre, others, like Nate, love athletics. But we all can find common ground when we open books together. It's a unique thing and I've been fortunate to have pretty great kids each year.

I hold up a thumb and release the wildlings into the hallway.

Like the rest of the mini adults in this school, my class takes to the hall in one big cluster.

The closer I get to the gym, the more my disquiet builds. Any genuine thoughts I might've had for this band are forever tainted like a rusty piece of metal.

The elevator will never be brought up again. Seriously, it needs to stop reeling through my head. I need to find a way to bury my shame and stop shuddering every fifteen seconds when I replay the wretched discovery.

Yesterday, when I brought the food back to my friends, I managed to hide my horrific moment at the café until I was alone and screamed into my pillow.

No one will know.

Instead of a saucy, romantic moment, I now have the first secret I'll take to the grave.

The only positive I can find here is the way my students light up when we start filing into the gym. To me teaching is a lot like hard candies with a gooey center. Rough on the outside, but once you get to the heart of it, the benefits are melty and warm and sweet.

I catch sight of Karla Brisby, the principal. She's running around a raised dais in the center of the floor working with our IT technicians and custodians, checking cords and microphones.



Her cheeks are flushed pink, but she keeps grinning as students file in, taking their seats in the bleachers.

Even if the entire school isn't going to be featured in the video, this first assembly is a chance for everyone to feel involved and meet the band personally. I'm told it's supposed to be inspirational.

We'll see.

I settle my class on one of the front bleachers, then take the standing post off to the side to keep watch, and sort of secretly protect against the few outside fans who have been allowed into the school.

I've seen how people act around this band, and the last thing that is happening today is a stampede hurting one of my kids.

Soon enough, the lights dim; an excited hush falls across the gym. A constant click of cameras from the media at the front of the dais is the only sound for a moment as Karla steps up to a standing microphone.

“Good afternoon. We have such an exciting opportunity here at Valley High. As most of you know our special guests have picked this school to be part of their new single and music video.” Karla pauses, tucking her thick bob-haircut behind her ears as the kids squeal their delight. She holds up a palm, waiting until it goes quiet again. “But before that begins, we have the special opportunity to hear a little from the band, Perfectly Broken. Now, let's give them a warm welcome and show them the best of Valley High.”

She starts the rumble of applause as she backs away from the mic. I clap along with the rest of the school as four guys emerge from the back of the gym.

Three of them stay too far away to really make out faces, but one guy with dark hair, earrings, and tattoos like Darcy steps onto the dais, saying something to Karla that leaves her smiling.

The energy thrumming through the room is as addictive as the night at the concert. As if these guys bring a hum of excitement wherever they go.

Cheers and squeals bounce off the walls in the gym, and I catch myself sort of bouncing on my toes as the first member of the band steps up to the microphone.

The crowd thickens on the edges where I'm standing. It's uncomfortable, but I'll deal with it. I glance over my shoulder to check that I'm not too close to anyone's personal space. Three feet away, I catch sight of a face, and choke on a scream.

The pregnant woman from the café.

What did I do in a past life to deserve this? Karma is cruel, and I want to shriek to the ceiling that I didn't know the man wasn't single. I've learned my lesson!

My hands tremble as my stomach melts when the woman cups her hands around her mouth and whoops when the guy with earrings waves to the kids and crowd for a few heartbeats.

*Please don't look at me. Please don't look at me.*

The way my luck is going, I should've known better.

"He looks like he loves this, doesn't he?" My head whips to the side. She smiles, then her eyes widen. "Hey, you're the woman from the bathroom."

Sand and grit line my throat, but I nod. "Um, yeah. Good to see you again. Are you ... a fan of these guys?"

Of course she's a fan. Dumb, Vienna. Don't keep the conversation going.

She grins, then pats her round belly. "I better be."

"Is this your first?" Ahh. Why do I keep speaking?

"Yep." A sly grin spreads over her lips as she leans in. "And the reason I stopped by to see him."

I follow her pointed finger to the microphone. He's introducing himself as Bridger Cole, the lead vocalist.

"He's my baby daddy," she says, and I choke on my own tongue. He's her baby's father? I'm stunned, speechless, maybe a little relieved. What does this mean for Darcy? When I can't find words fast enough she hurries on. "I figured it's time to tell him, and this seems as good a place as any for the big showdown."

I snap out of my stun and flip on my teacher bear mode. The need to keep this tame and uplifting for my kids wins out.

I peel my wallflower back off it's safe zone and rest a hand on her arm, leaning close to whisper over the noise. "I'm

sorry, but you really need to do that off school grounds. There are a lot of kids here, and they don't need to be—”

Words choke off mid-breath. She's laughing. To the point she needs to hold onto her belly, wincing as if laughter pulls too many muscles at once.

“I'm sorry. I'm joking.” She swipes at tears in the corners of her eyes.

My shoulders visibly slump in relief.

“He hates it when I do that,” she goes on. “I mean, he is my baby daddy, but he's my husband too.”

“Wait. Really?”

She holds out a hand. “Alexis Knight-Cole, or just Alexis Cole, or just Alexis. I'm pretty easy to please.”

I'm still trembling when I shake her hand. She's married to the lead singer of the band. Okay, going out on a limb here and it might be completely possible I jumped to salacious conclusions yesterday.

Darcy, perhaps he was, I don't know, out with a friend? If he runs the crew, odds are he knows the band more intimately than most.

It would make sense if he got to know their significant others too.

Before I can stop myself, a strangled laugh scrapes out of my mouth. I clap a hand over my face. A shudder races through me.

“Are you okay?” she asks, amused.

“I’m ... I’m sorry, it’s just—” Blame it on the rush of relief loosening my tongue. There isn’t another explanation for why I keep talking. “I thought you said the crew guy you were with was your guy. I, um, I met him at the concert on Saturday and I think I got the wrong idea about him.”

“Crew guy?”

Her confusion escapes me as I giggle with relief. *Giggle*. Like I’m drunk. “Vienna Shaw,” I say, shaking her hand again. “Sorry for laughing in your face.”

“I love laughing, so it isn’t a big deal,” she says, still looking at me like she’s trying to figure me out. “You said you were at the concert?”

I nod, half in the conversation, half out, as I pause to snap my fingers when two of my students start giggling at something on a cell phone instead of paying attention. “I know, I don’t look the type, right? We were given tickets for a suite by Mason Walker’s mom.”

“Oh. You’re a teacher here.”

“Yeah, English.”

Alexis nods as if she’s following me, but there is a pensive furrow to her forehead that hints she might not be. “The suites are fun. I’m glad you were able to make it. But tell me again about this crew guy? How did you meet?”

Oh, possible scenario two of this situation—could she and Darcy still be fooling around, and she’s getting flustered I

caught her?

I study her face. She's certainly one of those people who gives off completely genuine vibes. She keeps ogling the dais at her husband, looking like he makes up her entire world.

One of life's disappointments will be if I end up being wrong about her.

I give a quick glance at the students as they clap when the lead guitarist takes Bridger's place on the dais.

"The guy you were with yesterday," I say, slowly, "I heard him mention the crew, and since we met at the concert, I sort of put it together he must be involved in the setup crew."

Alexis grins. "Interesting. Where did you meet him?"

"The elevator actually." I gnaw on the inside of my cheek. "I'll be honest, I sort of thought you two were together, and now I feel weird if I'm walking into something I shouldn't know about."

"I think I get the bathroom hideout now, and I'm pretty sure there wasn't a lost contact lens." Alexis laughs. "But no need to stress. He is dreamy, and I clearly have a thing for tattoos, but I've loved Bridger since I was five—don't tell him, or he'll insist he told me so. Trust me, Bridger Cole is it for me." She turns over her shoulder. "Hearing this, Thor? Rees met a friend in the *elevator*."

Rees. His name is Rees and she's not dating him.

My heart wants to hug her, but before I can make it weird a meaty guy emerges from the back corner. Seriously. He's a

ghost; I had no idea he was even there, but when he looks up  
...

“Quinn.” I blurt out his name before I can stop myself.

Quinn takes in my face, a few awkward breaths, then recognition brightens the sharp lines of his jaw. “Hello, again.”

“Vienna.” I hold out my hand for him to shake. “Thank you for taking care of my friends. Marti said you made sure they were spoiled in the car home.”

Quinn’s lips twitch in a half-smile. He looks at Alexis. “Told you I’m a hero, Lex.”

“I never doubted it for a second,” she says, and turns to me. “So, elevator?”

I pause to remind two boys to sit polite as the guitarist wraps up his intro and demo, and hands things off to the drummer.

When the kids are settled, I talk to Alexis, but keep my class tight in my peripheral. “We both were in it when it stalled between floors. Basically my living nightmare.”

No need to explain how the nightmare turned into a delicious dream.

I can return to the fantasy now that I know Darcy is not pond scum. At least, if Alexis is to be believed, he isn’t.

Still, it was risky and reckless, and they might judge me for it. When I really break the choice down, kissing a stranger in a

box I can't escape is not behavior I'd recommend to anyone. He might've been a lunatic, a stalker. Anyone really.

"The elevator got stuck?" Alexis says each word slowly. Odd.

"Yeah. You hear about it happening, but I never thought I'd ever be using those alarm buttons."

She rubs her belly as Tate Hawkins drags on a partial drum set. I don't know how he moves those sticks so fast, but the beat burrows deep in my chest.

A strange, sly grin is still on Alexis's face as she takes a step closer to my side. "Seems like you two might've hit it off."

She knows Darcy—Rees—and for the first time I remember these people are not ordinary people. "Look, I know rumors can fly in this line of work, so—"

"Girl, if anyone knows how to keep things out of the spotlight it's me." Alexis tilts her head. "So, you liked him?"

"Um. He was nice." My hands twitch, I'm shifting on my feet. This took a turn to awkward town and I'm entirely to blame. Info dumping on strangers because my nervous mouth won't stop working is the epitome of uncool. This, right here, is why signing is useful. Keeps all these moments out of existence.

"Okay, I'll stop being nosy," Alexis whispers. Now, she looks downright devious. "But I'm really good at reading between the lines."



She glances back at Quinn. Is his face turning red? What am I missing?

I've never been the girl with buckets of friends. A few good ones, like Marti, who deal with my lack of exuberance without judgment.

Senior year in high school, I decided I didn't have more friends because I'm not great at making them. I sign when I'm nervous, I don't party, I don't even like huge crowds. I'm not exactly putting myself out there as bestie material.

So, if I've said something off kilter from girl code, I doubt I'd even know.

Alexis sort of hums and folds her arms over her chest. "Who knows, maybe you two will run into each other again. Because he's part of the crew, and all."

My face heats. "Maybe, I guess."

In truth, I have grand plans to avoid all crew members of Perfectly Broken. My heart screams to see him again, but would be crushed if disappointment lived in those eyes when he saw me. I'm not exactly the picture of the girl from the elevator.

A background color. My hair is once more the matte blonde, no vibrant pastels in the locks. My cardigan is stretched from overuse. And most mornings if I have a brush of mascara, I call it a win.

Not that I need to look different for a guy—my dad would never speak to me again if I thought I had to change for a man

—but I’m just saying I’m not the girl he found attractive enough to lock lips with.

“Oh, Tate is finished,” Alexis says. To me, or Quinn, I’m not sure. “Bass is up next. I think you’ll really like our bassist. He’s amazing.”

I flash her a quick grin, grateful we’re dropping the subject, and use the opportunity to check on my kids. They’re clapping as Tate Hawkins spins his drumsticks in a tricky way. “You ready to meet the guy responsible for all those awesome, deep sounds?”

The gym echoes in cheers and claps.

Tate grins at the mic, still spinning his drumsticks. “Then give it up for our buddy and bass player, Rees Hayden.”

The name, it registers, but at the same time it doesn’t.

For maybe ten seconds.

That’s how long my night of fantasy continues to live before it shatters like weak glass when the bassist turns and faces our side of the gym.

Silent. Where a heartbeat should be, there is nothing but dead quiet. No thud against my chest. Nothing but stunned horror. I scan his features, that smile, that scruff, those scary tattoos. All of it collides like a grenade inside my skull.

A weird hiccup scratches up my throat. I press a hand to my chest, desperate to recharge some sort of beat to combat the tingling numbness settling in the tips of my fingers. No. I’m seeing this all wrong.

My Darcy is not ... he's not a member of Perfectly Broken.

Except his delicious, grouchy, broody self is standing up there, guitar in hand.

I startle when a hand goes to my shoulder. Alexis is grinning, the sort of smile when someone is trying extra hard not to burst out in a laugh.

“Funny story,” she whispers. “We lost Rees after the show last weekend. And the next morning he had almost the same report as you about an elevator. I don't take losing my guys well and he owed me big time for disappearing. Eight whole brownies to be exact.” Alexis links her arm through mine. I don't mind, to be honest, because I think I might tip over any second. “I think you just found your elevator guy.”

When the crowd quiets, when Rees opens his mouth to speak, Alexis waves her hand and screams. “Go, Rees!”

His eyes—I can't see the two colors from this distance—follow her voice.

It takes another breath before his face visibly pales. I'd like to fall into the bedrock, deep, *deep* under our feet.

He's not staring at Alexis. Nope. He's locked on my bloodless face as I fight the need to recoil because I'm a teacher. I have kids to look after. There cannot be any recoiling.

His mouth parts.

Whatever Rees Hayden was about to say is replaced with a breathy, “Oh—”

The gym erupts into giggles and hisses as his swear seems to echo against the walls and into my heart.

Eight

# REES

“DUDE, YOU CAN’T SWEAR.” Tate nudges my ribs, voice a harsh whisper.

The gym is roaring in laughter, but I can’t seem to find the ability to shape words.

*Lizzy.*

A sharp pinch of heat in my chest puts me on edge.

My Lizzy is standing next to Alexis. Her face was boiled into my brain after that elevator, and without a doubt the woman who knocked the breath from my lungs is standing across the gym from me.

What is she doing here? How did she find me? Why does Alexis look so pleased with herself?

I’m reeling.

If she’s here because she figured me out, we’ll deal with it. We have plenty of security. Pops is brutal when it comes to protecting his musicians. But the narrative isn’t fitting with

what my eyes are seeing. For a woman who hunted me down, she looks like she wants to bolt out of here faster than me.

Her shoulders are curled. Head down. She's signing, that or she's going to break her fingers off from wringing them too much, and I almost smile.

I forgot how much I liked learning she worries in sign language.

"Rees." Adam hisses my name.

*Focus, idiot.* Kids, reporters, everyone is staring at me.

I clear my throat, force a smile, and fall into my spiel about the bass guitar, about when I knew music was what I wanted to do. I think I throw in a bit of hard work, of never giving up, something sweet and fluffy the media won't be able to spin. One hundred percent, I skip at least half of what I'd prepared, then manage to control the tremble in my hands enough to riff a few chords. After a quick thanks, I hurry off the dais.

While the principal returns to the mic, the guys study me like I've grown a second head.

"You okay?" Tate asks through a bite of protein bar.

"I'm good." I drag my fingers through my hair. A woman I was never supposed to see again is here.

In another second, Greyson and a few more guys hired to serve as security usher us toward the back of the gym.

Tim materializes through the crowd, always at our sides, always talking. "Great job guys. Rees could've done without

the word. Okay, on to the meet and greet now.”

Tim says everything without glancing up from his phone. I’ve never met a guy who can multitask with his caliber, all while remaining a completely devoted dad and husband. He takes care of everything from scandal to our transportation, and still makes it home to his girls by six every night.

With the others distracted, I look over my shoulder. I shouldn’t, but I can’t help but look for her face.

As students are ushered out of the gym, free to leave or come meet us, I catch sight of her pale hair. She’s holding up a palm, and some of the kids gather close to her. There are few more adults helping with the students, and I watch as students start to huddle around her.

She’s ... she’s a teacher. An aide? A something at Mason’s school.

And I’m going to be showing my face in these halls for however long rehearsals and this video shoot takes. The odds? I don’t even worry about the odds of colliding into her again. I’m more concerned about what to do now.

I shove my hands into my pockets, keep my head down, and follow the guys into another hallway.

Quinn and Alexis meet us there. Alexis is using the time in the school to promote her Never Forgotten book boxes, so she’ll be around as much as we will. Heat prickles across my face when she locks eyes with me, brow raised.



“Rees Hayden.” My name comes out slow and steady. “I think there is more to your elevator story than you led us to believe.”

The guys look between us for a few heartbeats before Bridger chuckles and goes to Alexis’s side. “Al, what’s going on?”

“That woman next to me, she’s the one Rees met in a broken elevator. She’s pretty, and perfectly sweet. You’ll like this—because I certainly do—she’s an English teacher.”

My stomach boils. I’m going to be sick.

“Yep,” Alexis goes on, “we had a nice chat, and I’m sure we have a lot in common when it comes to our bookish needs. Somewhere during our talk she told me about a concert she attended last weekend, and a nice guy in an elevator who helped talk her out of sheer panic. You’re right, she had no idea who you were because her face was priceless when she recognized you. Funny all the things she told me.”

My throat tightens. “Look, I didn’t expect anything to happen, but—”

“Ah-ha!” The next thing I know, Alexis has her finger shoved into my face. “I knew something more happened. It was all over her face. She was ready to dissolve on the spot. Not to mention your face when you saw her.”

“You fell for a classic Al manipulation, man,” Bridger says with a subtle head shake.

So, Lizzy hadn't told her what went on between us. Awesome. I'm the one who broke the cone of silence.

"What happened with you and my new friend?" Alexis knows. Oh, yeah. She, at least, has an idea. The little curl to her mouth, the flicker of her brows; she's waiting for every sultry detail.

But I'm a Southern boy from the bayou. I know how to dig my heels in. "If she didn't say, then I'm not saying anything."

"Whoa. Something really did go on?" Tate coughs, choking on the last bite of his second protein bar. "Did you make a move on her?"

"Make a move on who?" We've caught Tim's attention. His eyes bounce to each of us but end on me. "Rees, what's going on? Did you hook up with someone? You know my rule, man. You *know* my rule." He slaps the back of one hand into the palm of the other as he talks. "Non-disclosures must be in place."

"Take it easy," I say, a touch of frustration sharpening my tone. "I didn't hook up with a teacher."

To make the situation worse, in the same moment the words are out, Finn and Mason materialize out of thin air right behind me.

"You hooked up with one of the teachers?" Mason pauses halfway through opening a bag of potato chips.

Finn snorts and shoves my arm. "Walked into that one."

I groan. "I didn't hook up with anyone."

Mason settles next to his dad. They're not blood related, and the adoption only went through a few months ago, but funny enough, the older Mason gets the more he almost looks like Finn.

"I won't say anything. I've had enough practice keeping quiet," Mason says. "But now w-we gotta know."

"He's right," Tate says, accepting a chip from his nephew.

My thumb and finger pinch the bridge of my nose. "Guys ..."

"You might as well tell us," Bridger says. "Tim won't let it go, Al won't let it go, and we're all too curious to let it go."

This is where I can't seem to find my footing with the band.

The idea of people caring enough to corner me and press for answers. I learned quickly it isn't because they don't respect privacy—they do, even Alexis—they only get like this when they're concerned, or excited, or need to know how to have my back over something.

Answering to others who give a crap about me—the idea is so foreign my brain short circuits every time I'm in this spot. I have Noah, but there are things I keep from my twin. Things I've never admitted.

I'm better at keeping things unsaid.

Words shrivel up, my palms get nasty and sweaty, and my instinct is to go inward. To clam up until they give up and stop trying. Alexis rests a hand on my arm and waits until I look at

her. She gets it. Out of anyone Alexis has a way of reading people and knowing what they need.

I blow out a breath. “We made out in the elevator. Not a hook up.” I make sure Tim hears me. “Last I checked there was nothing wrong with that.”

Defenses are up, but by now my instinct when cornered is to bare my teeth and shut the doors on any turmoil going on behind the scenes.

Mason’s brows shoot up. “Go Rees. What teacher?”

“Her name is Vienna,” Alexis whispers.

“Miss Shaw?” Mason grins with a bit of slyness. “Lukas is a TA for her, and my speech therapist is her roommate. She’s hot.”

“Mase,” Finn says, but he’s trying not to laugh.

They’re all trying not to laugh.

Welcome to my life.

Alexis bites her bottom lip. I’ve known her long enough to know that means she’s trying extra hard not to break into a cheesy smile. From excitement, or because she was right, I don’t know.

Tate tears open a pack of pita chips, smirking.

Adam is unreadable. Concerned maybe?

Bridger is the one who has his lips in a tight line.

I respect Bridger; I respect all the guys. They’re a few years older, more settled in this lifestyle, and have more experience

navigating the pitfalls that come with fame.

If this disappoints any of them, well, my stomach is already upset.

“What?” I finally ask when I feel like I might snap in two. I’m asking everyone, but my eyes are on Bridger.

He blinks a few times. “Nothing. It’s not a huge thing, but ... well, she knows who you are now.”

“Okay?”

He holds up his hands. “I’m not saying it’s bad, I’m just saying now that she knows you’ve got means—be careful.”

“Exactly. N.D.As.” Tim claps his hands on each letter again.

“I’m sorry. It’s not like I had one in my pocket ready to go.”

“No problem.” Tim is already opening his messenger bag. He pulls out a legal document because, of course, he has one at the ready. “Once school is out, we’ll meet with Miss ... what’s her name?”

My face heats. This is embarrassing.

“Vienna,” Alexis says when I stay silent.

“I d-don’t think she’ll need one of those sheets,” Mason says. “She’s sort of, I don’t know, quiet.”

Maybe Mason and I need to go have a talk, so he can tell me what he knows about Vienna Shaw.

No. Bad idea. The look in her eyes when she saw me said it all. She was mortified, and probably filled with a heap of regret.

“Better safe than sorry,” Tim says.

“Tim, how well did it go when you tried to get me to sign an NDA?” Alexis flicks her eyes to Adam and Tate. “Let’s not forget that no one ever asked Becca, or Ellie either. Why all the fuss over a kiss with Rees?”

“Al,” Bridger says gently. “It’s not the same.”

“Why?”

“I’ve known you most of my life, Ellie is in the industry, and so is Bec. We don’t know this girl.”

“She’s cool,” Mason says.

Alexis folds her arms over her chest. “See, Mason knows her. Based on how she was talking, I know she liked Rees. Quinn interacted with her. She’s nice, don’t you think?”

Quinn, one of our silent guards, looks up. “She was polite and involved in the care of her friends. But faced with fame? I have no way of knowing how she’d react, Lex.”

Alexis frowns, but doesn’t seem ready to disagree anymore either.

“Look, even if she’s a good teacher, people show their true colors when money is on the line. Bridger can tell us that more than anyone,” Tim says.

We all shudder. Bridger was slandered up and down, fed drugs, and tormented by his ex-girlfriend for a few years. I don’t want to think of Lizzy—*Vienna*—like that. She carried an innocence about her that night, and to think she’d go to the

press, or speak poorly of me to get a hush money payout lifts the hair on the back of my neck.

But Nadia, Bridger's ex, did him wrong when they were together, when he thought she cared about him. Vienna *doesn't* care about me.

She doesn't know me and has no reason to show a thread of loyalty.

For some reason the thought irritates me. A poison burning under my skin. All the different scenarios play out in the ways this woman could come at me for what happened in the elevator.

I take a step away from my band. "She won't say anything. No need for the NDA, I'll make sure she doesn't."

"Not a good idea," Tim insists.

"I don't care." I've never been this bold before, but I want to fade into the brick walls. I hate that Lizzy knows who I am, I hate that she looked at me like I was terrifying, I hate that I've disrupted her life at all.

It stops here.

Alexis reaches for me again. "Rees—"

"It's fine," I say. "Doesn't really matter. It was something spontaneous; not like it meant anything."

But the lie tastes harsh and sour on my tongue as I walk away.

Nine



# VIENNA

WE ALL HAVE OUR vices. Some are harmless, should be left alone, and unmentioned if indulged during a crisis. There is nothing wrong with choking on chocolate-coated marshmallows, seated on the floor behind my desk in my empty classroom.

And I would shout my deep-rooted opinion at Marti's face if my mouth weren't stuffed to the brim with said chocolate-coated marshmallows.

"Honey," she says, voice rife in pathetic misery. "Not the mallows. What happened? Did Max go off on one of his conspiracy theories again? That kid better be a literary theorist someday, I swear."

I shake my head, adding another plump, gooey cloud of fluff to my stuffed cheeks.

This is a disaster. It feels like a disaster, at least. My beautiful charade is crumbling around me, and I'm left with the pieces of a girl I don't know.

A rock star.

Darcy was not some guy in an elevator. He's not cheating on his pregnant girlfriend. And he's certainly not part of the setup crew.

Nay. Nay. He was one of the guys everyone came to see, to scream his name, to swoon and cry and ogle over because he is delicious to ogle!

And me, like an oblivious fool, jumped him. Screamed at him. Kissed him. Oh, yes. I kissed the heck out of that man.

What I thought was a connection, a romantic, carefree connection, no doubt to Rees Hayden, I was another notch in his registrar of women.

Is that what he thinks I was doing? Playing the fearful damsel simply to touch a famous guy? *Pfft*. He seemed mighty happy letting me cling to him like he was the only thing keeping me planted on the ground.

With a groan, I close my eyes, and start banging my head on the back of the closet behind my desk.

Another marshmallow, another sigh from Marti.

"Come on," she says and scoops under my shoulders, hoisting me off the floor. "Let's have a drink, and you'll tell me about it."

By a drink she means our secret stash of soda and iced coffees we store in my desk.

“No.” My voice is a slurred blob of a sound, and I take a few seconds to swallow the rest of my marshmallows. “I’m fine. It’s nothing.”

“Vi, I know when the mallows come out, we’re in critical meltdown zone. What’s up?”

Marti pops the top of a diet soda and nudges me to sit in one of the bean bag chairs in the classroom reading corner.

“Spill.” She lifts her soda can to me and waits.

My fingers tangle in silent words, a habit that keeps me connected to home, and it calms the tight, heavy pressure in my chest.

Marti knows I word vomit better than anyone. I’ve always been the easiest egg to crack. My parents, all they needed to do was look at me with a quizzical brow, and if I was hiding anything it would fall into their laps.

Marti knows how to apply pressure to break me, but at least she has the decency to seat us, and give us something to drink before it all starts rolling.

“I kissed a stranger at the concert.” I hurry and sip from my can, letting that bomb settle in my friend’s brain for a minute.

Ten seconds is all it takes before Marti snorts and takes a drink from her own can. “Not what I expected, but I am here for this. Tell me everything, then tell me why this is the first time I’m hearing of it, and finally, why it brought out the mallows.”

Marti is safe. She's one of the best people I know, and she does not do conditions. When you're her friend, she takes you as is.

My fingers drum over the outside of my can. Unbidden heat fills my belly at the mere thought of Rees Hayden and the way the man knows his way around a kiss.

*Stop it.* I'm not here to curl up and melt again, I'm here to confess my foolish behavior and see if my friend can help me wade through it all.

"In the elevator," I start slow. "I told you it broke, and I told you about the guy who—"

"Oh, my gosh! You made out with the elevator stranger. Is it too soon to say I'm proud, or is that wrong? Wait—was he scum? Did you want him to kiss you? Vienna." Her face goes from smile to pale in a matter of seconds. "Are you okay? Did he do anything that—"

"No," I interrupt. Reckless. Dumb. Risky. All the things that could've happened if I'd been trapped with a different sort of stranger press against my shoulders until my spine curls like a weak tree in a windstorm. "No, he was completely respectful. But I saw him at The Fix yesterday. With a woman."

"Pig."

"I thought that at first too. Until I met her today. Marti, she's married to the main singer. And you know how I get excited and start talking sometimes? Well, I blurted out how I saw her

with the guy from the elevator, and sort of admitted I thought they were having a seedy affair.”

“Oh, Vi.”

“I know!” I cover my face with my hands. “I know it’s not what you say to people you just met, but I was so relieved I wasn’t a homewrecker who kissed her man that it all toppled out.”

“Okay, I’m not sure how this leads back to elevator guy. She knows him?”

I let out a wild, shaky laugh. “Oh, she knows him. In fact, we all know him now. We ... we didn’t give names because we were never supposed to see each other again.”

“You’re kidding.” She props her chin on the heels of her palms, once again invested. “Where was he? Did you talk to him? Vi! This is like fate if you keep seeing the guy.”

I shake my head with enough vigor my neck pops. “No. Definitely not.”

“Look, you’re dragging your darn feet, and I’m not in the mood to spout off guesses about your soulmate. What’s the problem, then I’ll tell you if it’s mallow worthy.”

“He’s the bassist in Perfectly Broken!”

Silence. The same kind of quiet that struck me the second Rees Hayden stepped his beautiful face up on that dais two hours ago.

“What you’re telling me is you unknowingly made out with a guy, saw him at The Fix, thought he was a slimeball, then had it corrected only to discover he is, in fact, not a cheater, but a successful, hot musician?” Marti unfurls her fingers from the marshmallow bag and holds it out to me. “Eat the mallows because you are a freaking *queen!*”

“A queen? Marti this is a nightmare. He saw me. He knows where I work!”

“What’s the problem? You can ride off into the sunset and have beautiful rock and roll babies.” She takes a sip of her drink. “His cuss up there makes so much sense now.”

“There is no sunset. There is no romance.” I let my head flop into my hands. “He probably thinks I’m a wild fan.”

“Stop. If you were a fan, you would’ve said his name in the elevator, or at least asked him to take a selfie. I think you don’t want to admit he was just as into it as you because it freaks you out.”

She’s not wrong there.

The way Rees handled the entire thing still sends a shiver down my spine. His soft, deep voice, his obvious conversation to keep me distracted. The way he didn’t recoil when I about popped his head off. His lips.

I close my eyes again.

Marti must not notice since she squeals. “You’re going to see a lot of him during the music video shoot.”

Great. Just great. They're going to be here working with our music department, winning over kids, all to add their voices to their song. Rees Hayden, my rock star Mr. Darcy, will be wandering these halls.

I'll be, unwittingly, entangled in his world.

"He's definitely not hard on the eyes."

I look up. Marti is staring at her phone, sipping her soda. I snatch the phone from her hand and study the picture from the night of the concert. I'd forgotten we snapped it in front of a large poster of the band.

They're arranged so Bridger Cole is at the point, the drummer and lead guitarist wing off his shoulders, but at the back point is Rees Hayden. Dressed in his rocker getup. Eyeliner, dark clothes, leather bracelets on wrists.

I stood this close to his face, and still didn't recognize him in the elevator. I'd blame it on panic-induced face blindness, but I think it was so outside the realm of possibility, it never even crossed my mind that a band member would be meandering alone in an elevator.

Rees's dark-lined eyes pour into me from the picture of a picture. His tight black shirt tugs at his shoulders and lean biceps too well. Fingers, beringed. Skull tattoos on full display. They don't freak me out anymore, and the wicked part of me wants to trace them with my fingertips.

Both Marti and I jump when a furious knock pounds on the door. School is out, and if it is Lori, our night custodian, she

doesn't knock.

Marti gives me a nod, eyes wide, and sips her soda like the murder part of a horror movie, when the actors who are about to get diced answer the door, even when every instinct is demanding they run out the back.

A second knock rattles the old tin door handle. I pause, then swallow my disquiet and slowly crack the door.

I should've shut off my lights and pretended I was gone. If I had, my stomach would not be knotted in a ball of heat, fear, and desire right now.

In the doorway is my Mr. Darcy. Those fascinating eyes are hot coals, and for half a breath his dark, inky pupils dilate. But in the next second, it's over. He narrows his gaze until I'd like to shrivel like a raisin and disappear.

"Oh. My. Gosh." A breathless voice reminds me we're not alone here. From the corner of my eye, Marti scurries behind a room divider where the kids can take quizzes or read quietly.

I could use a visit to the quiet side of the room right about now.

I lick my lips, unable to take his glare a second longer. "Um —"

"Did you know?" His gritty, deep voice shakes me to my core.

"Did I know?"

"Who I am?"



The way he speaks, slow and steady and vicious, it takes me another second to realize he's furious. At me.

"No." The hair on the back of my neck raises. "No, I didn't know who you were. But I've got to say, it would be a pleasure seeing you again except the way you're snapping at me, it's not."

He ignores my jab and pushes his way into my classroom. "And now that you do, what do you plan to do with it?"

"With what?"

"My name? Will you sell the story? Say I came on to you? Attacked you? You want money?"

He could've slapped me across both cheeks, and it wouldn't sting as much as his bitter accusations.

What happened to this man to make him so irately suspicious straightaway?

The surface of my face burns in embarrassment and a whole stack of shame. "I-I didn't even think of any of those things. I wasn't going to say anything."

"Funny how you found Alexis immediately and told her everything."

"No, I can explain that—"

"I should warn you, Enigma Records looks after its own. They won't settle easily with you."

"Warn me?" The Darcy fantasy is breaking into tiny little pieces. What is left is a grumpy, snarly guy who has every

barrier, every hackle raised and pointed at me. And I'm done with it. "You've come to warn me? Got it. Well, don't you worry, *Mr. Hayden*. I will keep my nobody mouth shut, and make sure no one knows about your little regret. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

I open the door, standing stalwart and stiff. If I don't, he'll see how every word has bent a piece of my heart in ways I'm not sure how to fix.

All I wanted was to keep a memory.

Now, I'm being treated like some gold digger who set up the entire thing. I blink through an embarrassing blur of tears. Nope. Not going to show this guy how much this cuts to the marrow of my smallest bones.

For a moment his eyes soften. I can almost catch sight of the guy I met in the elevator under all his fury when he comes closer.

I curse myself for remaining in the doorway, it's a terrible lapse in judgment because his body crowds my space. He doesn't storm past. No. Rees remains close, shoulders squared to me, the homey spice of his skin rattling my knees.

I lift my eyes to his. The dark brown, the vibrant blue. He's heated, but I'm not so sure anger is fueling that dark look anymore.

A ragged breath blows out when he dips closer, his lips maybe an inch from brushing across my face.

"I never said regret, Lizzy."

I close my eyes, sinking into the heat of his breath, the hum of his pulse, until he rips it away like a bandage on a healing wound.

Rees steps into the hallway, his glare in place. “We have an understanding then?”

A sharp, hot flood of frustration and betrayal molds a new wall around the muscle in my chest. “I assure you, I’ll never be your problem, Mr. Hayden.”

Again, the barest flash of something like regret softens the hard lines of his face. Regret for me? Us? His stupid bear-man behavior? I don’t get the chance to find out before he’s gone.

Alone, I allow my shoulders to slump against the doorjamb, and Marti is at my side in two seconds.

“Girl, he is ... wow, I don’t know what that was.”

“Disappointment,” I whisper.

“Oh, I don’t think that was disappointment in his voice. That was all fire. If I had to guess, I’d say you got under his skin.”

“Like a disease.”

“No, I—”

“Marti, it doesn’t matter. That is the last time I’ll deal with him, and I plan to make it very clear.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What are those things rich people always make plebians sign?”

She rolls her eyes. “Non-disclosure statements.”

“Right. I’m going to sign one of those in bright, red ink.”

“Vienna, he didn’t ask you to do that.”

“He wants me to go away, well, I want him to go away, and I want him to know it. I bet Karla knows how to reach out to the label. I’ll be back.”

“Vi, wait.”

I don’t wait. This is the only way I can swing a right hook at Rees Hayden. He wants me to fade into the background, well, he’ll know that I will. That it meant nothing, and I have no issue cutting all ties with a rude rock star.

And I keep repeating the same lie over and over, hoping, eventually, the truth won’t ache so much.

My head won’t stop spinning in thoughts of the guy who knocked me off my feet with one unforgettable kiss.

But to him, I’m utterly forgettable.

Ten

# REES

“YEAH. HOLD YOUR FINGERS like this.” I demonstrate for the row of ten kids who hold their own bass guitars. “Keep the chord light, just easy flicks.” I pluck the strings of my bass, head moving. “See. An easy, bum, bum, bum, ba-dum. Okay, give it a try. The goal is to sound like one guitar.”

The bass players nod, still quiet, but they’re starting to warm up to me two days in. I get it. I was the same for a solid five months around the guys. When I joined the band, I’d already been a fan of their music. I mean, I got my shoo-in to audition because I’d been at their concert in Louisiana and struck up a conversation with Alexis at one of her book box tables.

Never thought she’d remember me and pass my name along.

Another reason I will always buy Alexis Knight-Cole brownies when I tick her off.

The kids are a little overwhelmed by having us up in their face, but I think they're starting to realize we're pretty normal.

Sometimes.

I stop playing the bassline, listening to them work out the chords, until a smile breaks. A thrill, maybe a bit of pride. When they finish the last note together, I clap, grinning. "Yes. Yes. That was awesome."

"This is so cool," a girl mutters to one of the boys next to her.

"You guys are cool," I tell them. "And that's it for today. It's already four thirty. We were supposed to be done ten minutes ago."

The kids sort of groan and tell me they want to stay. I'm afraid of parents and stories being written about Rees Hayden spending too much time with minors, though, so they're packed up and ready to go in about five minutes with the promise of my famous beignets tomorrow.

My beignets meaning a fresh box purchased from a Café Orleans a few blocks from my house.

As they leave the auditorium stage we've used for our bass group rehearsals, each teenager gives me a fist bump, and leaves feeling a little more confident.

At least, I hope.

This is what I wanted to do with music. Inspire people. Bring them into a world where differences were forgotten over a good song.

Their faces make the harder parts of this week a little easier. Namely, a teacher who is suddenly everywhere. I like it and hate it and want more of her all rolled into one confusing jumble of emotion.

Every time I pass her doorway, I look. Like my brain craves a single glance of her face. When I catch her in the hallway, I stare with intention, hoping she'll get that creepy feeling of being watched, so she'll look up. Works every time, and the devilish side of me enjoys the way she ruffles when she meets my eyes.

She tries to be unbothered. But whenever she sees me, I catch the same frenzy I have inside. A pull to look, a pull to want, but a new jagged barrier keeps us at a distance.

I take full responsibility for putting the wall up.

Did I come off too strong the other day? Probably. But the idea that my Lizzy might turn out to be like Bridger's ex, exploitive, and vindictive, made me sick. My chest got tight, and each breath burned. A perfect storm for me to get high strung and lash out.

In truth, I don't think Vienna Shaw even realizes people can stoop to low levels and exploit others.

There have been moments when I haven't tried to get under her skin. Moments when I catch a glimpse of the way she interacts with her students. She's gentle, animated, she's genuine. And she wants nothing to do with me.



I'm not sure what grates on me more—that she doesn't, or that I can't shake the night we met.

“Rees.” Adam's voice echoes into the auditorium. “We're loading the trailer. Coming?”

“Yeah.” I lock up my guitar and sling the case strap over my shoulder. Out in the hall the guys are there, chatting with the vice-principal as he goes over the areas where we can record the finale.

A little squeal brightens my melancholy thoughts over a tantalizing teacher.

“There's my baby girl,” I say and reach out for baby Raegan whose little plump fingers wiggle when she sees me.

Jazzy rolls her eyes. “Why does my kid like you best?”

I cradle the baby in my arms, letting her razor fingernails dig into my bottom lip. “Who doesn't, Jaz?”

“Hey, you can't use my baby to hide for the interviews tomorrow, Rees.” Finn lifts his head from a tablet he's showing Bridger. “I saw you pulling a Raegan-escape at the meet and greet on the first day.”

I groan and wince when Raegan digs into my cheeks. We're buddies, so I let the skin slashing slide. I'm grumbly about these interviews. Part of the job, and all, but I want to focus on the kids. All these interviews turn into are a lot of pictures, a lot of smiles, a few fans trying to touch when it isn't wanted. Then, the normal question, “Are you related to Noah Hayden?”

Yes. We're twins. Cue squeals.

It's usually the same, and when it starts to detract from the purpose of the band being in the school, our PR team politely ends the questions.

I smile against Raegan's fingers, forgetting about interviews, as Alexis chats with Becca and Adam.

Micah skips, hand in hand, with Tate and Ellie while Mason and Lukas, his best friend, saunter behind us, their eyes glued to their cell phones. Mason was reminded at least three times by Jazzy, Alexis, then Ellie that he is never to speak of his teacher and me.

Honestly, Mason couldn't do any more damage than I'm doing myself. The look in her eyes when I'd barreled in there—I think that's what's bothering me so much.

She'd been vulnerable, surprised, bold.

She'd been hurt.

Bottom line: the words I'd spewed out had slashed her up and left her there to bleed. I've seen the same look in more than one person after I've done something rash and stupid.

But doing it to her—I don't know, it digs down, sharp and deep.

Mason is a solid kid; he knows the consequences of stories leaking to the press, but this will always be a thing now. I've forever changed his perception of a teacher in his school.

It doesn't sit well with me.

“So, Friday we’ll have the school cleared out for the sound, and your guys will have free reign to do what they need.”

My attention abandons the spiral of thoughts and goes back to the vice-principal.

Finn answers with a nod. “Perfect. We want the kids to enjoy this, so let them know it doesn’t need to be perfect. We’ll fine tune everything in production.”

The vice-principal waves us out the door where our trailers and crew hang around helping with the setup and takedown of our equipment and cameras. It’s a thing with Enigma. Pops, the CEO, always wants moments caught on camera to use for promos or music videos. In this case, they’ve even had drone cameras fluttering around catching arial shots of the rehearsal groups.

“You guys want to get something to eat?” Tate asks, stretching his arms overhead.

“Sure,” Bridger says.

“You guys go without me,” I say. “Got a swim planned.” The business of preparing for this project has left my pool sorely neglected and left any longer, I’ll be gasping and choking on a lung.

Tate frowns. “Exercise over food?”

“I’m disciplined Hawkins, you know this.” I give him a shove until he laughs.

Another thing I love about these guys, they’re all about doing you. They don’t push too hard, so long as I don’t ditch

them all the time. Honestly, I rarely do. They're family. My favorite people outside my default affection I need to have for my twin.

After my guitar is loaded up, I turn toward my bike. The first purchase I made with my first Perfectly Broken check. A fixer upper old-school Harley. All it took were some solid hours of work, and she's no fixer upper now.

I love the wind, the hum of the engine. I'm free on the bike. But before I can slip into my calm, my phone rings. I straddle my seat, jaw tight. "Dad?"

"Rees."

Lee Hayden has a voice that is no nonsense. I've witnessed the man smiling before in my life, but they're rare and only pulled out when you do something to make him proud. I'll rephrase—I've seen him smile. At others. A smile for me? I'm not sure when he smiled at me last.

Rarer than his smiles are his phone calls.

"What's up?" I ask.

"I'm calling about the wedding."

I fight the urge to groan. What is it with the Haydens getting all chatty about this stupid wedding? "What about it?"

"There won't be any problems, right?"

A punch to the chest. My muscles tense. As if everything in my body reacts to the insinuation. I draw in a long, soothing,

warm breath until I'm back to a simmer. Back to not caring.  
"I'm not sure what problems you mean, sir."

"I think you do."

"Oh, you mean me?"

"Don't be flippant, boy."

I crack my neck side to side, falling into the compliant son.  
"There won't be problems, sir."

My dad lets out a long breath. "Good. There's something else I wanted to tell ya. We're not unaware cameras will be scooping Noah during the weekend."

Not me. No one knows who Perfectly Broken is, right? Honestly, I think my dad and stepmom think I'm a constantly high junkie who strums a guitar for a little cash. I'm not sure they even know the band is a multi-award-winning band with more on the horizon. So, if cameras follow me, it must be because I'm the feckless brother of Noah Hayden.

"There's a good chance," I agree.

"Justine doesn't want any negativity surrounding the wedding, so Noah is bringing a plus one for the weekend. A model, I guess. Paints a softer picture."

Like we've all got our crap together, or what? "He's bringing a date? I thought this was a family thing."

"It is. A few plus ones won't mess up getting together with family."

Wait. What? "A few?"

“You’ll have a plus one too. She’s a nice girl from Justine’s law firm who is willing to be your date. Help with the image.”

I cough. There’s even a little wheeze tucked in there like I’ve gone into a swift panic. “Come again? I have a plus one?” Oh, no. Tim will not go for that. Some stranger tucked away with me for days with plenty of opportunity to take pictures and spread rumors. “Thanks, Dad, but no thanks.”

“Not an option, Rees,” he says sternly. “How will it look when everyone else is enjoying their weekend and you’re scowling with a guitar in the corner?”

Ah, I didn’t know my reputation meant so much to them. “I’m used to it, sir.”

“But this isn’t about you,” he says. “This is about Ads and Mark.”

Ads. I grimace. He treats her like his baby girl. Treats Mark like his pride and joy. I’m not jealous. Maybe a little, but I can tap down the little boy inside yearning for his father’s acceptance.

Except this. I’m not going to hang out with some woman Justine knows. Odds are she’s heard all the lovely things my stepmom says about me, has all kinds of preconceived notions I simply don’t want to deal with.

I’m not doing it. I’m not. “I have a plus one already, Dad.”

A pause.

What did I just do?

“I’m not talking about groupies, Rees.”

Offensive, but it could’ve been a solid plan. There are fans who’d play along. Not that I’m open enough to even ask, and in truth, a fan would be more of a risk than Legal Barbie. *Think.*

But I’m not thinking. I’m not thinking at all when my mouth keeps moving. “Not a groupie, Dad. A teacher. We’ve been seeing each other for a bit.”

Another pause. This is bad. So bad.

“A teacher? Really?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Stop. Talking.

“Huh. Okay. Well, that’ll probably work.”

It’s annoying how judgmental my family has become. They’re so worried about opinions they don’t care who they offend in the process.

“Good.”

“I assume you can handle your own flight.”

“Yep.” I want to get off this phone call yesterday. “We’ll be there. Can’t wait for y’all to meet her.”

I hunch forward, shaking my head at my own stupidity. Why add that little snippet at the end? What am I trying to prove? I could win the Nobel Peace Prize and my folks would probably say I didn’t win it right.

My dad sort of grunts. “Yeah. Should be ... fun.”

No. No it won't because I said I was bringing a teacher only due to the irritating fact a teacher will not leave my head.

A teacher I snarled and snapped at.

A teacher I might need to go make nice with in a hurry, and I have no idea how.

This is insane. I described Vienna Shaw as someone I'm seeing, and I'm pretty sure the woman hates me. Now I've volunteered her for a family beach vacation.

Awesome.

My dad hangs up with a half-hearted goodbye. No questions about life, no follow up on upcoming shows. Nothing but a subtle warning in his tone that I better not mess anything up.

"Hey, Rees. Rehearsal go okay?" Tim waves at me over the top of his car.

"All good, Timmy." My voice is a soft rasp.

"Good. Good." He holds up a file folder. "Hey, wanted to let you know, I'll get everything squared away today."

"Tim," I say without missing a beat. "I warned you not to look in the back room of my house. It'll make you an accomplice."

His eyes flicker, and for a second I'm sure he's wondering if I'm serious, and is filing through the ways he can jump into action to clear my name. It's only a pause before he's right there with me. "Not that. Body removal is all Mallorie's job. I don't do dirt and shovels."



We think we're funny and sort of give ourselves a few honorary chuckles.

Tim clears his throat and holds up a sheet of paper. "No, I have Miss Shaw's requested NDA all written up. You're good, kid. I thought I'd need to intervene, but you handled it perfectly."

Laughter sinks like a lead weight into the pit of my stomach. "What are you talking about? What NDA?"

He punches in a few things on his phone, doesn't look at me, doesn't hesitate. "The teacher. She requested the form, so I brought it today."

One might think I learned my lesson minutes ago on how not to be an idiot, but some might also say a high school dropout like myself is not someone who learns fast.

"That is a contract for Miss Shaw?"

Tim glances at the file folder like it might've changed in the last second, then nods. "That it is. I was going to drop it off tonight, then pick it up in the morning."

I step off my bike, and go to Tim. "How about I bring it to her? I might want to make a few ... adjustments."

His face falls. "Rees. What are you doing?"

"Nothing. I promise I'm not doing anything stupid." I'm totally doing something stupid. "I'll take it to her. Honestly, I need to apologize. I came off pretty strong the other day."

Tim narrows his eyes. He's a girl dad and has a soft spot for women's feelings getting hurt, so I've pretty much won this argument. With a touch of suspicion, he hands over the file. "Okay. I'll pick it up with your adjustments tomorrow. I'm trusting you not to ruin my life, Rees."

"I'd never dream of it. You'll be coaching Rosie's soccer game this weekend with nothing to worry about, big guy."

"I don't believe you, but I'm going to pretend like I do." He closes his eyes as if giving over the form is physically painful. "Get it done, but don't tell me anything until there is an emergency. It's Rosie's playoff game, and I will be there, Rees."

I give him a reassuring clap on the shoulder and backtrack toward the school again.

This is a bad idea.

I calmed her down in an elevator, she rewarded me with a kiss I can't forget.

Now, I've got another favor. I'm going to need Miss Vienna Shaw to date me for a long weekend.

Eleven

# VIENNA

TURNS OUT IF SOMEONE wants to hide from a rock star, all one must do is hunker down in her classroom the second the film crews and studio personnel show up on school grounds.

I've hidden here, avoiding the hordes of fans filtering in and out of the school to meet the band, all day.

"What is the plan with this thing?"

I glimpse over my shoulder at Marti. She juts her thumb at the broken shelf in the back corner of my classroom.

"That's tonight's to-do list."

"I can help."

"Don't you have a date?"

She shrugs. "I don't think it'll work out. He's a cat guy."

I stack a few files of standardized test results into a plastic tray on my desk. "Cats are interesting, quit making excuses. Go. Have fun."

She breaks one of my chocolate marshmallows in half and pops the sticky piece onto her tongue, wiping her hands of the dots of white on her fingertips. “Not until I know you’re good. Maybe admit you’d like a rock star to bring back some of that fire from the other day.”

“First, he does not want fire with me. Second, he does not want fire with me.”

She rolls her eyes.

I don’t even want to entertain the idea he had the same spark as me. Honestly, I thought my Darcy left that elevator winded, maybe a little stunned, with a layer of lust and want in his eyes.

Until the bubble burst and he became more of a Mr. Wickham than Mr. Darcy.

Marti drops her hands to my shoulders. “Fine. But listen to me. You’re a knock-out, and he sucks. His loss, girl.”

“And this is why we’re friends.”

“Seriously, do you want me to stay? We can have one of our taco salads with so much sour cream it cancels out the lettuce nights.”

“No.” I laugh and nudge her toward the door. “I’m fine. Now, go have fun with cat man.”

“Okay,” she says as she reaches for her purse. “Honestly, this entire fiasco just proves my years’ long hypothesis that all men are clueless when it comes to handling women.”

I snicker and wave as she leaves my classroom. When she's gone, I pull out the small, pink tool kit my dad gave me when I moved out of the house. I'm pretty handy, and that shelf is in my sights.

But a knock at my door stops me from doing anything. Ugh. I'm never going to get this thing fixed.

I don't have time to even head for the door before it opens. My eyes pop, my heart stalls, my fingers grip the hem of my T-shirt like it is the only thing keeping me steady.

Here we go again.

Rees Hayden in all his impressive, grumbly glory fills my doorway.

He's not glaring—not exactly—more plotting. Like he's figured something out and he's come to monologue how he's discovered my involvement in some dastardly plot. What's extra annoying is how edible he looks. Black T-shirt. Tight, dark jeans with black boots that hit his ankles. His hair is messy, half spiked, half spilled over his brow. The perfect style to run fingers through.

My mother would fan her face if she knew the sort of thoughts running in my head about a bad boy rocker.

Mister Rogers is more the type she envisioned for me.

His jaw tightens. This is a first for me, a jawline causing irrational, sultry thoughts, spurring memories of all the things the lower half of that face can do.

“What is the NDA about?” How dare he bring back the demanding, broody drawl of his voice.

“Um ...” My tongue is broken. I don’t gather words fast enough before he’s taking an assertive step into my room.

The man has black magic. He’s a villain, the delicious kind, but still a villain with uncanny powers over women—maybe teachers—I don’t know. I recant saying he steps into my room. Rees *bombards* my room, and I gasp.

A stupid reaction, and not in the *I’m so annoyed this caveman barged in here demanding an audience* way. No, it’s more like *Oh, my gosh. Sit and listen to the hot caveman or my body will revolt.*

“You want to sign an NDA,” he says. “Why?”

*Focus Vienna.* “Mr. Hayden,” I say with deliberate aloofness.

“Lizzy.”

Cheap. Shot. I force myself to adjust on my feet to hide the way his comeback shoots a shudder down my arms. “You made your position very clear that you had no interest in any negative attention over the ... other night. I took initiative, and frankly, your manager was ecstatic.”

“Because Tim lives for NDAs, but what negative attention?” Rees rubs his chin. “Did you look me up? Spend a little time on Google?”

“What? No, I—”

“I get it.”

Words dry up when Rees closes the space between us in three quick strides. He’s a step away, close enough the warm spice of his skin radiates like a memory of home with each breath. Those beautiful, unique eyes cut through me like jagged glass.

He’s ... he’s hurt by this.

I think. It’s wholly possible I’m misreading. My fingers twitch at my side as Rees comes closer. *So close*. I get a glimpse at the glassy specs of brown and blue in those beautiful eyes.

“I wanted to discuss this NDA. Maybe make a new contract with a few addendums.”

A knot grips my gut, harsh and sharp. He’s not hurt. He didn’t like the wording and came to change something. “What addendums?”

A sly grin crosses his face. Villainous. Because he is a villain. And I should not like it.

“Ironically, since you want to put a gag order on the night, I’d like it, if instead, you hold off on pretending it never happened.”

*I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen. I want to pretend it isn’t such a disappointment to you.* Thoughts rampage in my head, but as a teacher, I’ve been trained to react calmly, logically. I lift my chin. “Why would I do that?”



“Because if I remember correctly, you were adamant to repay the favor from the elevator.”

“Adamant is a stretch, but what favor are you talking about?”

His grin tightens. “I’m not talking about the impressive way I knocked something off the bucket list, Lizzy.”

He’s arrogant and pompous and kisses like a dream. I hate that he knows it too. I snort and roll my eyes. “Unfortunately, I still have my list. Unchanged. I don’t think I quite hit the romance novel level. Close, don’t get me wrong, but just not ... there.”

Oh. *Oh*. Mental note: never insinuate he did not satisfy again. The simmer of heat in his eyes is enough to toss me into his arms and ask for another try. Stupid. Ridiculous. This man doesn’t even like me. I was a notch in his belt. Nothing more.

“I see,” Rees says. “Sorry for not delivering.” He takes a seat behind one of the desks. “But, as I said, that isn’t the favor I was talking about anyway. As I recall, you told me you were grateful I was there to keep you from a complete meltdown.”

“I don’t meltdown.”

“I beg to differ.” He waves the notion away. “The point is, I’d like to cash in on that favor. But don’t worry—this time we go in with eyes wide open. Nothing negative will fall back on you.”

I don't miss the way he says the word negative. Almost like he's insinuating he's the negativity in my life. He is, but in an annoyingly desirous way. The way he hides the sweet man I first met is negative. No positives.

If he'd let down this tough guy act and come back to me, he would certainly be the positive.

“You need a favor? From me?”

“I do.” He laces his fingers behind his head, entirely at ease. “As it turns out there is a wedding I need to attend this weekend. A family wedding. Apparently, my family has it in their head that I'm in need of a nice, good woman at my side to keep me looking like I have a soul. They tried to arrange a stranger, but that doesn't sit well.”

*Pfft.* “Huh, you were fine with a stranger once.”

He hesitates, a bit of his bravado falters. “Touché. But the idea of a whole weekend—it's not my thing. I'd like you to come with me as my plus one.”

I laugh because this can't be real. Until he doesn't flinch, and my face falls along with my stomach. “You're not serious.”

“Totally.”

“You want me to go to a family wedding with you? All weekend?”

“Yes. We're not strangers. You're a hard-working schoolteacher who can balance out a guy in a rock band with a

bad attitude.” He pauses and looks away. “And you’re not terrible to be around.”

“Oh, well thank you. I’m so flattered.”

He sighs and stands. “The bottom line is you don’t care about fame. At least I don’t think so. You were willing, on your own, to sign an NDA when most people would blast the truth on social media. It’s ... refreshing.”

Okay. That does sound like a very veiled, very reluctant compliment. “I don’t care about fame. You put your pants on like everyone else. Unless you have people dress you.”

“The people who put my pants on are on vacation this week, so yes, I did it all by myself today.”

I bite my cheek to keep from laughing. He hasn’t earned a Vienna laugh yet. It’s a sight. All snorty and wheezy and horse-like.

Rees’s face softens. He’s almost Darcy. Almost. “My brother is an actor, and he’s got quite the fanbase now, okay?”

“Wow. There are two famous people in your family? Your parents must be so proud.” I say it sarcastically, but I’m not totally insincere. I imagine a pair of stage parents pushing their sons to be huge entertainment successes. They probably are proud their hard work paid off.

“I’m sure they’re very proud of him,” he says with a smugness, and a pain, I wish I could unhear. There is more to this guy, and he hides it. Too well. Rees drags a hand through

his hair. “The point is you won’t drool over him the same way you don’t drool over any of us here.”

“I could. I might be a huge fan of your brother’s work.”

“Really? What’s his name?”

“You should know your brother’s name. It’s sad that you don’t.”

He chuckles. “Okay. So, if we login to your Netflix account I won’t see *Bridgerton*, and instead I’ll see high fantasy, blood, gore, and magic. Those kinds of shows?”

I don’t answer because he would absolutely see *Bridgerton* and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Downton Abbey* on my list.

I let my shoulders slump. “Mr. Hayden—”

“Rees,” he says. “If we’re going to be spending time together, I’d say first names should be appropriate.”

“Rees, you don’t actually want me to come, do you?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

“More like if you had a better option.” That’s the truth. Why do I get the feeling this has about a thousand underlying motivations, and isn’t at all because he wants to spend time with me?

His expression sobers. “Look, I don’t know anyone outside my band and their wives and now, you. But that’s the problem. The other women I know aren’t in a position to be my date. Unless we really want to start a scandal, I guess.”

“I need a better reason.”

“You won’t get one.”

“Well, have a nice trip, Mr. Hayden.” I start walking toward the door. “I’m sure it will be a lovely wedding.”

He drops his head and groans. “Wait. Fine.” Rees clears his throat. “Most people who interact with me only do so because they want to get to my brother. Or they only want to talk to me because I’m in Perfectly Broken. Or they want to know if rumors online are true. You didn’t even know who I was, and for the little time in the elevator ...”

“What?” I say when he pauses. I pinch my lips together to hide how much this taste of vulnerability ignites the flame he started not so long ago.

“I got to be me.” He looks away as if ashamed. “I didn’t worry about ulterior motives or judgment. Happy?”

I lick my bottom lip, voice low. “Is that the truth?”

He tilts his head, exasperated. “Swear it.”

I consider the options. What do I know about this guy?

1. He’s not a serial killer. I’m pretty sure his band would’ve caught on by now.
2. He’s not married. Not a father to be.
3. He’s rough around the edges with a gentle side he gave up in the elevator.
4. He’s hiding something about himself, and I have an insatiable curiosity to figure it out.

Still, this isn’t a good idea. Not after the antagonistic way we reunited. “I’ll be honest, three days seems like a steep favor for thirty minutes in an elevator.”

“Longer. Friday to Tuesday.” My eyes widen, but he doesn’t give me time to retort before holding up a file folder. “Which is why you can add your own clauses to this deal until you’re comfortable.”

The more this sounds like a business transaction the tighter my stomach becomes. “Does there really need to be a contract?”

He pauses, as if reconsidering, but in the end, he opens the file. “From experience, it’s probably a good idea. For both of us.”

I heave a sigh and sit behind my desk, trying not to wonder too much on what experiences he’s talking about. “This is weird.”

“What is?”

“That you’re you and you’re asking *me* to do this.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

I choke on my words for a breath. “Nothing, it’s ... I’m just sure there are more glamorous women who’d throw themselves at a weekend away with a rock star.”

“That’s exactly why I’d rather ask you.” He grins and nudges the papers across my desk. “There is something to be said about a woman being honest, no matter who I am. You’ll be honest with me, right Lizzy?”

“About what?”

“Everything. If I chew too loud, if I smell bad, if I’m undeniably handsome.”

A tiny, strangled laugh breaks through my gritted smile. “If you’re undeniably full of yourself?”

“Exactly. So, what do you say? Want to negotiate a beach vacation that I guarantee will be filled with awkward moments for everyone?”

Twelve



# VIENNA

THE WAY I GREW up, I learned to watch people, to meet their eye, to notice the tiny micro expressions every word gives.

Rees doesn't like asking this, but I don't think it has anything to do with me. Beneath the surface, there is clear unease and a glaring hope that this'll go how he wants. By me agreeing. I'm not sure if it breaks my heart that a weekend with his family causes him distress and not excitement, or if it makes me smile to know I have the power here.

"I'll at least *look* at it." I start to scan the document. Most of these addendums of his are handwritten. Words crossed out from what is clearly the NDA I asked for from the manager.

"It'll all be written up and official," he tells me. "These are just some additions I made for this particular trip."

Written in the side margins isn't anything outlandish. We go as a new relationship. Undefined, and too vague.

"What does new mean?"

“We’re getting to know each other. Isn’t that the truth?”

I shrug. “I thought you wanted me to pretend to be your girlfriend.”

“That’ll be too unbelievable when they see you’re too good for me.” He leans forward, seemingly unaware he stopped my heart for a few breaths. “We’re new. Maybe we’re friends, maybe more.”

I shake my head when he wiggles his brows. “Keep dreaming, Rock Star.”

“I will.”

I ignore the tug in the center of my stomach and keep reading. Mostly simple rules. I will be given the bed in any room we may or may not end up sharing. He will take the couch, floor, or potentially the bathtub depending on how luxurious—his words.

If any food or beverage has the power to kill me, I am to inform him immediately. There is a sweet look of relief when I tell him I can eat anything, and I plan to.

If I go, that is.

My favorite rule, because it makes me smile, is I am in no way obligated to stand for any snarky, rude, or snotty comments from a guy named Mark, a woman named Justine, and another named Adrienne. This rule branches to any extended family members in attendance I find particularly unbearable. It makes me smile at the absurdity of the wording. He sounds like he did his best to come across official, but it

comes out like he's offering backhanded compliments to everyone.

"Oh, this is my favorite," I tell him. "I'm required, at least twice a day, to compliment your unmatched skills with a guitar and stage presence."

Half his mouth twists when he looks away from a few book reports in the form of paper mobiles hanging in a corner. "What guy doesn't want a beautiful woman bragging about him?"

He's a flirt. That's all. I shake my head and stare back at the paper. "These seem reasonable, but we need to discuss the terms of this final note."

Rees peels away from the wall. "Yes, we do."

"In return for my presence the entire trip, I agree not to ask personal questions—vague and ominous. What qualifies as personal? Favorite color, or deepest, darkest secrets?"

"Favorite color is silver or gray."

"It is not."

He holds out his inked arms. "Very much is, Lizzy." Rees takes up a pen and scribbles an addition to the sentence. "Is that clearer?"

"Ah." I read the addition. "I'm not to ask about your family or the dynamics. Even more ominous."

"There are some things I don't talk about."

“Don’t I need to know some of them if I’m going to be with your family?”

“Are you agreeing to come?”

I fold my arms in a challenge. “If you agree to some answers. I’ll let you ask questions too.”

“Fine. Three. Three questions, but that’s it.”

I tap my chin. “Okay, what do your parents do for a living? Pretty standard question if we’re getting to know each other.”

He grinds his teeth, but nods. “My dad is a narcotics detective, and his wife is an attorney.”

“His wife? I’m guessing she isn’t your biological mom.”

“Stepmom. One more question, Lizzy.”

“No, that didn’t count. I said *I’m guessing*. You answered on your own.” I don’t give him a chance to argue before I hurry on. “Are your parents divorced?”

“No.” He clenches and unclenches his fist. “My mom died when I was eight.”

Any playfulness is gone. My heart cinches as I lower my voice. “I’m sorry, Rees.”

“It’s fine. Long time ago. Last question.”

So much more is beneath this man’s outer shell. Those colorful eyes give him away almost every time. But he’s a master at stomping it all down. Only a few encounters and I can see he keeps most of himself checked and locked inside.

I have no doubt no matter how many questions I ask I'll never get the full story of Rees Hayden.

“Okay. Who are the bride and groom?”

“Mark and Adrienne.”

I glance at the contract. “The people I’m allowed to yell at if they’re rude?”

“Exactly. He’s my stepbrother and she was my high school girlfriend who decided a stuffy law student was worth more than a starving musician. So, there ya have it.”

My lips part. “She’s your ex and is marrying—”

“Into the family.” Rees leans over my desk, his face dangerously close, voice rough and dark. “I said this would be a fun-filled trip of awkward.”

“Okay. No more family questions. I’m learning things, like you start to drawl when you get uncomfortable. You’re drawling.”

“I don’t drawl.”

“You so drawl.” I laugh and point to the bottom line of his makeshift contract. “There is another half to this final clause.”

His smile returns, but a bit of the light is gone in his expression. “Don’t ever say I don’t make a fair contract.”

“If I agree to go, I don’t ask the family questions, but you don’t speak to any media or anyone without my approval, and I get to ask another favor from you in return. Very generous, Mr. Hayden.”

“I thought so.” He drums his fingers against his legs, clearing his throat. “I know what it’s like to have your name in the press in ways you didn’t expect or want. Consider that the NDA. You command the ship on what I tell people about us.”

“There will be cameras and paparazzi, huh?”

“Vienna.” One word—my name—in his mouth sends me into a spiral. Does he need to say it so low and needy? I’m one second away from fanning my face like a fool. Rees doesn’t go on until I meet his eyes. “I will do everything I can to keep your privacy. If you’re ever uncomfortable, tell me, and I’ll get you out. I know this is a lot to ask, but I do care about how it impacts your life.”

Welcome back, Darcy.

I give him an agreeable nod, afraid my voice might break. “Okay. What about this favor I get to ask for?”

“Within reason,” he says through a laugh. “I wrote that, don’t skip that line. I can’t buy you an island or anything.”

“Then what even is the point?” His laugh follows and I’m undone. I drum my fingers on my desk. “Hmm. I’d want it to be good.”

“You’re a little scary when you look at me like that.”

“What did you expect? That I’m just a quiet schoolteacher all the time?”

“No.” Rees leans forward over my desk again, but crosses the invisible line between us, and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “I think there’s a lot more to you than that.”

Same, Rock Star. Same.

I swallow with a new effort as my gaze dances to the broken shelf in the back. I grin. “How handy are you with a hammer?”

Rees follows my eyes. He chuckles, laces his fingers, then cracks them dramatically. “Are you asking?”

His head jerks at the shelf.

“I might be.”

“Can I count you in for this trip?”

Am I doing this? My insides twist and turn like a tangle of yarn. Technically, he’s a stranger. He’s famous, and to be in the public eye with him could fall back on me. But ...

“I’d need to arrange a substitute.”

He nods. “For sure. I’d have you back no later than next Wednesday if that helps.”

I hardly recognize myself. First, making out with a guy in an elevator. Now this? Because let’s be honest—I’m 99.9% sold.

“One more condition,” I say. “We go as friends.”

His brow furrows. “Okay, we can say that.”

“No.” I grin. “I mean *real* friends. It’ll be better if I’m there with someone who might actually like me as a person.”

Rees studies me, a twitch to his lip. “Fine. But it’s a little sad you wrote a whole contract just to be friends with me, Lizzy. All you had to do was ask.”

I shove his shoulder, a bit of pressure breaking off my spine. “You’re going to be annoying like this all weekend, aren’t you?”

“Guaranteed.”

I sigh but sign my name on the signature line. Rees does the same.

“Okay, I guess that’s it.” I gesture at the pink hammer. “Well, get to work, bud. I’m calling in my favor.”

Rees snorts and snags the hammer and nail set. “This’ll be done in ten minutes. I have nowhere to be but my pool later. Give me your entire classroom fixit list, Lizzy, and you will see what a good choice you’ve made entering a friendship contract with me.”

I roll my eyes, but smile.

This is nuts.

Going to a family wedding with a guy I barely know, who happens to be famous, and someone I’m annoyingly attracted to.

It’s a recipe for disaster.

But ... when in Rome.



Thirteen

# REES

ONLY THE LIGHTS FROM the hallway and a retro lava lamp cast any sort of color over the shapes of guitars, subwoofers, sound equipment, and an antique baby grand piano in the corner of my inhouse studio.

I find some of my calmest moments when lights are low, when headphones are on, and when I'm flat on my back, guitar in hand. My fingers pluck the strings, not in a particular tune, but the motion of it sends me to a different place.

A place where hazel eyes light up at the sight of me. The real me. Not the guy in a band. Not the guy with a famous brother. Me.

My Lizzy. The grip she has on me is unsettling. To wrap her up in this weekend is stupid, and I'm not sure I've ever wanted to see how something plays out more than this.

I've replayed our entire conversation over and over the last twenty-four hours, and it isn't getting quieter. She's coming with me. To a wedding I don't want to be at. She'll hear

comments, murmurs, digs. If I'm not careful, Vienna will see sides to me I don't let anyone see.

Finally, I had to snuff out the noise and disappear into music.

So, here I've been for, I think, twelve-ish hours. I've taken breaks for food and some sleep, but I'm positive the wood flooring in my studio will have an imprint of my body when I finally snap out of it and step back into life.

I don't have much of a choice. Tomorrow I'm back at the school for the final rehearsal before the weekend. Then the kids will record with us next week. After the shoot and recordings are finished, I won't have much of an excuse to see Vienna anymore.

What should be a relief is like a pebble in my shoe, and frankly, makes me cranky.

At first, I'd loved the idea of working at a school. The song *Breaking Walls* is all about growing up as an outcast but coming into yourself. It's a true collaboration. Bridger is our typical lyricist, but with Finn's help, we wrote and produced the song together. All of us pulling from experiences, and I'm not here to brag, but it rocks hard.

When we caught Micah and Mason Walker jamming out in the studio as their dad produced the final track, the idea to include kids in the video and background chorus was a missing piece to wrap an awesome song in a nice, neat bow.

The song is a fight anthem for anyone who might feel different.

But now, all my excitement is hardened into a heavy brick of dread.

Vienna wanted to go as friends, people who like each other. That's the trouble, isn't it? I do like her. I hardly know her, but she did something to me in that elevator.

If I had half a brain, I'd call it off and hang out with the stranger attorney Justine wanted to bring. I could be quiet and have no obligation to share anything about myself. But with Vienna, there is a piece of me that wants to absorb everything about her.

But how do you do that without giving up bits of yourself in return?

I'm an idiot who let a whim blossom into something more meaningful. In the elevator, we both insinuated multiple times the moment was circumstantial, a bit of frenzied passion in a tense situation. It wouldn't extend past that night, and here I am like a kicked puppy wishing it had.

Wishing she thought more of me than a weird, friend of happenstance.

My face pinches into a grimace when a familiar tightness shapes in my chest. A reminder of things I do not want Vienna to know.

The worst part of all this is, doubtless, before the weekend is over, she'll get the opinion on which Hayden is worth

knowing. I think that's what will cut the most—if she looks at me with contempt, or disgust, or regret over things I do, or say.

A swift kick strikes the bottom of my foot. I jump into sitting, fumbling over my guitar as I go.

“Dude.” I narrow my eyes and pull off my headphones, waiting for my heart to slow its pace before I stand up. “What are you doing? How'd you get in here?”

“Door's open.” Parker Knight looms over me in the dark. The shape of him is easy to distinguish between the other guys. Parker has legs like tree trunks, and arms that look like small watermelons took up residence under his skin. And he has about two inches on all of us. “Why are you pouting?”

“I'm not pouting.” I grab my guitar, and return it to the stand, then go to flip on the lights. “What are you doing in my house?”

“Checking for signs of life.”

“Who gave you the code to the front door?”

“You.”

“Lies.”

He laughs and breaks into my mini fridge, pulling out a bottled water. “Seriously, what's going on?”

“Nothing, just zoning out a bit.” I catch a water he tosses at me and sit on a high-backed stool in the corner. “How was the series? I caught the end of the Twins game.”

“So, the loss?”

I grin. “Unfortunately.”

Parker leans a shoulder against the wall, and drinks half the water in one gulp, staring at a poster with the Perfectly Broken raven.

When I joined the band, I didn’t anticipate making friends with ball players. First, I’m twenty-five, and Parker and the guys all hit thirty this year. More than that, Parker is a guy who only connects to the people he calls his family. He doesn’t make room for anyone else besides shallow interactions, and his family consists of those associated with Perfectly Broken, plus a few Kings teammates.

I expected to have a friendly acquaintance, not have him end up as one of my closest friends. Not complaining, but I think I surprised myself too. It’s not like I’m walking around, arms wide open, inviting everyone into my black heart.

What can I say? We clicked.

I prop my elbows on my knees. He says he’s here to make sure I’m alive, but he’s the one staring at the raven like it might fly off the poster. Look, when you grow up with a clone from birth, you learn to recognize when another person might have something on their mind.

One thing I pride myself on is burying heavy personal thoughts in my own head, and being a listening ear for others.

I maneuver off the stool and punch his thick shoulder. “What’s going on, man? You don’t look good.”

Parker shrugs. “Thought you might want to go toss a few balls.”

This is Parker-speak for something is bugging him and he wants to throw until it’s worked out of his system.

My brow starts to furrow, but I quickly shift into a neutral expression. I’ve learned enough about the guys in the band and Parker that they’re a little skittish when they’re wrestling with something. It takes a bit of coercing to get it out of them, so I play a game of nonchalance. “Sure. Let me grab my glove.”

“Cool.” Parker pastes on his wicked grin the cameras love.

I leave him in the studio and disappear into my cluttered bedroom, giving my fitness watch that tracks heart rate and oxygen levels a quick glance. Sats look good, I can skip meds for now. Parker would ask what took so long anyway.

“Just so you know, I think you ask me to do this to build your ego since I suck compared to you,” I tell him when I come back out.

Parker laughs. It’s sort of true. Somehow I slipped into the role of his unprofessional baseball guy. Especially when there are things he wants to work out that he can’t—or won’t—discuss with his teammates.

Twenty minutes later we pull up to Burton Field and make our way toward the large, indoor practice field.

“Thanks for coming,” Parker says, after we’ve stretched a bit and have gloves in place.

I throw the first ball. There's hardly any umph behind it, and Parker could probably catch it with his eyes closed, but skill isn't what this is about. "Want to save us some awkward small talk and tell me what's bugging you?"

He throws the ball back, mouth pinched. "This Sunday's home game—I'm pitching."

"Really? I thought you'd be playing third."

He rolls his eyes with a grin. "You know what I mean. First inning and I'm at the plate, man."

Parker has been the Kings' closer for years. The relief pitcher with the most accuracy, the guy who seals the wins during games. But after this season Jovi Green, the starting pitcher, is done, and the coaches want to give Parker a chance before the season ends.

Parker has worked harder than should be humanly possible to take this spot. He earned it.

"You'll make it," I tell him.

He lets out a long breath. "I've been working my arm and the stamina, but my accuracy dips after so long."

"You're freaking yourself out, man. Do you think your pitching coach, or any of your coaches for that matter, would put you on the mound if you couldn't last through the innings?"

Parker shrugs and makes another throw, reluctant worry printed on his face.



“Park, listen to me.” I slip off my glove, tuck it under my arm, and cross the distance between us. “You’re going to be pitching for a longer stretch, true. It might be shaky the first game, but you’ll build up to it like you always do.”

“I can’t be shaky the first game,” he says, dragging his fingers through his thick hair. “This is my job on the line. I’m not an idiot, I know this is a trial run. There are rookies the Kings are looking at. Good, solid pitching arms out there, and if I can’t hold my game ...”

He shakes his head and tosses the baseball up a few times.

“Forget about the length of the innings.” I wave my hands as if erasing all the things we’ve said so far. “Forget about starting. Go back to what you’ve trained that big arm to do and trust it a little more. You know I get freaked every time I get up on stage.”

He scratches his neck, and nods. He’s one of five people who know about my stage fright. My band and Noah are the other four. Of course, no one but Noah knows the underlying cause of it, but we’re not here to break that down right now.

“Okay,” I go on, “and what works for me is remembering my exceptionally talented hands know how to play.”

That, at least, gets a little laugh. He shoves me. “Love the confidence, buddy.”

“I think you’re letting everyone else’s expectations get in your head. You’re trying to be Jovi and you’re not. You’re

Parker *freaking* Knight. And that guy knows how to pitch a baseball.”

“For a few outs at the end of a game.”

“Come on. Don’t do that, don’t downplay the last seven years you’ve been putting in the work to get here. You have the accuracy, now you’ve built the stamina. Trust it, and trust yourself a little more.”

I use my chin to point to the built-in mound in the practice field. “Go on. One pitch, just to get your doubts doubting themselves.”

He glances between the ball in his hand and the mound. It takes a few breaths before he gives in and heads to the center. Parker rolls the ball around in his hand a few times, settling into his studious zone the fans go wild over at the games. His jaw pulses. He sets up. Lifts his left leg, then lets the pitch fly.

I don’t know Parker’s top speed, but even in a casual setting like this, the *thwack* of a ball hitting the target mat comes about a second after the ball leaves his hand. He rolls his shoulders, smiling. Mission accomplished.

I clap him on the back. “Like I said, you’re a baseball darling.”

He laughs. “Yeah, you need to stop calling me that.”

We toss a few more balls, Parker ends the night with another crushing pitch, then we head to a twenty-four-hour diner we frequent since no one cares if we’re on billboards here.

We can eat mediocre burgers and be normal for a breath.

“The least I can do is return the counseling session,” Parker says halfway through our food. “Want to tell me why this trip with a teacher has you locked away in your studio?”

I drop a fry, eyes wide. “How ... how did you find out?”

Parker grins at his plate. “Rees, you’ve been here for three years, and you still don’t realize all of us will find out major things in each other’s lives one way or another.” He wipes a few crumbs off his hands and leans back. “Your teacher is roommates with Mason’s speech therapist, right? Well, she let it slip to Jazzy, Jazzy let it slip to Ellie, who let it slip to Lex, who always tells her big brother everything.”

This is such a bad idea. If gossip traveled that fast in my own circle, what is going to happen when I step into the sunlight with Vienna at my side?

A bad idea, but I like it just enough to be too selfish to cancel.

“I’m never talking to anyone again,” I grumble.

“Not true. And Lex will say she’s pregnant so you can’t get mad at her,” Parker insists. “I’ve been given the important details, the random make-out being one.”

“Hey, don’t pretend like you haven’t done it.”

“I’m not pretending anything,” he says. “But I am both impressed and surprised it was you. Back to this trip thing. That’s big and completely out of character. What brought it on?”

We call ourselves the evergreen bachelors of the group. Parker has no desire to ever be in a relationship—much to his sister’s annoyance—and me, well, with the way life is, I doubt it will ever happen.

How do I explain that thirty minutes in an elevator stamped a woman over my bachelorhood, and I can’t stop thinking about her? So, naturally, to fix my predicament, I volunteer her to spend several days with my family.

Good thing Parker is quick and makes it easy for me. “Do you like her or something?”

I stir my blob of ketchup with a limp fry. “No.”

“Good,” he says, taking a bite of his own fry. “Glad we’re honest with each other.”

My chest tightens and I slump in my seat. “Does it matter if I do? It’s not like it’ll be anything more than two people who need a few favors from each other.”

He gives me a bemused look. “Yeah. A woman who isn’t interested will just agree to spend a weekend at the beach with you. She’s interested, or she’s in it for the fame.”

“She doesn’t care about fame,” I insist, a weird defensiveness builds at the idea of anyone accusing Vienna of being some kind of fame chaser. “She doesn’t.”

“Okay.” Parker holds up his hands in surrender. “Got it. Then she’s interested.”

“She’s not. She was going to sign an NDA to keep everything quiet—voluntarily. It was her freaking idea.”

“Huh.” Parker mulls it over. “That’s interesting. But why didn’t she?”

“I turned it into her going on this trip instead.”

Now he gets it. Vienna isn’t interested in me; she’d probably like to forget me if I’d let her.

Parker shovels a few more fries in his mouth and clicks his tongue. “You said you went in there like a jerk when you saw her again. She was probably going to sign it because she thought you wanted everything kept quiet. What is she getting out of this deal now?”

I can’t keep the smile away. “I have a honey-do list for fixing things in her classroom and apartment when we get back.”

Parker laughs. “That’s it? I like this girl already. I expected she’d at least ask for perks at concerts or something.”

Maybe other people would, but Vienna Shaw is a bit of an enigma.

I’m positive she thinks she’s getting the better end of the deal after I fixed her broken shelf, tightened her desk chair, and hung up two coat racks in the back of her classroom yesterday.

The way she looked at me like I walked on water softened my black heart and I caved, giving her freedom to extend our contract to three days’ worth of work in her apartment. According to Vienna, the landlord gets to things on a six-

month basis. By the time repairs are addressed, most people don't even have a lease anymore.

I'm definitely getting the better end of the deal.

A few days with a calming presence in the chaos of my family. Sure, yeah. I'll hang a few shelves and fix a few faucets.

"So, what are you going to do?" Parker asks.

"What I agreed to do. We're there as new friends, we go to a wedding, deal with my family, then she gets a handyman for a few days. After that, there isn't anything more to do. I have no plans of continuing to be a bother in her life."

"Are you a bothersome thing to have around?" Parker is surprising at times. He holds my stare, and presses in again. "Are you?"

I tilt my head. "Come on. She's like the epitome of good, innocent schoolteacher, and I'm the unfortunate, hotheaded brother of Hollywood's brightest new star."

"Yeah, and Tate has cheated on Ellie, what? Twenty times now? Bridger has an underground opioid operation. Adam uses Becca to hide that he's gay. Me, well last I checked I had twelve children."

I laugh. Not because any of it is funny, but because the absurdity is so out there, if we don't laugh, we'll lose our minds.

Parker crosses his arms over his big chest. "The way I see it is you have a choice. Never settle down and never drag anyone

into the crap that comes with the limelight. Trust me, I get it. That is my plan until I die, and I'm completely satisfied with my choice. But if you're interested in something deeper with *someone*, you'll need to see if they can handle it. Rees, if you were a freaking angel, the tabloids would write that your halo was crooked."

I look away. "It's her I'm worried about, not me. I'm used to being the bad one."

"You've been compared to Noah a lot?"

It's so much deeper than that, but again, I give a simple shrug, leaving it there. My hands are starting to sweat, and I don't want to open this can of worms. Not here. Maybe not ever.

Parker scrutinizes me. Cracks my head open and peers into my personal thoughts is more like it, but he doesn't dig much deeper. "Keep in mind there is one guy I went to tonight, and I couldn't care less who sees us."

"Ah, Park." I toss a straw wrapper at his face. "I'm touched."

He curses at me, face red. "Look, I'm not telling you to marry the girl, I'm not even telling you to date her. I like our bachelor bromance. But if she's getting under your skin, fix it. At the very least, if you feel so inclined, get her out of your system."

There he is, the playboy of the Vegas Kings. Parker winks and takes a bite of his burger.

In truth, the trouble with Vienna isn't that I need to get her out of my system.

I want to keep her in.

But I don't want to make the mistake of getting into *her* system. For her sake.

The rough, jagged edges hidden inside have no place scraping up a woman like her.



Fourteen

# VIENNA

IN COMICS AND NOVELS there is typically a clear line between good versus evil.

Real life has a few more layers. Once again, Rees has been named the villain of my life because he is the one causing me turmoil.

The trouble with some villains is they're sympathetic. Sometimes the farm boy hero has the same broad shoulders and toned hands as the overlord. Or the dark king has tormented eyes, and it leaves the conflicted heroine wondering what lies underneath those angsty layers, and how she might pluck out the soft beating heart.

There are a few reasons I've filed the beautiful bassist in his own antihero category. He's shifty. He's unpredictable. Cool, sweet, and delicious in one moment, then cold, collected, and steely in the next.

Those eyes, two colors. Obviously, villain.

The man has skulls permanently drawn on his hands. Lord of the Underworld, anyone?

And he's too handsome. Jaw too well formed, a nose that has no divots, or bumps, or angles. No one is that perfect.

Dark. Magic.

It's necessary to rate the man as the antagonist in my story. If I opt for anything different, my traitorous, romantic mind thinks too much about all things Perfectly Broken. Then, I start to think about the concert. Next, a night in an elevator.

It's ridiculous and leaves me with a pain in my gut. Which only a cruel villain would leave.

I groan, annoyed with myself, and pop an overly salty off-brand cracker onto my tongue. The halls are empty, the school eerily silent as outside the busses hiss, moan, and pull away. Another day over, and I could hardly focus on deconstructing the first three chapters in *Lord of the Flies* in honors English.

Instead, my head has drifted to the band room. To the choir kids. Bits of the song have floated through the hallways like a melodic river. A thud of drums, the rumble of bass. What is Rees like with kids? Did he scowl? Smile?

Does anyone else notice how he smells like a bottle of cinnamon with a dose of man?

I chomp into two more crackers, add a little huff of irritation, and nearly stomp my foot at my own ridiculousness.

"Girl, same." A laugh follows the voice.

I whip my head to the side and take in the open library door. Alexis Knight-Cole is boxing up, well, boxes with a blue-haired woman and a woman in stilettos and a baby wrapped against her chest.

“By the end of the day,” Alexis goes on, “I definitely feel like shrieking too.”

I crumple my gross cracker bag, clear my throat, and step into the library, words spilling before I can judge if they’re awkward or not. “How did the baby daddy confrontation go?”

Her eyes brighten. “Really well. He threw me for a loop. Turns out the guy is excited and wants to be a family.”

“Congratulations,” I say with feigned surprise. “You just never know how those standoffs are going to go.”

“You really never do.”

Did I banter? Like ... like girlfriends do? Odd.

Marti has been my closest friend since we were both awkward girls on the playground in a one-horse town. Marti blossomed into a personable butterfly, but the few times I reached out to get to know other people, my wrist was promptly slapped, and I returned to my lane as the wallflower sidekick to a sassy bestie.

Alexis hands the blue-haired woman a colorful box, then turns her grin back to me. “I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been wanting to introduce you to the girls.” Girls? She’s already moving on. “Elle, Jazzy, this is Vienna. Rees’s friend.”

My stomach sinks when the other two women snap their eyes to me, sneering. Okay, they're smiling, but my mind wants to interpret them as sneerers.

"Oh," says the blue-haired friend. "I've been wanting to meet you. Ellie Walker."

I give her hand a shake. "Vienna. Good to meet you."

Ellie glances at Alexis with a bit of awe, and whispers just loud enough I can hear. "She doesn't know me. It's *awesome*."

The second, Jazzy, I assume, chuckles. "Ignore, Ellie. She's been crowded all day by teenage girls begging her to make them famous."

"Oh," I say, shaking Jazzy's hand, but glancing at Ellie. "I'm sorry, I'm not really up to date with music. Are you in the industry too?"

"I like you." Ellie grins. "Yes, I'm signed with Enigma Records, but I'm smarter than the guys and took a residency here in Las Vegas. No crazy tour schedule for me for a few years, thank you very much."

"Except when the guys go out," Alexis says.

"True." Ellie cozies up next to me. "I'm Tate Hawkins' fiancée."

"Oh, that's great. Congratulations on your ... engagement." My face heats. Maybe they've been engaged for ten years, and I'm offering congratulations like it was yesterday. Social situations put me on edge. Add some fame, wealth, and downright cool-girl vibes, and I'm a goner.

Ellie simply smiles and chirps, “Thank you.”

With a few flicks of my fingers at my sides, I glance at Jazzy. “I think you might be the one who gave us the concert tickets, right?”

Her face brightens. “Yes. I’m Mason Walker’s momsinsin.”

I smile at the name because I know from Marti she’s actually his cousin, but it’s nice to put a face to Marti’s unicorn all the same.

“Mason is a good kid,” I tell her, because what parent doesn’t want to know their kid is awesome? “His friend, Lukas, is one of the teacher’s aides for me, so I see him hanging around sometimes.”

Jazzy starts to bounce when the baby fusses. “I think we’ll keep both of those dweebs. And I’m glad you used the tickets. Marti has been amazing for Mase. I figured she and her friends deserved a night of pampering.”

I grin, scanning the table filled with the boxes. “What is all this?”

“Book boxes,” Alexis says. “My foundation, Never Forgotten. I thought while the guys are busy here, it’d be a good time to get some sign-ups and get some feedback from the kids on what books they like to read.”

“Wait, the Never Forgotten Boxes?” I pick one up, inspecting the fun illustrated characters on the side, the bookmarks, and the T-shirts for the mystery novel. “You run this?”

“Yep. Forcing my love of books on the world—the perfect way to spend all Bridger’s money.”

“I’ve had a few kids get one.” I’m fangirling, getting weird, and I don’t even care. “These are doing a lot of good; I hope you know that.”

Alexis’s eyes turn glassy. I did not set out to make a pregnant woman cry, but when she squeezes my hand, I think it might be worth it. “Thank you. That means a lot. Good is all we ever wanted them to do.”

“Have you ever thought of adding storytelling videos with ASL or for visually impaired kids?”

“Um, well, no. I haven’t really thought of videos at all.”

I want to bite my tongue off. What am I doing inserting myself into this woman’s foundation? I just get passionate about certain things and sometimes the wallflower transforms into something bold and colorful.

“Oh.” That’s all I say because I have no idea how to keep conversation moving when I feel like I’m suffocating.

“Wait,” Alexis says. “I like this idea. As an English teacher, you would know much better than me what kids might need for adaptations. I sort of feel like a jerk for never thinking of different abilities. Everyone deserves to have a good book.”

“No, don’t feel like that. I didn’t intend to come off that way.” I rub the sweat on my palms over my jeans. She asked, might as well talk. “But kids today love interactive book videos. There are some sites where celebrities will read them

stories and it's a big hit. Especially if there are families where parents work late, or something. But I thought it would be awesome to have videos for the deaf community, the blind, or even kids who can't sit and focus to read."

All three are staring at me like I have three heads, until Ellie turns to Alexis, grinning. "Remember how you were talking about branching out? I think you might've found your branch."

A smile breaks over Alexis's face. "Do you mind if we get together and talk more about some of your ideas? When you get back from California, of course."

My face burns. "You heard?"

Jazzy snickers. "Marti was quick to tell me all the latest developments, and I'll just be honest, when it comes to the guys, we blab about everything."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I have no idea what I just got myself into. We were never supposed to see each other again and now I'm going to a wedding with his family?"

Alexis pats my arm. "We've met his twin, and Noah is—"

"Wait, what?"

"Noah. Rees's twin. He's actually a really nice guy."

I groan again. "He never even said they were twins. He just said brother."

"You really don't keep up with pop culture, do you?" Ellie asks. She doesn't say it as an insult, more like it's a nice



surprise. “His show has been the number one trending show on Netflix for six months.”

“If his brother was Matthew Mcfayden or Dan Stevens, yes, I’d know him.” I press my cool palms against my boiling face. “I’m walking into this totally blind and will probably do something to mess it up in front of a bunch of famous people.”

Where I expect them to commiserate with me, maybe tell me I’d be smart to reconsider the arrangement, instead, they laugh.

“You’ll be fine,” Alexis says. “You know what, why don’t we go shopping for your weekend, and we’ll spill all the dirty details we know about Rees. Give you a leg up.”

Okay, I really want the dirt on Rees, but I’m also a little caught off guard she wants to go shopping with me.

Ellie glances at her phone. “The guys still have at least two hours left in their rehearsal since it’s the last one before recording. Let’s go.”

“Wait, really?” I’m talking, but Jazzy has stacked a few boxes in my arms, and Alexis is pulling on me, urging me to follow.

“Yes, really. Elle, want to call Bec and see if she can meet us?” Alexis faces me. “Becca Stone, Adam’s wife. She’ll want to meet you.”

“Why? I’m not ...” I was going to say I’m not anybody, but my dad’s scathing glare fills my head. Never demean yourself

in front of Miles Shaw—he will let you know how much he disapproves with a single look.

“It’s okay,” Alexis goes on. “I’m sure this is overwhelming, but we might be able to help a little. We do know Rees, and we like you.”

“You don’t know me.”

“Yeah, but you got under Rees’s skin,” Ellie says. “That officially makes you someone I need to know.”

They laugh together as we walk toward the side parking lot. They’re serious about knowing me. Sincere.

I hardly know what to make of how much life is changing.

One simple night, one wild moment, and suddenly I’m going shopping with the wives of rock stars.



“Have you told your parents?” Marti flops onto my bed, messing up my neat piles of folded clothes. She slurps a Capri Sun because my educated, brilliant friend has not graduated from childhood beverages yet.

“Um, it’s on the plans for tonight.”

She grins with a bit of wickedness. “I can’t wait to hear Fay freak out.”

“Well, I’m twenty-four, so.”

“Like she cares.”

“She can’t talk. My mom met my dad because she ran him over with her Moped. She can’t talk about weird things.”

“Ah, is this the origin story you’re going to tell your adorable rock star babies someday?”

I toss one of my rolled pairs of socks at her head. “No. This is not an origin story of anything more than a friendship.”

She draws another long drink, picking at one of my shirts with lace flowers on the hem. “How was shopping?”

I smile and unzip my suitcase. “Honestly? Really fun. They’re funny.”

“I only know Jazzy, but she’s about as down to earth as you can get. But Ellie Walker—Vi, she sells out concerts. That’s cool.”

“She’s really nice. We were stopped a few times and she took some pictures with fans, but it’s like just a thing she does. Next thing I know, she’s spilling nacho cheese on her shirt like I do.”

Marti lies back against my thousand pillows and fiddles with the end of her long, dark braid. “Soooo. What dirt did they give you on Mr. Hottie Bass Player?”

“Very tame dirt.” I go into the bathroom to gather my toothbrush, perfume, and deodorant. I refuse to be the smelly one on this trip. “He’s from Louisiana. Took over the bass spot in the band because the last guy turned out to be a sleaze. Alexis told me Rees just fit in like he was always there.”

“Tell me about the movie star brother.”

“Noah? I don’t know much. They’ve met him a few times since he comes to the shows when he can. I guess he’s nice.” I step into the room to Marti holding up my tablet with my Netflix app pulled up.

She points at an image of a show. Dark and shadowed, there is a bearded guy who has what looks like blood on his face, a woman who is clearly some grungy pirate, and another guy who is some kind of fantasy prince.

Marti taps the main bloodied face. “He’s the movie star you get to eat Froot Loops with each morning while sitting next to his hard rocker brother. Girl, like I said, you are a queen.”

I study the image. Underneath all the movie magic and makeup I can almost make out Rees’s face. Twins, huh. It’ll be interesting to see how much they’re alike or if they’re completely different.

“What’s the deal with the family?”

I sigh and sit on the corner of my bed. “That, I still don’t really know. The girls didn’t know much either, only that he doesn’t talk about his family a lot. It was news to them that the bride is Rees’s high school girlfriend.”

Marti rests the back of her hand against her forehead. “I bet you’ll get to see tons of drama, and I’m totally jealous.”

“Want to trade places?”

Now she tosses the socks at me. “Don’t even pretend you aren’t looking forward to this.” Marti slinks off my bed. “Get

packed. I'm going to eat ice cream and wallow in my mundane existence."

Drama queen.

Alone, I rearrange my suitcase at least three more times, convinced I've forgotten something. The ladies of Perfectly Broken—as they call themselves—helped me pick out a few beach covers, a new bikini, and a cute, pink, sleeveless cocktail dress for the wedding.

They made the trip easy. By the end I'd forgotten they lived in mansions and needed security out in public. It wasn't until halfway through I noticed Quinn and another hulky guy were following us ten paces back.

They are truly ghosts.

Then, when they dropped me off to my car, Alexis reminded me she wants me to attend an official meeting with her foundation board to review my ideas of incorporating adaptations. *My ideas.*

It's surreal and I'm a little giddy.

As I add a few more shorts to my bag, my phone buzzes on my nightstand. The text sends a deep rush through my stomach, like falling and not knowing when you'll stop.

**Unknown: Hey Lizzy. Guess if we're going on a plane together, we should have each other's numbers. Weird that Lex had this before me, but I'm not jealous or anything. I'll come pick you up insanely early in the morning. Five-thirty. You game?**

**Unknown: This is Rees, by the way.**

I smile at that. As if I couldn't tell who it is.

**Me: Rees who?**

**Unknown: Your best friend, Rees? Cool ink? Unafraid of elevators? Amazing kisser? Rees Hayden.**

I'm going to kill him. I hurry and add his number, typing a reply.

**Me: You had to take it there didn't you, Rock Star?**

**Rees: I will always take it there, Lizzy. Wouldn't want you to forget my best qualities.**

**Me: You mean before I get the chance to see your worst since I'll be with you nonstop for the next few days?**

**Rees: You're catching on. It was a good friendship while it lasted.**

**Rees: Need anything for tomorrow, or are you good?**

He's secretly sweet in a way that isn't really secret. True, Rees tries to be nonchalant, but I think the concern he has for other people, the kind heart inside, bleeds through. More than anything I look forward to seeing more of that.

He'll fail if he tries to keep it hidden. I know he will.

**Me: I think I'm set. I'll be outside before the sun.**

**Rees: See you tomorrow, Lizzy.**

I bite my bottom lip. **Goodnight, Darcy.**

Fifteen

# REES

THIS WOMAN IS A fidgeter.

Since we boarded the plane she's shifted in the seat, apologizing for knocking the seat in front of us. It's empty. She then proceeded to apologize to, I guess, her purse under the seat for getting tangled in the strap.

I'm captivated, entertained, and I plan to give away none of it.

Truth is, Vienna is the best choice I've made in a long time. And the worst. Both for the same reason.

Since I picked her up this morning, I haven't stopped stealing glances at her, and every time I do, I forget to breathe.

She stood outside her door waiting for me in a pair of oversized sweatpants, a messy knot on her head, a fresh face, and a T-shirt that says, *I love public schools*.

I think I fell in love a little right there.



Honestly, I'm not sure Vienna tries to be authentic; I think she simply doesn't know how else to be. It's not as if I expected her to be wearing stilettos and a pound of makeup on her face, but the last time I even tried to date, every girl was constantly worried if cameras would catch us, or they had to stop the conversation at least five times to fix something about their outfit.

I have nothing else to base my expectations on when it comes to bringing a girl to meet my entire family.

To me, she's more stunning than the night in the elevator. And that is only adding to my good choice versus bad choice. Romance has never been a bad thing in my view. For all my dad's shortcomings, he's had two healthy marriages.

Not to mention, love and all sappy things are constantly shoved in my face with the guys.

Adam and Becca are solid. They're basically the parents of the entire group. The veteran lovers who see the future in each parting glance, or whatever lines Vienna probably reads in her romances.

Bridger and Alexis are about to have their first baby and look at each other like they're falling in love all over again.

Tate and Ellie are months away from their wedding and have no regard for how others might feel if they touch each other. Non. Stop.

Then, there's Finn and Jazzy. Sure, they had an instant family with Mason and Micah when they got together, but

they're technically barely leaving the newlywed phase. Trust me, we've all felt it for the last two years.

All I'm saying is I know good relationships exist.

I'm not jaded like Parker who believes our friends got lucky.

He is completely on the side that if he tried to open his heart, it would end in the atomic bomb of failures.

The trouble with the twists and turns Vienna Shaw is causing is I know what happens when I drop the act and give in. My track record isn't exactly doing me any favors. Each time I think about letting anyone peek below the surface, as soon as they catch a glimpse, it becomes too much.

Vienna is the first woman in ... forever, I want to let see me. The trouble is if I drop my guard, if she peeks inside, I don't want to think of how bad it'll sting when she slams the door back in my face.

She jostles again, reaching for something in her bag as the flight attendants start checking the plane for takeoff.

"Do you want me to find a different seat?" I ask. "Would you like the whole row?"

Those eyes flash at me with a bit of wildness. "No. I'm just getting my book out. Did I hit you?"

"I think you hit about five seats."

She blinks like she's been stunned. "Sorry. We're going to take off, right? Like right now?"

The plane jolts and begins to taxi away from the terminal. Vienna stiffens, her fingertips grow white as she grips a tattered version of *Sense and Sensibility*.

“Yeah, we’re taking off. You okay?”

“Fine. I’m fine.” One hand releases her book and twitches at her side, spelling something.

She opens the cover and stares too hard at the words to actually be reading. I chuckle and lean my head back, closing my eyes against the rock of the plane. Before joining the band, I’d never been on a plane. Now, it’s like second nature.

A familiar pressure builds in my chest when the plane leaves the ground. Expected, but what isn’t expected are the mutters, like a curse is being cast, right next to me.

I crack one eye. Vienna’s forehead is pressed against the seat in front of her. She’s hugging the book tightly to her chest. Eyes clamped, shoulders heaving. It’s the elevator all over again. I’m more than happy to take one for the friendship team and calm her down the same way I did that night, but I have a feeling she wouldn’t appreciate it with an audience.

I lift the armrest between us, don’t say a word, peel one of her stiff hands off her poor book, and interlock our fingers. Vienna lifts her head. She looks at me.

With a shrug, I lean back again and close my eyes.

Ten seconds pass. Not a word is said, but I can’t stop my smile when she squeezes my hand, then leans her head on my shoulder, staying close until we’re at thirty thousand feet.



“So, planes and elevators are to be avoided. Got it.”

Vienna scowls at me. “It is a flying tube, sir. A flying tube. Anyone with a hint of claustrophobia would claw at the window.”

“Which you did impressively well. I think the flight attendant was worried you might break through the third windowpane.” I turn away from her narrowed eyes and snag our two bags on the baggage carousel.

Morning at LAX is in full force. Barely eight o’clock and already busy passengers are shoving through check-in to security, unaware of anyone or anything around them.

I curl an arm around Vienna’s waist, tugging her out of the way of a guy in a rich suit, shouting into his cell phone, on a collision course for her. Her palm presses against my chest, and I enjoy it a little too much.

With a bit of reluctance, I drop my hold, and Vienna snatches her bag from my hand. “I did not claw at the window.”

“You’re right.” I rotate my shoulder, wincing. “It was my arm.”

Her pink lips pinch into a quivering line, eyes bright. She’s fighting it—she’s fighting that smile hard. Then ... she breaks. *Finally.*

Shaking her head, Vienna leads the way out of the baggage claim. “You are mean, Mr. Hayden.”

I quicken my step to keep up. “Hey, I never said I didn’t enjoy you digging your claws into my arm. I enjoyed every second.”

“Ugh. You’re going to be this weird, flirty, crass guy all weekend. I have a feeling.”

“You’re already here. Can’t run now, Lizzy.”

When she glances at her phone, I grab her bag again. She gives me a look, informing me she noticed the gesture, and I’m fooling no one. I should probably play this time together with more indifference, but she makes it impossible.

Truth be told I *did* like the way she clung to me the entire hour flight.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today?” she asks on the moving walkway.

I blow out a breath, rehashing the detailed schedule Justine emailed two days ago. “We’ll go to Noah’s this morning and stay there for a bit. Then, the rehearsal dinner tonight, just to make sure you get overwhelmed as quickly as possible. After that we’ll go check into the cottage Justine rented.”

“Busy.”

Welcome to my stepmom. Every minute must be planned. Once, just once, I’d love to see Justine let her hair down and play hooky.

I don't drink, but already I wish I did.

The terminal is packed. I keep a step behind Vienna, my hand on her back, once we head toward the passenger pickup area.

Ten feet from the door, I wish I could turn around and head back home. I'll tell them I got sick.

A massive white poster board hovers over the heads of busy travelers. The sign is held by a guy in a ridiculous cowboy hat, aviators, a perfect Tom Selleck mustache, and cut off Daisy Duke shorts.

The idiot is looking for *Regina Hayes*.

"I hate him." I stop in the middle of the bustle.

"Who?" Vienna follows my disgust to the door. She covers her mouth with her hand. Probably to hide the weirdly cute wheezy laugh.

"Regina!" Noah waves the sign like a flag. "Reggie, there you are. Can you see me?"

A few people turn to look at us, but this is LA; it's not that weird. He's done the same thing when he flew into Vegas, and no one looked twice.

"I apologize upfront for my brother," I whisper before Noah and his bulky arms scoop me up.

"Reggie! I missed you."

"Really? The shorts again, dude?"

Noah laughs, tilting his glasses halfway down his nose. “I had to make an impression.” At that he wheels on Vienna. “For this brave lady. How’d you talk anyone into coming with you, Reesie?”

Noah holds out his hand. Vienna’s face is bubblegum pink. Guaranteed she wants to laugh, but probably isn’t sure if this is his normal outfit, so it might be considered rude.

“I’m Noah,” he says, shaking her hand.

“Vienna,” she rasps. “Great to meet you. Um, I like your shirt.”

He beams and opens his arms so we can get a better look at his stupid T-shirt that has a teddy bear on it, and underneath says, *Hugs Heal Hearts*.

“Thanks,” he says, sounding like the Southern boy he is. “I picked it special for my big brother.”

“Shut up,” I say. “Vienna, you don’t need to be polite. He’s dressed like this to throw you off.”

Noah balks. “I would never. I’m incognito.”

“Yeah, I bet. Hey, want to know something funny?” I start walking outside. “Vienna has no idea who you are.”

“What?” He turns his mustached face, gaping at her. “You don’t have posters of me on the wall?”

“Sorry.” Vienna snorts. “I promised myself I’d start the first episode when we get home.”

“Oh, no. We’re starting them here.”

“No,” I say. “You don’t like to watch yourself anyway. And I’m not sitting through the first episode ever again.”

Noah winks at Vienna. “He’s so funny when it comes to watching his brother kiss a lady on screen.”

“It’s more than a kiss,” I grumble.

Noah claps me between the shoulder blades. “Come on, I parked over here. You’re so shy, Reesie. Vienna, tell him to ease up. It’s a vacation.”

“Come on, Rock Star. I happen to like Noah’s bold wardrobe.”

“Oh, I like you,” Noah says, and I have the sudden need to stick myself between them. Stupid, and a little over the top. One thing I know about my brother, he’s loyal to me. No doubts there.

“You are on my side this weekend,” I say once we reach Noah’s sleek BMW. “Not his.”

Vienna surprises me by stepping close. Chest to chest, she presses her fingertips under my chin. “Don’t boss me around, and maybe I will take your side.”

If this is a game she’s playing, a way to tease or torment me, well, two can play.

She startles, drawing in a sharp gasp, when I pinch her chin between my thumb and finger. “Trust me, Lizzy,” I say close to her ear. “You haven’t seen my bossy side yet.”



She pulls back gently. Clears her throat and aims for the back seat.

“Nope.” I block her and open the passenger door. “Ladies up front with the guy in short shorts.”

She rolls her eyes, and slides into the seat next to Noah, chatting it up with my brother like they’re the oldest friends. Once our bags are loaded in the back, I take the seat behind the driver’s side and sit quietly, simply observing as Noah and Vienna laugh through the Daisy Duke shorts in Las Vegas story.

I’m glad she’s focused on my brother. If she looks in the back seat, she’ll catch me staring at her smile, her lips.

The more she talks, the less sure I am that I’ll make it through this weekend without tasting those lips again.

Sixteen

# VIENNA

NOAH HAYDEN IS A bit of a character.

No doubt he's over the top merely to irritate his brother, but it makes for an entertaining car ride.

After we pull away from the airport, he strips off his 'disguise' and it's an uncanny game of spotting the differences between the twins.

Noah's sharp jaw is covered in a dark blond beard. Not unruly, but thick and trimmed. His brown eye is more hazel than Rees's, but the blue isn't as sharp. Rees has a blue eye like raw sapphire, deep, rich, and glassy. Noah's is more like summer. Bright and warm, but without the mystery.

He's bulkier than Rees. A fact, I was quickly assured was only for his role. Catch him when they aren't filming and Noah is like a bean pole according to Rees.

Naturally, Noah took issue with that.

"He's always been jealous he can never have a body like this," Noah says as he pulls up to a luxurious condo complex

on Ocean Avenue.

I gape at the building. The outside is clean, white, and made of modern angles with large windows. Noah parks in the garage underneath, and hurries to the back, grabbing my suitcase.

“Get your own, Rees. I’ve got Vi’s.”

“Vi?” Rees narrows his eyes at his twin. “Are we at nickname status?”

“Don’t be mad Noah made it before you did, Rock Star.”

Noah gives me a cunning grin, as if I’ve given him the best gift ever. He clicks his fob and curls an arm around my shoulders. “This way, my lady.”

Rees lets out a soft groan. “Can you not be weird, No?”

“Comes with the job,” Noah insists, glancing at me. “Everyone thinks actors are all suave, but we’re just a bunch of theatre junkies who are usually a little dramatic.”

Rees snorts. “Usually?”

“Hey, keep your bad attitude in the parking garage.” He points a finger at Rees, then leads us toward a massive elevator where he greets a stiff doorman. “How are you today, Harvey?”

“Doing well, Mr. Hayden.” He opens the doors for us without so much as a smile.

On the ride to the penthouse, I stand back and watch the brothers fall into idle chat, completely comfortable, like

they've never been apart. Rees seems close with Noah. I don't know why he made such a fuss about his family. Even if he doesn't get on like this with the others, how bad can it be?

The elevators open to a private floor, and once we're inside the condo, I start ogling and drooling all over again.

"Wow." I hurry to the wall of windows that let in the gray morning light. Ocean stretches on forever, and the sound of waves on sand is Noah's personal white noise. A clean, briny breeze tangles with the hedges of plumerias on his deck. The deck is a view all its own. A large edgeless pool stretches across the space. A hot tub hugs the balcony rails with a perfect view of the beach and sunrise. "This is amazing."

"Thanks," Noah says, a bit of color tinging his cheeks. Maybe he's like his brother and shies away from attention too. "So, we have a few hours. If you want to shower, there is a guest bathroom and bedroom down that hall you can use as long as you want, Vi. Rees, I guess you can use mine."

I grin and take my bag down the hallway, leaving them to bicker back and forth.

The guest area is nicer than my apartment, and looks staged. No doubt when Noah moved in, he bought the show furniture along with it. Nice, clean, a little rigid. But everything breathes in clean laundry.

Once the airplane is scrubbed free, I rifle through my suitcase for something comfortable to wear before the dinner. The dinner. What do I wear to a wedding dinner with people I've never met, but have two high-profile sons? I'm a bit like

an outsider here. A schoolteacher from a small town with a microscopic savings account, a nine-year-old car, and my splurge consists of buying five-dollar chocolate chips instead of the two-dollar bag.

The ladies of Perfectly Broken helped me pick out the dress for the wedding, but I lay out all my clothes, searching for something for tonight.

First impressions are important, and since my date is tight-lipped on his family, I'm left guessing.

All I know is me, so in the end, I pick the pale blue sundress with comfortable wedge sandals. It's not flashy. Simple and comfortable, but when I meet people, I'd rather be comfortable more than fidgeting because my skirt keeps hiking up.

With my dress sprawled over the guest bed, I slip into a pair of shorts and a plain pink T-shirt.

Rees has seen me in my sweats and in more than one panic now that we've endured a plane ride together. There isn't a need to doll up when someone has seen you at your worst.

My hair—ugh—that's a different story. Still a little damp from the shower, but the humidity isn't helping. Looks like it's a ponytail kind of day.

When I'm satisfied I'm at least clean and presentable, I follow the clatter of dishes into the kitchen.

Noah sits on a barstool, elbows on his white gleaming countertop, staring at something on his phone.

I chuckle nervously. “I bet you hear it all the time, but it’s unnerving how much you two look like each other.”

He grins. “We used to get it a lot more. If I shave and if Rees covers his tats, we could probably switch it up again.”

“People wouldn’t tell you apart? Your eyes are different.”

Noah lifts a brow. “You noticed that?”

“Yeah.”

“Peering into my eyes, huh?” Noah winks. “I like it.”

My face burns. I stay quiet, afraid I’ll dig myself another sinkhole of weird, and look out at the ocean.

“There’s tea and coffee if you want,” he says.

I give him a nod of thanks and help myself to some of his fancy herbal teas.

“So, how do you know Rees again?” Noah studies me for a few breaths. I don’t blame the guy, he doesn’t know me, and I’m sure he feels protective over his twin.

“We met after one of his shows.” The truth. No need to give more details.

“Are you a fan or on the crew?”

I take a sip, then add a little sugar to sweeten the earthiness. “Neither. Well, I’m more of a fan now, but hard rock wasn’t really my thing before. I was invited to the show because a friend was given tickets from the wife of Rees’s producer.”

“Gotcha.” Noah shifts his mug back and forth. “So, you had backstage passes, or something?”

He's trying to politely dig, but there is a layer of suspicion there too. Truth be told, it's a little endearing. "No. We got stuck in an elevator together."

Noah's eyes brighten. "Really?"

"For a good thirty minutes." Rees's voice interrupts.

I whip around and wish I hadn't. Or at the very least, wish I had a bit more control over my body's reactions to this guy.

He runs a hand through his damp hair. Drops of water slide down the stubble on his jaw. The buttoned-down shirt hugs his chest too perfectly, and the way he rolls up the sleeves to show off his own ink sleeves ... I blink back to my tea.

Better to not keep looking.

Of course, the villain in him must read my unsettling reaction to all that is him. No other explanation for his rudeness in squeezing next to me, leaning over the counter, then reaching for his own mug, so I get a healthy whiff of the freshness of citrus on his skin.

Rees gives me a breezy look as he pours a cup of coffee. "You look nice."

My hand goes to my flat ponytail. "Careful with the compliments or I'll never dress up."

Rees takes a slow sip of his coffee. Who knew coffee and a plain white mug could be so ... tantalizing?

He leans in closer. "You look perfect."



Tea. I need my tea to focus on or I'm going to do something heinously embarrassing like touch his face, or his hand, or waist. It's anyone's guess at this point, but all I know is my hands want to be on him.

He has no awareness, maybe no cares about my feelings, and leans casually over the counter onto one elbow. Ugh. I hate him. How can he not see when he leans like that it tightens his forearms? And when his forearms do all that sexy bulging I think of when he held me close. Then, I start to confuse what I'm doing here.

Friends. We're friends.

One step over that line and Rees Hayden will have all the power in the world to squeeze the life out of my heart and leave me broken and bleeding when he moves on.

Which they are. *Soon.*

I'd do well to remember they will leave our little high school and return to their rock star ways.

"Hey, Noah." Rees peels his gaze off me, turning it to his brother. "If it makes you feel better, Vienna didn't recognize me either. We're just not famous enough for this one."

Noah chuckles. "Not a bad thing. It's kind of nice not to be recognized sometimes."

"Told you." Rees wiggles his brows at me.

"Oh, but Rees isn't telling you how I basically choked him to death because I was uncomfortable being stuck there."

“Uncomfortable? No, she had a meltdown.”

“I told you, I don’t meltdown,” I say, grinning. “I got a little *nervous*, but didn’t think I’d see him again.” Rees won’t tell more. I’m learning the man takes our deal of me telling what I want quite seriously. “So, when Perfectly Broken showed up at the high school I work at, you can imagine I about puked when I realized who he was.”

“No way.” Noah looks up. “You guys ran into each other again because of the school?”

Rees shrugs. “Small town Las Vegas, I guess.”

Noah slaps the countertop. “Well, cool. I’m glad you’re here Vienna. You seem to keep moody almost bearable.” Rees shoots him a scathing glare which Noah promptly ignores. “You two hang out, get comfortable. I’m going to pack. Don’t tell Mom I waited for the last minute, then I’ll need to pick up Briar.”

Rees shakes his head, sipping his coffee mutely when Noah disappears into the master bedroom.

“Who’s Briar?” I ask.

“Briar Madden. Noah’s date. She’s a model, and very interested in camera time.”

“A *model*?” My throat tightens as I scan my wizened outfit. I’m pretty sure that is an old varnish stain on the hem of my shorts. “Seriously?”

My breath shudders when Rees’s callused hand lands on my arm. He gives it a quick squeeze. “What did I say? You look

perfect.”

I offer a quick smile, wholly terrified. Models, movie stars. Who else will be at this dinner? Where I find peace in my background color life, now I have no doubt I’ll stick out like a weed in the flower garden. The girl who doesn’t belong among the rich and famous.

I already knew Rees had dark magic, but I’m starting to think he automatically knows what to say to soothe my nerves because he scans my shirt as he drinks his coffee. “Actually, you look like you’re ready for a day at the beach.” He nods to the massive windows. “Which works out pretty perfect since the beach is across the street. Want to go check it out in a bit?”

Honestly, who knows if he really wants to stroll the beach. I’d bet my ten fingers he’s saying it to make me feel more comfortable with our soon to be company, and I think the sweet Darcy side is trying to break out whether he wants it to or not.

“That would be great,” I say, then lower my voice. “So, what’s with Noah and using *Mom*?” Rees frowns. “Sorry, personal family questions. Off limits.”

I mimic zipping my lips, and it works. His muscles relax, he plops onto the seat next to me. “Noah is closer to Justine than me. When our mom died, he must’ve craved that connection again. I pushed back.”

“It bothers you that they’re close?”

“No.” But a heartbeat later he runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. The damage had been done, I guess, so when I was ready to accept her as a mom-figure she didn’t seem all that interested. I’m glad they’re tight, but ... I don’t know. I’m glad they’re close.”

I have thoughts, but they’re mine to keep. For now.

This much I know about Rees Hayden, he doesn’t give up what’s beneath the surface easily, but if I had to wager, I’d say there is a lot there. Something kind, a little broken perhaps. Something gentle and sweet.

Something I won’t get to keep when this is all over.

Seventeen

# VIENNA

**MOM: I HAVE VASTLY differing opinions about this than your dad.**

**Dad: Hit Disneyland while you're there, kiddo. The kids at the office loved it when I brought back those Mickey Mouse lollipops a few years ago.**

**Mom: Call us when you can. I'll need welfare check-ins, Vienna. You know this.**

I smile and lean against the back seat of Noah's car. I'll respond later. Darkening the screen, I tuck the phone back into the glittery clutch Becca Stone let me borrow since she insisted it would go with any style of dress, fancy or casual.

She was right.

My parents are night and day. I figured this morning would be bombarded by texts from them since I took the coward's

way and sent a text explaining I was whisking away for a California wedding with one of the guys from a rock band after I'd already boarded the plane.

Knowing my mom, she would've barricaded my door if I told her any earlier.

My dad probably would've helped me pack if I promised to bring back the Mickey Mouse suckers.

"Everything good?" Rees asks.

"Oh, yeah. It's my parents." I flush, glancing at the clutch. "My mom can't decide if I'm an adult yet, and my dad will only be okay with this if you take me to Downtown Disney so I can get special suckers for his pediatric patients."

"Patients? Is he a doctor?"

"Yeah. So is my mom. They run a family clinic together back home. My mom is a total germaphobe who wants to shelter me, but my dad balances her out with plenty of inappropriate sarcasm." I pause, unsure why it hasn't been said before now. Maybe it's a new level of trust. Whatever it is, I start to sign, waiting for him to notice. "My dad is why I sign. He's deaf."

Rees lifts his brows. "Really?"

"Yeah. He can read lips, too, but I've always signed with him. Sort of felt like our own secret language, even though my mom is fluent." I smile. Honestly, half of Clayton knows basic ASL since my dad is their doctor. He reads their mouths, they read his hands. "It's genetic on his side of the family.

Something causes the auditory nerves not to form. He always says he's the lucky one to draw the right straw, and totally means it. He's never let anything stop him, and I was the one teenager who had quiet fights with their parents."

He chuckles. "I would've liked a few of those."

His tone stops my smile. This morning has been enlightening without saying anything too deep beneath surface talk. After he admitted he wanted to connect with his stepmom I've grown privy to an open wound he might not even know is there.

I enjoyed the morning, though. We walked the beach. I picked up shells. Rees stared at the ocean like he was free.

Maybe in a way he was.

Crowds in the morning were nothing to worry about, but even then, Rees assured me only hardcore fans recognized him on his own since he'd only been with the band a few years. If the other guys were there, he'd duck his head a little more.

When we returned to the condo, we ate sandwiches by the pool.

Noah kept insisting we could order out, but something about the normalcy of a turkey sandwich while squatting in a movie star's apartment was my own oxymoron and I insisted we stay in. Yes, wallflower Vienna insisted, and frankly, I think the guys enjoyed trying to outdo each other on their sandwich making skills.



The afternoon was spent asking surface questions. I told Rees what it was like growing up in a small desert town fifty minutes away from Vegas versus his upbringing with Spanish moss and Cajun neighbors.

Favorite food. For Rees it'll be salmon every time and his favorite dessert is a classic chocolate malt. He now knows I live for all things barbecue, chocolate, or cinnamon, and turn feral if I do not get them.

My favorite discovery: the dot under the center of his bottom lip is not a freckle, but a hole. *For his lip ring.*

Never have I considered a lip ring would add a layer of butterflies to my stomach, but when he said it goes in for the concerts, I began counting the days until the next performance.

Surface things. We've been knocking them out one by one.

"Noah, how many cameras will be there? I'll need to stand on your left side."

Ah. Then, there's Briar. Noah's weekend date is tanned, tall, and never takes her lips out of a perfect pout.

"She's a friend of my costar, Belle. Sorority sisters in the old days, I guess," Noah told me.

That's fine, except Briar hasn't stopped whining about small things since he picked her up. The sun is too harsh. Why are we driving ourselves? Why can't she tweet about the wedding? I'm sure she's great when she's not flustered over getting to this dinner.

We're probably dealing with the same stress in different ways.

But no matter what Rees says, walking in next to Briar Madden in her perfectly shaped tapered black dress, is making me feel less confident with every whisk of her bouncy chestnut hair.

"I'm not underdressed, right?" I whisper as Noah pulls alongside a curb at a chateau-like restaurant.

Rees flicks his eyes over my outfit. Long enough heat blooms up my neck, but not enough for me to read too much into it.

"You look great."

I resist the urge to argue. It's annoying when lack of confidence bleeds out in the need for a thousand reassurances. I've already texted a picture to Marti—got her approval. Then, I went a step further and asked Alexis. She said I looked like a girl who will make it hard for Rees to concentrate on using his fork right.

I take that as her way of saying the dress works.

The truth? It'll be me who struggles.

Rees added a suit jacket to his buttoned-down shirt before we left. No tie or anything, but there is something to be said about the man with his edgy ink poking out of the cuffs of a charcoal fitted suit.

Yes. There is a lot to be said, and my entire body has been shrieking each word since he snuggled in close to me in the

backseat.

Briar looks slightly disappointed when we step out of the car and no one but the valet is there. No cameras, no reporters, no crowds.

“It’s a private wedding, babe,” Noah tells her as he holds the restaurant door. “We’ve worked hard to keep it that way. Just enjoy.”

“Fine,” she says, then curls a hand around his arm.

I bite my cheek and lean into Rees as we walk. The closer we get to the actual dinner the more Rees locks his jaw.

Clearly, the restaurant has been booked out. It’s empty except for the main dining room where tables have been rearranged to fit a small party.

“The boys are here!” A crackly voice lifts over the soft hum of conversation.

Rees pauses, a bemused expression on his face before he smiles. Like a weight is lifted off his spine, he stands a little straighter.

“Gram?” A woman with peppery hair slips around the corner. My heart skips a little. She’s short with a few curves from life, but her smile is endless. The way her smile pulls up her cheeks causes her eyes to squint into little, shiny slits.

She studies both Noah and Rees for a few seconds before she opens her short arms and chuckles in a way that bounces her entire body. “Get on over here you two weasels.”

Rees obeys at once. Together the twins swallow Gram completely. But when they ease back, she's chuckling. The best part is, Rees laughs too.

She pats his face. "Let me look at you, boy. Well, at least you haven't drawn all over your face, and keep it that way so I can see ya, unlike this one."

Noah rubs his beard. "Gram, it's so I can look pretty on TV."

She smiles and ruffles his hair like he's ten.

Rees grips her veiny hand. "I didn't know you were coming."

"You bet your fancy butt I'm coming. Why wouldn't I?"

I snort a laugh and Rees snaps his eyes back to me, all at once remembering he didn't walk in alone.

His smile breaks, warm and wanting. It's an addictive look on him, and he ought to keep it.

"Gram," he says, reaching a hand for me. "I'd like you to meet my friend, Vienna. Vienna, this is Gram. The wildest grandma in Louisiana."

Gram smacks his arm, grinning.

"You'll appreciate this," he tells her. "Vienna is a schoolteacher like you were."

Pretty sure my eyes brighten the same as Gram's.

"You taught school?" spills out of me in the same moment Gram says, "You teach, huh?"

I smile. “I teach the honors English classes.”

Briar sighs, a hand to her chest. “That is so adorable.”

Noah mouths *sorry*, but I don’t care, Gram has my hand and I’m desperate to make my first good impression.

“Taking on the teenagers, huh?” Gram nods her approval. “Brave girl. I stayed with the little ones. Third grade for forty-five years. Sweetest little things.”

“Oh, see, I think you’re brave,” I tell her. “My classes are usually small. I’m not sure I’d survive two dozen eight-year-olds all at once.”

She laughs and pats my hand. Victory. “Well, we’ll both be brave, how ‘bout that? You’re lovely, Miss Vienna. You take care of my baby, now.”

I give Rees a dramatic flutter with my lashes. “I’m sure I’ll probably drive him to insanity by the end of the trip.”

She huffs a deep laugh, liking the whole idea, then moves onto Noah and Briar.

Rees tugs me toward the other tables where more people are standing and waiting.

It’s small, intimate, but I still don’t think I’ll remember all the faces. Rees briefly points to the bridesmaids. They stare back at him, not even trying to hide their whispers. The groomsmen wave, but seem as interested in us as staring at rocks.

It’s the next table I’m tied in knots about.

A stern-faced man stands. He's clean cut, fit, and intimidating.

"Rees. Glad you made it." Even his voice is strait-laced.

"Me too, sir." Rees drops a hand to the small of my back. "Vienna, this is my dad, Lee."

"Oh." I hold out my hand. "It's nice to meet you. Vienna Shaw."

Lee gives my hand a firm shake. He smiles. Okay, he's not so bad. A little stern, but Rees said he's a police detective. Probably was born with discipline.

"Vienna," he says. "Welcome."

Rees keeps moving me down the line of the main table. "This is Justine."

Ah, stepmom. She's pretty. A dark bob around her slender cheeks. But she's probably sterner than Lee. She doesn't smile, hardly even looks at Rees before she faces me. I shrink when her eyes rove over my dress, staying a half-breath too long on my wedge sandals before finding my face again. "Good of you to come," she says, holding out a manicured hand.

A manicure. I should've gotten a manicure.

I take her hand, hoping she doesn't know how much I want to fade into the pale wallpaper right now. "Thank you for having me." My voice cracks. This is going great.

We don't linger on Justine and move to the next faces.

“This is the happy couple,” Rees says.

A rush of gratitude fills my veins when there isn't any resentment in his voice. I didn't even know I was worried about lingering feelings for the bride. Maybe he's hiding them, but he sounds bored. Like he doesn't want to be here, but more because the only warm welcome he's received is from Gram.

We should definitely sit by Gram.

“This is my stepbrother, Mark,” Rees goes on.

I force a smile and look at the groom. “Hi. I'm Vienna.” I shake his hand. “Congratulations.”

Mark is trim with a square jaw. His blistering blue eyes are cautious, and rife in scrutiny. I get it. Who am I to be crashing his wedding with his famous twin brothers? He shakes my hand, mutters a thanks, then turns to Rees. “Wondered if you'd show with the date change.”

“I couldn't miss your big day, Marky.”

Mark scoffs. “Missed everything else with the engagement.”

“Been a little busy living a few thousand miles away.”

“Right. How is your band? Sick of playing in clubs yet? You know there's a job at the firm waiting for you, Reesie. Probably need to be in the back since tats can't be visible, but I'm sure Mom would work with you.”

I'll ignore the tattoo comment because some people might think they are a little intense, but ...

“Clubs?” There are times when my mouth simply moves, as if my brain sends thoughts without a warning sign that these thoughts are private. “They don’t play at clubs. More like arenas.”

Rees lets his arm circle my waist, tugging me against his side like he’s guarding me. I don’t mind. Not one bit. “He knows. Just giving me a hard time, right Mark?”

Mark smiles. It’s not kind. “Always.”

I’m just going to say it—I don’t think I like the groom.

And the bride, well, the way she glares at me, then looks at Rees like he’s been brought in from a blizzard, I think I might like her even less.

“Rees, I’m so glad you came. I wasn’t sure ...” Adrienne waves her hand, chuckling. She’s all dolled up in a vintage polka-dot dress that shows off her curves. She’s beautiful. And wants nothing to do with me. Adrienne reaches out like she might hug him, but Rees steps back.

“Vienna.” He pulls me against his side again. “This is my new stepsister, Adrienne.”

She frowns at the title, unamused. But like the polite hostess she’s expected to be, Adrienne faces me, red lips locked in a stiff smile. “Vienna. What an interesting name. How do you know Rees?”

She thinks I’m a groupie. No mistake. “We’re friends.” Okay, I take offense the way Mark snorts. What? Is it impossible for Rees to have friends, or is it me? “I teach at the



high school where Perfectly Broken is mentoring some of the students.”

They’re teaching them a song, but I plan to puff up Rees’s chest by using snappy words like mentoring all night if it puts that dumb, stunned expression on Mark’s face again.

Adrienne raises a brow in surprise. “Mentoring?”

“Yep,” I say before Rees can correct me. “The kids love the guys, and they’ve learned so much.” I give him an appraising look. “I guess Rees and I just hit it off.” I turn my forced smile back to Adrienne. “Thank you for having me. Your wedding looks like it’ll be beautiful.”

She blinks, as if confused. Mark pulls her into him with a possessive hand until Adrienne snaps out of her stupor and gives me a sad smile. “Yeah. Good to have y’all here. Glad Rees is doing so well in Sin City.”

“They’re tearing up more than Vegas. It’s amazing,” I say, then take the initiative of pulling him away toward a table when I’m not even certain that’s where we’re sitting.

Before I can find a place, Rees pulls on my hand, smashing me into his chest. Hip to hip, chest to chest, I didn’t realize how long my body has craved being back here again.

“What are you doing, Lizzy?”

“Meeting your family.”

He quirks one corner of his mouth. “Mentoring?”

My shoulders slump. “It’s a buzz word, fine. But I didn’t like the way Mark got all snide with you. Clubs? Come on, they’ve seen how massive your concerts are. That’s just an unnecessary dig.”

Rees’s face winces as I talk and it’s a slap to the face when I guess why.

“No.” I let out a harsh breath. “Rees, have they not been to a show?”

He clears his throat, looking away at nothing and everything. Like a sexy business tycoon, he buttons the center button on his suit and shrugs. “Noah comes whenever he can get away.”

My voice turns into a gurgle of frustration and disbelief. “No one but your brother has seen you play?”

Three years. He is a few months away from his three-year anniversary of joining Perfectly Broken.

“It’s not really their thing. Come on, let’s sit down and eat.”

He’s silencing me. Per our agreement, no personal family questions or interest in their dynamics, right?

Not how I expected to begin dinner with Rees Hayden’s family. Me, glaring at everyone as they greet Noah and Briar like long lost children. Lee smiles, claps Noah on the shoulder. Justine hugs him. She *hugs* him, holding his bearded face. Then, beams at Briar like she’s part of the family. I’m pretty sure this is the first time even Noah has met her.

I clench my jaw to keep from pressing right now, but I have plans to bring it up. Even if it's not to Rees, I have Noah on my side. I have a slew of creative ways I can sneak comments in.

Trust me, I'll make all the comments this weekend.

Eighteen

# REES

THE MORNING OF THE wedding starts with a tight chest, and a scratch I can't cough away until I step inside a steamy shower.

Vienna is tucked into one of the massive rooms in the cottage Justine rented. It's huge, within sights of the Santa Monica Pier, and twenty feet from the beach. Not exactly what I picture when I think cottage. We won't even need to see everyone if we don't want.

Our room has a pullout bed with a mattress more comfortable than mine at home, but I stepped out, afraid to wake her with all my stupid wheezing.

Honestly, her messy hair over her sleeping face, the way she hugged three huge pillows in her sleep, was a little too much, a little too perfect, and made me consider things I have no business considering with a friend.

Outside on the back patio I close my eyes, and get lost in the clean air, the humidity.

Peace lasts a total of ten seconds before the screen door slides open.

“Doing okay?” Noah materializes beside me and hands me a mug of coffee.

“Fine.”

“Heard you this morning.”

“I’m good.” He’s such a pansy and turns into a mother hen the second he hears a cough.

“I can go grab your bag if you—”

“Noah,” I say with a laugh. “I’m good. Vienna’s sleeping anyway.”

He pinches his lips in clear disagreement, but again—we’re Haydens. Don’t press. Don’t dig too deep.

“Ready for today?” I ask, desperate to change the subject.

He shrugs. “Don’t have much of a choice. You didn’t give a toast last night.”

I chuckle with a touch of bitterness. “I wasn’t asked to give one.”

The way people avoided us last night at dinner, it was as if we were the problem children tucked away in the corner.

And it was the best family dinner I’ve been to in a long time.

Gram sat by Vienna and me, we laughed, ignoring everyone as they chatted about the sweet love story of Adrienne and Mark.

Most of it was probably true, except how they met. Adrienne's dad certainly didn't hint in his toast that it was the gloomy tattooed guy in the corner who brought Adrienne into the Hayden family first.

No, they spun it like they connected at college. And my, what a coincidence, they went to high school together, but hardly knew each other.

I thought this wedding would bring up old resentment, but I think Vienna has a unique talent. She has a way of making you feel like you are the only person in the room.

Part of me forgot we were here at a wedding the way we laughed. It was more like one of the Perfectly Broken family dinners except Alexis hadn't banished me to the kids' table.

Movement inside the cottage brings us back to reality. Noah grips my shoulder. "Well, we better get ready and get this over with."

I chuckle. He's the golden boy, but he's on my side first and foremost. The games Adrienne played years ago still don't sit quite right. Not even with Noah.



Two months ago, if someone would've asked my thoughts on the girl I thought I was madly in love with during high school marrying my pompous stepbrother, I would've scowled and locked myself in my studio.

Now it's here, it's done. Adrienne is married to Mark, and I don't care.

My attention is glued on someone else. Someone who has a grip on the scabrous thing in my chest more than Adrienne ever did. Puppy love doesn't compare to the pull, the attraction, the feelings Vienna Shaw keeps forming inside.

Some are too much to even process right now.

Her pretty in pink dress tapers around her waist, those stiletto heels she keeps cursing under her breath show off the length of her legs; I've been a goner since she stepped out of the room this morning.

Briar is obsessed with looks and appearance. Vienna isn't blind to it, but when Noah's date spent the hour before we were supposed to head to the church fretting over her hair not setting right, Vienna stepped up and casually asked for help with her makeup.

"I just can't get it to look like yours," she said. "Since you're in fashion, I thought maybe you could help."

The look in Briar's eyes—it was as if Vienna unlocked a key to a different side. Two minutes later, Briar had Vienna plopped on a kitchen stool, chatting about her perfect facial structure, contouring, and something about a mat for lips, I think.

Noah's supermodel transformed into a woman who didn't care about her hair and became bold with that makeup brush in hand. All because Vienna took one for the team, and, somehow, knew just what to say.



Vienna is stunning. But it's her heart of gold that keeps adding links to this chain I'm building between us, tethering pieces of me, and pieces of her, bit by bit. An involuntary consequence of spending time with Vienna Shaw.

"Gram's taking to Vi pretty well." Noah elbows my ribs, pointing across the table in the reception tent.

I grin because the scene across from me is one of the best things I've ever seen.

Vienna leans in close to my grandmother, hand over her mouth, laughing at something. They look like two kids up to no good as they snicker over cheesecake and ridiculously expensive gold leaf dusted eclairs.

"Yeah," I say, "they seem to get along."

And it does something to me I can't explain.

My grandmother was a saving grace after my mom died. I don't know how my dad came from the woman, but she's been our biggest fan, our number one supporter, even when one of her grandsons had a bad attitude for a solid decade.

That she is here as family to Mark and Adrienne is a testament to her goodness. She took Mark on when Dad married Justine like he'd always been one of her boys.

"Are you sticking with your 'just friends' story?" Noah winks. "I think there's a little drool on your chin."

"Shut up. Don't you have a date somewhere?"

"She's in the bathroom."

“Well, go talk to Mark’s stupid friends then.”

Noah glances over at the groomsmen. “I think I will. Tyler Wells is here. He threatened to break my lip when I got the lead in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. Never did follow up on it. Wonder if he still wants to beat up the drama geek.”

Noah wiggles his brows, a bit of vengeance in his eyes, and strides across the massive white tent. I chuckle when Briar returns and my brother drapes one arm around her shoulders, ending up in the center of the groomsmen who picked on us growing up.

The thing is, Tyler did make good on that threat. He just didn’t know it wasn’t Noah.

Their faces now, as they look on him with envy, are worth every punch, every bruise.

“Hey.”

A soft touch to my arm drags me to better sights than the past. Vienna smiles up at me.

“Brought you some champagne,” she says. “Thought you could use it.”

I take the flute from her and set it on the table. “Thank you, but I don’t drink.”

She doesn’t look at me like I’ve accomplished some extraordinary feat, or like I’m insane. Vienna pauses for half a breath, then shrugs, and puts her flute next to mine. “I’m going to ask the reason, buddy.”

Buddy. That's her little jab lately; a reminder that we said we'd be friends here. I'm starting to hate the name.

"Figured you would, nosy." I take hold of her hand. "But we can dig into my sobriety while we dance."

"You *want* to?"

"Should I be offended that my date doesn't want to dance with me?"

Vienna snorts. "I didn't say I didn't want to; I'm just surprised you do. One, because I didn't know you danced. Two, I figured you were content to scowl in the corner for the rest of the reception."

I take our interlaced fingers, and wrap them around her waist, pulling her abruptly to my chest. Vienna's eyes widen, and I take too much pleasure in the way she glances at my lips, not once, but twice before meeting my gaze and holding it.

"I can dance, Lizzy." I dip my head and draw in a breath of her hair before letting my mouth brush against her ear with each word. "And I don't scowl. A man would be insane not to dance at least once if he had a date like you."

Vienna shudders, little goosebumps lift on her arms. She licks her bottom lip, slowly twirling the ends of my hair with her fingertips. "You shouldn't say those things, Rock Star."

"Why not?" We start to sway among other couples. "It's the truth, right?"

"Because you're not even trying to keep our made-up NDA. What happened to friends?"

“I’m only saying the truth, Lizzy.”

She pinches her lips. “You’re annoying.”

A laugh scrapes out and I pull back to see her better.  
“Why?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re prickly to everyone, then you say all the sweet things. I’d like to smack you, then steal the mic from the DJ and announce that Rees Hayden is a big, gooey, softy.”

“I like this plan except no one would believe you. In fact, they’d laugh at you, and I won’t let you do that to yourself.”

She sighs and stares over my shoulder. “Why don’t you drink, Rees?”

My eyes close for a few sways. I rest my temple to hers.  
“The internet will say I’ve had a substance abuse problem since I was twelve.”

“But the truth will say ...”

A gritty knot adds a rasp to my voice. “That my mom was killed by a drunk driver, so getting wasted sort of felt like betraying her. I don’t even risk it.”

Silence grows palpable and thick until Vienna sinks against me, her fingers dig into my shoulders; her voice goes low. “As I said. Soft and gooey.”

“Keep my secret?”

She smiles. “Always.”

We sway a little closer. “Your turn.”

“My turn for what?”

“Tell me something I don’t know about you.”

She hesitates. For a second I think she’s going to pass, then she glances at the floor and begins in a soft voice. “I’m afraid of a lot of things. I don’t take risks; I don’t step into the spotlight because I’m always nervous, or afraid of the things that could go wrong.”

Vienna leans closer, her warm breath tickles my ear, and I need to fight the urge to groan.

“But,” she whispers, “when I’m with you, when you hold me like this, I feel like I could take on the entire world. I’m not afraid. Not with you.”

Vienna starts to draw tiny circles on the back of my neck. The roughness of my cheek collides with the warmth of hers. A simple tilt of my head and our lips would be aligned. Are we crossing that line again? I hope so.

Building on what we started in the elevator has been a song on repeat in my head since the moment I saw her across the high school gym. Forget agreements. Forget the walls we’ve stacked between us, the fire hidden in those eyes is a new kind of high. A glimpse at the woman inside, the one she keeps buried beneath caution and the safe way.

I turn my head. Our eyes meet. My jaw pulses as her arms tighten around my neck. I nudge her closer.

Vienna pulls in a sharp breath, and her forehead falls to mine. When she looks at me, there’s hesitation, there’s want.

There is every defense I've placed against my own heart in her eyes, but I'm watching them crumble in her the way they're shattering in me.

I draw my palm up her arm, letting it hover in the empty space between us, before cupping the side of her face.

She swallows, the rise and fall of it brushes against my wrist. One step, one bit of brave, and I could break the weak glass keeping us at a safe distance. Safe from risk. Safe from the pain.

Right now, none of it matters.

What matters is the way she spun me around in that elevator, and I haven't stopped spinning since.

"Vi," I whisper. Her name is a plea on my tongue. A plea to stop me before I ruin us. A plea to pull me closer, to want me the same.

"Rock Star, you've definitely reached nickname status if it sounds like that every time."

I'm going to kiss this woman and I don't think I'm ever going to stop.

I bring my other hand to her face, framing her smile in my hands, and dip a little lower. There is no thought to who's on the dancefloor. Not a thought for any cameras. Right now, it's only us.

Until it isn't.

A throat clears and Vienna pulls back.

I'm not a violent person by nature, but red tints the corners of my eyes when I point my glare on our saboteur.

Tyler Stupid Wells stands two feet away, rocking on his stupid feet. He's dressed in the ridiculous paisley blue tie Mark forced the groomsmen to wear, and the ugly plaid suits Adrienne thought were stylish.

The last time I saw this moron his fist was slamming against my nose. If it had been any other time, I might laugh at the way he looks at me like I'm a boot and he's an ant about to splatter underneath it.

“Um, so the dancing, uh, paused—”

“Not for us,” I growl, one second from shoving him, from making the scene Justine has been biting her nails waiting for all night.

“Mark and Ads are cutting the cake,” he says. “Fam-Family is supposed to be there for pictures.”

Oh, now I'm family to Mark? My face must say what my mouth isn't because Vienna rests a gentle hand over my heart, soothing a bit of tension. Tyler is safe for now.

“We're coming,” Vienna tells him.

He nods, rubbing the back of his neck. “So, I saw Perfectly Broken when y'all came to NOLA last year.”

“How happy for you,” I grumble.

“Rees,” Vienna warns.

Tyler clears his throat. *Still. Talking.* Why? “Looks like you’re doin’ well for yourself, man.” He flashes his snake smile at Vienna. “Doin’ real well.”

I’m going to burn up. Again, this tool is saved because I respect Vienna enough not to start a brawl and embarrass her. But it doesn’t mean I can stay here.

I slip my fingers into Vienna’s grip and step in the opposite direction as the cake.

“You know what, Wells? My girl here isn’t feeling well.”

She smacks my arm. “Hey, don’t put this on me.”

“Right.” I give a fake cough. “*I’m* not feeling well. We better leave before we spread something. You’ll let Mark know, won’t you?”

“Um ...”

I grip his shoulder with an extra dig. “Do me a solid. Maybe I can scrounge up backstage passes next time we stop by.”

His eyes brighten with possibility. “Yeah. I’ll, uh, I’ll let Justine know. Thanks, man. Good to see you.”

I don’t respond, and pull Vienna toward the back of the tent.

“Rees, are we really leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I wheel on her, grinning a little viciously. “Because we’re finally going to have some fun tonight. You game, Lizzy?”



Her cautious grin transforms into a beautiful, bold smile.  
Her grip tightens on my hand. “Lead the way, Darcy.”

Nineteen

# VIENNA

THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS.

My awful, pack-a-day, honking laugh bubbles to the surface.

Once upon a time I might consider it a thing of nightmares, but here, on the Santa Monica Pier, my face burrowed against Rees's chest, it's become more like a seagull infested dream.

Rees keeps one arm around my shoulders, his other flails at the swarm of birds beelining for our bags of kettle corn.

"It's like *The Birds*," I screech into the crook of his neck.

Rees tosses a few pieces of corn over the rail of the pier, giving us a chance to break away. "You've seen *The Birds*, a Hitchcock movie, the king of horror, and you haven't seen *The Goonies*?"

I smile. "A total mistake. I was home sick, and I thought it was some nature documentary. By the time I realized it definitely wasn't, I couldn't stop watching. Pretty sure I slept

on my parents' bedroom floor for a month and didn't look at a bird for a year."

"I basically did the same thing with the original *Psycho*. Clicked on it, got sucked in, couldn't stop watching." He pops a few pieces of kettle corn into his mouth and shrugs. "Except, I loved it." Rees grins. "Not sure what that says about me as a person."

I trace the edges of the skull on his left hand. "It makes so much sense now why you're a walking Halloween endorsement."

He chuckles, then leans down and hooks his fingertips into the heels of my stilettos. Another one of those gooey things about Rees Hayden. The first thing he purchased on the pier was a pair of foam flip flops with tiny dolphins on the straps.

He's been carrying my glittery heels ever since.

We wander the pier, my hand gripped around his bicep. Hot butter and delicate sugar from candied nuts and cotton candy fills each breath. Squeals of delight from the Ferris wheel and carousel collide with the lull of waves below us. Growing up near Las Vegas, lights and noise were part of my life, but this is freer. No obligations live here.

I can be at ease, keep his body close, and live unburdened a little longer.

Rees doesn't tease me when I stop at nearly every booth, fascinated by the diverse carts and stands. He doesn't laugh

when I hype up the sight of parasailers in the distance, or the sight of a dolphin pod playing in the gold skeins of sunset.

A few people recognize him. Some simply wave, but others shyly ask for a picture. His eyes hint how badly he doesn't want to be seen, but he ends up posing more than once while I take the pictures.

As he said, if they recognize him in a suit, on a pier, they're true fans. They deserve a picture.

It's a perfect evening.

"Are we going to get in trouble for leaving the wedding?" I finally ask once we're at the start of the pier, two bags full of chocolate gummy bears *and* cinnamon bears. He gets me.

"I might."

Rees stops and places a hand on the back of my neck. His eyes break into me. The final piece I've kept as a shield against him, against the hurt he might bring if I fall and he decides I'm not worth it to catch in the end, fades. I can't help it. My heart, my mind, my body are in full agreement. I know what and who I want.

Rees's thumb follows the peak of my top lip. "But I promise you, this is worth it."

*This man.*

I take his hand and walk slowly back toward the cottage, soaking up the last bits of sunlight. We climb the slope of the beach that'll lead to the back door, but I pause when Rees

faces the water, watching the line of red disappear over the horizon.

I let my head tilt onto his shoulder. “I’m glad I came, Rees.”

“Why?” His voice is hoarse, wanting. Surprising.

I look at him, confused. “Why? I thought it might be obvious.”

Rees drops our bags of chocolates and slides his arms around my waist. Fingertips on my hips, one palm glides painfully slow up the divots of my spine. Tension in his jaw sends my heart careening out of pace, too fast, too deliciously fast.

“We have an agreement,” he whispers. We’re close, so, *so* close. The soft edges of his lips taunt mine. But he won’t end the space between us. If I had to guess, I’d say Rees is waiting for me to take the first step over the edge.

“Want to know what I think?” I close my eyes with a sigh when his nose brushes the ridge of my cheek.

“Always.”

“I want to burn our dumb NDA. I don’t want it. Any of it. I don’t want rules to follow, or lines to cross.”

With the pull of night surrounding us, Rees’s eyes look like different shades of midnight. His body is tense, as if he’s bracing for a blow to the ribs. “What do you want, then? I need you to tell me exactly what you want, Lizzy.”

Background colors can be muted, maybe a little dull. But the thing about those strokes in the background, eventually they swirl together into something bold and beautiful. He's asking with great deliberateness for me to step forward and be the bright focal piece.

Whatever truth Rees tells himself in that beautiful head, he needs me to want him. To need him.

My palms trap the sides of his face, my lips touch his, but only a whisper of a touch. "Rees. I want you. All of you. I want the elevator, I want to wear grungy clothes around you, I want to watch old movies with you. I don't care what it is. But I want it with you."

"So, what exactly does that mean?" He quirks one brow, and I have no doubt he's making me spell it out to tease me.

I laugh and tighten my hold on his face. "Rees, pretty, pretty please forget about our little friendship contract and kiss—"

He's still smiling when he crashes his mouth to mine. Words get lost; thoughts shift to nothing but feeling.

This isn't our first kiss, but has all the qualities of something new. Slow and tender at first. Rees's long, callused fingers curl around my hair. The other hand squeezes my hip, a silent reminder he's there; he's got me.

Gentle kisses burn into passion and desire. The longer he kisses me, the less like the elevator they are. Back then, we didn't know anything beyond faces. We kissed out of opportunity and curiosity. Maybe a bit of the forbidden.

But now, tangled in each other's arms, this holds layers. The demanding burn of his mouth is more than a kiss, it's a story of what we've become. What we might be if we dare to hang on and ride it out.

Rees takes me off guard and smashes me to his chest, smiling against my skin when a squeaky gasp slips out from my lips. His body is hard and strong and safe. His taste is a craving I'll still be seeking on my death bed.

A groove of emotion carves into my forehead as I hold to him like he's my last breath, my lifeline.

A tight knot fastens to my heart. I'm not the most experienced woman, but I know this feeling is heady and overwhelming. If my body weren't trying to crawl into his, I might pull back and shed a tear for the sweetness that is my broody, tattooed Darcy.

I've caught glimpses of the broken man, the wonderful man, and I want more of him.

I'll never stop wanting this. Ever.



“Okay, wait, wait, here's a good one.” I nestle against Rees's side, my head tucked under his chin. Only the light of my phone brightens our faces. “There is a question about you being the father of Alexis's baby.”

Rees snorts and a little water dribbles down his chin. He wipes it away and sets the glass on the table. “That's still on there?”



I wiggle my phone holding up the page of Google headlines from a simple Rees Hayden search.

He rolls his eyes. “A few months ago, it was Tate, and when they first announced, Adam was the father. Alexis doesn’t find it as funny as Bridger does.” He presses a kiss to my temple. “Trust me. That kid is going to come out with pierced ears and a book in hand. He’s all Bridge and Lex.”

I grin and accept a chocolate gummy bear when he holds it out. He drops it into my mouth and follows with a quick kiss.

An hour ago, we came up for air long enough to walk the fifteen steps to the cottage. Lights are off, everyone is still at the wedding, and we’ve spent our time on the back patio trading kisses and myth busting his Wikipedia page while Rees asks me questions like I have anything more than a wholly normal existence.

I point out another headline. “Noah Hayden disowns brother after assault charge. Obviously, untrue. Or this one—Noah Hayden’s twin drains bank account in night club, asks brother for bailout. Come on.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“You never set these straight,” I say. “Why?”

“That’s a lot of work for another one to pop up tomorrow.”

“Noah could say something.”

Rees shrugs. “I told him to leave it. Better to give no comment and keep on living.”

“Rees, these things paint you terribly.”

“They probably found some story about how I stole a dollar from his piggy bank as kids and spun it into something else. It’s fine. We know the truth, and I don’t mind if Noah is the favorite twin. As long as I get to play music, they can say what they want.”

“How does it not bother you?”

“It helps that the other guys brush it off too.” He shrugs. “But I’m used to being the bad guy anyway.”

He says it blithely, but the words pinch in my chest. “You mean with your family?”

Rees doesn’t need to answer, the mist of a shadow in his eyes says it all.

“Since our NDA is dissolved, I should tell you that I see it.” I offer a weak smile, tiptoeing in, hoping he doesn’t shut this down. “I see the difference in how you’re treated. Justine hardly looks at you, and I don’t understand why.”

“I told you, I didn’t make it easy on her when she married my dad.”

“You were a little boy who’d been through something terrible. Sorry, but childish outbursts aren’t an excuse to reject you. I know bonds with stepparents aren’t always natural, but did she ever make an effort with you?”

“At first, but when I didn’t reciprocate for so long, I think it was easier to ignore me. I’d only talk to Noah or, when I met her, Adrienne.”

“Ah, Adrienne.” I drag one finger down the curve of his ear.  
“A story I want to hear.”

“Really? You want to hear about an old girlfriend?”

“Hey, I’m not so fragile to get jealous over a high school girlfriend, Rock Star.”

He kisses the tips of my fingers. “Fine, you win. I met Adrienne in eighth grade. She said my eyes were cool and for a fourteen-year-old, well, that’s all it took. We dated for a few years, but looking back, I think I became something familiar. Comfortable. She hated that I played guitar.”

“Why? It’s ridiculously sexy.”

He laughs and I would love to bottle the sound forever. “It wasn’t always. I was teased for it, and that embarrassed Adrienne. Music broke us up.”

“Weird thing to break up over.”

“Maybe, but I was obsessed with it. One night I chose a street gig over her, next thing I know, she’s at Sunday dinner with Mark.”

“Wow. So, them meeting in college was a bit of a stretch,” I say. “And it was cool with everyone?”

“Justine assured me Mark would be a better fit for a driven girl like Adrienne. My dad told me if I’d get serious and quit messing up my life, I wouldn’t push people away. It was pretty explosive. That’s when I dropped out of school, and focused on guitar, couch surfing with indie bands all over the French Quarter.”

I let his side of the story sink in, frowning. “I think it’s hypocritical of them to encourage Mark, Adrienne, and from what it looks like, Noah, to pursue their passions, but not you. After all you’ve accomplished now, they have to be proud of you. I don’t understand why they don’t show it.”

His voice is hard and sharp. “Perfectly Broken isn’t their sort of thing.”

“And my parents wish I would’ve become a neurosurgeon, but I like to think they’re still proud of me.”

At that, Rees narrows his eyes. “The last thing Justine said before I moved to Vegas was if I planned on doing drugs with *my sort of people*, to make sure it was off camera, so it didn’t come back on Noah’s or our family’s reputation.”

Oh, Stepmom and I might have a problem.

*I’m used to being the bad guy.* Maybe he was terrible, a real pill as a kid, but he’s not now. He’s a man with a deep vein of loyalty inside. His band, the way he talks about his brother—anyone can see Rees Hayden would do just about anything to ease the burdens of the people in his life.

Me included.

Exhibit A being the safety he offered in the elevator before he *even knew my name*.

“You look like you’re going to explode.” He uses his knuckle to tilt my chin to him.

“I think I want to.”

Rees turns away, his thoughts a thousand miles from the beach. I want to know what he's thinking, but doubt he'll let me into that beautiful head of his. The world may never know what goes on up there in its entirety. And what a dreary thought that is.

"I'm used to having a small circle. I prefer it," he says. "My dad broke when my mom died. Justine fixed a part of him. He had her; Mark had them. But Noah needed me, so we stuck together. It was enough."

I don't believe him, but who am I to argue his upbringing?

"Tell me something." Rees forces a smile. "What made you want to teach?"

Smooth subject change. I'll humor him. For now.

I lift one knee into my chest, reclining against him as I stare at the velvet sky. "I don't know exactly. The love of literature, I guess. I loved books and took every literature class in college I could get my hands on. By the end, I figured the best way to stay absorbed in it every day was by teaching."

He doesn't say anything, but the gentle stroke of his fingers up and down my arm quickens, and he pulls me a little closer. Like the miniscule space between us is still too much.

I tilt my face to meet his eyes. "It's rewarding to see kids who think reading is stupid or uncool find something in a book they can relate with, or to be moved in a way they won't forget. I try to keep my classroom judgment free, as open as we can to different genres, and I guess it's my small way of

keeping minds open to new ideas. I think we need more open-mindedness in the world sometimes.”

“Agreed,” he says softly. “Sometimes all it takes is someone to have an open mind about someone else. It can make all the difference. In school I got into a lot of fights for Noah and me. One time the guidance counselor dropped me into the study hall room while she went to call my parents. There was another kid there, Zack, he had a stack of books and a bloody nose. One of the bookworms who didn’t fit the mold bullies wanted, I guess. Anyway, he noticed my guitar. I was that kid who carried the guitar everywhere, yes, don’t be too impressed.”

I grin and nuzzle against his shoulder a little more before he goes on.

“Zack asked me to play something. I thought he was going to make fun of me, but he kept asking, admitting he loved Hendrix. So, while we waited to give our own fight reports, I played the guitar.” He pauses and watches my fingertips trace his knuckles. “When I finished, Zack didn’t care who saw, he stood and clapped like my own little encore. He told me I better never quit. He didn’t laugh at my impossible dream to make it in music, so I promised him I wouldn’t quit.”

“Good thing you didn’t.” With a sigh, I wrap an arm around his waist, my cheek over the beat of his heart. “What did you mean when you said you got into fights for you *and* Noah?”

Rees stiffens.

“What?” I lift my head. His eyes are burdened with pain he carries like a battle wound. His mouth is tight, as if giving up his scars might change my opinion. I could never hate his scars, but I’d love to share them. I touch my thumb to his lip. “You don’t need to hide, Rock Star. Not with me.”

“I’ve never told anyone this,” he admits. His swallow is heavy before he speaks again. “Noah has always been good, the nice kid. He loved drama. *A lot*. Noah was that kid who talked in accents or quoted freaking Shakespeare all the time. In a small school, you hear things. Whenever I heard someone was going to beat up the drama nerd, I made sure it was me they found instead. They couldn’t tell us apart, so it didn’t matter.”

“Rees.” I straighten. “You posed as Noah when you got into fights?”

“Just to the bullies. To the school and my dad, it was always me. I was the problem, the angry one.”

“Why didn’t you tell the truth?”

“Because it worked,” he says, passion in his voice. “Noah had no idea, so to the bullies he was resilient. He kept acting, and since it never bothered him, they started to leave him alone.”

“It didn’t bother him because he never knew they were after him.”

“He would’ve quit,” Rees insists. “The confident guy you see now, wasn’t Noah back then. He was a people pleaser. He

would've stopped acting.”

This, right here, *this* is the man I wish his family would take the time to see. Noah and Gram excluded, the Haydens all look at Rees like he's a stain you can't shine up again, so you put a rug over it and pretend it isn't there.

But there's more. I narrow my eyes. “Rees, are you still doing it?”

“Fist fighting? No.”

“No.” I wave the thought away. “People write terrible things about you, but praise Noah. You never correct it and even tell Noah not to say anything. You're still protecting him by keeping negative attention on you.”

He coughs, rubbing his chest. “It's not a big deal. We both reached our goals. I have the band, and they're my family, Vienna. I have Noah. I have ...” He swallows, one hand reaches for the side of my face. “I hope I have you.”

“You do, Darcy.” I sigh. “But I think your family believes certain things about you, and maybe being honest would change something.”

More like heal something.

Rees doesn't entirely dismiss the idea, but he doesn't address it either. He pulls me a little closer, his hands grip me tighter, and those lips graze the curve of my neck until I forget what I was talking about.

“You're trying to shut me up,” I say in a low rasp.



“Never.” His mouth leaves hot sparks across my jaw. “But I don’t plan to waste my time with you.”

“Oh, really?”

He smiles against my cheek. “You’re all mine for the next two and a half days, Lizzy, so hang tight.”

One sentence has power, this one breaks me in the best ways. The truth is I’ll be all his for a lot longer if he wants.

Twenty

# REES

“YOU DON’T LOOK SICK.” My dad’s gruff voice shakes me from the peace of the morning. He frowns as he steps into the breakfast nook. “You good?”

Sometimes the way he looks at me, I believe it’s totally possible for a father to dislike his own kid.

Justine comes up behind him, an even deeper look of disapproval in the tight lines of her mouth.

They won’t accept any reason for leaving. Certainly not the truth that I had no interest in being there, pretending to be a big happy family a second longer. So, I stick with what they’ve come to expect.

“A few people tried to stir some things up with me. Figured it wouldn’t be appreciated if I started trouble at the wedding.”

Justine snorts. “Rees, sometimes I don’t know why we even try.”

“Me neither.”

My dad rubs the side of his head. “Thought you might’ve grown up by now, boy.”

A tight pressure gathers in my chest when I take too sharp of a breath. I cover the pain and raspy wheeze by clearing my throat. Not here. The stress, the lingering congestion, the discomfort that comes around my own freaking family always sets me off and I hate it. Not. Here.

I blow out a long breath until the tension eases.

“Working on it.” I ignore the narrowed looks and stare out the window. “What’s the plan for today?”

Justine perks up with the thrill of a schedule. “We have down time this morning, but this afternoon when Mark and Ads get here, we’ll head to the beach and do dinner as a family.”

I can’t be the only one who is cringing over newlyweds spending the first few days of their honeymoon in the same house as their family, right?

“Great.” I stand, taking my coffee mug to the sink. If Vienna were here, she’d say something polite, share a bit of excitement for the day ahead. Me, I simply give a quick nod and abandon the room.

I’d rather be in different company.

Noah is still asleep. Briar woke with the sun to run on the beach and hasn’t been seen since. The last hint of Vienna was too long ago when I slipped into the casita and overheard her belting the lyrics to *Hotel California* in the shower.

Last night broke something inside. Or healed something.

This woman, she's the first who has me thinking of weeknight dates, of calling to ask about her day. She causes thoughts of rings and babies, of silk and vows to run through my head. The kinds of things I never rejected, but never thought I'd get. No one has ever made me feel safe enough to share things like I did last night.

The bedroom is empty. I grin at the made bed. She even stacked the pillows in a new configuration and decorated the bedside tables with the seashells she found at Noah's place.

A few clangs in the kitchen draw me back down the hallway. I avoid the dining room and slip in through a different door.

My heart jumps in my chest. A moment of time I'd like to capture in a polaroid and keep forever. Gram stands next to Vienna at the counter. Both wear matching aprons they probably found in the pantry.

They laugh as clouds of powdered sugar bloom over a steaming plate of fresh beignets.

At the sound of the door, Vienna peeks over her shoulder. Those eyes almost sparkle when she lights up at the sight of me. Of *me*.

I can't quite wrap my mind around how she cares, can't quite puzzle why. But I must've done something right because she does. Every smile, every touch, she tells me she cares and I'm not sure I deserve any of it.

I scoop my arms around her waist from behind, breathing her in. A perfect collision of honey and sugar. “Mmm, you smell good.”

Vienna reaches a hand around to the back of my head, leaning into me as her fingers tangle in my hair. “Good morning to you too.”

“This morning became my new favorite.” I press a quick kiss to the crook of her neck, then kiss Gram on the cheek. “You’re making your beignets, Grams?”

“What else would I be makin’, kid? It’s family breakfast.”

“Gram used to make these for us every Sunday before she dragged us wayward boys to church,” I tell Vienna, laughing when my grandma swats at my hand after I steal a small one.

Gram winks. “Well, the Lord knows y’all needed Him.”

The door swings open and Noah steps into the kitchen, hair on end, red sleep marks still imprinted on his face. He draws in a long breath through his nose. “Gram. Beignets.”

It’s all he manages, as if the smell of everything is short circuiting his brain.

I empathize.

Everything about this kitchen right now is making me want this again tomorrow, and the next day, and every day after.

Gram chortles and wipes her hands on her apron. “I think that’ll do it, sugar. We better feed these wild things.”

I help carry the plates into the dining room. Justine is on the phone, talking loudly to someone at her office. My dad scrolls mindlessly on his phone, and now Briar is there, stretching her hamstrings, checking her workout stats on her watch.

“Hey, baby,” Briar says and pecks Noah on the cheek.

He gives her a sly grin and takes a seat at the table.

When Noah came into himself, his confidence with women shifted into a beast all its own.

Briar isn't his baby, but they keep using the pet names like they're more than a weekend. No doubt when this trip is over, Noah will be over his supermodel, and she will be over him.

I never could do it. I'd date, searching for some kind of connection that never came. The more Noah's popularity grew, the less I trusted anyone wanted a connection with me, but more they wanted a connection with my brother.

Vienna brushes her fingertips over my shoulders as she sets a plate on the table, as if she can see into my thoughts and is simply reminding me she's here. Not for Noah, not even because of Perfectly Broken. She's here ... for me.

“Morning, Mr. Hayden,” she says with a bright smile at my dad.

He lifts his eyes off his phone. Huh, look at that. Maybe Vienna's spell works on stern cops, too, because Lee Hayden's frown lines uptick into a smile. “Morning. Sleep all right?”

“I'm finding a way to take that bed back home. Best night's sleep ever.”

My dad chuckles. Even Justine smiles as she hangs up the phone, like she was given a personal compliment.

Vienna is a bit of light in the center of a storm.

“Well, sit down,” Gram says. “Vi and I made beignets.”

Noah scrubs his hands together. I take the chair next to Vienna, sinking deeper when her hand rests on my leg. But we’re the only ones moving.

Briar stares at the plates with a wash of horror. “Oh, that is so, so sweet. But I haven’t eaten bread in two years. My manager would kill me.”

“Come on, Bry,” Noah says. “It’s one day.”

“Noah,” she whines. “I’m cleansing.”

“Polly, this is so sweet of you,” Justine says. “But Lee and I are on the low carb, remember? His cholesterol is up again.”

A notable slump fills the bright nook when Gram’s shoulders slouch. Her face is devoid of the thrill she always gets feeding the people she loves most.

I’m protective to a fault. Always have been, especially for certain people. Noah. My band. My Gram. Hackles raise, and I’m ready to bark out that everyone better quit their stupid diets in two seconds and eat the woman’s beignets.

I’ve seen my dad wolf these down from my earliest memories. What is this low carb crap? Eat healthy, sure, but like Noah said, it’s one morning.



We'll have kale smoothies tomorrow if it makes everyone feel better.

"I'll just cut up some fruit," Justine says, unaware of the disappointment in my grandmother's face, or maybe she's not interested in budging.

"Looks good, though, Mama," Dad says, glancing at his phone again.

The temper is coming. Screw the reprimand my dad'll give me. This is for Gram.

One.

Two ...

"*Ohhhh*, Gram." Vienna hums, half a beignet in her mouth. "This. Is. Amazing." She sighs again, and it causes a sudden need to take her away to be alone. She needs to stop making that sound. Until I look again, and, slowly, Gram's smile starts to hike back up. Vienna breaks off another piece. "Worth one morning, guys. Briar, you're gorgeous, don't you dare think this will change that."

Briar hesitates. "What ... what does it taste like?"

"Literal heaven."

"No." Briar shakes her head. "My manager—"

"Girl." Vienna holds up a plate. "I teach in a high school. A strong, independent woman like you is exactly the sort of role model teenage girls need. But they need real, not expectations they'll never meet. I know you get it, right? The pressure to be

perfect.” She pinches her lips and points at the massacred beignet. “Trust me, perfection is *right here*. Answer honestly, do you want to try one?”

Briar shifts on her feet. “Maybe.”

“No one should tell you what you can and can’t eat,” Vienna says, in full teacher mode. “Well, unless they’re a doctor trying to save your life, but not a manager who is probably eating donuts and coffee on this beautiful morning.”

Briar snorts a laugh. “He so does. A caramel latte every morning.”

“See.” Vienna wiggles her brows, pillowing the plate on her palms. “If you want one, then you are disciplined enough to have one. You don’t get to your success without discipline, right?”

Briar gnaws on her bottom lip. “It is good to teach girls how to have a healthy relationship with food.”

“Totally.”

Briar’s cheeks pink up. She lifts her slender chin and pulls out a chair with a bit of caution. “You know what, you’re right. I’ll try one.”

“Thatta girl,” Noah says, passing her a plate with a wink.

“Ugh,” Vienna goes on, unaware how she’s tilting the entire table upside down. “Gram, you *need* to give me this recipe. My roommate will die.” She smacks my arm. “Rees, have you let the band try these? Alexis would probably like them better than those brownies you always have to buy her.”

Gram is humming again, dishing up three more of her sweet beignets onto Vienna's plate.

Briar takes bird-like bites, but she sighs in contentment, vowing not to get carried away, and murmurs a thanks to Vienna.

"Mr. Hayden." Vienna looks to my dad.

I lift my brow, glancing at Noah. He's just as surprised. Vienna is taking her fight there, huh? Going after the stubborn man who growls more than he smiles.

She tilts her head. "I promise to make you a nice, green salad for lunch. But I've got to say, Gram told me all the times you two made these when you were growing up and it's the sweetest thing."

My dad narrows his eyes, leans over onto his elbows, and holds her gaze in a deadlock. "Are you manipulating me, girl?"

I thought I was protective of my Gram. Nope. I was wrong. I'm about to start a flame circle around Vienna Shaw if my dad thinks he can snap at her.

I should've had a little more confidence in the woman.

She laces her fingers under her chin, smiling all innocent and sweet. "I am. One hundred percent."

The stare down lasts a few more seconds before Lee Hayden breaks and barks his rough laugh. "All right, you win. Doesn't take much to get me to break for my mama's beignets."

Everyone digs in. Gram looks ready to shed a tear. All I can see is Vienna. I'm lost in the strangeness of her whirlwind. She's cautious, jittery, then she's the woman who singlehandedly takes down a model's fears and a Southern police officer with a few smiles, a few words.

She turns to me, the smile on her mouth riddled in victory. I don't care who sees and lean in to take a piece of it for myself. She shudders under my kiss.

Noah makes a funny noise, but hasn't lifted his eyes off his plate. Who cares if he's laughing at me? I pull back, studying her a minute longer. It's then I know this is more than a weekend. It's more than kisses and passion.

I'll give Vienna a lot more if she wants me to.

Twenty-One

# VIENNA

I RE-READ THE TEXT again, a strange thrill deep in my belly. One I didn't expect, and I'm not sure what it means.

**Alexis: I spoke with my foundation board and the ideas started flowing on how we can incorporate different ideas for different abilities. We'd love to meet with you sometime. I'll be honest, this makes me want to steal you away to work this entire department for us. Hope it's going amazing in Cali. Tell Rees my weird brother needs to know if he brought his second Kings' hat for the game tonight. \*eye roll emoji\* \*heart emoji\***

To help an amazing foundation build a department focused entirely on the diverse needs of all children—it's an idea I never considered. A strange want I never had before.

I shake it away and return my phone to the beach bag at my feet. With a simple flick, I help Briar arrange some towels over a large beach mat on the sand. My toes wiggle in my new

dolphin flip flops—a staple now since they remind me of Rees whenever I look down, and what girl wouldn't want to be reminded of him?

I slide the diaphanous wrap off my body, and let it gather at my feet, fully aware Briar is now studying my every move.

Her eyes appraise me head to foot, then she smiles. “Your bikini is cute.”

She's being genuine, I hope. My gaze flicks to the navy blue and polka dot swimsuit. It screams *I Love Lucy* and I fell in love with it. But hers is black with a fringe and looks like she plucked it straight off a magazine cover.

“I have the perfect sun hat to go with it,” she adds, holding up a finger as she digs through her own beach bag and pulls out a stylish red hat with a big white bow on the front. “Here.”

Briar hands me the hat, watching as I put it on, her hands in front of her mouth. I almost laugh. The thrill of dressing me is bright in her eyes. One of the most real things she's done this morning. Some things can't be faked, can't be hidden.

A little squeal of delight comes when the hat is settled on my head. “So cute.”

“Thanks,” I tell her. Briar isn't what I thought. At least not entirely. Much like how my opinions on rock bands have changed, I'm beginning to see what I thought about models was a bit shallow. I considered them airheaded and self-centered for the most part.

With Briar, it's like a bright, confident woman is in there, but shackled by what she thinks is expected of her.

“You're really good at the fashion side of things,” I tell her. “And makeup.”

Her eyes brighten. “I love it. I've always wanted to do makeup.” She snickers and brushes some sand off her tan legs. “When I was little, I'd always sneak away and dress the mannequins in the mall.”

I smile and sit beside her on the towel. “But now modeling is your passion?”

Her face twitches. “It's much better pay. But, between you and me, sometimes I help other girls with their faces or with their outfits before they go out to shows.”

“Briar, why don't you do the design side, then? If that's where your passion is.”

She lifts one shoulder. “I don't know. Money, I guess.”

At least she's honest. “Well, I think you're talented either way. But life is too short to do things we don't love, in my opinion.”

Briar looks at me like she's never seen me before. “You're so smart.”

“No. I just get grumpy if I can't do the things I like often enough.”

She smiles and reclines back onto her palms watching the guys drag a few coolers from the cottage to our secluded area.



It's not a private beach, but the only people are still fifty feet away, so I figure we're pretty close to private.

Unbidden, my lip curls over my bottom teeth as I watch Rees. All his muscled tone, his gray ink, the veins in his forearms and hands. Perfect guitarist hands. By the state of his arms, I imagined every inch of him was covered in tattoos under his shirt, but only an intricate Fleur De Lis marks his sternum.

Briar snickers again. "You're staring, girl. Let him chase you a little."

"He's hard not to look at," I whisper.

Briar sprawls out on her towel, soaking up the afternoon sun, but she grins. "He's a rocker bad boy, what's not to enjoy?"

I snort and peek over my shoulder again as Rees helps Noah set up an umbrella. To some he might be the bad guy, the rough one, a broody, unapproachable villain. I might've named him my own villain once, but only because he stole my heart before I had a chance to catch my bearings.

The truth is under all the walls he puts in place, a gentle, maybe a little shy, protective man shines more than he knows. More than he wants.

Try as he might, Rees can't keep all those delightfully sweet things hidden. Not from me.

My heart thumps wildly at the thought of being near him. But what happens when this is all over? Soon enough, I'll be

back in my small apartment, eating chocolate cinnamon bears as Marti demands I hash out every detail of this long weekend.

Soon Perfectly Broken will be finished with the recording and video, and their time at Valley High will be over.

I told Rees I wanted him. He kissed me, showed me he wanted me back. But does he know I meant I want him longer than these few days?

He must sense my puzzling because he looks up from the umbrella, catches my gaze, and smiles. One coated in a hundred things. Playful, intentional, his smile is wicked, and I love the way it curls my toes in anticipation for what he might say or do next.

“Look who’s here!” Justine’s chipper voice breaks over the lull of the waves. I look past Rees to where his stepmom practically skips in the sand.

Mark and Adrienne follow, hand in hand, waving at us like we should all bend the knee as they pass.

I know, *I know* we came for their wedding, but I’m a little sour that Mark and Adrienne chose to hang out with us. Be normal, go on a honeymoon without the parents. My bad attitude is probably a remnant of the solid belief they’re here to rub their bliss in the face of a certain guitarist.

At least, that’s the vibe I got this morning from Gram’s muttered comments as we made beignets.

“Ever since my smoosh picked up steam, I tell ya, girl, Marky and Ads have been getting a little greener in the face, if

you know what I mean. Want to jab him where they can. He's got the fame, they've got the love," Gram told me. Smoosh, by the way, is the nickname she calls Rees because she insists he was the chubbiest baby, begging to be smooshed.

I will call him smoosh.

He will allow it.

It will be my new joy in life.

Except Gram finished her little declaration with a sly grin at me and said, "But now you're here and it'll make all the envy worse."

Funny, but I don't think she meant it as an insult at all. In fact, she winked and grinned at me like I was the best part of the morning. Adrienne and Mark have love, and Gram was insinuating, now Rees does too.

Love. I grin at the sand. Something is wrong with me because I've been falling in love with him since the first night we met. It's too fast, but I couldn't stop careening toward the maelstrom of Rees Hayden if I tried.

"Hello ladies." Adrienne releases Mark's hand and places their towels beside us. Briar waves with a cheeky smile, then returns to her sunbathing. Mark settles back, scanning something on his phone, but Adrienne glances at me. "Viola, right?"

"Vienna," I say. "How is the first twenty-four hours of married life?"

Ugh. Why did I ask? I don't *want* to know about the first twenty-four hours after a wedding.

"Like a dream." Adrienne flutters her long lashes at me. "How has your trip been?"

"Amazing," I say a little wistful for my tastes, but it can't be helped. Rees is stretching his arms over his chest and my eyes are popping out of my head. "Thank you for having me."

Mark scoffs. "We had to keep our boy on the leash somehow. Reesie won't act up with a date around."

My smile is gone before he finishes. "He's never been anything but kind to anyone he meets as long as I've known him."

Which is not long, but they don't need to be clued in.

Adrienne pinches her lips. "Are you two serious?"

Okay. I had to know questions like this would come. The trouble is how do I answer? We came here after signing a contract of weird friendship while I served as a date for a wedding, but now I don't want to think of a day when I don't talk to the man.

I go with the base answer. "We're new, but I really like him."

I like everything about Rees. Even his scowl.

"Hmm." Adrienne starts applying sunblock to her arms. "I'm sure it's exciting to date someone famous."

"Ads," Mark says with a chuckle.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound cynical, but the idea of fame can catch up with people.”

“I get it,” I say. “But I don’t care if he’s famous. In fact, I didn’t even know who he was when we met.”

“Not surprising,” Mark says, and I wish he’d just focus on his phone. “He’s the bass player. People only recognize the lead singer.”

Untrue, but I’m not going to go on about the fan pictures I took for Rees yesterday on the pier.

“I think he’s plenty popular. Half the girls at school want to marry him.” I smile, recalling a dozen conversations I’ve overheard in the hallways since Perfectly Broken showed up.

Adrienne hums again, like it’s the only sound she can conjure up.

Mark has more to say. “He’s probably loving the attention. My poor little brother was the biggest outcast when he was in high school.” He chuckles. “Always fighting, always playing that dumb guitar out in the open like he was already on a stage.”

My mom would tell me to ignore them and walk away. My dad would probably tell me to smack this guy’s mouth.

I go somewhere in between. With a gooey, fake smile I lean forward to look at Mark. “I think we can easily say that dumb guitar has paid off for him now.”

“I guess if you want to see his chaos like that.” Mark sets his phone down, staring at me. “Have you read about his

band's lifestyle?"

Adrienne pouts her lips. "So sad. Last I read, the drummer had a nervous breakdown from the drugs and getting caught by his girlfriend with two women."

"Fiancée." My voice is jagged.

"Excuse me?" Adrienne cocks a brow.

"Ellie Walker is Tate Hawkins' fiancée. He worships the ground she walks on and would never be caught dead with another woman." I don't tell them I've only hung out with her once, but we talked a lot about her love story with the drummer on our shopping trip. "He didn't have a nervous breakdown, either. He has anxiety. Frankly, he should be applauded for being open about it because mental health shouldn't be taboo. You can find all these *true* stories when you Google Perfectly Broken as much as you can find the fake."

"Look, we're just giving you a heads up," Mark says.

"A heads up to what?" My fingers tremble, signing my frustration. "I've met them, no disrespect, but you two haven't. You've never come to one of Rees's shows. How do you know what his band is like?" I stand, brushing off the sand from my legs.

Adrienne lets out a long sigh. "We're his family and only trying to help you. Rees can be complicated."

"You can only help so much, babe," Mark says, pressing a kiss to Adrienne's neck and finally going back to his phone.

A hand squeezes my hip. I jump when Rees's strong body is there to greet me. "You don't need to defend me in front of them. It won't work."

Adrienne pouts. "Way to be nice, Rees."

He ignores her.

My heart sticks in my throat. He heard all that. Is he mad? I can't tell. He's wearing that villainous sort of smile again.

"But." Rees brushes his lips over my cheek. "It was sexy to watch."

"Then I plan to keep doing it." I press a hand to his chest and pull him away from his stepbrother's glare. "Are you finally done with the umbrella? I thought it was going to beat you there for a second."

"It almost won, but you'll be glad to know, Noah and I are smarter than the beach supplies. Want to come swimming with me?"

I set Briar's hat on the towel and nod. "Big yes, Rock Star."

I take off in the sand, screaming laughter when Rees bolts after me, wrapping me up in his arms and tumbling into the waves, holding me close.



I'm a lobster.

Curse expired sunblock!

We spent hours in the sun, the water. Rees taught me how to use a boogie board, and I'm hooked. He practically dragged me, kicking and screaming, from the surf, then kissed me because he's vicious.

He knew I'd follow if he kept doing stuff like that.

The best part is he didn't care who saw. Noah made all kinds of whooping sounds like we were at a high school football game. Gram fanned her face and winked at me.

Even Lee grinned. Sort of.

I was too lost in Rees to care much that Adrienne stomped off, pouting. I mean, I cared a little. I don't want to ruin her wedding weekend, but it's not my fault if she's discovering all the things she's been wrong about with Rees.

"Don't laugh, Darcy," I mutter as Rees gently rubs aloe over my skin.

"I'm not laughing." He's sort of laughing at the same time he keeps wincing on my behalf. "Do you want some Tylenol or anything?"

"No. Gram's tub concoction actually helped a lot."

Right after dinner, Gram forced me into her tub with oatmeal and baking soda and the sting faded. Now, it's more a soft burn with the aloe.

"I'll survive."

"Good." He presses a kiss to my shoulder blade. "Because Parker would never forgive you if I was distracted from his



game because you didn't survive."

Salt and butter floats in the air from popcorn bowls. Rees has the second Vegas Kings' hat he ever purchased turned backward on his head, a picture sent to Parker Knight to prove it, and the sportscaster is giving the pre-game interviews on the TV.

We're ready for a night of baseball.

"Well, we've never met," I say, "so, he won't know who to blame."

"You'll meet him."

There are a dozen meanings in such a simple phrase. Parker Knight is Bridger's best friend. Alexis's brother. He mentors Mason Walker. And I owe the man a little. Rees confessed to Parker's pep-talk regarding how he should handle ... us.

When Rees says I'll meet Parker, it means he plans on me being around, on us still being *us* when we go back to the shimmering lights of Vegas.

A calm settles over me, and I gently lace our fingers together, pressing a kiss to the skull on one of his hands.

Rees gives me a bemused smile, then inches forward to kiss my lips.

"Gah, stop." Noah pauses in the doorway, a popcorn bowl in one hand, a plate with buffalo roasted cauliflower for Briar in the other hand. "Geez, once you two get started, you don't stop."

“Can’t help it, Nancy.” Rees laughs and makes room for me to cuddle against his side.

“This is your friend’s team, Rees?” Briar asks, gesturing at the screen.

He nods. “Yeah, he’ll be pitching the entire game. He wasn’t happy when I said I wouldn’t be there because we usually—oh, there they are.”

The camera pans across Burton Field pausing on the seats behind home plate where a clear view of Perfectly Broken takes up the screen.

Alexis rubs her stomach, dressed in her brother’s jersey. Bridger, Tate, and Adam all wear backward hats like Rees. Ellie has a ribbon tied around a curly ponytail—the curls are important according to Rees. The first time Parker pitched more than the end of a game and struck out three batters in a row, Ellie had a bow in a curly ponytail. Becca is in a Perfectly Broken T-shirt one size too big. Beside them are Jazzy and Finn Walker, their oldest daughter who dances around with a Kings’ flag, then Mason who has a backward hat like all the guys.

“Ahhh, Regina, they left your seat open.” Noah points at the empty seat on the other side of Bridger.

A smile tugs at Rees’s lips. “Parker would kill them if they changed anything.”

Lee and Justine walk by in the hallway. It’s not my place to insert myself here, but I’ve caught more than one glance Lee

gives his son. Like he, too, knows there is something missing, but he doesn't know how to bridge the gap between them.

“Mr. Hayden, Justine. Want to watch the game with us?” I call out before I lose my nerve.

Rees tightens his hold on my shoulders, but doesn't take his eyes off the screen.

Justine gives me a polite smile and shakes her head. “Thanks, but we're heading to the pier with Mark and Ads.”

“Dad?” Noah presses. “You in? It'll be like how we used to watch with grandpa.”

Lee hesitates, a faint smile on his mouth.

I'm hopeful. Beneath the surface, I can tell, I *see* it, he wants to get closer with his boys. What holds him back? I don't know, but my heart sinks when after a pause he steps back.

“Nah, y'all go ahead. We'll be at the pier.”

One pulse to Rees's jaw gives away his own disappointment, but he covers it quickly by turning up the volume once the Vegas Kings take the field. It's sort of endearing how focused Rees is on the screen. Parker steps onto the mound and gives a salute to the seats behind home. Rees salutes back as if his friend might see.

“All right, big guy,” Rees whispers, lacing his fingers with mine. “Let's see what you've got.”

Twenty-Two

# REES

THE NEXT MORNING THE air is thick and wet. Oddly cold. I swallow against the rasp in my throat from shouting at the TV all night.

I'm going to kill Parker. Buy the guy a freaking steak, too, but kill him. First three innings he pitched like he's been the ace since his first game. The next three innings, a few balls made it to the outfield. A few runs crossed the plate. Then, he pulled it together for a last-minute one run win for the Kings.

I ended the night breathless and smiling.

I'd been too wired to sleep, so Vienna stayed out on the couch with me playing Blackjack with her chocolate cinnamon bears as our buy-in, then talking long after everyone else went to bed. Vienna fell asleep on my lap.

She'd been too peaceful, too perfectly beautiful, I didn't have the heart to move.

With a new crick in my neck, a healthy aversion to the cold humidity, and lingering congestion I can't shake, I sneak away

from the living room, and open my laptop in the breakfast nook.

I'm signed on early, but after a minute the cheery beep signals the others are logging on. The first face to pop up is Finn's and he has my girl with him.

"Rae-Rae," I say. She smacks the air with her chubby little hands, tugging on her dad's shirt, babbling. I like to think it's because she's excited to see me.

She arches against Finn, fussing, and it's entertaining to watch him try to entice her to take her binky.

"Rees." Finn says once Raegan is happy again. "How was the wedding?"

"Pretty basic wedding." I cough into my elbow at the same time three more screens pop up. Tate's hair is messy and stands on end. He waves through a big bite of one of his chocolate protein bars he packs around. Adam is dressed and put together as always. On Bridger's side, we catch the tail end of an argument and Alexis's pregnant belly in front of the camera.

"That's what I'm doing, Cole," she says. "I plugged it in the bottom one."

"Al." Bridger's voice is rough with sleep. "It's the top one. Like I said."

"Then why is the thing charging?"

"Would you two let a guy sleep?"

The rest of us laugh at Parker's groggy voice.

"Park," Tate says. "Bridge, Lex. You're logged on, but keep figuring out that power cord. We'll wait."

Alexis backs up. "Oh. Hey guys. Rees! How is California? Where's Vienna? You're being nice to her, right? Because I need her to like us so she'll keep giving me all the good ideas for the Never Forgotten boxes."

A quick tug to my gut draws out a smile. Alexis wants Vienna to like her when Vienna has said at least twice how much she hopes she wasn't weird on their impromptu shopping trip before we left.

She probably was a little weird. I like her weird, though. I love her weird.

Looks like Alexis does too.

"I'm always nice, Lex," I say, smiling as Poppy, their massive dog, pants and drools on Parker's long body sprawled out on their couch. "And she's still sleeping because we were so hyped up after some idiot pitcher decided to kill us with a close game."

They laugh. Bridger taps Parker's back with his foot.

"Parker," Finn says. "You joining us for a production meeting?"

Parker waves and groans.

Alexis puckers her lips. "The big baby needed Bridger to ice his wittle shoulder last night, and rub his wittle ego, and tell

him he did a good job.”

Parker covers his head with a pillow, cursing. “He was mine first, Alexis!”

I miss these guys more than I thought I would. Funny how quickly they became part of my every day, and the absence is noticeable when they’re not around.

“Okay, let’s get started,” Finn says, handing Reagan off to Jazzy who quickly waves and steps out of the room.

Our meetings go from once a month to once a week depending on what we’re working on. None of us are productive during these meetings. The downfall of being friends and having too many inside jokes and sarcasm amongst a band. Add a random appearance of Parker, and the meeting hardly touches on the important things.

“Last thing, five more minutes of focus guys, we can do this,” Finn says. By now Ellie has joined Tate’s screen and they’re eating what she says is a power breakfast of steel cut oats, apples, and cinnamon.

I think Tate has undone her purpose by adding at least a pound of sugar into his bowl.

Becca had to leave to take a phone call from one of her sisters, and Parker is icing his shoulder, texting his teammates about some huge news that just came in. Something about the team owner and the discovery he has a daughter none of them knew about. Apparently, she’s coming to work for the Kings’



organization and it's causing a stir because no one knows what job she's taking or anything about her.

“Let us have it, Finn,” I say, trying to help the guy out. He's one of the busiest with three kids, and his job of making sure our music is smoothed and polished, ready for the charts. We can focus for his sake. But my chest has also progressively grown tighter. I have selfish reasons to end this call.

“We're all set to record the high school kids on Wednesday. Paul Renard—the guy who did *My Reason*—is coming in again for the music video. We'll have the school set up to shoot those parts of the video to include the kids. Be there early for hair and makeup. We're talking seven in the morning, Tate.”

“Why does everyone” –Tate slurps another spoonful of oats – “think I can't get up early? I'm marrying Eleanor Walker, the queen of sunrise yoga thanks to Jazmine.”

Finn chuckles. He probably rises with the sun too since Jazzy is the sovereign of bending and stretching and cleansing breaths. “Whatever, just be there, and be ready for quite a bit of press. We'll have interviews and meet and greets afterward.”

My favorite thing. A bunch of people touching me when it usually isn't wanted, and most asking me if the estrangement rumors with Noah are true.

“Is everyone good?” Finn goes on. “Any thoughts on the direction?”

“I think adding the kids is a solid touch,” Adam says. “It’s at that level we couldn’t break before.”

“Agreed,” Bridger says.

Tate gives a thumbs up, and eyes turn to me. My throat is rough, and the burn is growing. I cough to try to clear it out, but it only comes out scratchy and gritty.

“I’m good,” I say. I’m anything but.

The dreaded sting worsens, building into sharp breaths. I clench my fist under the table. Outside is gray and sometimes a brisk ocean breeze filters through the open windows. In my head I reel through the ones I’ll need to close, but why? The hair raises on my arms. I already know I’m beyond the point of return.

I’ve been careless with managing things since I came, pretending I could take a vacation from everything, I guess.

I slept with the open screen letting in the strange drop of cold air all night, screamed at the TV for hours, ignored a lingering chest cold, then spent the day choking on sand and jumping in and out of brisk water.

I’ve pushed too much, been too reckless, and my body is protesting in the cruelest ways.

I take a deep breath through my nose, refusing to let my band catch on to the mounting turmoil over here. More than that, I refuse to be a burden for Vienna. There is no way I’m messing up her last day at the beach because I’m not handling my freaking issues.

I don't want to see that look on Vienna's face, freaked out, put out, the one that says you're a little too much. I've seen them all.

This weekend I invited her into some of the sharper edges, but I don't need to fall apart in front of her.

"Okay, that's it then," Finn says.

"Oh, sorry."

My stomach drops, my chest tightens until I wheeze. Vienna halts in the doorway.

"Vienna!" Alexis says, hurrying to the screen. "Hi! How is it going with moody Rees?"

Play this cool. A little longer. It's fine.

Vienna beams at my band and waves. "He's been a perfect, semi-smiley gentleman."

They laugh and start chatting—*chatting*—about the beach, food, and the Never Forgotten boxes. What feels like an hour is more like two minutes, but anxiety is creeping up as I try to think of all the ways I can sneak out of here without drawing attention to myself.

Finally, Vienna waves. I wave. We say goodbye.

She grins at me and pecks my lips. A bit of the tension eases simply being around her. Still, a throaty cough comes.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Yeah. I'm good. Did you sleep okay?"

“You mean how I pinned you to the couch all night? Yes, I slept beautifully. I bet you didn’t.”

I smile, chuckling, and fight another small cough. “I didn’t mind.”

“Good. So, everyone just took off for the catamaran whale watching tour.”

“Vi, you could’ve gone with them.”

She waves me away. “No way. I’m here with you, Rock Star. I knew you had your meeting, and I get motion sickness. Plus, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, I get a teensy bit claustrophobic. So, on a boat—freaking out—no thanks.”

I laugh and wince at the stab to my lungs.

“But in other news, Mark got food poisoning or something. So, he’s hanging out upstairs, miserable.”

Any other time I’d laugh at the irony of Mark puking on his weird family honeymoon, but I can’t really think about much except breathing.

I cough again and Vienna studies me with a narrowed glance. “I hope you’re not getting sick.”

“No. Just a scratch in my throat.”

She looks at me like I’m a dirty liar for ten seconds, then goes to the sink and fills a glass of water. “Here.” She sets the glass in front of me. “I’m going to go shower, then I’m up for whatever you’ve got, Darcy.”

My smile is forced. I hate it. I hate that I'm petrified of showing this side of me, I'm petrified of asking for help in case it's shut down, downplayed, shamed. Vienna wouldn't be that way. She wouldn't.

But I steel myself against verbalizing anything. Instead, I let her kiss me, holding my breath.

"I won't be too long." She hurries to the bedroom, clicking the lock behind her.

Sweat beads over my brow when it hits me—I need to get into that room. My bag is in there. Quick, sharp breaths start to pull at my chest. Calm down. Focus. Deep, open breaths.

*One.*

I draw in air through my nose.

*Two.*

It burns.

*Three.*

Panic rises.

*Four.*

I'm screwed.

Twenty-Three

# VIENNA

ANTICIPATION AT SPENDING A chunk of uninterrupted time with Rees in a little corner of ocean paradise is heady like a sugar high from chocolate marshmallows. True, Mark is here, but the poor guy is going to be indisposed.

I'm a bit surprised Adrienne didn't stay back with her husband, but I guess Justine can be convincing and told her he'd be fine since Rees and I are here.

This is our last day before we need to go back to reality. I've already checked on my sub, the teacher I replaced when she retired. She loves to come back and spend time with the kids. She was actually the one who sent me an email letting me know all was well, and to enjoy my vacation.

I'll do that.

I hurry and shower, ready to start the day with my Darcy. When I'm dressed in tattered shorts and a white tank, I hurry and clean my teeth, add a bit of mascara to my lashes, and am

starting to towel dry my hair when a slow thump, thump hits the door.

I glance at my phone, smiling. I've only been gone for seven minutes. Hopefully, it's a sign Rees is as anxious to spend time together too.

I'm practically giddy this morning.

Last night, the way he held me to him, the laughter, teasing, all of him stirs a piece of me into a deliciously addictive need for everything he is.

Another thump hits the door.

I laugh and pull it open. "I'm almost done ..." My stomach drops. "Oh, my gosh, Rees!" He's on the ground, slumped against the wall, his hand falling away from the door. I'm at his side in the next breath. "Rees, what's wrong?"

His eyes blink to me. He looks like death. Pale, and—

"Your lips are blue!" My voice is shrill, and it's then I notice he's not breathing. Well, he's trying to, but it isn't going well.

His chest pits, each breath rolls so tightly I make out the definitive lines of his ribs.

"The bag," he croaks out, and points inside the room.

"Bag." I scramble backward, ripping open drawers in the bathroom, the closet, the dresser he put a few things in when we came. I rush back to the hallway. "There, there isn't a bag. What bag?"



He closes his eyes and lets his head fall back. A few more of those horribly silent breaths grab his chest. He tries to sit up, but hunches forward, dragging in a silent pull of tight air.

“Mark!” I scream up the stairs. “Mark, help!”

I drop to my knees, one hand pressed to Rees’s chest. His heart races against the lack of oxygen. I’ve seen this. I know what a severe, sudden asthma attack looks like. My first year of teaching, one of my kids had life-threatening asthma, and he went limp like this in the middle of class.

Maybe being raised by doctors kicks in because I slow my voice, my heart is in my throat, but I keep my focus. “Do you have an inhaler?”

“The bag,” he rasps again. “My ...”

His hand presses to mine on his chest. A wheeze breaks through. That’s good. If I remember right, the student who had asthma, his mom wanted him wheezing before going to the ER. She said it was better than the terrible silent breaths that tie my stomach in a sick knot.

Rees tries to stand, but fumbles back to the floor, disoriented, and losing air. I’m not even sure he’s aware I’m here.

“Rees, I’m calling an ambulance.”

I lied, he’s aware because he vehemently shakes his head. “No.” He takes a deep, pitted breath. “In the bag. My suit—”

His suitcase. I don’t need more and rush back into the room, flipping the edge of the long duvet up onto the pullout bed. His

small suitcase is tucked underneath. I yank it out, hands shaking, and snatch a black zipper bag from inside.

I skid back into the hallway at the same time Mark slinks around the corner of the staircase, messy hair, green, and pallid.

“He’s blue!” I shriek as I fumble with the zipper until it opens to a rescue inhaler and an oximeter to read his oxygen levels.

“Whoa.” Mark’s eyes widen. He must get a breath of energy, and drops at Rees’s side. “Rees, man. Hey, breathe.”

I want to scream at him that’s exactly what he’s trying to do, but I grip Rees’s hand and smash his inhaler in his palm. “Rees, come on, use it.”

He cracks open one eye when I urge the inhaler to his pale lips. *Stay calm, Vienna.* I can hear my mom’s doctor voice. *Stay calm. He needs you to be calm.*

I’m terrified. I’m on the brink of sobbing. I can’t stop touching him as I check his ragged, unproductive breaths, then watch him click his medicine, trying to draw in the relief.

He hardly can.

When he blows out the first puff, I take his hand. He squeezes mine, clamping his eyes shut as his breaths go silent again. No. No. No.

“Is it getting better?” Mark asks.

I bite back a tear and shake my head. Rees is still silently gasping, his hand is locked with mine, but his color is terribly off.

“Okay,” Mark says with a sure voice. “Rees, you’ve got to take one more puff. One more.”

Rees nods mutely and lifts his inhaler to his lips. He pulls in a weak breath, then lets it out, his head falling back against the wall.

We wait. He doesn’t shift, doesn’t move.

“We need his sats,” Mark whispers. “His ... his saturation levels, you know? The oxygen levels.”

He points at the oximeter by my knee, one hand gripped on Rees’s shoulder, helping him stay upright. I grab the tool and reel through what I’ve witnessed in school and at my parent’s clinic.

“Warm up his fingers,” I whisper to no one. My mom is in my head—cold fingers make it hard to read. I start rubbing Rees’s chilled fingertips. Waiting. Praying.

“I didn’t know ...” Mark starts. “I didn’t know it was this bad.”

“Has this never happened before?”

Mark winces. “I think it did, but it’s ... a lot of people have asthma, you know? I thought Noah was being dramatic when he talked about his last attack.”

“Dramatic!” I shriek. “This isn’t freaking dramatic.”

“I know,” Mark says, and he has the decency to look ashamed. “What’s the reading? Noah would always say his sats are good at ninety.”

I click the oximeter on his middle finger, one hand on his overworked lungs, trying to keep panic out of my expression. No doubt failing miserably.

Rees wheezes. The wheeze. We want the wheeze.

But he’s still pale, still sweaty, still disoriented. I hold his face until the oximeter beeps. My stomach falls. “Mark, he’s at seventy-five.”

“He needs to get to the ER.” Mark uses the wall to pick himself off the floor.

Rees grips my wrist. “Cam—” Another disjointed breath. “Cameras.” He shakes his head.

“Rees, you’re not getting enough air,” I whisper, tears in my eyes. “I’m sorry, but this is your life. I’m not worried about paparazzi right now.”

“You,” he gasps. “I’ll go with you.”

“Take my car,” Mark says. “The hospital isn’t too far from here; I’ll pull it up on the GPS.”

Honestly, at this point, it might be faster than waiting for an ambulance. I look at Rees. “Hold onto me.”

I try to keep him upright. Naturally the instinct is to curl forward, but he grits his teeth and somehow makes it to the

front door. Mark holds it open, hands me the keys to his car, and helps me get Rees over to the passenger side.

Even gasping, Rees manages to give me a look of displeasure that he does not like me babying him. Not at all. Too bad. I'd like to keep him pink and breathing.

He can be moody on the way to the freaking hospital.

“Call Lee,” I snap at Mark.

“I will.”

I don't answer before I slam the car door closed and speed out of the cottage driveway toward the nearest hospital. Rees's fists are clenched, his throat is strained. Skin pulls taut over every tendon, the entire shape of his chest.

The next moments bleed together in one chaotic blur. When we reach the hospital, a physician, nurse, and a respiratory therapist, arranging the equipment, are there to meet us at the front of the ER. Somewhere from getting out of the car, to inside, they tell me Mark called ahead.

A hospital orderly pops out of the woodwork with forms ready for me, jabbering on, asking questions about coverage and things that don't matter to me right now.

I'm so flustered trying to keep up with the gurney they plop Rees on, that I don't even get embarrassed when I tell the orderly he has an overflowing wallet and he'll cover his bill because he's a rock legend, or rock god, I don't know, some weird title Rees'll groan at when he finds out.

Once we're tucked into a room in the ER, the doctor gives a dozen orders to the team, and I feel a great deal like dead weight in a tight space.

"Start a continuous nebulizer," the doctor says to the respiratory therapist.

She moves without a drop of tension, simply knowing how to calm Rees, how to get a little relief into each breath.

They hook Rees to the treatment, then run tests on how well he breathes in, how well he breathes out, then how fast. It's a never-ending cycle.

"When did this start?" the doctor asks. It takes me a few seconds to realize he's asking me since Rees is working on breathing through the steroids and tube.

"Maybe fifteen minutes before we arrived."

"Has he had symptoms at all the last few days?"

I want to scream that I had no idea he had asthma, let alone severe enough it would land him in the ER. I would've rolled him up in bubble wrap if I'd known. I would've brought a mask, anything to keep his stubborn, guarded face out of the emergency room because he was turning into Smurfette!

But instead of freaking out on the impeccably calm doctor, I lift my chin and mention a few coughs I've heard during the weekend, at the beach, then not long ago how he brushed the harsher ones off as a scratch in his throat.

Now that he has airflow, I don't miss the few glares Rees shoots my direction for ratting him out.

Serves the man right, scaring me like this.

With a nod, the doctor gives a few more instructions to the therapist and nurses, then calls for a corticosteroid IV drip to tie off the terrifying morning.

“Lizzy.” Rees’s rough, broken voice stirs me out of my stupor.

His eyes are closed, but his hand is open, palm up. My face pinches. Why didn’t he say anything about this? Why wouldn’t he just tell me? I lace our fingers together, holding tightly as he finishes another breathing treatment, and they tell us he’ll be moved to a room to be observed through the day.

There isn’t much talking. By the time his breathing is back to the wheeze and coming easier, he can hardly keep his eyes open.

I stay there, holding his hand, until he falls asleep.

Not even a few minutes after his eyes close, the light of my cellphone brightens with a message from an unknown number. **This is Mark. Got ahold of my mom. She said they already convinced, meaning paid, the captain to turn around because Noah had a bad feeling. Should be there in about an hour. Update?**

I swipe at a few tears and thank him, then give him an update to pass on. I lick my lips and look up a different number.

He said they were his family, and I believe him. They’d want to know.

I hit the green call button.

“Hey, girl.”

“Alexis.” I hiccup and embrace the crack in my voice.

“Something happened with Rees.”



Twenty-Four

# REES

A SOFT PRESSURE ON my chest stirs me from strange, chaotic dreams of drowning and elevators. I crack my eyes open, every inch of my body aches like I've been boxing with a train, but I smile at the delicate hand splayed out over my bare chest.

Vienna's head is on the edge of the hospital bed, but one arm is extended as if she fell asleep, making sure I was breathing.

Surrounding her fingers are patches with monitors and wires, tracking my heartrate, my blood oxygen. But all I see is the way she possessively clings to me, and how it stirs something to life I didn't know was there.

The tenderness of the moment is pulverized by a rush of guilt.

How could I let this happen? I knew it was getting bad. The burn, the tightness. I used my inhaler to prevent this, but probably not as regularly as I should've been.

I'm an idiot and thought I could work through it. I know better, and now I've pulled her into my mess.

I cover her hand with mine, dragging her palm to my lips, and press a soft kiss in the center.

Vienna lifts her head. "Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Better," I say through a rasp. "I'm sorry."

A groove gathers between her brows. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I don't talk about it." How am I supposed to explain the fear of showing weakness? How it's impossible when for so long I've been the hard one, the one who didn't back down from a fight. To know my own body can knock me off my feet into something helpless isn't something I go around discussing. "Only my family knows about it."

"Why didn't you tell the band?"

I'm about to open my mouth to tell her all of it when her comment strikes me. "How did you know I didn't tell the band?"

Vienna lifts her chin in a sort of unashamed defiance. "Because I called them."

Straightaway, voices rumble outside the door.

"They're talking, he's up."

"Give him a second."

I groan. My dad and Noah are barking at each other out in the hallway. Great. But it's another voice that has me covering

my face with my palms.

“Is this a military fort? How many forms of ID do we need to get into his darn room?”

“Vienna.” My voice is sharp, dry, and tinged in a bit of panic. “Is that Alexis?”

She doesn’t need to answer before the door to my room swings open and Alexis fills the doorway like a marauder about to attack. She’s not alone.

Bridger, Adam, Becca, Finn—great—even Parker is there in the doorway, shoulder taped from his game.

“Rees Hayden.” Alexis hiccups, eyes red, and before anyone stops her (maybe no one dares) she’s across the room, flinging herself on me.

The monitors beep with my heart rate.

She gasps and peels back. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

Becca looks like she might throw up. Bridger keeps raking his hands through his hair. Adam is talking with a nurse, and Parker goes to Vienna’s side.

“Parker Knight,” he says in a tight voice. “I hear you’re the one who brought him here.”

“Vienna,” she whispers back, eyes on me. “Good game yesterday.”

I’m about eighty percent sure she’s going into shock. I reach for her hand and hold a little tighter, urging her to take a seat on the edge of the bed. “Why did you call them?”

“If she didn’t, I would’ve, you idiot.”

My stomach sinks. Noah stands in the doorway in a damp T-shirt and swimming trunks, eyes wild like they are when he’s in character.

“Noah, I—”

He silences me with one finger, shoves his way past a crying Alexis, and freezes by the side of my bed. “Levels are good. Isn’t that what you said? Does this look good to you?”

I ignore him, still reeling that my room is filled with everyone who shouldn’t know about this, who shouldn’t have to be bothered with it. “How long have I been asleep?”

“It’s almost two in the afternoon,” Vienna tells me.

“How’d y’all get here so fast?” I croak at the band.

“We took Pops’ jet,” Finn says. “And he’s sending you the bill. He’s also furious at you which means he’s actually terrified, and officially has all of Enigma worried sick too.”

“What’s with you, Rees?” Noah snaps. “I just found out these guys didn’t know about this. You told me they knew.”

“No.” I cough, and everyone freezes. “No, I said I took ... I took care of it.”

As I say the words, I hear how ridiculous and weak they sound.

“We didn’t know. Three years and you’ve never mentioned this.” At last Bridger snaps. One arm is around Alexis, but his eyes are leveled at me.

“I was one more concert away from going brother bear on you guys for using the smoke machines.” Noah gives him a look. “I thought he told you, and you just didn’t care.”

Becca lets out a little squeak, claps a hand over her mouth. She blinks at me like I just told her the band is breaking up. I don’t even dare look at Alexis; she’ll take that admission as a betrayal and either feed me until I feel surrounded by too much love or put me back at the kids’ table.

Finn smacks my leg. “Do you get sick every concert?”

“No,” I insist, and I don’t. I manage it.

“Only because he does a breathing treatment before.” Noah glares at me again. I’m officially going to kill my brother. “That’s why if there is too much of a crowd, he takes a different way out. Can’t be around a lot of cigarette smoke outside.”

“That’s messed up,” Parker grumbles. “I thought you got stage fright. But you’re doing breathing treatments before you get smoke blasted in your face for two hours? Dax has asthma, man. It’s not a slimy secret.” I didn’t know his teammate had asthma, but the way Parker looks at me, clearly, he’s seen what it can do.

“Why keep it from us?” Adam asks.

I close my eyes. “Because you had enough trouble with Lance.”

“So what? Because you have asthma you thought you’d be another douche bassist?” Bridger chuckles with a heap of

bitterness. “Here I thought you knew you’re part of the family, man. It’s asthma, not a drug scandal.”

He’s talking about himself, and I hate that he had to say it at all.

I hate that I’ve put them all into this position of thinking I don’t trust them, or maybe I don’t care about them. I do. That’s the problem, I revere them all too much, so I chose to keep parts of me hidden, desperate not to burden them.

*The band means family.*

That’s just it, though, Noah is the only one in my family who understands what this does to me.

*A lot of people have asthma. What do you think that inhaler is for? Use it and get back out there.* When my dad said that after I couldn’t breathe during a little league game, it was the last time I told anyone but Noah that sometimes it felt like my lungs were narrow, lead pipes in my chest.

But these guys—they’re different. I know it. I’ve witnessed how they rally. From tabloid scandal to personal heartache, they’re loyal to the end.

And I didn’t trust our family enough with this.

“He does get stage fright,” Noah adds, his focus on the monitors.

“Will you stop, Nancy?”

“Nope. They need to know. I’m with Bridger, this should’ve been disclosed from the beginning. You know, like you told

me it was.” He glances at my bandmates. “As I was saying, he gets stage fright because he’s afraid he’ll have an attack during a performance.”

I groan and flop back onto the pillow. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine!”

The room quiets. It wasn’t Noah, or Bridger, or even Alexis who shouted.

This is worse.

Vienna is on her feet, hugging her middle, her eyes lined in tears. *Tears*. I sober, ashamed for putting them there.

She clears her throat and lowers her voice. “You’re not fine. You couldn’t breathe. Your lips were blue, Rees. *Blue*. You won’t keep this from the people who need to know it most. Never again.”

“Vi,” I say softly, reaching for her, but Noah blocks my hand.

Instead of me, he gets to curl an arm around *my girl’s* shoulders. My brother gets to comfort her while he glares at me because I had to be the tough guy, because I had to hide it all, because I never want to lose this woman and didn’t trust her with a few harder edges of me.

“You did good, Vi,” Noah says. “You did really good with this jerkwad.”

And this is my life. Every person who matters, every person who has a place in my shriveled heart has turned against me.



I huff and drape an arm over my face until Adam taps me on the shoulder, letting me know Tim is on this.

“Tim is here?”

Adam scoffs. “Always. He’s meeting with the doctor and his team as we speak, making sure the staff has an added NDA on top of, you know, their oath to keep HIPPA.”

“He does like those NDAs, doesn’t he?” Vienna whispers, but it’s enough to lighten the mood slightly. A few of us even laugh.

“Where’s Tate?” I ask, embarrassed it took me this long to realize we’re missing a drummer. Finn and Bridger share a look, and my pulse kicks up. “What?”

“He’s in the parking lot,” Bridger says. “He got pretty upset when we got here.”

Great. Tate has come so far with managing his anxiety, now I’ve set him back two steps.

Noah grips my shoulder, the truth of how freaked he probably was is in his eyes. Like me, he won’t say it outright. He’ll yell a bit, get skittish and jumpy, then he won’t leave my side until he’s utterly convinced I’m not going to keel over.

The adrenaline of the band finding out is fading, and every hot spark of pain from the attack digs into my chest. I’m withering beneath the glares, the frustration, the tears. It’s overwhelming to have so many people look at me, to care.

Vienna must read my face, or maybe she has a sixth sense, and knows I need a soft hand in mine, because she comes to

my side again and tangles her fingers around my palm. She holds me, but runs her fingers through my hair with her free hand.

I'm not even sure she knows she's doing it.

But it's something I could get used to, something I want to get used to.

A deep voice clears away the moment. My dad and Justine stand in the doorway.

After a stiff second, Justine steps forward. "I think Rees needs some rest."

Noah responds by pulling up a chair and plopping next to me. No one will tell him to leave. It's pointless. "I'll stay with him for a bit, guys. Y'all might need to get Vienna something to eat. She hasn't had anything all day from what I've been told."

"I'm okay," Vienna whispers.

I get what Noah's doing. He knows my band. They pounce when their people need help, and it works. At once Alexis and Becca are at Vienna's side, urging her to come with them to the cafeteria.

She turns to me, her chin quivers before she leans over and kisses me.

A few clicks of a few tongues fill the room from my band, maybe Parker. A whispered, "I so called it," from Alexis gives up they're all watching every bit of our affection.

But it doesn't take long for everyone to disappear from my view. This kiss is Vienna telling me without words what matters most to her right now. It's over too fast, but she leaves me with a smile before stepping out with Alexis and Becca.

Justine ushers my band, Parker, and Finn out, assuring Noah, they'll be getting coffee.

My dad keeps his jaw tight and stares at the ground.

"Dad," Noah says. "Want to have a seat?"

Lee Hayden is not a man of many words, certainly not ones riddled in comfort. Truth be told, I think my dad has his own walls in place. I don't know what keeps him guarded against me, even against Noah.

He rubs his chin and steps to the foot of the bed. "You feeling better, kid? Had your Gram in a fit."

"Yeah," I say. "I'll be good as new in a few hours. Didn't mean to mess up—"

"Shut up," Noah says. "We were already on our way back because I have impeccable Rees is a Liar radar."

I laugh and it hurts. With a moan, I rub my chest, but catch Noah smiling.

"You boys talk," Dad says. "But I'll be, I'll just be in the cafeteria." He pats my leg, giving it a little squeeze. For my dad it's the equivalent of a warm, cozy hug.

Then he's gone.

Noah shakes his head. “He doesn’t do the hospital thing well, does he?”

True. My dad has a healthy aversion to hospitals since our mom died. He gets even more tense than he already is. To others it might not be much, but that he’s still here is a little bit of something.

“You good, No?” I mutter.

“No. No, I’m not.” He pauses, a muscle throbbing in his jaw. “I knew something was wrong, then Mark called all flustered. He made it sound like you were dead, and I about lost it. I can’t believe you didn’t even tell Vienna, especially since I *know* this has been building since you got here. You didn’t prepare her as a just-in-case thing. If I’d known you were so weird about telling people, I would’ve been writing it on your forehead.”

“You know why I didn’t tell her.” My voice is a soft breath, broken, almost like a little boy’s voice.

Noah softens and grips my forearm. “She’s not that way, dude. Even I can see that. She’s not Adrienne who wants someone to take care of her, she’s not a woman looking for fame with a rocker.”

One of my worst attacks happened when Adrienne came to my house with Mark.

I fought with my family and ended up at the hospital before dark. She told me when I got home, she shouldn’t have to take care of me when she had goals to focus on. Noah has a point.

Adrienne wanted stability, not music, not a severe allergy. Not me.

Another, smaller attack came a few months after moving to Las Vegas. I tried to date a model like Briar, but when I started gasping during a dust storm, she told me to fix myself, called an Uber, and left.

I'm pretty sure she thought I was having a reaction to a drug or something.

Next time I heard about her, she'd married some hot shot music executive in a quickie Vegas wedding. She wanted a name, a connection to fame. Not me.

"Rees," Noah goes on. "Vienna is here because she's all about *you*."

"We signed a contract," I blurt out. Then, laugh until my chest can't take it. "A freaking contract because we met by randomly making out in an elevator. I had no idea she was a teacher at the high school, but she's here with me because of a signed agreement."

Noah listens. Not a flinch on his face to give away his thoughts.

I close my eyes, hand over the ache in my chest. "Vienna is ... she's ..."

She's so many things. How can I pinpoint the exact thing about her that causes my heart to race, or laughter to come, or a desire so potent I can't see straight?

“She’s not here because of a contract,” Noah says with soft understanding. “At least, not anymore.”

“You don’t know that Noah.”

He adjusts on his chair and leans over his knees. “I do, but I also know you’ll try not to see it. I know what you do, Rees. I know what you’ve always done. Especially for me.”

I freeze. “What are you talking about?”

Noah scratches his beard. “You always needed to be the strong one, the brave one, maybe just the unbreakable one. You hardened yourself, so I could feel. So, I could be the one who could be open on a stage.” Noah lifts his eyes to me. “I know about the fights, and I think you’re still doing it.”

“Did Vienna tell you?”

“No. I found out when Mark proposed to Adrienne. I’d gone home to visit, remember? Ended up out with his buddies. He’d had a few drinks and laughed as he told me he knew you were the one who always pretended to be me, but he let you do it because you needed to prove you were tough.”

“Mark’s an idiot.”

Noah chuckles. “Maybe. I think he’s got his own things with us. He’s always been envious of us, mostly you.”

“Me? Yeah, that’s not true.”

“It is.” Noah smiles. “You knew what you wanted to do, and you never let anyone tell you differently. You didn’t let laughs or taunting stop you. Mark envied that. He conformed.

Became what his mom wanted him to become, what society wanted him to become. You, me, we went for what we wanted. You, without a care for what anyone thought of you.”

Silence builds between us. I don’t know what to say, but there are times when it’s better to keep quiet.

Noah lets out a long sigh. “It ends now. Your whole rule about me not making comments to reporters to set stupid stories straight; it ends now. I get what you’re doing. Keep all the bad press on you, so my tender little heart doesn’t get broken.”

“Noah, that’s not—”

“That’s exactly what you’re doing.” He takes my hand. We aren’t an affectionate family, but this matters. I grip his tightly in return. Noah blinks a few times before going on. “I haven’t been a good brother.”

“Shut up.”

“No. I haven’t. I haven’t stood up for you. I’ve been so convinced that you needed to feel invincible, so I gritted my teeth and said nothing. It stops now. Because you’re not invincible, Rees, and you don’t have to be. You don’t need to be my great defender. You’ve done that. I’m pretty arrogant and full of myself now, so you can give me the reins. I’ll be okay.”

I chuckle, so does Noah.

“I’m serious,” he says after a moment. “I’m not going stand by anymore and be a passive brother. Because one of the

things I'm proudest of in my life is that you *are* my brother. I've always looked up to you. Always."

"You're not going to cry on me, are you?"

He shoves my shoulder, laughing. "Just drop the man of steel act, okay? Let people in. Your band—Rees, all those people hopped on a jet the second Vienna called them. The *second*. And I'll repeat what I said—no woman who is here for a contract fulfillment would look at you like she might die if you got hurt again. Give some of us a chance to carry you sometimes."

My throat is tight, and it has nothing to do with my asthma.

I nod, uncomfortable, and touched all at once. "Be careful what you wish for, Nancy. I might get extra needy."

Noah laughs, and for the first time in a long time a weight lifts off my chest.



Twenty-Five

# VIENNA

I PICK AT A dry turkey club while Perfectly Broken and Parker Knight hover around me.

Parker is huge up close. Tall, broad, made of hard muscle. I thought professional athletes might be all unwavering confidence and brawn. But the way he keeps pacing to an information desk and pulling every pamphlet on asthma management, gives away how Rees means as much to him as he does the band.

Tate finally joins us in the cafeteria. He slumps at the table, asking for a few updates on Rees, assuring everyone he's not going to tense up.

“Ellie is working on keeping Pops from transferring the entire label to LA,” Tate says, giving Finn a grateful look when he passes him the rest of his pizza. “They’ve put the school shoot on hold for now.”

School! I’m supposed to be back in the classroom tomorrow. Not happening.

I snap out of the cloudy stupor I've been in all morning. A constant replay of finding Rees pale and breathless on the ground. With numb fingers, I type out an email to my sub, begging her to stay the rest of the week, explaining the situation with as few details as possible, and promise a massive gift card to The Fix when I return.

“Vienna,” Alexis says softly. “Are you okay?”

Eyes drift to me. All I want to do is sit with Rees right now, but the wild desperation in Noah's eyes gave too many hints he needed to make sure Rees was fine without the rest of us peering over their shoulders.

I nod. “I'm okay. It was ... awful. I thought he was going to stop breathing completely. I don't know why he's so embarrassed by it.”

They share a few looks, but Tate is the one who responds. “Sometimes people are afraid of showing what they perceive as weakness because being a burden is more terrifying than trusting others to hold them up if they fall.”

How long has Rees 'fixed' others by sacrificing himself? I can see why he wouldn't want to admit this, but I don't understand it.

Truth be told, his reluctance to even disclose this to his band adds a touch of anger to my frustration. Not at him. But at those who have taken his warped belief that he is somehow harder to love and twisted it until Rees Hayden nearly broke himself.

Finn's phone dings. He reads the text, then tucks it into his pocket. "Pops says to hang around until Rees is good, then bring him home with us."

"He does know how many people came with us, right?" Adam says. "Are we supposed to sit on the floor of the plane?"

I smile. "I'll make sure he gets home safe and sound."

Bridger chuckles. "Pops' is in fix-it mode. Trust me, I've survived the hovering before."

They all grin and explain a few things about the eccentric CEO of Enigma Records. How every artist, producer, assistant, anyone becomes an adopted child of the man.

My shoulders straighten the more I sit with the people who'll have Rees's back once we return home. I think it clicks, watching them, soaking up the worry in each eye at the table, it makes sense why they call themselves a family.

Perfectly Broken would give up every drop of fame and fortune to help one of their own.

Rees is theirs, but he's mine too. If today has taught me anything it's the truth about how much my heart screams for the man, how I don't want to go home without him. I don't want to be without him ever.

I notice Justine and Lee seated at a back table. Frustration bubbles at first glance, but fades when big, burly Lee scrubs his face and stares at the wall, lost in thought.

These Hayden men are the most stubborn fools I've met in my life.

“Will you guys excuse me? I’m going to go check on him.”  
Right after I have a few parting words.

Alexis follows my eyes, then smiles, squeezing my hand.  
“Tell him we’ll be up soon to bug him some more.”

I abandon the table, their hot stares on my back, as I cross the cafeteria to Lee and Justine.

Only when I’m at his shoulder does Lee lift his eyes off the wall. “Hey, sugar.” He takes my hand. “Thanks for ... helping him.”

“Mr. Hayden, I don’t know your family all that well,” I say with as much boldness as I can muster before I sink into my wallflower impulse. “But I know enough to see you all keep Rees at a distance.”

“Honey,” Justine interjects. “There is a lot you don’t know. Rees was never easy.”

I don’t look at her and keep my eyes on his dad. “He might’ve been the biggest tantrum throwing punk in the world. But I think you should know the sort of man he is now. He’s giving. He’s kind. Every fight he got in during school was to protect his brother.”

“Hon, you don’t—”

“Justine,” Lee says, holding up a hand. “Let her talk.”

I lick my lips. “This might not be my place, but I care about your son, so maybe it is. He’s not reckless, sir. He’s a good, *good* man. You can see that.” I gesture at Perfectly Broken, all of whom are pretending not to look at us. “His band, their

families, his producer, even a baseball player hopped on a plane to be here for him because he means so much to everyone. I guess what I'm trying to say is to please stop expecting the worst from Rees. Because it's not there."

I'm about to rant and rave and confess things I haven't even confessed to Rees. Clamping my jaw, I step back. "Sorry to overstep, but you both raised a good man, even if you don't see eye to eye. I just ... I just wanted you to know that."

Lee stares at his hands for a long pause. "I'm glad he has folks like y'all." He uses his chin to point at the band's table.

A cautious smile curls in the corner of my mouth. "They're pretty great, and currently without anywhere to stay, but also without any intention of leaving California before Rees is okay."

I give him a quick wink that finally breaks a smile over his face.

"Good thing we have a big ol' cottage with plenty of seats then."

"Lee," Justine says, voice sharp, but she's trying to keep her smile in place. "This is a family vacation."

"And they're family," he says as he stands. "If they're here for one of our boys, they're with us."

There it is. I take a step back, aiming for the elevators to return to Rees's room, and smile as Lee Hayden finally introduces himself to Perfectly Broken.



“The wheelchair was excessive,” Rees whines from the passenger seat.

I grin and pull Mark’s car into the driveway of the cottage, grateful we had the drive to be alone. The only reason Noah gave up his duty as sentinel over his twin was because of me. He passed the torch in a way, giving me the honor of sticking with Rees through his hospital discharge and tantrum over being coddled.

I shut off the ignition and unbuckle my seatbelt. “Hospital policy. Even for sexy rock stars.”

“My lungs are not in my feet. I can walk.”

He’s moody and grumbly and all I want to do is kiss him. “Well, your lungs could use a break, grumpy. Come on.” I pat his knee. “Let’s go inside.”

Rees grips my hand before I leave the car. His eyes carve out a piece of my heart and take it for him to keep. “Vienna, I ... I don’t know—”

I take his words when I give in to the need and kiss him. This isn’t sweet or soft. As if the last twenty-four hours bleed from my lips, I kiss him fiercely. My fingers grip his hair. Rees sighs and takes everything I offer. His big hands hold my face, his kiss deepens into something passionate and greedy.

The windows have a thin layer of fog on them by the time I dip my chin, resting my forehead to his. “It’ll take a lot more than an asthma attack to push me away, Darcy.”

Rees draws his face toward my neck, breathing me in. “I don’t want to push you away.” He lifts his eyes. “I want you, Vienna. Today, tomorrow, when we go home. I want you. With me.”

“Are we making addendums here?”

“I’m up for negotiating.” He kisses the tip of my nose. “As long as it means you leave here with me.”

My smile fades, I stroke the side of his face. “I was never leaving here without you.”

“Good.” Rees brings my knuckles to his lips, never looking away. “So, what am I walking into in there?”

I beam, snatch the plastic hospital bag with medications, paperwork, and a few of the supplies we brought with us in our frenzy. “Parker had to leave before dinner. He wasn’t happy about it, but said the Kings expect him to pitch at their Houston game, or something silly like that.”

“Excuses.”

I interlock our fingers and head for the door. “Tim and Finn went with him to quell rumors at Enigma before the place burns down, but Ellie flew in and traded places with them.”

Rees blows out a long breath. A beautiful, strong breath. “So, my band and friends have been shoved in this place with my family for hours now.”

“Pretty much.” I pump a reassuring squeeze to his hand. “Ready?”



“We could get a hotel.”

“Nope. Sorry, you need to face your fear of love and attention.”

“I refuse.”

At least we’re smiling when we step into the rambunctious cottage.

Bags from department stores are stacked in a row near a new line of shoes. The guys went out to get a few clothes and toiletries since they literally showed up with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Rees kicks off his shoes and tightens his hold on my hand as I lead him down the hallway toward the bustle of the front room and kitchen.

We step into a million moments.

Alexis, Bridger, and Tate play poker at the table with Lee, Gram, and Noah.

Briar chats with Ellie and points to makeup swatches.

When Briar fangirled over Ellie’s music they got to talking, and the second Briar learned Ellie’s makeup artist was out with a new baby, leaving Ellie to figure out her face for shows alone, Briar set to work on all the tips to match Ellie’s vibrant, everchanging hair color.

If I had to guess, I’d say the model will be hired before the day’s over. Maybe it’ll give her the nudge to live her passion.

Adam and Becca stack plates of snacks on the coffee table in the TV room while Adrienne sits on the couch, eyeing them

with a hefty amount of suspicion. Justine keeps to the kitchen, clearly uneasy about the houseguests, but polite enough not to say anything.

Ironically, again, it's Mark who sees us first. The same as the other night, he descends the steps in the same moment we step into his path.

“Oh.” He reels back. “You're here.”

A standoff builds between us until Rees breaks, his hand out. “Thanks for your help, Mark.”

Mark clears his throat and shakes Rees's hand. “Yeah. It was Vienna mostly, but ... I'm glad you're doing better, man. Really.”

Will they be besties? I doubt it, but maybe a few resentments can fade between stepbrothers today.

“He's back!” Becca announces, rushing us in the hallway.

In moments we're surrounded by other people. Ellie hugs Rees, quietly chastising him for scaring them. Briar hops up, handing Rees a handwritten list of home remedies she promises will help keep airways open and healthy.

I bite my lip against the thickness in my throat when Gram cups his cheeks and hugs him until Lee reminds her Rees needs to breathe, or he'll be back at the hospital. Adrienne keeps her distance, but I don't mind. A bit of sympathy is there that her wedding weekend has shifted into a bit of a disaster, but again, that is the risk she took by spending the first few days of a honeymoon with a group of people.

I still have my suspicions she did it to flaunt her ring in Rees's face. But I'll never prove it and I'll never waste the energy trying.

"Y'all didn't need to stay," Rees tells his band.

"Oh, we weren't going to," Tate says. "Then we heard there was a movie night about to go down, and since Vegas doesn't have movies, we decided to take advantage of the opportunity to finally see one."

Rees shoves his shoulder, laughing. "Thanks." Nothing is playful in his voice now. "Thank you for coming guys."

"We always will, man," Bridger says, clapping him on the back.

Rees starts to retreat under all the caring going on; his muscles tense, but I hold him steady, squeezing his hand.

He scans the room. "What's the movie? Noah isn't making us watch his show, right?"

Ellie hums with an exaggerated wink at Noah. "We're always up for a good *Wicked Darlings* binge."

Noah wiggles his brows. "I won't force you to endure my excellence today, Regina."

My head drops onto Rees's shoulder. "Figured it's about time I saw *The Goonies*, Darcy."

His eyes brighten. "Really? I'm sold. You know the main character has asthma, right?"

"Is that why it's your favorite?"

“There are so many reasons why this movie will rock your world, Lizzy. I’m going to go get hospital smell off me, then we are doing this.”

It takes a few seconds before any of us fully back off and let him shower without an audience. Clearly, we’re more rattled than we’re letting on.

Justine is floundering. The shift in her family is a struggle for her to grasp, no doubt. Maybe, like Mark, she might give Rees a chance after all this. She’ll recognize Perfectly Broken isn’t made of partiers, that Rees isn’t a screwup in life. Still, it’s surprising when she settles next to Lee on the couch because ... they’re going to watch a movie with their boys.

All of them.

Adrienne sits next to Mark with clear signals to everyone to keep their distance. Gram insists that Alexis parks her pregnant body at an end of the couch since the feet pop up, then starts harping at Bridger to rub her ankles to help with swelling.

When Rees comes out, his hair is damp, his skin red from the water, and he’s wearing glasses.

I give him a look, and his cheeks deepen in color. “Impressed yet, Vi? You snagged yourself an asthmatic with glasses who has read *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“Twice. For pleasure, not for school purposes,” Noah adds without looking at his brother.

Rees leans his face close to mine. “I bet you’re quivering at my sex appeal.”

My head falls back with a laugh. I snag his hand and pull him down onto the couch with me. “I didn’t tell you? Inhalers and tattoos are my thing.” I kiss the hinge of his jaw, whispering for him alone, “Especially when they come with you.”

Twenty-Six

# VIENNA

I GRIN AT THE video Becca sent me of the recording session. I've watched it at least three times since this morning.

Kids wear big, bulky headphones and huddle around standing mics in a massive studio with the Perfectly Broken raven behind them. It isn't their normal studio—I've seen the smaller one when Rees took me to meet Greyson, the head of security, so I could come and go at Enigma as I please.

The video shows Blake conducting his band students, a huge grin on his face as Bridger sings, and the rest of the band plays in front of the kids.

My stomach stirs at the sight of Rees lost in his music.

He's delicious and broody and perfect. I wish I could've been there.

Three weeks since California, and I can hardly keep up with all that's happened. Rees is finally cleared by Pops to start working on the music video and recordings again.

During his weeks of boredom, when Enigma thought he might break, he fixed every leaky faucet, ceiling fan, and squeaky hinge in my apartment. I think Marti is falling in love with him much like me.

Life has changed since I met Rees, no mistake. I'm bolder, I walk with my head a little higher. I even survived another informal discussion with Alexis about making some adaptations with Never Forgotten Boxes.

My stomach tightens with excitement merely thinking of the input I've been able to give on how to expand her audience.

I'm not officially involved, even though Alexis has practically begged me to join her team, but I felt something new. Something exciting and natural being part of a foundation. Even if I'm only at the giving-input level.

Over the last few weeks, I've loved getting closer to Alexis and the ladies of Perfectly Broken, and even have an official invite to their Netflix Nights once a week.

It's a little strange watching *Wicked Darlings*, seeing Noah in bloody battles and passionate romance when I know he's a chatty teddy bear who greets his brother in Daisy Duke shorts.

Rees demands the girls skip the love scenes when I'm there. Says it's weird since they're twins.

They don't.

I abandon the teacher's lounge with copies for tomorrow's lesson in hand, and head for my classroom. The day is nearly



over. Good thing; today is a day I don't want to stay late getting out of here.

There are places to be.

When I turn the corner, Marti and Tabitha hang outside my classroom, a bag of cashews between them, staring through the line of glass into my room.

“What’s wrong with you two?”

Marti sighs. “Nothing, girl. Just keeping my envy of my best friend at bay. I mean, there has to be something wrong with him, right?”

I shoot her with a quizzical look and glance through the windows.

My heart jolts. Rees sits at one of our round tables with old copies of *Lord of the Flies* spread around a few of my honors students.

“What is he doing?”

“CeCe” – Marti points to one of my juniors – “told him she didn’t see the symbolism in the book. The man sat everyone down and started going on about how Piggy represents something about rationalism, and Jack can show us the savagery of humanity, and all this other English jumble. They’ve been eating up every word since. He’s a male version of you, and there has to be something wrong with him. Tell me there is something wrong with him.”

I love this man. A bookish high school dropout who rocks hard on stage. The petty side of me wants to spread the truth of

who he really is merely to let his bullies see he didn't break. He won.

Hugging my middle, I move for the door. "He's not perfect, but I'll take him."

Marti groans and eats a cracker. "Ugh, Tabs, let's go find an elevator tonight. Maybe Vienna will surprise us with Rees's movie star brother or something."

I smile. Noah is single—no, he and Briar are not a thing even though tabloids tried to spin it—but I don't think he's interested in anything. Not yet, at least.

Tabby squeezes Marti's arm. "Knock yourself out, girl. I'm going to dinner with Blake tonight."

"Great. I'll go sit home alone." Marti faces me. "Nervous about tonight?"

I shake my head. "No. It'll be great. If I can get through this last class, at least."

She grins. "Have Rees teach, they won't make a sound."

I wave them away and step into my classroom. "So, am I done for the day?"

I prop my hands on my hips, trying not to grin when Rees peeks over his shoulder. His hair is still styled from the recording studio, and there is the slightest hint of eyeliner under his bottom lashes.

Yes, please. The man has a dangerous look sometimes, then cracks it open with sweetness.

“Hey, you,” he says, grinning big and white. He reaches out for my hand. “I’m educating these guys on the importance of this book.” He wiggles his copy.

“I can see that. I think I might take a break and let you finish up.”

Should I be hurt that the entire class loves my boyfriend enough they almost look like they’d prefer it? I don’t know, but Rees gives up his spot at our round table, and leaves me with a hand squeeze and promise he’ll meet me outside after school is out.

By the time class is wrapped up, I have twenty kids looking forward to a new book, and a new set of butterflies in my belly. As promised, I find Rees near the back doors, waiting. I snake my arms around his waist, holding him close.

He kisses me slowly, like I’m the only good thing about the day.

“I saw the recording video.” My chin tilts up to meet his eyes while still keeping his body against mine. “How’d it go?”

One palm brushes my hair off my face. “Amazing. The kids killed it. I can’t wait for the finished sound.”

I unravel from his arms and grab my purse from behind my desk. “I can’t wait either. But the question is: are you ready for tonight?”

His face visibly pales, but he hides it beneath his wickedly sexy grin. “What do you think, Lizzy?”

“I think you’re terrified.”

He laughs and takes my hand, tugging me outside. “That obvious?”

“They’re going to love you. Mom already texted me that they’re looking forward to it.”

Rees blows out a long breath. “I haven’t met a girl’s parents since I was fourteen.”

“And was it so bad?”

“You saw Adrienne’s parents at the wedding. They didn’t like me then, and they still don’t.”

I laugh. I still haven’t figured Adrienne out. Mark—yes, Mark—has texted Rees a few times since coming home while Adrienne makes passive aggressive posts on social media with pictures from the wedding. None with Rees or me in them, of course. She posts about family, always tagging Noah, but never Rees.

It’s almost as if she wanted him to be the black sheep forever to make herself feel better.

Now, that his family is realizing he isn’t—she’s irritated.

Her loss is my beautiful gain.

Rees walks me out to my car. He parked his bike beside it, and before he opens my door he kisses me long and hard. We’re cautious around the school with affection. I don’t need high school kids making my life difficult with a million questions about my famous boyfriend, but something about tonight unlocks a thrilling new piece, and we don’t hold back.

“See you soon,” he whispers when we come up for a breath of air.

“Don’t be late, Darcy.”



I’m about to ask Rees if he needs his inhaler he looks so nervous. He adjusts the rolled sleeves of his shirt. Like the wedding, he pulls off the formal with the rugged in a perfect balance.

After the third breath, I take his hand under the table. “They’re going to love you.”

He clears his throat. “You’re one thousand percent girlfriend material, Vi. You won my dad over the second he met you, and he is fully aware you’re way out of my league. I’m not the guy moms are thrilled to see on the doorstep.”

These broken pieces he shows me—the man has stolen my heart.

“Hmm. Let’s double check, shall we?” I tap my chin. “You keep tabs on my chocolate marshmallow supply.” I kiss his cheek. “You cook me dinner.”

“Macaroni and cheese doesn’t count.”

“Excuse me, this is my list. Butt out.” I rest my head on his shoulder. “You text me every morning just to wish me a good day.” I kiss his knuckles and lower my voice. “You trust me with things, and I trust you.” My thumb follows the line of his jaw. “You make me feel safe, important, and wanted, Rees.

I'm sorry, but if that isn't boyfriend material, then I don't want one."

"Lizzy." A sexy kind of growl breaks from his throat when he kisses me. "You can't say things like that when we're in public or I'll embarrass us both."

"Sweetie, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but your gentleman here doesn't know your name."

Rees and I jump apart.

My mom and dad stand at the edge of the table. Fay Shaw has always been beautiful, but tonight she pulled out all the stops. Her pale hair is curled—a trait she didn't pass on—and she's wearing one of her above the knee skirts. My dad is in a suit, a crooked grin on his face, his naturally tousled hair is combed, showing off the first peppers of gray on his sideburns.

"Mom," I whine. "It's a *Pride and Prejudice* thing."

My fingers sign as I speak. My dad prefers ASL but when I speak out loud at the same time we use SEE; helps me keep my sentences something Rees would typically follow. Sometimes we don't use any signs since Dad usually picks up on lip reading.

I know Rees is watching my hands, maybe trying to keep up. It's sweet. I'll break him in slowly to the differences in dialects. Even for me, who used it every day, it was a lot to learn.

My mom grins and curls me into her arms, whispering, “He’s handsome, Vi.”

Mother, I know. I. Know.

Rees jumps to his feet, his hand out. “Mrs. Shaw. It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

I watch him, bemused. “Ma’am?”

“Southern boy, Vi.”

“No, no, let him keep the ma’am,” my mom says. “I like that.”

My dad waves to get my attention. *Tell him I’m sir. Always.*

I snort a laugh, “Dad, he’s not going to call you sir.”

Rees braves the intro again, meeting my father’s eyes, then moving his hands. He’s ... he’s signing. A simple spelling of *Rees*, then, he clears his throat and says, “And I will call you sir ... sir.”

He holds still for a moment, as if making sure my dad followed, then he steps closer to me.

“You signed your name.”

Rees nods. “I’ve been practicing.”

I want to kiss him, like, yesterday.

My dad is impressed. He’s trying not to show it, but he wiggles his brows at me, then holds out his hand for Rees to take. A soft laugh flows through his chest and shoulders. My dad’s laughter is quiet, but it’s always been one of my favorite sounds.

“What’s funny?” I ask him.

My dad pulls my mom’s chair out for her, then faces me. *People say I have deficits, but this guy thinks he’s a coloring book.*

I laugh into my water, a weird wet snort, so it sprays a little. “Dad.”

“What?” Rees asks.

My dad winks. Ugh. He’s awful and will know if I don’t translate correctly. “Um, he thinks he’s funny, and basically said he’s not the one with a deficit, you are because you think you’re a coloring book.”

Rees pauses, then a loud, authentic laugh fills the space. He makes eye contact with my dad and holds up one hand. “Once I got started, I couldn’t stop. Maybe you’re right.”

Not exactly how I expected our meet-the-parents dinner to start, but the tone is set, and it turns out more perfect than I imagined.

My mom asks about *Perfectly Broken*, the filming at the school. She offers a bit of doctoral concern over his asthma.

My dad quizzes him on his favorite bands, they get lost in eighties movies, and before dessert arrives Rees Hayden and Miles Shaw have planned to attend the upcoming Journey concert at Caesar’s Palace in March.

Rees insists on paying for dinner, holding my dad’s stare in some manly pride thing, but my Darcy actually wins. It’s



almost as impressive as the way he has my mom laughing after describing the first time he stumbled on a stage.

*Rees, can I trust you to look after her?* Dad asks as we walk outside.

Rees smiles once my mom translates. He takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. “Yes, sir.”

My mom hugs me, but looks at Rees. “We’ll need to embarrass you a little more and have you come visit Clayton. You and Vi are the talk of the town. Everyone wants an autograph, but we’ll save that for next time.”

I roll my eyes. “Tell everyone to relax and remind them he’s human.”

“I’m very unimpressive to your daughter.” Rees squeezes my hip.

I pinch his arm. “I didn’t say that, but I’m not going to take you home to a bunch of crowds waiting to bug you.”

“I like this protective side,” he says, laughing.

Who cares if my parents see? I peck his lips, wiping off some of my lip gloss left behind.

“Miles, stop.” My mom taps his shoulder, and I catch my dad’s wide grin, laughing with her.

“What did he say? I missed it.”

“Nothing. He’s just being a dad.” My mom lets out a sigh. “Well, this was fun. It was wonderful to meet you, Rees.”

His eyes go wide when she gives him a tight hug.

*We'll talk later, Vi*, Dad tells me, then shakes Rees's hand again.

Once my parents leave us for the parking garage beneath the restaurant, Rees scoops an arm around my waist and lets out a haggard breath.

I pat the spot over his heart. "Can you breathe again?"

He laughs and kisses the side of my head. "I think so. It went okay, right? Your dad didn't sneak in anything about me staying away from his daughter?"

I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing against his chest. "You won him over when you introduced yourself with sign."

He smiles shyly. "I thought it would be good."

I lean in to kiss him but am stopped by a bright, harsh light. Rees blocks his face, and when my eyes adjust to the flashes, I realize we're surrounded by a large camera, three guys in hats, all shouting things at us.

"Rees! Is this your girlfriend? Is she the teacher you've been seeing at Valley High School?"

His eyes flash in something dark. In another second, Rees has his arm around me, dragging me back toward the restaurant. Everything spins quickly. One minute there are three paparazzi, but in the next, it's as if more snap up from the sidewalk.

A swarm of reporters surround him, shouting profane things. Things that turn my stomach.

“Are you Vienna Shaw?”

“Miss Shaw—is it true students caught you in a compromised situation in your classroom? Are parents demanding your resignation?”

I cling to Rees’s waist, drawing in a sharp breath when one of them reaches for me. He actually touches me, and for a moment I think he’s going to pull me into the swarm.

“Get your hands off her,” Rees grumbles. He curses at them.

“Rees did your girl hook up with Noah in California? Does she use both of you?”

He reels on the guy, fists clenched. He’s going to hit him, end up in jail, and I’m not about to watch that happen.

I pull him into the restaurant, and practically beg the hostess to hide us. She hurries us to the staff office where we can finally breathe as the managers try to shoo the cameras away from their front doors.

In the office Rees laces his hands behind his head, taking deep, sharp breaths.

“Rees,” I whimper. “Rees, it’s fine.”

It’s not fine. Truth be told, that was terrifying.

“Fine? How ... how did they know your name, Vi? They know where you work, and ... they followed us here. They’re *following* you.”

“Hey.” I trap his face between my hands. “Take a deep breath. Please.”

Rees closes his eyes and drags a slow breath through his nose until I'm convinced he's not working himself into another asthma attack.

“We knew they'd find out my name eventually, right?”

He winces. “Not like this. They called out the school, which means someone told them about you specifically. The school is under contract to keep privacy, and they wouldn't give you up, right? Marti, she wouldn't say anything to a reporter would she?”

“No,” I say. “No, of course not. But it could be anyone. My parents just said half of Clayton knows I'm dating you.”

He scrubs his face in frustration. “Those things they were saying—” He grits his teeth. “They're going to write about you, Vienna. I knew this would happen and—”

“Hey, stop.” I take his hands. “This isn't your fault, Rees. It's ... it's just part of what this is, right? What does it matter what they write about me? We know the truth. Listen, you've dealt with this longer than me, so I'm going to need you to help me because we're in this together. Right?”

I search his face. He hates everything about what happened outside. Worse, he blames himself. His eyes give him up the way he glares at the floor.

“Rees? Right?” I press.

Rees kisses me softly, holding my face, and whispers, “Right, Lizzy.”

I smile with a touch of caution. I'll need to get used to attention, in the back of my head, I knew it would happen.

I simply wish I knew how bad the fallout would be.

Twenty-Seven

# REES

I HAVE A FEELING I know who is really behind the leak. I stare at Vienna's name and pictures of her face with me in California.

My fists clench and unclench as I scan the social media posts from Sabrina, one of Adrienne's bridesmaids. They've been edited, as in, she went back and altered the text from the original posts from right after the wedding.

New pictures of Vienna and me on the dancefloor, standing close, even a picture of us kissing in the driveway right after I was discharged from the hospital. A select few people could've taken that shot. I'm instantly canceling out my band, Lex, Ellie, and Becca. They would never do it.

The pictures could've been innocent enough, but it's the caption that turns my blood on a steady boil.

*Wedding Weekend! Fun to catch up with @NoahJHayden but even cooler to see @reesjoseph settled down.*

*Schoolteacher Vienna Shaw for the win. Keep an eye on him in Las Vegas girl.*

First, Sabrina Lundgren hated me in high school. One of Adrienne's best friends, she was one of the worst critics of my guitar, my attitude, and my relationship with her friend. Second, she used Noah's actor account so more people would see. Third, who posts a full name like that? She doesn't have Vienna's social media because they *are not friends*.

Deep in my gut I know Sabrina posted our city, her occupation, and her full freaking name with intention.

When the right tabloids see something like this, it doesn't take them long to find out everything about a person.

Already the firestorm is raining on her head.

Gross headlines about a battle between brothers, of Vienna's misbehavior in the classroom. She'd never do anything to compromise her students, and now because of her attachment to me, she's getting the backlash.

The only bright spot of the entire post is Noah responded. Golden Boy is gone and his promised attitude of sticking up for me has begun.

*Hey @brina23 you've got some nerve posting someone's private pictures like this, especially when you weren't there to take them. Crazy how that happens. Know anything about these pictures @adriennegrant? Take her name down and get a life.*



He's on the same thought train as me. Noah's response has spurred outcry from his fangirls. They're furious for a woman they don't know simply because Noah is.

I expect this post to be removed soon enough, but clearly, the damage is done.

**My fingers shake when I send the text. Adrienne, I know you sent those pictures to Sabrina. You crossed a line. Because her name got out, some guy practically grabbed Vienna in the street yesterday. Take them down and get out of our business.**

I don't expect a response. Truthfully, I expect my dad or Justine to call and yell at me by tonight, but my phone goes off two minutes later.

**Adrienne: Brina asked for pictures from the wedding. I didn't tell her to post them like that.**

**Me: Pretty sure the picture of us in the driveway wasn't from the wedding. And Sabrina didn't know her name. Wonder who gave it to her.**

**Adrienne: I didn't mean for it to explode like it did.**

My molars grind together. I pound each word, tangled in knots, and furious. **Well, it did. Don't post about me. We're**

**not friends. And NEVER post about Vienna again.**

**Adrienne: We aren't friends? Really? We're family, Rees. I never stopped caring about you.**

**Me: This was vindictive, and you know it. Sorry we messed up your wedding weekend, I'll try not to stop breathing next time. Take it down.**

She responds with more excuses, and I delete her number without a response. I can blame Adrienne for starting the flame, but my name is the wind, spreading our relationship in front of fans and foe at the same rate.

It's a storm. People from Clayton talk kindly about Vienna online, they give more details of who she is, unknowingly adding to the problem.

Then, there are the cruel ones. People from my past who insist any woman who'd be with me must have questionable morals. They judge her. Degrade her. Some say wretched things about how they'd like to take her from me.

It's sick and I have no idea how to help her through it.

But one thought burns a hole in my skull: she'd be better off away from my chaos.

My phone lights up again, but it's Vienna's name. Nearly an instant calm comes until I read her message.

**Vi: Hey. FYI I'll be a little late coming over. I have a meeting with Karla after school. See you soon \*heart emoji\***

I don't respond. I call her.

"Hey," she says in a low voice. "Lunch is almost over, so —"

"Why is the principal meeting with you?" I interrupt.

"Um, I don't know. I just got the email."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. This isn't good.

"Rees," she says. "It's going to be okay."

"How is it at the school?"

She pauses long enough I don't believe the next thing she says. "It's fine.

*"Vienna."*

A sigh blows into the phone. "There are reporters here. They haven't gotten to me, though. The school resource officers aren't letting them even get close to the doors."

I curse.

"Hey," she snaps. "This is going to blow over. It will. Aren't you always telling me you're just the bass player?"

She laughs and I want to smile, I do, but the sinking feeling in my stomach makes me want to puke even more.

"It would blow over faster, but the things they're saying are bringing Noah into it, and he's the one everyone is interested

in. It'll be a lot longer and do a lot of damage before it blows over.”

“Then we hang on until it does,” she whispers, but there is a quiver of fear in her voice. She’s worried, and, no mistake, she’s trying to spare me, so I don’t spiral.

Too late for spiraling. The consequence track is clear. If I would never have stepped back into Vienna’s life with a bunch of stupid addendums, dragged her to California, if I never would’ve fallen in love with the girl from the elevator, she wouldn’t be in this mess.

This lands on me.

“I’ll see you tonight, okay?” she says.

“Okay.”

“Hey, Rees.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m with you. I want this with you.”

I wince against the sharp jab in my chest. How did I ever get a woman like her? “I want you too.”

Sometimes, though, we don’t get to keep what we want.

Twenty-Eight

# VIENNA

THIS DAY HAS BEEN chaos. Parent emails asking about my name in the headlines. Half my class was absent with concerned parents voicing their distrust in my abilities to teach.

Did I downplay this to Rees? Yes.

Did I have good reason? Also, yes.

He's shouldering this himself and is pulling away. I'm sure his head is spinning in all the ways he needs to fix this, in all the ways he's responsible because he's not deserving of something good.

*I'm used to being the bad one.*

And villains don't deserve a happily ever after. Not to Rees.

We'll survive this. It's the only thought I hold onto when I step into the office, chin high. I wave at Lola, the secretary, and she somberly ushers me into Karla's office.

“Vienna,” Karla says, standing behind her desk. “Have a seat.”

I sit, hands in my lap. I’m sure she has questions.

“Vienna,” Karla begins once she returns to her plush office chair. “I don’t like prying into personal lives, but—”

“It’s true, Karla. Mr. Hayden and I are in a relationship. I don’t mind you asking.”

She wiggles her lips back and forth, then leans back in her chair. “It’s a problem, Vienna. A real problem.”

I knew there would be a little pushback. But we’ve done nothing wrong here and I will make the case for it. “Mr. Hayden and I have not crossed any lines on school property, or anywhere, Karla. I assure you. This is a media frenzy because my name was finally found out.”

“I realize that,” she says, a briskness in her voice I don’t like. “But it is our duty to keep our students safe. The superintendent, and frankly, me as well, have major concerns about our ability to do that with your connection to Mr. Hayden and the school.”

It’s a knife to the heart. I blink, trying to keep my voice steady. “I’d ... I’d never do anything to harm any student.”

Karla softens. “I know, Vienna. But circumstances might be out of our control. Your name is out there now. and as long as you are connected to Mr. Hayden, those sharks will be here hoping to catch a statement from you. All day parents have been calling with concerns over safety and privacy.”

“So, what are you saying?”

The way she studies her desk for too many heartbeats tells me it won't be good. “We'll be placing you on administrative leave for the time being, Vienna.”

“Karla—”

She holds up her hand, stopping me. “After some time, we can reassess. We can see if you've changed your circumstances.”

My brow furrows. “Changed my circumstances? You mean if I've broken up with Rees?” I want to shout at her that they can't fire me because of who I'm dating. Right? I mean, is that even legal?

She tilts her head, staring at me like I'm a pathetic lovesick girl. “Vienna, these types of men aren't known for their longevity in relationships. Let's get this to blow over, and you can return to the classroom when life gets back to normal.”

My palms sweat, my heart races. Bold of her, thinking she knows anything about Rees at all. Who knows his heart, his fears, who has been there in his harshest moments? Me. He's loyal and kind and I'm at a precipice.

“And if my circumstances don't change?”

She considers the question. “Well, if media tensions continue, we might not have a choice but to take action. If it comes down to the best interests of our students and you, I know you understand, we'd pick the students and part ways.”



A tangle of thorns coils hard and angry in my gut. I love my students, I've loved teaching them, and I completely understand the concern of parents and the administration.

I wish they were being unreasonable, but Karla isn't wrong. The sort of headline chasers outside will do anything to get a good story. If I were a parent, I'd be furious at the thought of my child being exploited because an employee brought the risk to school.

But on the other hand, the heavier hand, the greater hand, I love Rees. I love him stupid. He's my first thought in the morning, he's the new song of my soul. When I look at the future, it's drearier without him in it.

Life always brings choices. I can love more than one thing, but if it comes down to one or the other, I hope when I look back I can always say I followed the truest desires of my heart.

"Karla," I say, voice soft. "I'm not going to end my relationship with Rees. He's not a flight risk, not to me. We're together, and plan to be together. But I love my students, and I will never be a risk to them. So, I think the choice best suited for everyone is if ... I resign, and the school makes a very public announcement that I'm no longer here."

"Vienna." Her mouth drops. "Let's take a deep breath. Give it some time, take the leave, and we'll reassess."

"We can, but my situation won't be different. I'll be with Rees, and he'll still be in Perfectly Broken. His brother will still be in TV shows. They'll remain high profile targets for media smear campaigns."

Silence gathers like thorns, prickling up my arms in unease.

“Vienna, be sure before you do this.”

Where I expected an unbearable ache in my chest, instead a bloom of warmth fills me. I have passions beyond my classroom, I have talents to share, and I have Rees.

I will choose him. I will choose love. Every time.

Karla tells me to wait a week. I agree, but in my heart, I know this will be my end at Valley High.



Marti is going to kill me if I don't respond to her five text messages and ten phone calls. But I need to talk to one person first.

I pull up to the gate outside Rees's house. It's secluded at the end of a subdivision in the hills. Private, exactly as he likes it. The stucco is a dark brown, with cut stone along the foundation and a front door more like a medieval castle. The arch hits ten feet and over the peephole is a small square of iron bars like a cage.

His motorcycle is in the driveway, and his truck is parked in one of the open garages.

When I type in the gate code he gave me right after California, I don't expect to see him pacing at the end of the drive.

I put the car in park and slowly step out. “Rees?”

His eyes snap up. “Did you resign?”

Holy—how fast does news travel in this town? “Who told you?”

“Marti has been trying to get in touch with you, but you’re ignoring her, so she called me. She said you resigned. Did you?”

I let my shoulders slouch, shut off my ignition, and walk toward him. “I did.” Rees digs his fingers in his hair, cursing. I grip one of his wrists. “Listen to my reasons before you get upset.”

“I know the reason, Vienna.” His voice is strained and his eyes spark in more than worry. There is sharp disappointment. As if he hoped this wouldn’t happen but knew it would. “Me. I’m the reason. I’m the reason you were forced to make a choice.”

“Rees,” I say, reaching for his cheek. His jaw is taut, body stiff, like he’s battling every instinct not to recoil. “Give me a little credit; I chose for myself, and Karla isn’t accepting my formal resignation for a week.”

“But you’re going to give it. You’ll need to because this connection to me is upending your life. Right?”

His description is harsh. Not untrue, but he’s picking the most vicious way to describe what’s happening.

“You upending my life isn’t a bad thing when I want you in my life,” I say, doing all I can to mask the hurt in my voice. He bristles away from me, laughing. Almost cruelly. I hate it.

My face pinches in pain. “What’s so funny? Is it so hard to believe I’d want you?”

His eyes flash with sharp heat. It stops me in my tracks. He’s trembling in frustration like an angry bear, not the man who holds my heart.

“Nothing is funny,” he says, slowly, dangerously soft. “But you’re choosing wrong. You’re choosing dead wrong, and I won’t let you do it.”

“You won’t *let* me? Let me do what, Rees?”

“Give up your life for something that never should’ve started in the first place.”

The lash of each word is staggering. For a second, I think I might tumble off my feet. I brace one hand on the hood of my car, blinking through the rush of tears. “I don’t believe you mean that.”

There is a glimmer of remorse in his face. A fleeting micro expression. Had I not been accustomed to reading facial expressions to communicate, I might’ve missed it. He’s hurting. He’s fighting. He’s pulling away. And he hates it as much as I do.

“I inserted myself in your life,” he says. “Convinced you to let me step into your space, and these are the consequences.”

I rush to him, trapping his face in my palms, pressing my brow to his. “Wonderful consequences.” I let out a trembling breath. “Beautiful consequences. Consequences I choose. No one is forcing me to be here, Rees. I’m here for *you*.”

His hands cover mine on his face, and for a second I think he might pull me closer. But soon, his hands ease mine away. “This is good,” he says.

“What is?”

“To have this happen now before we go too deep. Before there are too many regrets.”

My heart dries into nothing but a hollow pit in the center of my chest. Every sense, every nerve ending withdraws to the background until the pain is frozen. Numbed. Until I shield myself against the agony that will break, if I allow it. “I know what you’re doing,” I say, softly. “Don’t.”

“I think it will be better—” He shoves his hands in his pockets, finding the words, and struggling. Struggling because every word is a lie, but he’d rather shred something amazing than believe he could be someone else’s orbit. “It will be better if our contract ends here.”

“Don’t downgrade me to a piece of paper,” I spit through my teeth. I lift my eyes, tears drying, as anger builds, a delirious kind. “You’re a coward.”

He flinches, but says nothing, so I barrel on. “You’d rather give up love to stay hidden behind your fears that you’re somehow not deserving, not good enough. All I see is a wonderful, talented man running away because he refuses to work through his own warped self-perception. You’re too afraid to put the past behind you, and will give up a future to stay in your comfort zone as the bad guy.”

“As I said,” he croaks. “Better to see all this now rather than later. It wouldn’t be worth it.”

I slump back against the side of my car as if he slapped me. “I never should’ve trusted all those things you said about wanting me, wanting this. I fell for it.”

“You should be angry,” he says. “It’ll be easier to get over, right?”

I close my eyes. Empty. Cold. Furious. “I hope someday you realize you were worth it. At least to me.”

I have nothing more to say. My heart can’t take another dart. Tears blur my vision as I return to my car, turn the key, the last thing I catch before I slam the door on my broken heart is, “Bye, Lizzy.”

Twenty-Nine

# VIENNA

“MISS SHAW.” A CHEERFUL woman with a total Mrs. Claus rosy cheeked look peeks over the top of the tall desk. “The board is ready for you.”

I smooth my boring, yet professional pencil skirt and grip the folder with my resume and application tightly. The building is two blocks off The Strip, filled with live potted plants and exposed beams. It’s a hodgepodge of businesses stacked on top of each other.

Never Forgotten Boxes is on the third floor and shares a wall with a group of fulltime YouTubers who spend a great deal of their morning laughing loudly and bouncing balls against the wall.

I blow out a nervous breath, stomach in knots. For a bit of written courage, I steal a glance at my dad’s last text.

**Dad: Good luck today, Vi. Remember, when the earth shakes it makes mountains. But we never stop climbing,**



**right? You picked a good mountain, sweetheart. Call us when you hear one way or the other.**

This particular mountain is monstrous and jagged and steeper than anything I've climbed before. A week after Rees Hayden stomped on my heart, I am not better.

I'm still broken.

But I'm still climbing. In time, I'll be okay. More scarred, with a few bruises along the way, but I will survive.

I only wish Rees knew I wanted to make the climb with him.

The doors swing open before I can turn the knob. I'm greeted by an old man with a perfectly round bald spot in the back of his head and a toothy grin. "Miss Shaw. Come in. Alexis has been telling us all about your insights into this new direction."

On the table are glasses of orange juice, and a baking dish of homemade chocolate muffins that breathe like I've walked into a cloud of sugar and comfort. On the left side of the table are two women. One who wears her life in deep smile lines, the other looks fresh out of high school. In the corner I give a little wave to Quinn.

He offers a friendly smile in return, but his eyes say a hundred different things. Mostly silent apologies and sympathy.

If all goes well today, at least I'll get to see the sexy bodyguard friend who changed my life by a simple suggestion.

At the head of the table, Alexis waves, rubbing her baby belly. She's about six weeks out and looks beautifully miserable. Expectant mothers are interesting. They smile a lot, then wince and groan in the same breath.

"Vi," I'm so excited you came. Sorry, I'm not standing. Little guy is pressing down hard today, and I've had a lot of orange juice." She snickers. "Sort of like the first time we met. I don't need to explain more, right? We all get what I'm trying to say."

Quinn chuckles and shakes his head. "We get it, Lex."

"Okay." Alexis grins and gestures at the chair beside her. "Have a seat and we'll chat. Arlo will take your resume for you."

The man who let me in smiles and takes the folder out of my hands. Alexis offers me a muffin, but my stomach is too tight to eat anything. There is no way Alexis doesn't know what happened between me and Rees. Perfectly Broken is close enough to be a breathing, living thing. When one piece moves, the others follow. I anticipate the look, maybe a muttered question, a check-in on how I'm coping without a heart in my chest anymore.

But she says nothing as she introduces me to Arlo, her board president. The man has access to over fifty top publishers in the U.S. and Canada and has been instrumental in arranging special editions of popular books for the boxes. Lucinda, the smiley woman, manages the foundation applications, vetting those who submit requests for boxes with

a team of four. Then, Marquee, the hipster social media marketing director, gives a brief wave across the table.

“Vienna,” Alexis says, picking at a muffin but never eating a piece, “you pointed out our severe lack of adaptive resources for varying abilities across the board. It’s opened an entire department we *need* to create. Focus will be on adapting boxes, but also working with Marquee to arrange a new video and audio channel for those in the deaf community and the visually impaired.

“One note in our plan is to place special focus on low-income families with special needs in their homes. From the surveys we put out, many of these parents work multiple jobs to cover medical, or various services, so it’s one of the tasks the Adaptive Reading Director will handle. I think you’d make an incredible addition, but this isn’t teaching. Is it something you’d even be interested in?”

I clasp my hands in my lap and gather my thoughts into, what I hope, is an intelligent response. “Ever since I was small, I was shown over and over those among us with different abilities are some of the most capable, brilliant, talented people I’ve ever met. Opportunities like this one, are amazing ways to show others exactly that.”

A new passion blooms in my blood. I sit a little straighter. “Special needs don’t mean incapable or weak. It means these kids have a mountain that is different than the one we might climb. These boxes have the power to unlock imagination, a love of books, or they could simply be another way children

feel like they fit in with their peers. To some it might be small, but I believe the smallest things can have the biggest impact.”

I never anticipated latching onto a drive as much as helping this foundation expand into a demographic I love so fiercely.

I bite down to keep a bubble of emotion from spilling out. My pulse won't stop racing. The longer I sit here, dozens of ideas bumble through my head as if I already have the nameplate and office.

Alexis tilts her head, smiling. “You know what I think, Vi? I think we meet people for a reason. I met you for a reason. We all did.” Ah, there is the underlying meaning. It jabs, but not like I thought it would. I did meet Rees for a reason. I wanted it to be more, but perhaps, it was for this moment. Alexis leans forward. “We would love for you to be part of Never Forgotten Boxes. But I know this is very different than the public school system. Take some time, if you need, to decide if this is what you want.”

What I want.

This is a change. A risk. Something wild and bold and different. Not the sort of thing a background color with a comfortable life would do.

I never imagined *Director of ...* at the end of my credentials. I never imagined managing anything so influential, so impactful as bringing the magic of books into the lives of children who may not have access to it otherwise.

What I want.

Maybe I can't have the one I wanted more than air, but, maybe, I can have this.

Maybe it's time to be bolder. To step out of the background, and take hold of what I want, then never let go.

Still, it aches that the first person I want to talk to about all this ... isn't there.



“Babes, are you sure about this?” Marti snuffles as she helps me load a few things from my desk.

I nod and close the lid on a plastic storage container. “This is what I need, Mart.”

“I don't see how it solves anything.” Marti peeks out the window. “Those creeps are still out there.”

I glance across the street where a paparazzi camp is set up. For the last week wild headlines have drawn more crowds of tabloid reporters. I'm almost positive they sleep out there. All of it continues to cause an uproar at the school.

Today is even worse. Perfectly Broken is recording the shots of their music video.

My chest pinches. Rees is somewhere on campus, and I'm quietly hiding in my classroom. To see him when my heart is still bleeding will be too much. Facing his rejection again will split open the scar he left behind all over again.

I won't be here long anyway.

Karla looked ready to cry when I handed in my resignation. But the district has been backed into a corner. Concerned parents, student safety, all those needs must be a higher priority than my comfort zone.

Judging by the media frenzy still camped on the lawn, even separated from Rees they'll continue to harass the school for the foreseeable future unless I am no longer part of it.

The official statement to the public—one the district is hoping the vultures will take as a hint to get lost—is a new teacher with ten years of experience will be taking over my classroom.

I'll peek in occasionally through the transition to help the kids adjust, but technically I'm coming more as a volunteer.

My heart wants to snap in two when I think of the kids. I love my students, they bring me joy, but this new position with Alexis and her foundation has ignited a fire inside I can't ignore.

The truth is this isn't that I was forced out of a job I love, or because of my relationship with Rees Hayden. It took a few days after leaving his house to realize it, but this move doesn't have anything to do with him.

This is for me. An opportunity I never expected, but one I feel in my bones I can't pass up. This choice is mine alone.

“Did you see the brother tear a guy's head off?” Marti snickers and holds out her phone.

“Noah?”

“Oh, yeah.”

I snatch her phone with the clip of Noah Hayden shoving his way through a field of reporters outside his building.

One question gets him to snap. “Noah! Anything to say about your brother and his situation with the teacher? Is it true she played you both?”

Noah stops, tears off his sunglasses. The funny, happy-go-lucky guy is replaced with a gleam of an angry beast.

“Stop talking about my brother!” Noah waves off someone who looks like part of his team, then steps right up to the guy’s recorder. “You need to get your facts straight. I’m not estranged from my brother. He is my best friend and always will be. He was dating an awesome woman who happens to be a schoolteacher until people like you made their world unsafe. So, here’s my statement—stay out of their business, and let them get back to what was good for them.”

With that Noah flips his sunglasses back on and continues into his building as if he never stopped.

I grin. He told Rees he was done being silent. Looks like he meant it.

“Good for him,” I say through a rasp. I wish I could follow Noah’s advice and get back to what was good for us. If only his brother agreed.

A knock comes to the door. Quinn, dressed like he’s a hulking-out CEO, steps into the room. “Ready, Vienna?”

Alexis told me she would have Quinn help walk me out, but I think it was more Bridger, and part of my hopeful heart wants to believe at the base of the request was Rees who is still looking out for me.

“I think so.” I let out a heavy sigh. “We aren’t going close to ... you know.”

Quinn takes the box from my hands. “No. We won’t go by the shoot if you don’t want to.”

“She doesn’t want to,” Marti says. Through all this she’s been fiercely loyal, but with an opinion on the tip of her tongue. In a dozen creative ways she’s dropped hints about trying to talk to a certain rock star.

How can I when Rees is the one who shut me out?

It burns, but I don’t know how I can fix it if he will never think better of himself.

Quinn touches my arm, a kind smile on his chiseled face. “Stay close to me out there, okay?”

I nod mutely, grip another cardboard box, and with one stride I step through a new, unknown door.



Thirty

# REES

I NEVER HAVE TO step foot in Valley High again if I don't want to. Why would I? There isn't a reason.

Not anymore.

Right now, I feel like a tool. I ditched my band, and I never ditch my band so blatantly.

The film crew, Finn, Jazzy, their kids, the rest of the guys, and their girls are all out celebrating a successful shoot of *Breaking Walls*. The additions of the high school band kids and choir students to the song will be epic, and I'll never forget working with the bass students.

But therein lies the problem.

To forget would be a welcome relief.

I disappear into my studio, blasting my music through the headphones. I'm even considering cracking open a few drinks and breaking a promise I made to my mom's headstone if it means I won't dream of Vienna Shaw.

Time. All it'll take is time and I won't see her face in my head. Her laugh will fade. The nervous signing. All of it will fade with a little more time.

Celebrating the end of the experience that changed my life doesn't sit right.

The lava lamp is in full force. My skull rings in a low eerie bass as I lie on my back, plucking my guitar.

Her face is still there.

Noah texted me earlier, asking what was going on with Vienna with attached pictures from the internet.

I shouldn't have looked. Now those images of Vienna leaving the school are burned in my brain. Her face was turned down, Quinn's broad shoulders blocked decent shots of her, but those fingers used to play with my hair, those arms used to hold me close.

I don't need a full body shot to know she left a place she loved today, and I don't know how to fix it.

I don't know how to fix any of this except by leaving her in peace.

"Rees!" A furious knock rattles the door to my studio. Parker. I close my eyes and pretend not to hear him. "Rees! Open the door. Lex is in labor, man!"

What? No, it's too early. I rip off my headphones, trip over my guitar which slams me into the door, but I get it open in about four seconds.

Parker fills the doorframe with a stupid, dopey grin. “Figured that would get you to unlock the door.”

I glare at him and get ready to slam it in his face. Unfortunately, Parker Knight is a pitcher in the MLB, the consequence being he possesses mammoth biceps, and could pop my head like a pimple. He shoves his way into the studio and takes aim for the mini fridge immediately.

“I’m pretty crappy company right now,” I say with as much venom as I can muster so he’ll get the freaking hint.

He doesn’t take it, or he doesn’t care. The point is a big, annoying baseball player sits on my narrow couch against the back wall and pops the top off a sports drink. Then, grabs my phone while he’s at it.

“Dude.” I reach for it.

“Ten missed calls, various people.” He clicks his tongue in disapproval. “Looks like you might be ignoring us.”

“Yeah.” I grab a water from the fridge and move to the opposite wall like I might burn up if I get too close to him. “I’d like to keep doing it if that’s okay with you.”

Parker snorts. “Wow. She really did a number on you, didn’t she?”

A swift heat floods my face. My chest tightens. I’m on the line of my lungs attacking me because I can’t get my emotions under control. That, or retreating to an unnamed location where no one in my life will ever find me again.

“You don’t want to go there, Park.” Each word peels out of my throat like sandpaper.

“Yeah,” he says, wholly unfazed by my snarly face. “I do. If it gets you back to the land of the living.”

“I’ve been, thanks. Didn’t like it. Think I’ll stay here a little longer.” To merely be a jerk, I wave my arm at the door as a signal for him to get up and leave.

Pointless. The arrogance of Parker Knight won’t allow him to be dismissed before he’s had his say.

“Why’d you end things, Rees?” He strums the strings of an old guitar. “I gave up our bromance so you could be with her.”

Fine. We’ll do this, then he’ll leave, and I can get back to my mission of forgetting an unforgettable woman.

“Maybe you missed it, but her reputation is under fire with stupid headlines, leaked pictures of us in California, and I basically got her fired from a job she loved.”

“Right. Totally makes sense to break up with her for it then.” He grins with a bit of slyness. “One of those kick-her-while-she’s-down things.”

A furrow deepens between my brows. “Just forget it.”

“I can’t. I’m told I persevere when my friends are being idiots. Did it for Tate, Adam, and Bridge. Smacked them right when they tried to run scared too.”

I glare at him. “Last I heard, you’re the reason Bridger and Alexis almost *didn’t* make it.”

“Don’t change the subject.” Parker shakes his head, his blasé grin lost in a narrowed stare. “We’re here to talk about you and how you cut off a good thing when she never asked you to.”

I dig my fingers into my hair. “Can we not? I’d rather get her *out* of my head.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yeah, and I would be doing good with it if some overly involved people in my life would leave me alone.”

“It sucks having people care about you, doesn’t it?” Parker says, carefully. “I’ll make a deal with you. Explain to me where your head is, then I’ll leave.”

Where is my head? In a million places all at once and each of them leads back to Vienna. The way I miss her makes no sense. The sound of her voice when she wonders out loud. The way she traced the outline of my tattoos without even knowing it. It’s an ache, deep and fierce, knowing she’s not mine.

Someday, someone else will be a safe place for Vienna. She’ll find something that will be seamless, and I hate everything about the thought.

“There,” Parker says. “Where did you go right there?”

I shake my head. “Why does it matter, man? We can go back to being the eternal bachelors.”

Parker leans over his knees. “I’m single because I want to be. No one has even come close to making me want more, and no one will. I’m not built for it. But I have nothing against

relationships, and I will have my say when one of my guys is making a huge mistake in one.”

“Come on, you guys have to understand why this is better. Look what she’s given up already.”

“I get why it got under your skin, sure.” Parker scratches the scruff on his chin. “For a day or two. But I don’t get why you’re so surprised she made a choice and chose you.”

“She’s not giving up her job for me.”

“Rees, isn’t that what people do? Make sacrifices for someone they want to mesh their life with?”

I bark a laugh. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m glad you asked.” He holds up one finger. “Bridger and Alexis. Lex had to leave her master’s degree program because of the media. She always thought she’d run a library someday. Dreamed of it. But that wasn’t going to work with how much travel the band does. Never Forgotten Boxes was born because she pivoted to make room for something she wanted more. Now, Bridger. He almost gave me up. Think about that. We’ve been joined at the hip since we were two, but he was willing to let a lifelong friendship go for my sister.”

I don’t know what to say. I’ve never sat and scrutinized his sister’s marriage and the road that led her there.

Parker isn’t finished. “Let’s talk Tate. He had to put all his struggles, all his panic out there to be with Ellie. And Ellie—she chose a residency here in Vegas because she wants to be more flexible for when you guys tour. Does she seem

miserable? Does anything about their relationship scream they regret the things they did to be together?”

I get what he’s doing, and I hate that it’s working. I didn’t know Alexis had to stop going to her college classes. I didn’t know part of Ellie’s reason to stay in Vegas was for our tour schedule.

They make it seem so easy, so ... natural.

“This is why I’m lost, Rees,” Parker says. “I don’t know why you didn’t pivot when Vienna was willing to.”

I rub the cinch in my chest. “I don’t know how to do this. Let someone give up so much just to ...”

“Be with you?” Parker levels me with a soft look. One he must practice because it’s enough to slice me at the knees. “It’s done, Rees. She’s making a change in life. It happens. She’s heading up a department at Lex’s foundation.”

“Wait, what?”

“Yep, that’s the truth, bud. She could’ve stayed at the school, but still left because she wanted to.”

She could’ve stayed at the school? No, that doesn’t make sense. “You’re sure they would’ve let her stay on?”

Parker nods. “Mason got all the details from his speech therapist—who is, I guess, really put out with you—and he filled me in yesterday at the batting cages. Then, Bridger got an earful from Lex, and he came to me, so I got a double dip of all the drama surrounding you. Which is why I’m here. She chose to keep her resignation in place.”



“But she loves teaching.”

“Yep. But I think she loved you more.” Parker groans as he stands, stretching his pitching arm across his chest. “Sort of ironic, don’t you think? She left something for you, but you left because you thought she’d be better off without you. Now, she’s not back at the thing she left, and you’re sitting here miserable because you wish all those phone calls you’ve ignored were from her, not us.”

If I punch him, we can still be friends, right? I think we could still be friends.

He’s inching too close to the truth I don’t want to admit. The crushing regret of standing still as Vienna walked away with pain I put in her eyes.

I guess I never minded being a minor villain for Justine, Mark, for those in my past. But Vienna, she broke through something hard inside and made me think I could be more. She told me I was safe, and wanted, and hers.

Slowly, I slide my back down the wall until I hit the ground. My arms drape over the tops of my knees as I close my eyes. “I don’t know how to fix it, Park. Some things I said can’t be taken back.”

“Nope. That’s the thing about words, once they’re out, they’re out, so we better make them good.” Parker crosses the room and sits on the ground at my side. “But I don’t think you dug your grave with words. Not yet, at least.”

I chuckle, but it has nothing behind it. It’s just ... empty.

“I don’t think a basic sorry is going to fix this.”

“Agreed. You’ll need to show her you don’t have one foot over the line, ready to bolt at the first bump in the road. She was willing to brace against a storm with you, and—”

“I know,” I say. “You can stop rubbing it in that I screwed up.”

“Look, Rees, I don’t have a relationship to pull all this wisdom from, but I do think you should find a way to let her know you’re in this, *if* this is what you want. Vienna deserves your all. If you can’t give it, then let her go.”

The finality makes me want to throw up. When I told Vienna to go, to cut ties with me, I convinced myself it was the right move, but I’m a mess. I’m fighting for oxygen every day she’s not here.

I pushed her away, but to hear Parker mention letting her go completely, even the ghost of her, feels so *wrong*.

“What are you going to do?” Parker asks after a long silence.

The hope is almost suffocating, but still, if Parker came here, maybe there’s a chance I haven’t crushed every piece of us. I give him a cautious smile. “I think I have an idea.”

Thirty-One

# VIENNA

“YOU CAN’T BE TRUSTED.” I come to an abrupt stop in the back seat of the SUV. “I knew deep down there was no way all three of you would miss a show. Knew it, ignored it, now I’m paying for it.”

Alexis snickers before trying to adjust in the seat the best she can with her bump. “Will it help if we say we’ll be in the suite again, not backstage, and Greyson will be there for your escape plan at the end if you need it?”

I frown, pointing my glare at Becca who is acting innocent. She’s the driver, she’s not innocent. And Ellie, seated right next to me, isn’t even hiding how much pleasure she’s taking in their deviousness.

“Come on,” Ellie says, tapping my knee. “We said we wanted a girls’ night, so look at this as one. At a concert.”

I pinch my lips and stare at the four massive banners with the broody pictures of the guys individually. Bridger’s fretboard is in front of his piercing stare. Adam looks like an

emo supermodel, and Tate has his drumsticks crossed like battle swords.

Rees. I hold his black and white stare for too long. One hand at his chin, his thumb tugging at his own lip. Complete with that lip ring.

Kill me now.

To spend the night watching him on the stage, doing his thing as if nothing is amiss when everything in my world is careening in different directions will be torture.

Two weeks. Two flipping weeks since I've said a word to Rees Hayden.

Until last night at midnight on the dot. A cryptic message came in, and three more have come sporadically throughout the day.

**Rees:**

**Once a month eighties movie night**

**A kiss good morning, goodbye, goodnight. Anytime, really.**

**Dogs not cats**

**We stand still during a storm. No running away.**

I don't know what they mean, I'm not sure I want to. His texts dance on the line of cruel. If he thinks he can hook my curiosity as a way to get me to speak with him, well, he can be

a grownup and come talk to my face. Not send weird, half sentences with the hope I might send one back.

Honestly, his friends are about to join him on the bad list.

I study the door to the private entrance we can take without being noticed by the fans. “This isn’t what I had in mind when we said girls’ night.”

Alexis sighs. “We know. I’m sorry we were sneaky, but everyone is going to be in the suite, and we can keep it as Rees-free as you want.”

I don’t want anything Rees free, but I’m not going to be that girl. The one who holds onto hope beyond its expiration date. I can’t be. It’ll break me in the end.

“Fine, but you guys owe me a real girls’ night away from your husbands.”

Ellie claps her hands with a huge smile. “Deal. Come on, this one is going to be fun. It’s all covers of metal bands from the seventies to now.”

I won’t know any of the songs, but I won’t look at the stage anyway.

When Alexis said everyone is in the suite, she meant everyone. Finn, Jazzy, their family. Mason and Lukas McKenzie hang out by the buffet table with two girls from Valley High.

Awesome.

They catch my eye and wave like nothing happened. Quinn sits beside Parker who came with two of his teammates, each with a beautiful woman on their arm. One of Adam's brothers is in the suite with Adam's nephew, and Bridger's mom tells Alexis to come get off her feet.

I look at the corner, and my heart stops. What is he ...

Then, on a second glance, I realize he isn't Rees, and hurry across the suite. "Noah."

Noah Hayden opens his bulky arms and wraps me up. "Vi! My favorite." He hugs me, and there are things unsaid in the gesture. Sympathy, mostly. "How are you?" he asks softly.

"Surviving." I force a smile. "Although, it would've been a better night if you'd worn your Daisy Dukes."

"There are professional baseball players in this room. I have to look somewhat cool."

"You walk the red carpet with Belle Keys," Griffin Marks says. Since knowing Parker, I've learned the starting lineup of the Vegas Kings. According to Alexis, Griffin is the charmer of the team. He laughs at Noah. "Trust me, we're the ones trying not to look stupid."

Noah chuckles, keeping close to me as we find our seats.

We don't mention his brother and I'm grateful. There isn't enough strength in me to dig through Rees right now. The pressure is already crushing me from merely being in the suite. Everyone in here cares about each other, faults and all. To be

invited into their space is both endearing and heartbreaking. I feel a great deal like an imposter, an outsider.

“Vi,” Noah says. “This’ll be fun. I promise.”

I give him a smile, knowing full well that seeing Rees, but being unable to have him will be anything but fun.

A steady, single drumbeat begins. The crowd silences. This is what Perfectly Broken does, builds up tension in darkness, with simple, steady sounds, then ...

In an explosive burst of white and neon, the stage ignites in brightness, revealing the guys behind a thin, diaphanous black curtain. It falls away when Bridger steps to the lead mic and belts the beginnings of an *Overkill* cover from Motörhead.

Yes, Finn had to tell me the name of the song. And yes, he is named as my official song announcer for the night.

I planned to avoid the stage, but at the first word sung, I’m captivated. There are differences with this stage compared to the one I saw the night I met Rees.

On the wings huge screens with the lyrics spinning and flowing across the surface rise over the crowd. In front of each screen is a person. A sign language interpreter.

Alexis nudges my ribs and whispers, “Rees’s suggestion.”

I close my eyes. This is too hard. I want to run, and I want to stay all at once. My eyes lock on Rees. He’s in his element, playing as if nothing else matters. Or so I thought.



At the final chord, even from this distance, I clearly make out how Rees lifts his gaze to the top of the crowd, to the suite window. He presses his fingers to his lips, then points his guitar pick at the suite.

My hand goes to my heart as if holding it in place.

What does that mean?

Maybe nothing. He's performing, but somewhere inside I know it was a gesture at me. I'm almost positive Rees knows I'm here, I'm watching, and he wants me to know he knows it.

For an hour I try to steel myself against the bassist. Being a cover concert, the show isn't as long, and only once the stage clears do I let my hands unknot from my lap.

We sit around, everyone talking about the show for a good twenty minutes before we start to take the first steps toward leaving.

"Vi," Alexis says. "We have a few things we need to do on the stage, but we'll meet you at the car in ten, is that good?"

Emotionally, I'm exhausted. I want to go home, curl up in my bed, and sleep until this longing goes away. But Marti would kill me. She insisted I get out of the house since she has another date with cat-guy and has made a formal roommate demand that I stop moping.

The new position at Never Forgotten is distracting and wonderful and handles my heartache through the day.

Nights are a different story.

“I’ll walk her out,” Noah offers.

I give him a quick smile. They’re all handling me with care, and it’s equally nice and irritating. I don’t want to be the broken thing. I want to be who I was two weeks ago. But that’s the thing about life. Rarely does it go according to plan.

After I say goodbye to the others in the suite, Noah walks with me in the back hallway. At a distance, Greyson stays close. Quinn was called into a super-secret meeting with Pops. For the second time, I guess. It’s all Alexis could talk about this afternoon since Quinn says nothing when he comes back from the studio building.

“He’s not doing good, Vi,” Noah mutters when we reach the elevator down the hall.

My heart jumps in panic. “Did he have an attack?”

“No.” Noah shakes his head vigorously. “No, he’s just been a mess through all this.”

My arms curl around my stomach, a sort of shield against the pain of what happened. “Well, he’s been silent with me, so I don’t know what to say. I’ve been here the whole time, and still, nothing. I can’t wait forever, Noah.”

He nods with a burdened expression. “No. You can’t, and you shouldn’t have to.”

The doors to the elevator ding open. I take a step forward, then forget how to breathe.

In the back corner, the same corner he claimed the night my eyes drank all of him in for the first time, Rees stands still.

Eyes on the screen of his cell phone, a ball cap pulled over his brow.

The spitting image of my first glimpse of my Darcy.

He lifts his gaze, a hesitant smile on his lips.

“But maybe you can wait a little longer,” Noah whispers, and gives the small of my back a nudge.

My feet move, but my heart is stalled. I step into the elevator; Rees never drops his eyes. The doors close and I’m only half aware Noah didn’t join us. We’re alone.

I’m more than suspicious that I’ve been utterly setup.

Rees has wiped off the makeup from the show, changed into a white T-shirt and black jacket, and looks at me like I’m a puzzle he’s trying to solve. My hands are desperate to touch him, but my cracked heart keeps me pinned on the opposite wall.

Until the ground tilts and a terrifyingly familiar jolt screeches the elevator to a halt.

I’m sure I scream, but it chokes off with the distraction of Rees Hayden closing the space between us. My heart is in my throat partly because the elevator is once more dangling over an open hole, but more because Rees has his callused fingers on the line of my jaw.

He touches me as if I might burn him.

Nerves demand I hold onto him as my lifeline, so I dig my claws into the skin on his forearm, desperate not to lose my

head like last time, desperate for him to speak to me, desperate to know what this is all about.

I want him close; I want to feel his strength against me, and I want him to stay away. Far, far away if he plans to ruin me again.

“I’m such an idiot,” he whispers, then blinks to the ground. “So, what do you think?”

“I ... about what? Is the elevator going to move?”

“When we’re ready,” he says, voice rough.

“This, this isn’t out of control, then.” I close my eyes, drawing in a tight breath. My knees tremble when his chest brushes my body, his face comes closer. Fear bleeds out, and all at once I’m safe again.

“We control what happens here,” he tells me. “What do you think about my addendums?”

“Addendums?”

“I sent them to you today.” He holds up his phone.

I squint at his screen with the weird messages he texted throughout the day. I scoff. “Are we making a new contract?”

Rees’s smile dissolves. “That’s up to you, Lizzy.”

My. Heart. Is. Done. Tears threaten to fall, but I’m not going to crumble. Not yet. Not until I know what he’s doing here. “I’m not agreeing to anything until I know what they mean. They’re nonsensical.”

He balks. “They are not. Eighties movies once a month. I think we can make time for that.” He scrolls down the list. “The kissing one. I want every day to begin with you, every time we step away from each other, every night will end with you. I added the exception of anytime, because in all honesty, I am more than willing to kiss you any time of day. I can make that an exception, no problem.”

What is he doing? Still, I let out a shaky laugh. “Oh, it’s no problem, huh?”

Rees cups my cheek. “Not a problem at all. The next one—I have severe asthma and it can be triggered by cats. But I’m open to dogs.”

I can hardly talk. “And the last?”

Rees doesn’t blink. “When storms come at us—because they will—I won’t run.” He places his other hand on my other cheek. “Vienna, I’m so in love with you. And you were right. I was a coward. I pushed you away when I should’ve stood at your side.”

I draw in a rough breath. My fingers curl around his shirt as I let my forehead rest against his. “I need you to trust my choices. Like when I choose you.”

“I know,” he says. “I don’t deserve you, but I want to try. Every day. I want to be the guy who maybe gets why you chose him, even if it doesn’t make sense why you would.”

“I’ll choose you every time.” I draw my bottom lip between my teeth. “I love you. You had me from the start, Rock Star.”

“Don’t let me off so easy,” he says. “We’re still negotiating, and I haven’t heard your terms, Miss Shaw.”

I grin. “What are we negotiating exactly?”

“A life together.”

I’m a goner.

My voice catches. “I see. Well, I’ll see your eighties movie and raise you one Keira Knightley *Pride and Prejudice* on my birthdays.”

“Done.”

“I agree to your kissing terms. Emphasis on the anytime.” Rees grins and kisses my head. I run my fingertips up his spine. “I’m open to discussing dogs, but find fish relaxing, and low maintenance.”

“We can look at that one.”

“Believe me.” I drag my fingers through his hair, voice soft. “That’s my final addition. Believe me when I tell you I love you, that I want all of you. Don’t believe the noise, *believe me* when I say there is no one else I will ever want more than you.”

His brow furrows. For a moment he simply breathes, then he kisses me.

A sigh of satisfaction catches in his throat as he pulls me closer to him, killing any distance. Rees kisses me until the last two weeks apart are nothing but a bad dream.

I smile against his lips. “I noticed the interpreters.”

Rees's face heats. "I hoped if everything went good tonight your dad might come to some shows. Honestly, it's something we should've been doing long before now. Pops was a little embarrassed he hadn't put focus on it yet.

I curl my arms around his waist. "Did you set me up tonight, Darcy?"

"Maybe. I had some help." He tangles one hand in my hair. "I figured we had such good luck in an elevator last time, a redo couldn't hurt."

At that he presses the red button on the wall. With much more punctuality than our last elevator it hums, and a quick jolt sends the car creeping to the lower levels.

I laugh and press my lips to his again, holding him, loving him, until the doors open, and we're met by more than one squeal. The co-conspirators—all of Perfectly Broken, some kids tossed in there, a few baseball players, wives of rock stars, and one lone movie star, greet us at the end of the ride.

I laugh into the kiss.

Then step into the big, overwhelming band family, hand in hand. Unbreakable, at last.

# EPILOGUE

Rees

*ONE YEAR LATER*

**Dad: Make sure you call us, kid. Justine is going to do that tricky thing where everyone is on at once.**

I roll my eyes. That tricky thing meaning a group call. I swear, sometimes I don't know how Lee Hayden is a detective.

I don't respond, mostly because my fingers are shaking too much, but there is a part that wants to let them all sweat a bit since my family—blood and band—have been the most annoying people on the planet all day.

What do they think I'm doing here? Just vegging, passing the time without a thought? Their relentless messages about tonight are not helping the billion knots in my stomach.

My phone goes off again and I groan at the fading sun.



Until the name fills the screen. This one I'll read and do it with a smile.

**Vienna: Have I told you how much I miss you? I wish I could be there sooooo bad. I'm so proud of you guys and can't wait to hear all about it tomorrow when you get in.**

I blow out a breath as I type a quick reply. **There will be more talk shows, but I miss you too.**

**Vienna: You should know I consider this a breach of contract, Darcy. You are not around to kiss me goodnight and I haven't seen you all day, so you weren't here this morning or available for me to do my anytime kissing.**

Soon. I smile. Soon.

**Me: Tomorrow I'll make it up to you in spades, babe.**

**Vienna: You better. I'll call you when I get to my parents. Had to stop and get gas five minutes away. Don't say anything. I can hear you thinking it. Love you. \*heart emoji\***

I grin and tuck my phone away. The woman cannot—for the life of her—fill up a gas tank. Without fail she will roll into a station on fumes mere minutes from her destination every

time. For the last year I've taken it upon myself to take her car once a week and top it off just to make sure she doesn't run out in the middle of the desert somewhere.

Except I failed at my duty since we've been apart for the last twenty-four hours. I stand from the couch, with a shaky breath.

"Deep breaths, sweetie," Fay Shaw tells me. "Seriously, Rees. I will go doctor bear on you if you have an asthma attack right now."

I laugh. "I'm good. I promise."

A rough sandstorm five months ago was the closest I've come to a repeat of California. This time, though, I had Vienna hovering over me like a hawk and two physicians on speed dial. A little wheezing, a whole lot of movie-watching in my living room, and meal deliveries went down.

As one determined, bossy unit, the Shaws didn't let me see the sun until the air cleared, and I didn't mind.

In fact, I'm growing quite accustomed to letting more than one person care about me for a change.

I'm not the silent mystery on social media anymore. Most of my feeds are packed with pictures of the band, or Vienna and me, and it's been ... surprising to see the positivity outweigh the negatives.

Noah doesn't keep quiet about our relationship. He's blurted out my fight stories to more than one outlet and little by little the estranged brother headlines have died out.

In truth, that's been the biggest change this year—my family.

Mark joined Noah and me on a first-ever brothers' trip to Colorado. I still don't think Adrienne likes the idea of it, but she's Mark's wife, so he can deal with that on his time.

The start of the trip was a little awkward, but by the end we were almost, I don't know, like normal adult brothers. And Noah finally introduced me to Chase Thorn while we were there, who gifted me special editions of the entire *Wicked Darlings* series. Made all the awkwardness worth it.

My dad calls me. On a regular basis.

Justine, we're not exceptionally close, but last time Vienna and I visited Baton Rouge she hugged me before we left and told me to visit again soon.

They even came to the First Responder concert last summer. My dad bonded with Miles over a shared love of fishing. Justine covered her ears the whole time, but still managed to memorize every song.

There is life before Vienna and life after her.

I'll take the life after every time. I love it. The boyfriend and girlfriend things. I love sharing songs with her simply because the lyrics made me think of her. Or I love the way normal nights watching TV are like paradise if she's there, tracing my tattoos, running her fingers in my hair.

I love how she makes sure I manage my breathing, or how she surprises me with food after a long studio day, or when she

texts that she loves me—just because.

A hand falls on my shoulder.

Miles stands beside me and gives me a thumbs up. I return it and place my fingertips to my chin, pulling my hand down slightly. *Thank you.*

He pats the back of my head, then takes Fay's hand and pulls her inside the house at the same time headlights flood the front of the driveway.

I swallow the scratch in my throat, clasp my hands in front of my body, and blow out a long breath.

For at least twenty seconds the car idles there, flooding the porch in white lights, until at long last the ignition dies, and, slowly, the door opens.

Vienna steps out. Her hair piled in a floppy knot on top of her head. She's wearing those tight black yoga pants I love so much, and an oversized T-shirt that hangs off her shoulder, and those ridiculous dolphin flip flops on her feet.

She's perfect. Gorgeous. She's better than the guitar. Greater than music. On the stage, performing, the high of screaming crowds is nothing compared to the way Vienna Shaw races my heart.

"Rees?" she says, glancing over her shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

She shifts on her feet. It pulls a smile over my face. She's suspicious, but at the same time seems to be having a hard time not running for me.

“Why don’t you come over here and I’ll tell you.”

Vienna’s hand covers her pink lips when she starts to notice what’s all over her parents’ front porch. Jars with candles. Daisy petals, because they’re her favorite, intermingled with the gleam of pirate doubloons on the ground since *The Goonies* is officially her favorite movie.

Probably the strangest part is me dressed in a buttoned-up shirt and nice slacks with a velvet box in my hand.

She lifts those eyes to me and stops a pace away. Too far. To make it right, I wrap her in my arms and kiss her. Good and thorough. Maybe some might think it’s out of order, but Vi and I make our own rules anyway.

She closes her eyes, a tear on her cheek, when I pull back and drop to one knee. “Surprise,” is all I say.

A wet laugh escapes her throat. “Were you not in Phoenix?”

“Um, no. Next week. I might’ve had the girls take you on an overnighter to throw you off.”

She sniffs. “Sneaky, Rock Star.”

“Vienna.” I kiss her palm. “I love you. Most ardently.”

She snickers and squeezes my hand.

“Taking that elevator was the best choice I ever made, Vi, because it brought me to you. This black heart is yours and it always will be. I hope you will do me the greatest honor and agree to be Mrs. Darcy.”

I open the ring box, but Vienna hasn't even looked at it. She should, it's pretty amazing. Sort of vintage with a bunch of diamonds around a big one so it looks like a flower. Alexis might've helped a little.

But Vienna doesn't look anywhere but at me. It's a beautiful thing. To know all that matters to her is me. She's not here for diamonds, or daisy petals. She's here for us.

She kisses me again. Slow. Perfect. Thousands of tomorrows live in this kiss.

“Yes,” she whispers over my lips.

I slide the ring on her finger, never looking away, as her parents rush us. Her neighbors, who are the epitome of small-town nosy, join ten seconds later.

Let them gush and scream and hug us. As long as Vienna's hand stays in mine for the rest of my life, come what freaking may.

# EPILOGUE 2

## Vienna

### *SEVEN YEARS LATER*

Our living room is filled with giggles. Micah Walker tries to help wrangle the gaggle of busy kids filling the space. Helps to have an almost seventeen-year-old who happens to love all the band babies helping today because my energy levels are spent.

With Perfectly Broken about to head out on tour in the next month, I've been working overtime with Alexis and the team at Never Forgotten to get the book boxes ready to show at the venues. I think the tour is what is causing most of the excitement. The babies—even though some of the band kids are well into elementary school—are all coming on the road this time.

It's going to be one extended family vacation, and I think we all might lose our sanity by the end of it.

But Micah and Brynn McKenzie, Lukas's younger sister, are both coming as our helping hands to wrangle the wild ones.

“They’re ready for cake, Auntie Vi!” Micah shouts, shooting eight-year-old Raegan a glare for pushing their youngest sister, Brielle.

At the word cake, Garret Cole, Alexis’s oldest, plows through the crowd of kids. Morgan, Tate and Ellie’s almost seven-year-old, glares at him when she stumbles into the line of kids made of her sister, Gracie, Declan Cole, and poor little Brielle. Again.

“Gare,” Alexis scolds. “Chill, kid.”

It’s Bridger who ends up with a hand on his son’s shoulders, holding him steady.

I smile at the messy, busy group tucked in the house. We’re lucky to have a day with Mason. He’s right off the spring training with the Kings, no longer the rookie centerfielder, but he only has the next two days to hang out with his three younger sisters who are in heaven with him home.

I don’t know how we managed to pick a magical day where everyone’s schedules aligned, and we could be together.

Even Uncle Noah showed up. He’s tucked in the back with my parents and his, chatting about the newest movie premier. Since *Wicked Darlings* ended after season eight last year, Noah has been picking and choosing what roles he wants, and I keep begging him to do something his nephew can actually watch before he’s eighteen.

Speaking of nephew.

I wrinkle my brow. “Where’s Jude?”



Alexis snorts and jabs her thumb over her shoulder toward our playroom. “Take a wild guess.

A grin teases the corner of my mouth. “Hang tight guys. We’ll have cake soon.”

“Can I have a little piece, *pleeeeaassse*. I skipped breakfast,” Garret whines to his dad.

“I’ll hurry and grab them, buddy,” I tell him. “Two minutes tops.”

I pause at the door of the playroom, grinning, as I listen to the back and forth.

“It’s cute, dude,” Parker says. “Let them be.”

“You can’t use a four-year-old as your babysitter.” Rees’s deep rumble comes back.

“He’s officially five now.”

I snort and step into the playroom. “What’s going on?”

Rees lifts those beautiful eyes in my direction. This man. I’m convinced after six years of marriage, the beautiful rush in my stomach when he glances my way will never fade. He smiles for a microsecond, as if the sight of me causes the same reaction in him. Then, turns a frown on Parker.

“He’s monopolizing our kid again.”

Parker holds up his hands, innocently. “Vi, I’m not. But come on, do you have the heart to tear apart this cuteness?”

He pulls back the flap of the play tent and shows off the two sneaks who disappeared from the party to live in their own

world.

Like they always do.

A blue-eyed little girl tugs on Jude's hand. She pats his cheek and mutely gestures at the plastic food on a plate, then hands him a hot dog with an empty princess cup she left the last time she came for a playdate.

Jude looks so much like his dad. He favored the brown eye and gives the most thoughtful looks I've ever seen. He shares Rees's messy dark blond hair, but his smile is mine. And when he smiles at little Ever it's the brightest thing.

Jude touches his chin and pulls his hand away and down.  
*Thank you.*

Ever wiggles on her knees and taps her little fingertips together twice, head tilted, brows furrowed like a pro. *More?*

Jude nods and takes a pretend pour in his cup from the old metal tea pot I used to play with as a kid.

Ever Knight has been curled around Jude's little finger since she was five days old. They look out for each other, young as they are, but their other friends and cousins are waiting.

"Park, if your nephew doesn't get cake soon I think he might start eating the couches."

Parker scoffs. "Let me guess. Garret?"

"That's the one."

Rees nudges Parker in the ribs. "See? Now, move."

Parker rolls his eyes. “Don’t be all grouchy and pretend like this doesn’t melt you. You’ve sent me more pictures with these two than anyone.”

True enough.

Rees ignores him and dips into the tent. “Ev,” he says tickling her toes. “It’s time for cake.”

“Cake!” she squeals, then grips Jude’s hand.

He looks at his dad, and Rees makes a claw shape with his right hand and places it on top of his left palm—the sign for cake—until Jude matches Ever’s excitement, and the two spill out of the tent’s back flap, running for their other friends.

Parker follows them to make sure they don’t get sidetracked. With those two it’s entirely possible.

Rees stands and pulls me into his arms, smiling. My heart races, watching how tender he is with our son.

When we learned Jude was born without auditory nerves the same as my dad, Rees never worked harder to learn every dialect of sign language, to make sure our boy would grow up with the same attitude as his grandpa about being deaf.

I think he’s been successful.

Jude plays with the other band babies without issue. They’ve all learned basic ASL and pass notes on his tablet faster than anything.

But Ever, she’s a different story. She’s Jude’s protector and best friend. And he is hers.

Rees kept his promise. He's handled every storm without running, without bending. Negative media attention. Scary fans. A child who some might view as different. He's my rock and soft place all in one.

He always will be.

"Vi," he says softly, wiping a tear on my cheek. "Babe, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just love you, Rock Star."

Rees smiles, that beautiful, villainous smile of his, and kisses me. Probably a little over the line of appropriate when kids could walk in on us any second.

"Regina! We're waiting!" Noah's boom breaks us apart.

Rees smiles at me, his lips brush over my ear. "I love you, Lizzy." He curls his hand in mine. "Now, come on. Let's get our kid his cake before *Parker's daughter* steals him again."

I laugh and hug his arm tightly, leaning my head on his shoulder.

I love him.

I love our life.

I'll always be grateful I stepped out of the background at a rock concert and took a step into a finicky elevator. Always.

•♥•♥•♥•♥•♥•

*Oh, my gosh! Vienna, here, and I don't know about you, but I can hardly believe the wild ride we just went on. From*

*elevator to forever, I have to say I'm glad Rees and I decided to take a few risks or we wouldn't have this big, loud, awesome family. With a few baseball players thrown in the mix. Speaking of baseball players. I don't know if you noticed, but uh, Parker had a daughter there at the end. And there's quite a story that comes before her. Full of mistaken identities, a few Lego sets, and a whole lot of Celine Dion. Random? Trust me, you'll just have to see for yourself. If you're ready to switch gears and get to know the sexy guys of the Vegas Kings, I think you're going to love Parker's story [HERE](#)*



*Hey, it's Rees. I guess I'm supposed to come in here and let you know there is a glimpse and our life right after our wedding—which was epic, by the way. You can download the bonus scene when you sign up for Em's weekly newsletter where she just tortures us, but also lets us takeover a lot too. Grab your bonus Rees and Vienna bonus scene [HERE](#)*



*Hey there. It's Em. As always for those looking for some steam in their romance, I've included this additional steamy scene with Rees and Vienna. Get ready to fan your face because these two are HOT. After giving away several of these steamy scenes with my favorite rock stars, I have decided a new steamy pen name is happening. Books will be under Emmy Rose and the debut will be arriving—fingers crossed—late*

*summer of 2022. So, sign up so you don't miss out when the  
steamy series releases.*

*Grab your steamy bonus scene [HERE](#)*



*P.S. Reviews are like pants. Sometimes uncomfortable, but  
always appreciated. If you enjoyed OUR NEW SONG please  
leave your thoughts [HERE](#)*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for all the readers who've LOVED these rock stars as much as I have. Bridger and Alexis took shape in my head over a year ago. I loved the idea of an introverted rocker with a librarian who loved to chat. This series was new for me. It pushed boundaries and I wanted to show hope through things like addiction, mental health challenges, and the stress of trying to live a perfect life. I wanted to show that our favorite book heroes could be perfectly broken and it's okay to ask for help.

I'd like to thank Sara for editing these books and always giving me the best, entertaining voice chats that I sometimes took off on a few tangents, but I'm grateful you stuck with it.

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Thank you to my readers. For loving Perfectly Broken as much as me, and bringing these sweet, broody rock stars to life. I will be forever grateful for your support. Truly, you hold a special place in my heart. Thank you to the Lord, for guiding me down this road.

I love you all,

Em