

The background of the cover is a vibrant tropical beach scene. A large palm tree dominates the upper half, its fronds silhouetted against a bright yellow and orange sunset sky. In the foreground, a black and white electric guitar stands upright on a wooden pier. Several birds are shown in flight against the sunset. The overall color palette is warm, dominated by yellows, oranges, and reds.

SAY YOU
LOVE ME
again

Young, rich, and famous ...
nothing could go wrong, *right?*

CARRIE AARONS

**SAY YOU LOVE ME
AGAIN**

CARRIE AARONS

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Also by Carrie Aarons

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READER NOTE

This book contains the sensitive topic of postpartum depression. It is my hope that I've handled this important subject matter with the care it deserves.

1

SOPHIE

There are no less than four extraneous people in my house at all times.

Imagine that; settling down for a binge-watch at night, and it's not strange in the slightest that people who aren't related to you by blood, or by the fact that they're sticking one of their body parts into yours on a regular basis, are just walking around your house.

I try to think back to a time when this wasn't my normal, but it's been so long that I don't know if I've ever lived a life like the rest of the Americans sitting down to dinner at their kitchen tables, talking about carpool and what park soccer practice is at this weekend. Shit, I haven't taken myself to a grocery store in nearly three years for fear of mine or my daughter's safety being threatened.

Right now, I probably sound like some bitchy princess in her ivory tower, looking down on everyone else. In some ways, I am that loathsome, spoiled brat.

But you learn quickly in Hollywood, or once fame is injected into your life, that none of this shit glitters. The gold isn't real. Beneath the surface, these people you read about have lives just as fucked up as the rest of the world. Even more so, if I'm being honest.

“Ms. Truin? What do you think?”

A voice knocks me out of my melancholy daydreams, and I straighten my back. I remember my mother telling me that once, if you're unsure or confidence is lacking, fix your

posture, and the rest will fall in line. How many times have I used that trick in my life? Enough that its magic has probably worn off by now.

I should pay attention. I'm sure at any point now, Ariana is going to hit me with an annoyed glare and clear her throat.

As if her ears are ringing, my assistant turns to me and does just that. I'm being rude to the party planner sitting in front of me, the woman who is going over what kind of olives will be served at a charity event I'm throwing next month.

"I'm sorry, forgive me. Can you say it again?"

"We thought we'd go with that one because of the cuisine chosen? But we know you prefer a bleu cheese stuffed, so if you like ..." The party planner trails off as if this is the most important decision in the world.

Gertrude, my regular event planner, was booked for the last-minute fundraiser next month. If this were her doing the charity auction to raise money for mothers suffering mental health crises, we wouldn't even be meeting. She would just know precisely how I like things run, what kind of bar staples need to be stocked, and who isn't supposed to be seated next to each other at dinner and just get it done.

Internally, I take a deep breath, because if I come off like a bitch, it'll somehow end up on a gossip website in twelve hours flat. Honestly, even if I'm Mary Fucking Sunshine in this meeting, some tabloid will end up running a ranting, raving story on me by the end of the week.

A sweep of my eyes around the room as I collect myself shows the calming interior of my house. I told the designer I worked with that I wanted the whole house to have that elevated coziness feel of a Nancy Meyer's movie. Overstuffed cream-colored chairs and huge windows cover almost every wall of every room to let in maximum natural light. Fresh flowers on little pedestal tables. Artsy, colorful throw pillows. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined with classics and cookbooks.

When I was little, my mom would always curl up on the couch with me to throw on movies like *Something's Gotta Give*, *The Holiday*, and my personal favorite, *The Parent Trap*. They were a source of comfort, and when I could afford a home to make all my own, it was the style I wanted to emulate.

Thankfully I did, because it's bringing comfort in this annoying time of discussing olive flavors.

"I think that sounds perfect. And if we could get the booth set up for silent donations, maybe make it a confessional of sorts." I snap my fingers like it's all coming to me. "That new reality show, the one everyone is gushing about, with the confession cam? It's all the rage, and a dreamy set up including that would be fun for our guests."

Anything gimmicky to get them to dig a little deeper into those pockets.

"Perhaps a huge balloon arch people could walk into?" She grins like it's the best idea she's ever thought up.

I cringe on the inside but keep my face neutral. "Or some beautiful floral arrangements, maybe a garden come to life inside?"

The suggestion is a gentle push in that direction, one I hope she takes. I want my events to come off as classy and elegant rather than gaudy and showy, but it depends on who I'm working with.

"Well, this was a great meeting. You can send me the designs and mock-ups, let's say later this week? Then I'll get Sophie's sign off. Did you need anything else?" Ariana wraps the meeting up, knowing I have a packed schedule today and that I don't need to answer any more questions.

These events may seem wasteful to most, but the end result is always at the forefront of my mind. Raising money and awareness for women who don't have either of those spotlights on them. Anything I can do to raise money for females who don't have the resources to heal from the grueling mental state postpartum puts you in. That's my goal.

As the party planner packs up, my housekeeper, Hillary, comes to escort her to the door.

“Sophie, Hart’s teacher sent home some artwork yesterday in her backpack. You want me to frame it?” Hillary asks in the interim.

“Oh, please, you know how I love that.” My smile now is actually genuine.

Any mention of my daughter, and I snap out of any kind of mood I’m in.

Hillary nods, smiling back. All the people who work with me or at the house have been with me for so long, most of them before Hart was even born. They’re like family, and I treat them as such. Like I said, there are always extra people in my house, and that could be weird to most. But to me, these people are my friends. Yes, I know, you’ll point out the fact that I pay them. I do, generously.

But I’m also one of the only “celebrities” I know who is invited to things like Hillary’s daughter’s college graduation party. Last year, Ariana asked me to be a bridesmaid at her wedding. These people are my family; we have deep connections. It’s just a bonus I get to work with them every day.

“Okay, schedule time.” Ariana claps her hands once when Hillary and the party planner are gone, diving right into the rest of the day. “You have that photographer from the magazine coming by around two, hair and makeup will be here at noon. The whole shoot will last about forty minutes, and then I’ve screened the ten interview questions that we will be giving written answers to. You’ll have to come up with those this weekend.”

I process all the information she’s throwing at me, but we’re well-practiced in this. So many people assume that assistants in this industry are generally treated like people who run errands.

Let’s get one thing straight; Ariana runs my life, not the other way around. She might be my assistant, but her title is

business manager, just the same as Ruth, the suit who sits in a pretty office in the middle of Los Angeles and takes ten percent of my deals. Ariana is extremely intelligent, smooth with the people I have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, and knows the business of being Sophie Holly Truin more than I do most days.

“And all the proceeds of this shoot are being donated directly to Full Hands, right?” I clarify, not fazed by any of the other stuff.

She nods. “I had it put into the deal contract, Ruth confirmed. Ten percent of the sales of the issue will be donated to the company.”

Good. I might be a model by trade—it’s how I made my money—but Full Hands is my real passion. It’s the nonprofit company I started after having Hart, my daughter, seven years ago. My postpartum was hell on earth, it caused my life to be torn apart, and I suffered in silence. I never want someone to go through that, especially women who don’t have the financial means I do and did at the time.

Which is why I started the company. Full Hands provides everything from meal kits for new moms with precise ingredients to aid in recovery and energy boosting, to providing paid-for capsules or powder made from a mother’s placenta. We provide a vaginal birth healing kit and comfortable binding-wear for C-section moms. We employ tons of virtual counselors, run a network of “days out” in local areas or chapters, and are even launching a day and night nurse program for moms in need.

And we pay for all of it. We run solely on donations and my personal money, which is why I still hustle so hard in the modeling industry. Walking runway shows or posing for brands brings in the dough, which I can then use to provide so much for the moms who come to Full Hands. It also keeps my image and name in the media, which I both hate on a personal level but love for the exposure it can bring to my company.

For so many, these options just aren’t feasible or covered by insurance. It’s essential for a new mom, one who is two

months in and barely sleeping and suffering from postpartum, to get a few hours or days off. And the reality is, most just can't afford to. Or they can't find someone reputable enough. We provide the solution.

It's hard work, but it's so worth it. Once you become a mother, you have your hands full. And so many people don't focus on the mother in that scenario. I created my company with exactly that aim.

"Tomorrow you have Hart's class party, and we're bringing cupcakes."

I snap my fingers; the lightbulb going on in my brain once more. "That's right, I told her we'd make the funfetti ones tonight."

Ariana points to the kitchen. "Barth bought the mix and the frosting at the store. He grumbled about not being able to make his homemade chocolate ganache ones."

I snort. "Of course he did. While they're delicious, I want Hart to be a kid. And she loves baking with me. Her classmates could also stand to get a little dose of box-made goods in their lives."

My daughter is growing up in the most privileged world that exists. Both of her parents are enormous celebrities, and try as I might to keep her grounded in the smallest sense, the next day, one of her seven-year-old friends will walk in with a custom leather jacket gifted by a designer brand, and it'll all fly out the window.

So while my chef, Barth, makes the most heavenly food and cakes on the planet, Hart and I will be the ones making a mess of his mixer tonight.

After all, my daughter is half of me, and I grew up in a two-bedroom apartment in North Carolina for the first twelve years of my life, so I have no silver spoon.

"And then the final thing is ..." Ariana trails off, and there is only one subject with which she approaches me with any hesitancy.

We've been working together long enough, and she's brash enough that whatever needs to be said is said, and whatever needs to be done is done. Except when it comes to one subject. Or should I say, one person.

My heart is thumping so loud I think we both hear it. "Just tell me."

She reaches into her bag and produces what I know must be a magazine. I've heard the flutter of their pages and seen enough of their gloss shine off sunlight through a window to know what it is.

"Levi was photographed with Lauren."

Ariana drops this bomb as if it didn't just blow my entire heart to smithereens. As if I haven't been trying to actively avoid picturing those two names together endlessly, or see their faces mocking me in my dreams.

"Let me see it." I motion with grabby hands at the magazine, because I'm apparently a glutton for punishment.

Ariana hands it over, knowing she's giving me the material to make me spiral for weeks. Quietly, in a dignified way where I only hysterically cry in my bathroom when my daughter isn't around, but spiral, nonetheless. The headline splashed across the top of the glossy page shouts at me.

Music's Big Duo, Together at Last!

My ex-husband's lyrical partner is the one the public thinks he should be with. Not me. Not the mother of his child or the woman he once took vows with.

I can't bring myself to look down at the picture accompanying it but know I need to. When I gulp and then do it, forcing myself, the photo is a grainy one of two people sitting at a table outside a restaurant. It's daytime, and the picture was clearly shot from far enough away that neither of them suspected a paparazzi. Though, the vindictive streak in me wouldn't put it past someone on their teams to have called a photographer.

My eyes shift, and there he is. My ex-husband, the father of my child, the love of my life, splashed across the most

famous tabloid magazine in the world, with his hand resting on the arm of the girl I was insecure and jealous of our entire marriage.

I know this is recent because Levi's dark hair are longer than usual, and you can see the tattoo of the phoenix he just got on his forearm. Hart has recently fallen in love with *Harry Potter*, so her father inked the famous bird on his arm.

Other than that, you can't make out the sculpted cheekbones of his face or the tiny scar on his left eyebrow. You can't see Lauren's signature dimples, and I can't even really tell if they're smiling or yelling at each other. The picture isn't even of decent quality.

But it's enough. Enough to set the whole world ablaze. Enough for the public and every media outlet to start the buzz. Levi and Lauren, together at last. It's what everyone wants, what everyone is waiting for. I'm just the evil shrew who came in and threw a wrench in the whole thing, even though Levi and I fell in love years after the two had produced numerous songs together and never once sparked dating rumors.

My heart is tearing in two. I feel like retreating to my bedroom and closing every curtain, wallowing in self-pity and crying myself to sleep. There has to be some pill or tonic someone has to make me just forget all of this, because I can't go through it again.

Here's the thing ... I can't even be mad at him. Sure, I can be insanely jealous and severely hurt. I can cry and scream and be on the verge of throwing up. But I can't blame him. I can't hurl insults at him or claim he never loved me.

Because he isn't the one who ruined our marriage. I am.

Now, I'll be forced to bear the brunt of it for the rest of my life. The only thing worse is being reminded that I might have driven him into the arms of the woman the entire world thinks is right for him.

Blood-red carpet cushions the soles of my shoes as flashbulbs go off everywhere.

My eyes adjust, as they're used to the onslaught of chaos and bright lights. A movie premiere is just another Tuesday night for me, and how strange of a sentence is that?

"Levi, over here!"

"Levi, what inspired you to write this song?"

"Levi, will Lauren be joining you tonight?"

"Levi, how is Hart doing? Will she be walking the carpet?"

My seven-year-old daughter, thrown to these wolves? *Not likely.* I chuckle internally as I smile and wave to these absolute vultures. It's a good thing that I'm not the star of the night, I won't have to answer any of their questions or do media. I can walk this carpet, then head in to find said daughter and watch a movie while sharing popcorn with her.

The real stars tonight are the A-list actors of Hollywood, who came together on this film about a paranormal world. It's brilliant, I've seen parts of it, but only because they asked me to write the title song. It's a slow, sweeping, violin-induced melody with lyrics about hope and destruction almost becoming beautiful.

When my friend and this movie's stellar lead, Palmer Solo, asked me to write a knockout theme song for the flick, I couldn't turn it down. After all, when you're stuck in a rut on

your new album and inspiration for anything strikes, you take it.

Not that the public, or these media hounds, know I can't seem to write anything for the new album. Nor will they ever.

I'm Levi Truin, musician of my generation. The pop star everyone grew up with. The heartthrob girls had on their walls and the raspy singer every guy wishes he was.

God, I sound like a *total* douche saying that, but it's what my publicist says when I'm truly down about attending any event. Maybe it'll work as my cheeks start to ache on this carpet.

It's been this way since I was twelve. Sixteen years ago, I was a kid with a dream and social media pages. I would sit in the basement of my childhood home in New York and put out cover after cover song. Then one day, it blew up.

It's led to multiple albums going platinum, a Grammy when I was seventeen years old, sold-out tours, lines of merchandise, and a billion or more streams on music platforms. I write every single song myself, or with a writing partner I don't have the energy to discuss, and that's what I'm most proud of in my career.

But while I wanted all of this fame, or at least the musical career that led to it, it hasn't all been fun and games. Most of it hasn't, quite frankly. I got into this because I love music and have always had a burning passion for it. Nothing fuels me more than the need to write and sing. With that has come accolades, being able to play my music in front of hundreds of thousands of fans, and the love I feel from all of them.

It's also made me a target. For thieves and liars. For people with reputations of scandal and danger. For toxic relationships and exploitation. Aside from my manager who discovered me and I've since left, I had basically no one. I come from a household of divorce with two parents who hate each other and generally wanted little to do with me before I got famous.

They weren't standing up and doing the right thing when I was up for days on end, playing gigs in random cities all over

the country as a teenager. Those early days were fun when I had a following before the huge stardom hit, but they were reckless, and no place a kid should have been. When advisors were stealing my money or paparazzi were taking pictures of my first kiss, my parents were nowhere to be found.

Lord knows they came crawling back when the millions started to come in.

I can't blame them, though. Not really. They weren't there, that's for sure. I needed guidance and didn't have it. But I was also old enough that I should have known better. I shouldn't have fallen in with some of the people I did. I was old enough to know right from wrong when I was cursing out producers or showing up late to events. I shouldn't have gone to social media to blast people who were only trying to steer me in the direction of my vision.

My mouth and attitude were way out of line for a few years there. The fame got to my head, and by the time I turned eighteen, I'd felt like I lived a lifetime. It was a miracle I hadn't ended up in a worse situation.

So I went away, took a year completely off the grid, and came back a new man. I was grounded, laying off any substances, and not messing around with girls for the first time since I hit puberty.

And now, a decade after that refresh year, I'm where I always dreamed I could get to. A respected, glorified musician. The owner of my own record label. The kind of artist that other big-name artists want featured on their song. An industry professional who is asked to do things like compose soundtracks. There is talk that my song in this movie might be nominated for an Oscar.

But most of all, I'm one kick-ass father.

"Dad!"

Hart's high-pitched squeal comes from the end of the carpet, and I jog in her direction without a backward glance. No doubt whatever assistant my publicist sent to keep me on track and marketable tonight won't be happy with that, but I

don't give a shit. Not when my daughter is the other end of the equation. She's always been my non-negotiable. I don't care if the Kennedy Center is inducting me, if it meant missing her school play, I wouldn't be there.

"You look beautiful, my cute-iful." I engulf her in a bear hug, lifting her off of her feet.

"*Dad.*" She rolls her eyes as I set her down, running her small hands down the sky blue dress she picked for the premiere tonight.

I took her shopping especially for this, not that I don't spoil her most days of the week. We had a personal shopper help us, only pulling dresses or clothes for Hart. She picked out this bright blue dress with sequins in the shape of half-moons all over it, and she couldn't look cuter or more like the little lady she's growing into.

"Are you crying?" she hisses, embarrassed by her old man.

I wipe the tear that was about to fall from my eye. "It's just ... I remember you as a little baby in my arms ..."

"Oh my God, Dad." She laughs and blushes at the same time.

When she does that, I see her, but I mostly see her mother. It's hard *not* to see her mother whenever I look at Hart—she's the spitting image of Sophie, my ex-wife. Blond waves the color of dark honey, sapphire blue eyes that match the dress she picked out, gangly, long limbs just like the ones my former mother-in-law had shown me Sophie sported back in the day.

From me, Hart inherited only the slope of my nose and my full upper lip. And I guess she's also got a wicked eye for reading music; she knew how to play "Stairway to Heaven" on the guitar at five years old.

But magazines and media websites love to nickname her mini-Sophie. What they don't know is that she's more like her mother than just her outside appearance. Even at a young age, she has strong opinions, and she'll let them be known. Like Sophie, Hart is a tender soul who wants to help others above all else. And my ex-wife might be a reformed risk-taker, but

once upon a time, she would have joined Hart in jumping off the house into the pool. Which our daughter attempted last week and was lucky she didn't break her neck.

“This movie might be a little scary. If you want to leave at any point, let me know.” There was no sex from what I'd been told, or else I wouldn't have brought her. But the fight scenes ... they were probably heavy in this film.

“Kingsley's nanny let us watch *The Godfather* last week, so it can't be worse than that.” She shrugs.

“What!” It drops out of my mouth, and a couple of industry people around me look our way. “That's not ... the age you should be watching that.”

Plus, I'd always thought we'd eventually watch the classics together. I'm a purist when it comes to music and movies, a real oldies lover. Since the day Hart was born, I've tried to instill that same love in her. When other parents would play kid music she'd be listening to the classics with me. I'm a little peeved that her friend's nanny would let them not only watch it without me, not that she knew, but at such a young age.

“Hey.” Sophie appears from somewhere. I'm not sure if she was chatting or just letting Hart and me have our moment.

But her voice conveys that I need to have this conversation in private. While I love my career and am happy my daughter's mother is hugely successful, there is a price to pay for fame. And that's that we can't be normal, really. Any discussion or conversation overheard by anyone could be twisted, picked up by a news outlet, or conveyed in a completely wrong and ridiculous manner. Sophie knows, as well as I do, that me reacting even an inch badly to Hart watching *The Godfather* could be splashed all over social media tomorrow, calling me some shit that was completely untrue and overblown.

“Hi.” I drop it, walk to my ex-wife, and kiss her cheek.

Just being this close to her has my heart in my throat, the same place it is every time I have to pretend we're cordial and

friendly and that I don't want to pull her into me each time we're together.

“Thanks for having me. I've heard the movie is spectacular. Hart played me your song the other day, and I can't wait to see how it fits.” She beams at me, partly for show, this I know, and partly because she's always been my biggest supporter.

There is no doubt I am the man I am today because of this woman. We met just a year after my sabbatical, as I was trying to turn my life around. Sophie blew in like a breath of fresh air, and I fell head over heels for her from the start and proposed just months after we started dating. She practically moved into my Malibu mansion two days after I took her on our first date—driving a motorcycle around some of the most winding California highways and down to a private beach where we watched dolphins leap over the setting sun. Six months after I put a ring on her finger, we were married and then had Hart by twenty-one.

I really thought I'd found my person, my soul mate. Then it all got fucked up, and rather than sinking into a worse state than I was when I took a year off, I found my strength and stood tall for my daughter. I weathered the absolute heartbreak and kept our relationship intact so that my kid could grow up with two loving parents, something I never had.

That's because of her. Yes, she ruined our marriage and effectively blew a hole in my heart. But Sophie Holly, the supermodel who took the world by storm before I made her a Truin, transformed my life. She showed me what genuine love was. When we were good, I'd never felt so superhuman in my entire life. She also gave me the greatest gift I could have ever dreamed of, and I'll never be able to hate her in any way because she brought Hart into this world.

But I'd be lying if I said a part of me didn't crumble every time I see her. After all, like I said, she's the most famous model of our generation. Her face, that mystery in the set of her sharp jawbone and cheeks, has graced hundreds of covers. There was a time, in our teens and early twenties, when you

couldn't turn on a television or pull up a browser without seeing an ad for makeup or beauty without Sophie gracing it.

Tonight is no different in terms of me being absolutely blown away by the sheer magnitude of her gorgeousness. Sophie is tall—five eleven to my six four. When she wears heels, like the silver strappy ones her mile-long legs are encased in tonight, we're almost eye level. Her dress is a silky black slip of fabric that rustles down her body so you can never get a good enough grasp on her curves. But I know what's under there. I've studied the nip of her waist with my mouth, worshipped between her willowy, muscular legs. I've had her slim arms wound around my neck, and I've kissed every inch of her full lips. Sometimes, even though it's been years, I swear I can smell the scent of honey from her hair on my pillowcases.

She is perfect in every sense of the word. Her beauty is devastating. Especially to me, who once held all of it in my hands.

“Hart wanted you to come, and you know I'm more than happy for all of us to do something together,” I answer politely, politically.

Over the years, Sophie has morphed herself into an elegant, put together, reserved version of the wild child I once fell in love with. Gone is the girl who used to sneak us up the mountain to sleep next to the Hollywood sign. She's no longer the girl who insisted we fly to Morocco on a whim and get drunk before I gave a free concert in the streets.

And while she can fool everyone else into thinking she's this unaffected, cool as a cucumber, serene person ... I know better.

I know every language her body speaks. I probably know what she's thinking in every situation before she's even realized it herself. I studied this woman, made her my religion. I've bowed down, I know the secret of her life force.

So it doesn't escape my eye when she blanches, sadness filling those big aquamarine eyes for just the tiniest of split seconds. Me telling her that I only invited her to the premiere

because our daughter wanted the night with both of us? It guts her.

But I do it every time. Not only to remind her that our child is bigger than any of our problems but also to protect myself. For nearly seven years, I've held her at arm's length. I've had to, even if it breaks my heart. Sophie betrayed me in a time that should have been our happiest on earth.

And while I can't go back to that, can't seem to break through the mental block of being with her romantically no matter how much I still love her, I also won't break up our family. We are a team, and we work hard to keep us functioning smoothly.

We remind the world what great co-parents we are. We come off like the perfect modern family. A lot of the time, we are. But it's in the quiet moments, the lonely nights when I don't have Hart, that I know deep down I'll never love another woman the way I love Sophie.

Sophie clears her throat. "Well, thanks all the same. You clean up nice."

That devilish glint lights her, the one she only used to use when directed at me. I wonder if she's seeing anyone. I'd nearly threatened to kill the last idiot banker she dated, but that was more than two years ago. Our co-parenting relationship hasn't been without its private struggles. The media knows not of how jealous we've both been.

But could they blame me if they knew? This woman lights a fire in me that no one else has been able to match. Even now, with a seven-year separation under our belts and our daughter physically standing between us, I could drag her over my shoulder and lock her in my bedroom for days. I'm the one who keeps us at arm's length, but it doesn't mean I don't feel the severe, insistent tug.

"Can we go in and get popcorn? I want to put those little chocolate mints in mine, too. Mom, did you bring my medicine in case there is ice cream?" Hart grins up at her mother as if she isn't asking to eat something that will make her violently ill.

She's been lactose intolerant since birth, and it was hard in those early days. Now, there are alternatives and medicines, but I feel for the kid. Nothing is better than pure dairy ice cream.

"You have school tomorrow, babe, you don't want what will come from ice cream." Sophie runs her hand up and down Hart's arm.

"I'll sneak you some." I wink at her.

"Dad is always the good cop, huh?" Sophie jokes as we begin to walk into the theater.

The three of us are a unit, Sophie and I each holding one of Hart's hands. We must take a step too far in the direction of being visible on the carpet, and I know the moment that the crowd of people star-watching at the premiere catches sight of us. An enormous roar goes up, Hart's head whips that way, and pictures are snapped left and right.

My stomach bottoms out, and I feel my daughter's hand white-knuckle tighten into my own. But I'm frozen in place, waiting to catch a glimpse of Sophie's expression.

Her back is to the crowd, so they can't see it, but the minute her eyes lift to mine, the whole world ceases. I feel her anguish in my bones; I see how much this affects her. Our private life, thrown out into the world for them to dissect, no matter how much we protect our child. We asked for this, it's true, but that was before she was born. We didn't know what a celebrity life held for her.

It's in this instant that I know Sophie has also seen the articles, the grainy picture of me and my former writing partner. I can read it right there, in her eyes. Agreeing to lunch with Lauren had been reckless. I've controlled that situation since my marriage.

Now, it's hurting my family. It's hurting the woman who means so much more than anyone ever did.

Hart blinks up at me and says, "What're they doing, Dad?"

It's not lost on me that we've shielded her from a lot of this, on purpose. I haven't brought her to a premiere or award

show in a long time. It's probably past due time to have a discussion with her about why these people are so fascinated with us. She's going to hear about it, so I'd rather her hear it from me.

"Nothing, baby. Let's go in." I smile reassuringly.

We make it inside and to our seats, though the whole time, I can't bring myself to look at Sophie.

It's just another unspoken divide between us, and I'm not sure we'll ever address all the things stacked in that void.

The black Escalade pulls through the gates of our community, the one that Levi and I settled on when we bought our first home together and where I now live with my daughter.

Eight years ago, we went to the top real estate agent to the stars and searched through the neighborhoods of Los Angeles to find the perfect marital home for us. We were young, our priorities were ridiculous, and we ended up buying an all-modern mansion. The place had decks with insane views but no railings, an infinity pool over the side of a cliff, and a two-story champagne room. Two months after we bought it for millions of dollars, we found out I was pregnant with Hart.

We were twenty, had no idea how to be married, much less raise a baby, and were so blindly in love that we thought it would conquer all.

Now we both live in the same gated community as that first house, but not in *it*. The baby would have injured itself in twenty different ways by the time it turned one if we had stayed there. And it's not like either of us wanted to stay in a house that had such bad juju, it could suffocate you.

Once everything imploded between Levi and me, I moved into a dreamy house down the street. My house, and all the work I've put into it, has a French country chic aesthetic going that makes me just take a deep, calming breath every time I step onto the property. It's surrounded by two acres of

wildflower gardens, and when Hart was little, we used to get lost in them.

Levi bought the property three houses down, about half a mile in the car, a year after I bought mine. We're close enough so that either of us can walk over to see Hart, so her life isn't disrupted just because her parents couldn't make it work. It's typical for him to come over after an event, to drive us home, or to come in to put our daughter to bed.

Which is how I find myself in a floor-length silk gown in the back of a private car with my ex-husband. Well, our sleeping daughter is between us and he's looking out the window while I try not to stare at him.

Then again, I've never been very good at diverting my attention away from Levi Truin. It's pretty hard for anyone to look at anything but him when he's in a room.

His chestnut waves are longer than usual, and they've curled deliciously over the collar of his suit jacket all night as if teasing me to touch. And how ridiculously well that navy blue suit fits him, all broad shoulders narrowing into his waist, plus the mold of his spectacular ass. I've never much been into guys' asses, but Levi's is a masterpiece. He's got a bubble butt, and I still have fantasies of it naked, walking away from me into our bathroom after a night of making love. The man has the body of a swimmer and barely works out.

In the darkness of the car, I can't make out the gray of his irises, with their gold flecks that seem to shine brighter when he's strumming that guitar. The man has only gotten more handsome with age, and it's impossible not to stare. It's impossible, even when he's not mine and it only cuts deep to know that I lost him.

But it's his aura that's always drawn me to him. Honestly, it's the thing that draws so many to him, this feeling or his energy that you can't help but be hypnotized by. Levi has this classic quality to him that makes him feel like he's from another time. Like he hung out with the great Italian artists of centuries past. His creativity flows so freely around him that you can't help but catch it, like it's a fever and you've never

wanted to be more infected in your life. And when he goes full tortured genius ... my God, there is nothing sexier.

This is the guy whose face was plastered all over the walls of thousands of teenage girls' bedrooms. I followed his fame from a young age, when I had yet to be discovered. Even when I had, I was chump change compared to the stardom Levi found right off the bat.

As if he feels me looking at him, his head turns, and our eyes lock. Nothing illuminates the cab of the car aside from the dim light of the window and air controls in the back seat, but it's enough that our gazes can connect. I can't read him. I'm getting worse and worse at it as the years pass. Maybe it's a defense mechanism, because if I could read his every thought through his expressions, perhaps I wouldn't like what I was hearing.

"She's out," he mouths, his full lips curving into a grin.

Those are the lips, the mouth, that once sang love songs to me as I stood up on his stage in front of hundreds of thousands of people.

I nod, trying to push past the lump in my throat that forms anytime we're in private together. Not that we're alone, but this is the closest we come these days; sometimes Hart will fall asleep when we're transporting her from one home to another, and I get exactly a few minutes where it's just Levi and me.

Otherwise, there are a handful of people milling about as we interact, like my mom, who lives with me. Or his assistants, or mine, or our shared publicist, though that's more for Levi than me.

And the tension in the back seat of this car is flammable. We're only looking at each other, it's been seven years without touching him or him touching me, and I can still feel the burning passion like a thousand suns beaming down on me.

We co-parent like champs. Like well-worn friends who just so happen to both love and adore the same little girl unconditionally. We co-parent as if I don't die a thousand

deaths every time he carries our flesh and blood up to her room, tucks her in, then retreats back to his own home.

“Want me to bring her up?” he whispers as the gate to my property swings open, letting the car in.

“Sure.” I hold his gaze for the last fleeting moments before the interior lights come on.

When we pull in, Mom is standing in the driveway in a matching gray sweatsuit, a mug of something in her hand. Behind her, my house is lit up perfectly, with the plants highlighted and the rustic pendant lights illuminating each of the four garage doors. Our massive front porch is spilling with flowers and plants, a display installed by some company Ariana hired to make the curb appeal feel like an issue of some editorial magazine.

We both get out, with Levi carrying Hart, and I greet Mom with a hug. She moved in nearly two days after I moved out of the house I shared with Levi, with a four-month-old baby in my arms. Before I was discovered, my mom did the best she possibly could. A single mother who was left by her high school sweetheart, a man I never knew. She worked two jobs, sometimes even three, to help us get by when we lived in North Carolina. My early childhood wasn't particularly glamorous, but Mom always loved me fiercely. It was her and me against the world.

I was discovered the way all children dream they might be discovered. In a mall, shopping for back-to-school clothes with my mom. Back then, we barely had enough to afford a trip to the aquarium, but I'd begged my mom for one shirt from a popular store to wear on my first day of middle school.

So there I was, twelve-year-old me walking through an overcrowded mall, and this woman stopped me dead in my tracks. There is no reason Stacy Goshum should have been at that random mall in North Carolina, but she just so happened to be visiting a friend from college. So there we were, the biggest modeling agent in the entire western hemisphere and me.

She plucked me out of obscurity. Told my mom I could be a million dollar net worth model, and that was all mom needed to hear. Not because my mom was into pimping out her kid, but because we were so down on our luck after my dad took off right after I was born that Mom saw this as the light at the end of the tunnel and grabbed hold of the train.

I should thank my mother more when it comes to that. Most parents would have balked at Stacy's ideas, at her advances to get me on different shoots or campaigns. But I wanted to do it, and Mom trusted me. And we soared. I became one of the most highly-paid models in the industry, doing shoots for famous magazines, fashion houses, and even becoming a muse for one of the most iconic designers of the past three decades. I've had more success than I could have ever dreamed about, and it's brought me the ability to start my own company for other mothers. My mom and I did this.

She's been here every step of the way, and even when I was married to Levi, she'd been living closely in the house I bought her. We still own it, but now she lives full time with me, so Hart has even more of a support system around her.

Thank God, because I've tried my hardest never to have a nanny for my daughter. After my hellish postpartum mental state, I always felt guilty I didn't get to cherish the early days with Hart, and so I've tried to be extremely present. And the second person to be there, if I have a job I absolutely can't take her to, is my mother.

"Levi, I didn't realize you were coming back to the house. Come in, let me make you that coffee you like."

Levi goes to my mom and kisses her cheek as Hart dozes on his shoulder. They have always had a close relationship, and my mom just adores him. She's the parent he never had, since his family didn't bother to love him until they saw the millions rolling in.

"You look comfy," he teases her, rubbing the soft material at her elbow. "But that's okay. Been a long day, just wanted to bring her home so I could tuck her in. I'll be out of your hair soon."

He nods to both of us before walking into the house. There are no keys or codes that keep us from each other's houses. When I go over to Levi's, despite all the awkward and lingering feelings on my part, I feel at home and comfortable doing things like going to his fridge and grabbing myself one of his yogurt smoothies. And he's over here enough that he's programmed his favorite TV channels into the guide.

"How was it?" Mom gives me a look that's laced with sympathy.

It's probably been a full year since we've spoken out loud about my undying love for Levi, but it's not like she doesn't know. She's my mother, my pain is her pain. I know that now, more than ever, since I'm the mother to a daughter.

"It was fun, Hart loved the movie. Levi's song was great. I had fun. We had fun." I don't know why I'm bothering to put on the *I'm fine* act, at least in front of her, but it's nights like these that threaten to make me fall apart, even after seven years.

When I see exactly what my family could be. It's different when we're forcing Hart to do her chores or I go over to hang something for Levi since he never was a handy man. And yes, even though he could hire someone, he knows I prefer our daughter see both of us doing work that we can easily do rather than hand it off. That right there, that he respects how I want to raise her, makes me even more head over heels.

Not that I'll ever tell him that. Not again, anyway. I've been there, in that begging stage, for the first two or three years after I fucked us up. He's made it clear he will never get back together with me. So I lick my wounds in private, like I'm about to do now.

When I make my way inside and upstairs, Hart's door is closed. But I can make out the signature glow of her nightlight that Levi must have turned on. I hear it when he winds up her music box, the one that plays the title music of *Harry Potter*. He's such a phenomenal father that it makes me wish even more for a life we don't have.

I'm fastened up in a floor-length robe, my hair out of the clips it was spun up in, when Levi knocks on the doorjamb of my bedroom. I've been trying to distract myself by stepping out of the glam of the night, scrubbing my face, applying all of my creams. It hasn't worked, but at least I'm ready for bed.

"She's wiped, barely even opened her eyes as I helped her into her pajamas." He chuckles low, and the sound vibrates up my spine.

I smile back at him. "She's such an extrovert. I guess we have you to thank for that."

I might be famous, but I'm an introvert. I'd rather be home, with a very small group of people, then out schmoozing at events or hitting the networking scene. Levi's ability to do that catapulted his career at the beginning, and I can see how Hart is just like him in that respect.

"Her sense of humor is so advanced, it makes my jaw drop daily. I can't believe she called that comedian an amateur. To his face!"

"Leave it to our daughter to crack a joke at the expense of a late night host." I roll my eyes and shake my head. "Of course, he was smitten with her."

"That girl is going to give us a run for our money." Levi leans against the doorway, the top two buttons on his black dress shirt undone. A couple dark curls of his chest hair peek out, and I have to avert my eyes not to make it obvious that I would have been staring.

"About the photographers, Soph ..." His gray eyes hold so much guilt, as if this is his fault.

As if publicity is something he needs to apologize for. He doesn't. But he is the reason they're back with full force. Yes, we're a famous A-list pair. But him being seen with Lauren will insight something far more insane than our usual.

"So you're ... writing with Lauren again?" I turn to look at my reflection in the mirror because it will be way too painful to have this conversation looking him in the face.

I can't help but ask. I swore to myself I'd play it cool as a cucumber, but he practically brought it up, and it's right on the tip of my tongue. Plus, I'm a glutton for punishment, as if I don't have enough reasons why this man doesn't want to be with me.

Levi's sigh makes my heart plummet. "We're not writing together."

Turning, I shoot him a raised eyebrow.

"We're friends. If anyone knows that I've never been with her, and she's never been into me, it's you."

Do I know that? I want to say that out loud, but I'm too scared. I've wondered for seven years if he's seen her on the down low, or maybe they hooked up here and there. It wouldn't surprise me, but it would gut me.

"Levi, we both know it's not my business who you date. But ... the pictures. You knew they'd be everywhere."

"You know it's not romantic, it never would be."

His voice has a pleading quality to it, and I'm not quite sure why it's there. If either of us doesn't have to answer for who we date, it's him.

He runs a hand through that mass of milk chocolate hair. "But I know, it's not great. She's working on a movie that they want me to come in and produce songs for, and our agents set a meet. I should have known."

In recent years, Lauren Hap hasn't exactly been doing solid work. After she and Levi split as a writing duo, early on in our marriage because of creative differences, Lauren took jobs with artists who either ended up in scandal or just didn't produce a hit. A lot of articles called her a has-been, or said she was nothing without Levi. Needless to say, a boost of good press from being seen with him would be exactly what she needed right now.

"I'm out on whatever project it was anyway, but the damage is done. I just hate that this stirs up all that shit from the past. I hate that I'll probably have to explain this to Hart now."

There was a lot of speculation, at the time when Lauren and Levi decided not to work on his then-album together, that I had demanded he stop writing with her. It couldn't have been further from the truth, but people love to spin their own tales. In reality, Levi hadn't loved the direction Lauren kept pushing, and eventually they parted ways mostly passive-aggressively, but without too many hard feelings.

Our daughter's name, in conjunction with this stupid history, has my stomach dropping to my feet. That she will know the source of one of my biggest insecurities has me screaming inside as a mother and a woman. Just because Levi swears he and Lauren were never together, doesn't mean I don't envision the what-ifs constantly.

"Maybe we don't have to," I whisper, kind of to myself.

"I know it's not the most comfortable discussion, but she's going to find out some day. Better it be from us. Or me, if you don't want to tackle this one."

"You can talk to her." I nod, knowing I'd never be able to sit there and listen to him explain this.

Or how the public has always thought I ruined them.

"Tapping out? Sheesh, thanks, Soph." He smiles good-naturedly. "All right, I'll get out of your hair. I like it like that, by the way. It's always made you look more wild, more free when it's out of all those twists."

He motions his hands, trying to talk about my updo tonight, but I barely notice. Because currently, there is a blush running from the tips of my toes to the top of said wild hair.

"Good night," he says before walking from my room.

My ex-husband just complimented me, and it shouldn't have the effect of rendering me speechless. Then again, I shouldn't want so desperately to run after him and tell him to stay here, to not go back to his own house.

Instead, I turn off my light, close my blinds, and get in bed alone. Another night wishing I could do so many things differently.

Hart Studios is a two-story building I bought near the gated community both Sophie and I live in.

When our daughter was born, I was so inspired that I wrote both my fourth and fifth albums at the same time. The creativity was flowing through me like never before, and I didn't want to drive an hour into downtown or stay somewhere for a week without my girls just to record music.

I was, and am now, a family man who doesn't love the flashy lifestyle and kind of fame I had when I was younger. I needed a state-of-the-art recording booth, soundboard, and comfortable office to spend my time in that would also have me home in under fifteen minutes. I needed a place close by that wasn't in my home because I can't seem to work there, where I could be the musician I want to be—an artist of the highest caliber.

Which is why I bought this building and transformed it. The whole place consists of four studios, completely built out with the newest equipment and the best acoustics money can buy. Then there is a kitchen that has a slate of rotating chefs for artists who choose to work round the clock here. A couple bathrooms, two with showers in case, like I said, someone has been holed up for a week and things get unhygienic. Then I have a small office of my own, and in the basement, there is a gym with some treadmills and bikes to burn off steam.

This isn't a studio where people are partying or hooking up. No, everyone who comes in to make music here knows

there are rules. I'm the veteran these days, even at only twenty-eight. If these young bucks are coming into my studio, they better be buttoned up and ready to work. I might not be on their album, producing it, or even in this building when they record the entire thing—because I loan space out to people—but they know they better not pull that shit under my nose.

And the man who oversees it all, who manages the studios here, who has produced and helped creatively guide some of the most influential albums of the last thirty years, is a fucking stickler. He also happens to be my best friend.

“Good morning, my man,” Judd greets me at the door, and I hand him one of the matcha lattes in my hand.

“Morning, anyone else here today?” I ask as I make my way into the entry.

The whole building is done in sleek woods and black accents. We wanted a moody, stormy vibe, since so much music is derived from emotion and pain. Sure, we've written and recorded some upbeat tracks, shit, I am a reformed pop star, but I like to sit in a place of feelings and this design lends itself to that.

“Just you.” He nods, taking a sip. “I don't know how you drink this shit all the time.”

“It tastes good to me.” I chuckle, knowing his affinity for coffee. “But I just ordered a shipment of the Italian espresso you like and it's in the kitchen if you want it.”

His crinkly face lights up, and his white beard whips around his shoulder as he heads up the stairs to the kitchen.

Judd Tammer is probably the biggest star you've never heard of in music. He's written and produced so many iconic tracks, there isn't enough room in his living room to house all of his Grammys. He has worked with artists I grew up idolizing. He's been to industry parties he can't even speak of, they were that crazy, and one time when he got drunk, he told me about how he and some of the most famous rock groups of all time went into the desert and tripped out on mushrooms.

This guy has lived a thousand lives, and the minute we met, I knew he was someone special to me. It was right after my eighteenth birthday, and Judd was brought in to help on my next album. He walked in and told me, straight to my face, that he thought my music was shit, my attitude was piss poor, but that I had a voice no one in this world would ever have again and that he was here to work with that.

Judd was the catalyst to my reinvention, and I've kept him close ever since. It doesn't matter that he's almost sixty, the guy is my best friend, and I know I'm one of the most important people in his life. I know that because he tells me every day. Judd is a rare gem on this earth; he's honest to a fault, outwardly loving, never fake about a thing he does, and his ear for music is something sent from the gods.

I'm lucky he found me, saved me, when he did. I was adrift with no one anchoring me or telling me to get my shit together. He did both. When he said he wanted to settle a little, since he's been a wanderer his whole life, I asked him if he'd manage Hart Studios. I was in the process of building and needed a full-time employee, though anyone who steps foot in here knows he's anything but. Judd pretty much does whatever he wants here, and it gives the perk of being around music all day, every day, so it keeps him happy.

Once we reach the kitchen, all black cabinets and gold hardware with bowls of fresh fruit and premium snacks loaded in the pantry, Judd starts his espresso in the top-of-the-line machine I bought for the studio.

“So, you going to actually do anything today?” That devilish, childlike glint is in his glassy blue eyes.

I sigh, shooting him a dirty look. “You really know how to be an asshole, huh?”

He grins, a gold tooth glinting in the back of his mouth. “An asshole who could force you to write your goddamn album if I wanted to.”

While I wished he was right, unfortunately, he's not.

Judd is the only person who knows that I have barely recorded a song for my new album in over six months. I wrote that song for the movie that Hart, Sophie, and I went to the premiere of, and that was about eight months ago. Since then, it seems the talent well has run dry, like I can't seem to find any of the magic I once possessed.

"I've been toying around with some lines I penciled down last night, so let's try to work them today."

"No one else on the schedule, so privacy might help." He nods seriously.

Judd may be an old jokester, a jester to many, but he's fucking dead serious when it comes to the music.

"I thought that, too. Hart is with Soph today, so I don't have to be home at any certain time."

"Ah, you thinking an all-nighter? We haven't pulled one of those in a while." He stirs his steaming cup and leads me with a head nod back downstairs and into our favorite recording room.

It's the biggest here, with a giant wooden wall in the recording booth. The chairs are better, and I'm pretty sure one has the mold of Judd's ass he toys around in here so much.

"The best music magic comes after midnight, isn't that what you once told me?" I sit at the board and tinker with some of the controls.

"Yes, but back when we were both much younger men. By now, you should be writing albums in your underwear, scratching your balls on a Sunday."

I sigh, not even able to laugh at the joke because it's all too real.

"I don't know what it is," I admit, even though it scares the shit out of me.

The feeling that Judd is staring at the side of my face goes on for a minute or two before he speaks.

"Whenever I see a block in a musician, it's typically not coming from a creative place. It's coming from a personal

place. Something in their life isn't right, some kind of communication or relationship is off. You aren't making music because something inside you is broken, and it's not your creativity. It's your muse. Whatever well you used to siphon from is not accessible right now."

He's right, I know he is. But I've been avoiding going deeper because the thought of that is scary.

"Maybe what's been working for you for the past seven years isn't working anymore." Judd's voice is low as he plays a melody on his computer, one he must be working on.

Seven years is oddly specific, and it can only be directed at one area of my life.

"What're you trying to say?" I narrow my eyes at him, even though he isn't looking at me.

"Are we going to address the elephant in the room?" he says with a smug air about his voice.

I look around, playing dumb. "Didn't realize one was here. How'd it escape from the circus?"

Judd reaches out and slaps me upside the back of my head. Not hard, but enough to jolt my chin forward and have me rubbing the spot.

"Don't sass me, not when you were out gallivanting with the same woman who helped you make such a terrible album, you went into a self-imposed sabbatical."

See, I knew he was talking about the Lauren pictures. And where Lauren is, Sophie is destined to follow.

Lauren Hap and I started writing together when we were fifteen. She was fresh off a popular tween show, and I was the next pop superstar. She had something to prove, wanted to be this grand song writer being featured on tracks. Me? I thought us being seen together could boost my profile. We wrote pop after pop hit, the melodies and lyrics simple if not catchy as fuck. We fought a lot, the subject of which would be documented in teen tabloids and gossip sites alike. There was always a will they-won't they element to our partnership, and the world watched with bated breath.

The public couldn't get enough of us. At a certain point, the whole thing became more than the two of us. It was this living, breathing tale. Random people all over the globe were invested in a love that had never existed to begin with. I finally ended our working relationship when Lauren kept trying to force me into this tiny box of a musician that I didn't want to be anymore.

The public doesn't know about that, but they sure blamed me and everyone around me for depriving them of the spectacle.

Shortly after Sophie and I got married, the narrative took off; Sophie ruined our partnership, I was under her spell. My fans loathed her, they thought she was the reason I wasn't this person they'd all grown up with. As if I couldn't evolve as a man and a musician by myself.

Over the years, it's gotten much better, especially after the birth of Hart and a purposeful media strategy around our family. But there is still a sect of people who want Sophie out of my life for good.

"I shouldn't have gone to that meeting." I bury my face in my hands, thinking back to two nights before when Sophie had asked me about it.

Fuck. I fucked up bad.

"No, you shouldn't have and I would have told you so if I'd been consulted. What the hell were you thinking? Not only is it bad for your image and career to be seen with her, but that's the lowest reason on the totem pole. I saw the headlines from the premiere, and they weren't about your new song. The only song you've been able to lay down in close to a year."

He's speaking facts, but it pisses me off, the blood in my veins nearly bursting from the pressure.

"But I just met up with Lauren last week, and I've barely been able to write a thing in six months. That isn't the problem. She isn't the problem."

"Those photographers were zeroed in on your family because of that meeting. They went apeshit over your child,

and a woman who is a goddamn saint to have put up with all that shit for one go round. Do you ever think about Sophie in these situations?” Judd says cryptically, not elaborating.

“You know I do.” My gaze is sharp as I cut it to him.

Only every fucking second of every fucking day.

“I love you, kid. Like the son I never had. Like the musical soul mate I’ve been searching for my whole life. But that was a bad fucking move. Don’t pull that shit again. You’re already in over your fucking head and we need this album done in two months.”

Neither of us says it out loud, but there is no way it’s getting done. Two months is barely enough time to lay the melodies.

“Understood, boss,” I clip out my agreement.

“Now, get in that booth and sing. I don’t care what it is. It could be a cover. A fucking lullaby you used to sing Hart. Just fucking make words float from your mouth. Picture ... hell, picture the one thing that sparked any kind of blood in your dick in the last week.” He points to my crotch.

I roll my eyes, though I have to admit that Judd’s lifelong theory of all music stemming from sex is kind of accurate.

Grabbing a guitar from the row of priceless ones leaning against the wall, I sling it around my neck and walk into the booth.

As I sit down on the stool in the middle of the room, I have no lyrics. My brain is blank, with no starting point in sight.

But I close my eyes and focus on my dick. My mind wanders, but it’s not to sex. No, I’m not even thinking about anything that gets me aroused.

I’m picturing a moment from this week that had my blood stopping in my veins. That made my heart stutter and pause for mere seconds, all emotion in my body given to one thing and one thing only.

And that thing is the look on Sophie’s face when the press hounded us. The way sadness seemed to creep into every

beautiful crevice of her expression and how it made my stomach drop.

I don't sing, as Judd requested, but I do start playing. A new, foreign repetition of chords that is so heartbreaking and utterly devastating, I know it's going to turn into my next hit.

Just like that, the woman who used to be my muse strikes lightning once again.

The amount of makeup I have on my face right now could clog up a drain for a year.

“God, I forgot about the heaviness of photo shoot shellac,” I whine to Ariana, who is currently driving my SUV.

“You literally look like an Instagram filter right now. It should be illegal for anyone to be so attractive.” She rolls her eyes.

“Says the woman who is asked constantly on my photo shoots if she’d like an agent,” I tease her, but she really does get asked.

Ari shrugs as we pull into the Starbucks drive-through. “I like my black leggings too much. Plus, I’m too busy for my own success. I have this hard-ass boss—”

I point a finger at her, cutting her off. “Who loves you like family and has told you many times that she’ll back any venture you decide to pursue.”

Ariana has been with me for years, much longer than any other assistant. Or any of my friend’s assistants. But we work so well together that I think I subconsciously prevent her from leaving, and she’s so comfortable and in tune with my routine that she is happy here. I want her to leave the nest at some point, and she’s always talking about this idea or that, so when she feels comfortable, I’ll absolutely let her go while supporting her dream.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Anyway, you looked incredible in the shoot, don’t doubt that. Like the old days,” Ari reassures me.

“I was nervous going into today.” I chew on my lip.

Aside from Levi, my mother, and a few old modeling contacts, Ariana is one of the only other people who knows how nervous I get to do anything that comes along with fame. Once I’m on set, in front of the camera, I’m completely fine. There is a second skin that comes over me, almost protecting my inner introvert, when it comes to fashion gigs. I can fake it until I give the client what they want.

Otherwise, I’m shut down. Put me on a red carpet or at an award show when the main spotlight is on Levi, when we were together for real, and I was happy to fade into the background.

“It didn’t show at all. You looked fierce. They’re going to love them, the perfume will fly off the shelves.”

Today’s gig was for a new fragrance for one of the top beauty companies. “I hope so, means my check will increase. And we’ve got a lot to pay for if we’re going to launch the nurse program earlier than we had hoped.”

Ari mutters something I can’t hear under her breath. “I think we should slow down, just a bit. That program takes a lot of logistics, a lot of screening for the right candidates. It’s going to take so much on a planning level.”

“We’ve got people.” I pout, because being told no when it comes to my business is one of the things I despise most.

She’s about to argue with me when the speaker system and what’s playing on it takes over my entire brain. Slow chords, plucked from a guitar from weathered hands, bring me all the way back. They strip me down, expose every weak part of my soul.

“Why do you have this on your playlist?” My voice is nonexistent.

Ari grabs her phone, and it slips from her hand, making the song go on longer. I could recite the lyrics in my sleep or as they laid me in the ground. They’re tattooed on my soul, and

when the chorus comes in and Levi's husky, rich voice fills the car, I nearly start to cry.

*They say the heart grows fond with distance and age,
But, baby, I can't see it ever going that way.
Because as long as you stay right here with me,
I'm the happiest, the happiest, I'll ever be.
Don't think that universes or skies above,
will ever change our love.
Simply put, my darling, my world,
You have my heart, my forever girl.*

"Shit, sorry! Sorry!" She jabs her finger into the screen of her phone and another song fills the air, releasing me from the chokehold the previous song had on me.

My song.

"*Heart*," by Levi Truin. The song he wrote about me. The song that won every Grammy it was nominated for. The song that a thousand girls listened to when they fell in love for the first time.

I can't listen to this song without bursting into tears now, and it's a miracle I keep it together in the passenger seat.

"I put it on there when I started working with you." My assistant looks guilty. "I guess I never took it off. I'm sorry, Soph."

She shouldn't have to apologize, it's not a big deal. Or it shouldn't be. But listening to those words coming from him just makes me want to die. It feels like my soul might be dying at this very second.

"Hold on." She holds up a finger, cutting off our conversation as we pull into the spot in front of the speaker to order. "I'll have a cold brew with light ice, a cappuccino bone dry with extra cinnamon, and two banana breads, please."

Ariana rattles off our order like it's on the back of her hand, that's how many times we've rolled through this drive through in our lifetime together. And it transports me back to who I am now. The woman who can't be swept up in fantasies, like that song. I push it out of my brain, determined not to think or speak of it again.

We get to the window, Ari pays with my phone, and then she loads the things into the car. Taking a sip of the cappuccino is akin to putting new blood into my veins.

“Thank you for being there today. You don't always come anymore, you're busy and could send Sammy.” Sammy is my second assistant, who is basically Ariana's direct report. She is usually the one doing more of the day-to-day errands than the scheduling and setting up meetings or assisting on projects like Ari does. “Today ... I don't know. I feel very vulnerable right now. I think that premiere left me feeling exposed, or maybe those magazine covers. The photo of them. I'm feeling okay now, just didn't feel very settled in my skin.”

Throughout my years of therapy, one of the key things I focused on was expressing my feelings more. Postpartum trapped me in my own head, and the more I wanted to talk about it, the more I couldn't. It felt like no one would understand, so I simply stayed silent. I try my best, these days, to always tell those close to me how I'm feeling. Spiraling is not my cup of choice anymore.

As Ari drives, she sips her cold brew. “No one would blame you for feeling like that. Your life, and Levi's before you, is a touchy subject. These crazy people who want two people, who were never even together, to date are psychotic. It's messed up they still keep on about this, as if you don't have a whole-ass child with Levi. But it would be jarring for anyone. You shouldn't have to deal with this shit, but this is your life and unfortunately, these are some of the things that make it up. Levi should put a statement out, though. I should tell him that.”

“Don't you dare.” I inhale with a gasp, though deep down, I kind of want her to.

“What? I could just text Allen and tell him he needs to release something. He listens to me.” Allen, who is Levi’s and my joint publicist, is wrapped around Ari’s finger.

Most people are, since she doesn’t take no for an answer, even less than I tolerate it. “Sure he does, but Levi making a statement would look like it was coming from me. Which would then make it look like I was the wicked witch once again.”

I let my head fall against the back of the seat and sigh. For the rest of my life, I’ve tied my fate to this.

“You know, just for once, I’d love Levi to stand up and just actually put out a harsh opinion on it. Tell these people it’s fucked up, that it’s affecting his family. Tell them that Lauren was never anything more than his writing partner. Tell them that you are one of the best things to ever happen to him.” She’s fuming mad, I can tell.

We pull into our community and she winds the car up to my house.

“I’m the one who messed up, though, remember?” And if he was telling the truth, he’d have to tell them about what really happened seven years ago.

My assistant whips her head to me so fast that I think she might have pulled something in her neck. “I hate hearing you say that. More than anything in the world. You weren’t yourself, but more than that, you had a medical *condition* that caused you to not think clearly, to act out of your normal, and a host of all other things. Levi not identifying that and helping was just as much his fault as anything you did.”

“These are things of the past.” That I don’t want to talk about because it feels like someone is flaying my body and lighting it on fire to even remember that time period.

Ariana hits the code for my gate, and it opens to the driveway.

“Are they?” Ari challenges me as she pulls into my garage bay and parks.

“Mom!” Hart interrupts us, knocking on the window.

I take that as my exit strategy and get out.

“Hey, sweet pea, what’re you doing?” I hug her small body to me, sweat from her little temples pressing into my skirt.

“Lorraine is over, and we’re doing tricks on the trampoline. I did a back flip and actually landed it!”

“Wow, babe, awesome!” I high-five her.

Ari rounds the car, fist bumps Hart, and then goes inside. I’m assuming to gear up for our next round of meetings. My day never ends, and the people who work with me do so tirelessly. Which reminds me that I need to send them all on vacation soon, or at least give them a really nice spa day.

“What’re we having for dinner?” she asks, though she’s already sprinting back to the other side of the house to go around the back.

“Fish tacos, I think. Let me talk to Barth,” I answer, unsure of the text I received earlier from our chef with the weekly menu.

“Can he also make some of those long carrots with the garlic sauce?” She licks her lips like she’s been craving them.

“Go in and ask him politely yourself. If you have a request for someone, you have to do it. I’m not going to do it for you.” I’ve always tried to raise her to be independent, even if it’s the littlest things.

“Ugh, fine!” she whines but heads into the house rather than out to sweat under the sun on the trampoline.

The gate is open, and I’m about to hit the remote in my car to close it when James, my neighbor, comes walking past.

“Hey.” He does a double take when he sees me and comes to a full stop.

Internally, I’m annoyed because I don’t have time for this and probably have a whole slate of things Ari needs me for before I get to eat those fish tacos. On the other hand, James is one of the nicest people I’ve met in this business, and I have to be thankful I have good neighbors. Or at least I’ve never had to call the cops on them for having three-thousand-person

parties until four a.m. You'd be amazed at what happens up in these hills.

Although, James isn't really in *my* business. He's a sports agent who works with some of the most talented athletes in the country. He's a behind-the-scenes guy but still knows what it takes to make the front of the scenes happen. In that respect, I almost like him more. He's a private person who runs parallel to the most famous people in the world. I run into too many people trying to make their own star rise higher and will use any means necessary to get there.

"Hey, yourself." I smile genuinely, because even if I don't have time, this is the same guy who stopped by to pick us up two years ago when a brush fire nearly burned down our home.

"You look like you're just getting back from somewhere." He motions to my face.

"Oh what, I don't look like I have two black eyes this often?" I chuckle, knowing that my smoky eye put on for the shoot is probably about running down my face at this point.

"I mean, you look beautiful always, but I always think you look best without any of that stuff." He smiles shyly.

And my whole body blushes. I may be only twenty-eight, but I've lived a full life, been the hottest thing in town, married to the most famous musician. At this point, as a model whose career is about to be put to rest by the new fourteen-year-olds stealing the scene, I'm old news. Men don't compliment me nearly as much, or maybe I don't go out enough to let them. I rarely date. I've resigned myself to this abstinent lifestyle because I'm so anxious about what happened seven years ago that I won't let myself become involved very often.

"Thank you." I duck my head. "A little early evening stroll?"

"Something like that." He laces his fingers and flexes his arms out in front of him.

James is attractive. Very attractive. He's probably almost ten years older than me but still young in terms of overall age. His skin looks like he's constantly sunning under some Tuscan sky, an olive that is dreamy and looks smooth to the touch. With blond hair cropped close to his head and shining blue eyes, he probably could have become a model himself. In a dry fit T-shirt and basketball shorts, he looks ever the eligible bachelor, and I wonder idly why he's never been scooped up.

"What are you up to over here? Looks busy." He motions to the stack of folders and papers in my arms.

"Work never rests for me, unfortunately."

"Sadly, I know a lot about that." James moves closer, and I can make out the crinkle lines around his eyes when he smiles.

"I saw your baseball team won again. Mathis is playing like an all-star." I mention one of the players he signed who is probably going to take his team to a championship this year.

James' eyebrows jump, like he's surprised I kept up with what his players are doing. "Kid's a superstar. But I'm impressed, didn't take you as a fan. You'll have to let me get you tickets."

I shrug. "You can't live in LA and not follow the thing it revolves around. Or so it seems. I'd love that, but I'm just not sure about my—"

"Or maybe you're not sure if the tickets are for you *and* me." He cuts through the small talk. "Which, they are, to be frank. I'd love to take you to a game. Honestly, I'd love to take you anywhere."

He's asked me out a number of times over the past year, and I've always turned him down. Focusing on my daughter, busy with work, the fact that we're neighbors ... I've used every excuse in the book. The truth is, I absolutely should date a guy like James. He's nice and seems normal in this LA world that is clearly not. But I'm still not over the one man who captured my heart years ago.

The expression on my face must tip him off to my hesitancy and the no lingering on my lips.

“When are you going to let me finally take you out? And don’t hit me with some lame excuse, believe me, I’m a good time. You should want to date me.” James pleads his case, smirking.

You know what? Why have I used so many excuses to avoid going out with him? It’s not like I haven’t dated, and my choices are usually poor. Playboy bankers or millionaires who I find in bed with other girls about a week after I start seeing them. I’ve dabbled in the actor sphere, but in seven years, no guy has lasted more than a month or two. Either because Levi voices concern and I break it off, thinking he might ask me to get back together, or I just find myself bored or agitated.

But James is nice. Actually nice. He’s got his life together, and the outside of his house is always neat. Whenever I run into him at events, people have nothing but kind things to say about him.

It’s been a really long time since I’ve allowed myself to be happy when it comes to my love life. And I should stop hanging on to something that is never coming back. It’s time to move on, and if I have to force myself at first, then so be it.

“Yeah, you know what? Okay.” I nod emphatically, as if I’m convincing myself.

“A hesitant answer with a question somewhere in there, exactly what every guy wants to hear when he asks a woman out.” James throws his head back and laughs. I was being so ridiculous that I laugh too.

“Oh God, I’m sorry. It’s been a very long time since I dated someone normal. Not that you’re normal, but you know what I mean. And I guess sometimes I just think, why would someone want to date me, look at the amount of baggage I bring. Wow, that was brutally honest.”

I nearly slap a hand to my mouth from all the word vomit.

“I find brutally honest very refreshing in this town. And don’t worry, Sophie. I’ve been trying long enough to take you on a date, and it has nothing to do with your past or any of that. I just would love to take a beautiful, kind woman to

dinner. And I think you deserve more than what you've been getting."

It's like he sees right through me, and I wonder how long he's been looking at me without me ever giving him a second thought.

"Perhaps I do." I smirk, blushing.

"How about tomorrow night?" he asks.

I laugh out of surprise. "So soon?"

He shrugs. "I figure I shouldn't chance my luck. You've turned me down so many times, I'm not letting this one get away from me."

A twinge of regret from all the times I'd pushed him off before fills my chest.

"Let me check my schedule. You know Ariana runs my life, but if I'm free, it's a date."

He taps his stomach in a satisfied way, as if he's just won something. "It's a date."

As he walks up the road and I close the gate, I realize I have butterflies in my stomach for the first time in a very long time.

6

LEVI

I wrote a song.

Okay, so I finished the chords and wrote a half-decent chorus, but it's more than I've done in six months, and I'm so freaking excited about it that I want to keep going.

My brain, however, has other plans. Once Judd and I come to an agreement that the chords are finished and he goes out to get something to eat, I try to stay in the studio and start a new song. Or write some words. But once again, I'm stumped.

A buzz comes from where my phone is sitting on the table next to me, and I pick it up.

Lauren: Let's go out for drinks tonight. That place on the strip that you used to love. I've been thinking about this song that would be perfect for you.

My teeth snap together in frustration, and I wonder why, for the umpteenth time in years, I don't just tell her I'll never work with her again. Well, I know why. I've always suspected that so much of the rumor and buzz around us is her doing. I have no proof, but things always seem to be complicated when it comes to Lauren.

Her blatant forwardness and flirty attitude used to be something I loved, but now kind of pisses me off. She was my friend before I met Sophie, and it always felt like she was trying to assert that after I got married. While I loved the writing we did together, things aren't the same anymore.

Every fiber of my being is annoyed, and I hate that this narrative about Lauren and I still goes on. I should just ignore her for now, but it's not like she's really done anything.

Levi: Hey, can't. Also, you should know, that lunch was a courtesy to hear about your project. I'm really busy with my new album and can't. Hope your movie goes well.

There, that was nice and diplomatic. I don't add the line I want to, that I'll never work with her again for fear of how hungry the press will be for that interaction. She's done nothing wrong, but a lot of times in life, that has no bearing on how we have to treat others.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I'm greeted by a familiar voice.

"That's not what I want to see from my top artist."

Lyle, my manager for almost eight years, stands on the other side of the glass with his arms crossed. My manager looks more like a hipster, with his horn-rimmed glasses and iconic punk rock style, than most of these suave, shiny managers in Los Angeles. That's why I liked him the moment we met, right after Sophie and I had gotten married. I was in need of a new manager after leaving the one who had originally discovered me, and Lyle was so out of the box in terms of anyone I'd ever met in this industry. At the time, I'd been looking for new and different, and he hit the mark.

"Well, your top artist has fuck all to write about, so it's taking some time." Aside from Judd, Lyle was the only one I could be truthful about this to.

And I'd rather talk about this than get into the Lauren of it all.

"I didn't hear that. But if I did, I'd tell you, you need to pull that creativity out of your ass and get it done."

Notice how he didn't say I was on a deadline because I'm not. Sure, the two month thing is looming ... but in reality?

You don't have to answer to anyone when you own your own label and the music you make on it.

"Yeah, yeah." I walk out of the booth and grab the seltzer I brought out from the fridge hours earlier.

It's warm and not as fizzy, but I drink it anyway, needing something else to do besides think about how I could barely call myself a musician anymore. I drop into a chair and fiddle with some buttons on the board as Lyle looks at me. Guy is always eyeing people up, it's like he's a freaking mind reader.

"Matrix wants to put on a tour with you," Lyle says as he plops down on the suede couch in back of me.

That has me spinning slowly in the chair. "They do? But I don't even have a new album out."

I'm used to releasing music and then going on stadium-headlining tours. Sold out shows. Thousands of screaming fans. I haven't done one in recent years. Unfortunately, my last was canceled after Hart broke her arm at preschool on the playground, and I couldn't bring myself to leave. That was three years ago, and the tour before that was right after Sophie and I split, and it was so grueling that I needed a lot of time off.

"They want to do a 'best of,' so to speak. People are hungry for your music, especially with the new song from the movie, and since the album isn't here, they want some filler content."

"A multi-city stadium tour isn't filler content." I snort.

My manager shakes his head. "No, they want to do smaller venues. Theaters, popular but not massive event spaces. Maybe a stadium on each coast but that's still in talks."

His words are churning in my head, giving me a minute to process them. "I always think 'best of' tours are for burned-out artists."

"Or artists who can't release music fast enough for their fans." He raises an eyebrow and throws that dig right into my ribs.

I flip him the bird. “How many shows? When?”

“They want you to go ASAP. Kind of like an underground thing, really boots to the cement and buzzy. They want to try something new.”

Matrix is one of the biggest concert promoters and large-scale event companies in the country. They did a ton of artist’s tours and threw a lot of music festivals many people are familiar with. And this idea? It sounds fucking cool.

“About thirty shows in smaller cities, then some on the coasts. No real promotion, just social media and word of mouth. People will be lining the streets for you. It’ll be a real grassroots kind of tour, a more intimate experience for your fans. I think it’s a great idea, and I half told them you’d do it already.”

“Running everything by me as usual, huh?” I roll my eyes, but Lyle typically has my best interests at heart.

“You know, it’s a good idea. You’re clearly struggling in the studio, and getting on the road could be the perfect solution.”

This could be amazing, he’s right. I’ve been needing inspiration, and nothing brings out the creative in me more than being on the road. The sights, the people, the experiences, it’s art itself that I just crave to write once I’m in it. This could be the spark I need.

And then there is the fact that Hart has never been on tour with me, something that I’ve wanted to show her and do with her since she was born. This one would be perfect with its smaller scale shows and less of a security risk to her. She would feel the intimateness of playing music for people. I could even bring her on stage, see if she wants to play with me. The last time I toured, she was too little.

Well, this could be perfect. She has school, but she’s still young. We’ll bring tutors, or she can fly home some weeks. My mind turns like a clock on speed, all the wheels grinding together with a multitude of ideas. None of them negative, and in the simple calculations I’m doing about the new album and

any other commitments, I can't find anything to put in the cons column.

“Yeah. Tell them I'll go.”

When I walk into Sophie's house, Ariana is talking loudly at someone on the phone in the kitchen, Hart is lying on the couch watching some mindless TV show, Hillary has the vacuum busted open, screws everywhere, trying to fix it, and Barth is in the kitchen singing while cooking something that smells delicious and very close to shrimp scampi, which is Hart's favorite.

“Where is your mom?” I ask Hart as I walk in, kissing her head.

She doesn't take her eyes off the TV. “Upstairs I think?”

I sit down next to her for a second and hug her to me. It's not often she lets me hold her for very long anymore, but she's mostly ignoring me to watch a TV show and so I can do it now.

“You care if I stay for dinner?” After I talk to Sophie about the tour and coordinating to take Hart with me, I want to tell my little girl all about the idea.

She'll see so many places and gain so many new experiences. I can't wait to have her on the road with me and have her up on stage feeling that energy that nearly got me high.

“Nah. Barth is making my favorite.” She's a little zoned out, and I'm sure school is exhausting.

But we can get into it later. I pat her leg and stand, going in search of Sophie.

She's walking out from her room into the hallway as I round the top of the stairs. And am momentarily rendered speechless while losing all functionality in my body. Well, except for my goddamn cock.

Sophie is stunning, per usual. Makeup-less in the morning under the sheets, at a red carpet event, at a photo shoot. But tonight? Jesus fucking Christ. She's wearing a skin-tight black dress with a slit so high up the side that if she moves too suddenly, I'll get an eyeful of the most perfect pussy I've ever seen in my life. All of that blond hair is tumbling over her bare shoulders, a little tousled like she's been rolling in the sheets. And fuck me, she has blood-red lipstick painted perfectly all over her full lips.

A fucking wet dream, that's what she is.

"Wow. I mean ... wow. You look incredible. *Beautiful.*" I clear my throat and try to discreetly adjust my dick, which is currently fighting against my fist, trying to pop the button on my jeans.

I feel like the teenager I was when I first met her.

"You going to an event? I didn't realize you had one tonight. A premiere? A launch party?" Sophie always gets invited to the hottest ticket in town.

My ex-wife shifts from one foot to the other and runs a hand nervously down the other bare arm.

"I, uh ... I'm going on a date."

Something akin to a firing rage of jealousy rips through my gut. Seven years since I left her, since I told her I was done and didn't want her to be my wife anymore, and I still go into a blind fury over the thought of any other man with her.

Shit, she might have been the catalyst for our demise, but I'd been the nail in the coffin. And it had been a huge fucking mistake. How many times have I thought that to myself but never said a thing to her? And now, here she is, actually smiling and excited about going on a date. I know Sophie so well, I can feel the nerves coming off her. Which means, she is actually looking forward to spending time with whoever she's meeting tonight.

"Oh." The word drops between us like an anvil.

"James Platt, the sports agent? He's really nice and has been asking for a while—"

I cut her off. “Your neighbor? You really think that’s a good idea?”

There is an edge to my voice, and by the way she narrows those sapphire eyes, I know I shouldn’t have said that out loud. But apparently, the caveman in me won’t be silenced.

“Actually, I really do. He’s courteous, kind, checks in on us all the time. Successful, and has a wonderful reputation. I’ve been turning him down for almost a year now, and I decided I’m not doing that anymore.”

I should shut the fuck up, but I can’t stop myself. She made herself up. She looks like that for another man. It’s my own goddamn fault, this whole thing has slipped way out of my grasp. Now that she seems to be going for it, a desperate poison seems to be gripping my heart, and I want to hold on to something.

Coming over here, I’d planned to tell her about my plans for our life. My plans, they’d always been mine. For the most part, Sophie always went along with my wishes, what I wanted, who I was dating, or how I wanted to raise Hart. But, I know, deep down, she was still repenting for what had happened just after our daughter was born.

This isn’t the kind of man I wanted to be, the kind who was irrationally angry or thought she “spoiled” my plan by dropping this bomb. This fury bubbling inside me is only hiding what I truly feel; insane jealousy, heartbreak, and the fact that I’m the reason we aren’t together anymore when I clearly want to be. I’m being a fucking dick to her, but it was masking the pain.

“Why? You have anything you could ever want. A wonderful family. A career you kick ass at. What could this guy possibly add?”

Sophie’s irises go stormy, a dark, ice blue that’s trying to send daggers through my soul.

“He could add love, possibly. Eventually. I deserve love; I want it. I want to spend my life with someone who loves me, a partner who makes me feel loved and cherished and gives me

romance. That okay with you? Am I allowed to have that? Should I file some papers with the court?"

Her tone is hard, but I can hear the pleading underneath. I can hear how broken her heart has been.

What fucking tears me apart is that I was that person for her. She was that woman for me. Now that I'm standing just inches from her, I wonder how the hell we got here? I know, realistically, how it happened. But if you'd told me at the height of our love that we'd be facing off like enemies on the opposite side of battle, I wouldn't have believed you for a fucking second.

It breaks the spell of my anger, and the understanding, supportive co-parent who I've tried to be for seven years comes roaring back so fast, my ears ring. I'm being a total asshole, pinning things on her because of my insecurities. She doesn't deserve this. The way I spoke to her was extremely rude.

My chest heaves with my mistakes, ones I seem to make all the time when it comes to her.

"Wait, Soph, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to come over here and have this happen. Actually, I wanted to talk about something el—"

"Whatever, Levi. You happy? You rained on my parade, yet again. I get it, you're still punishing me for what I did years ago. I'm so fucking tired of always trying to prove myself to you, maybe that's why I'm going on this date. Maybe I've forgiven myself, despite what it makes you think of me."

She stomps past me, to the stairs, and starts taking them in angry steps. I follow and try to grab her elbow to calm her down before Hart sees us. No matter what, we don't let our daughter see us fight. Ever. That's the rule.

When my fingers brush her skin, she whirls around. Her eyes are full of venom, but I watch as she tries to wrangle it all in. A polite not-quite-smile slides over her lips, and she

straightens to her full height. She's standing two steps below me, and I want desperately to close the distance between us.

“Stay for dinner with Hart. That's why you came, right? She is our reason for interacting, so let's keep it that way. We've always been good that way. I won't ask about your dating life, and you don't inquire about mine. The best co-parents we can be, that's always been the plan.”

Sophie nods to herself as if the motion will convince both of us to settle for this lie.

“Let Hillary know when you're leaving, since Mom is on a trip with her girlfriends. If Hart isn't already in bed, Hillary will see to it. Have a good night, Levi.”

And with that, my ex-wife is down the stairs, giving hurried instructions to the people who work for her, and then out the door she goes.

I'm left standing there like a total chump. And it's fucking crazy of me to feel like I'm holding my heart in my hand, and I just forgot to give it to her.

I hate, absolutely loathe, that I'm on my first date in nearly two years, with a normal, nice man who keeps complimenting me, and all I can think about is the fight I just had with my ex-husband.

How fucking dare he?

My conversation, more like whisper-screaming match with Levi, on the staircase, plays over and over again in my mind. He lost his damn brain, apparently, to care this much that I'm going out with James. Maybe I was right, that he just wanted me to suffer in a purgatory of unhappiness forever because of what I'd done to our relationship.

In seven years, we've never gotten into an argument like that. We gloss over everything, keeping our chipper faces on for our daughter, pretending like there aren't hurt feelings, passive aggression, and unrequited love bubbling just under the surface.

"Is your halibut good?" James interrupts my thoughts, and I want to kick myself for not having my full focus on him.

I fork a bite into my mouth and nod too enthusiastically. "Delicious. How about you? This place is always so good."

He's taken me to one of the city's most private yet elite dining spots. This seafood restaurant has a back entrance for celebrity clientele and people of that nature, which James used when he pulled us in. It also earned him points in my book, because he didn't parade us through the front entrance of

somewhere swarmed with paparazzi. It shows he wants to actually get to know me rather than be seen out with me.

“One of my favorites. I started coming here after DiBello’s closed, they had the best raw bar.”

My mouth waters thinking about that place. “My God, they did. I was devastated. Never again will I have a plate of zucchini alfredo better than theirs.”

“Except in Italy.” He solemnly nods. “And it’s not like either of us can get to Lake Como as often as we’d like.”

I sigh dreamily, thinking about the trip I took with Hart a year ago. “I miss it there, it’s one of the most beautiful places on earth. Have you done much traveling recently?”

He shakes his head as he sips the glass of red wine in front of him. We split a bottle, one he chose, and it’s delicious. This guy is earning points all over the place tonight. Even with the distractions in my mind, this date is pretty top-notch. Not flashy, but clearly thought out. Nothing too adventurous or out of my comfort zone. Someone who would take me sky-diving on a first date is not my cup of tea. Both James and I are older and wiser, at least in my head I am, and good conversation with some fantastic food is all I require. He’s delivering on both parts.

“We’re in season and my clients’ schedules have been so hectic, which is a good thing. Chaos means business is going well.”

“Isn’t that always how it works?” I laugh, agreeing.

“This summer, I think I’m going to do a trip to Thailand with my brother and our cousin. They want to do some off-the-grid stuff and I could use a new adventure. As fun as luxurious Italian villas are, something fresh is definitely in the cards.”

“That sounds amazing.” I study his bright blue eyes across the candlelight.

He smiles back at me, like he almost can’t believe I agreed to this.

“Can I ask you a question?” I push a piece of rice around with my fork. “I mean, it’s kind of personal, and might come off rude, but I’ve always wondered ...”

“Ask away, I’m an open book.” He gestures his hands wide, and this guy couldn’t be more inviting if he tried.

There is a reason he lands big clients, and it’s because his personality just draws you in. He seems more trustworthy than my late grandma.

“Why are you single? I mean, I don’t mean it in a bad way. I just have always wondered. You seem like a hell of a catch. You’re respectful and you care about people. Did you just ... never find the one?”

James grimaces and then looks down at his lap. “Well, I guess that’s one good thing about not being the famous one in this town; your relationship drama stays private.”

That has me coughing out a laugh. “Shit, maybe I should try that.”

“Eh, it still sucks because you still get your heart broken. I wish it was as simple as I never found the right one, but I did. I was set to get married when I was twenty-six. Two weeks before the wedding, she called it off. Had been sleeping with her personal trainer and was in love. I was devastated. We’d been together for three years before that. I saw her as my everything, my wife, my future, the mother of my children. It took me a really long time to recover after that. And then I guess I just kind of married my work. I love what I do. Being single with no responsibilities gives me the freedom to go to any game of my clients that I want. But mostly, I guess I couldn’t stand trying to fall back in love. To get hurt that badly again.”

A beat of silence passes while I digest this information, and my heart weeps for him. Here I thought I was the one with the most baggage at the table, and this kind, sweet, attractive man who wanted to take me on a date had his heart ripped open and hasn’t been able to recover. I know a bit about that.

“Wow, sorry, that was definitely oversharing.” He clears his throat and puts on an embarrassed smile. “I should have just said I married my work.”

Immediately, I hold up my hands. “No, no, I’m so glad you explained. Thank you for trusting me with that. It’s heavy, and it sucks. That’s a terrible thing she did to you, and believe me, I know crappy love lives. You probably know this, but what happened wasn’t anything on you. It’s a shame you’ve deprived the female population like this, because one of them is probably dying to scoop you up.”

“Well, what do you think I’m doing here now?” He smirks, and my heart thumps into my ribcage.

“Why are you dating now?” I ask, genuinely curious, and to avoid addressing the compliment he gave me.

“Well, I’m not dating, not really. But I’ve been asking you out for forever, hoping you’d say yes just one of these times. It’s not every day I have a beautiful woman who seems to be the full package living right next door. You finally agreed, so here I am, taking the chance.”

Yeah, my heart about plopped down right there in front of my dinner. I haven’t had a man treat me this way in ... well, ever. My boyfriends before Levi were all stupid teenage flings. Then there was my ex-husband, and our connection had been intense and all-consuming. We were young and passionately in love. We didn’t slowly date or go out to dinner just for interesting conversation. The couple of guys I’ve dated in the seven years after him have all been douchebags, more intent on having a supermodel on their arm than actually getting to know me.

I can already tell that things are going to be different with James. It both warms my insides and scares the shit out of me.

Because the last time I fell for someone, truly gave love a shot, it cost me everything.

The love I had for Levi speared me straight through the heart like a poison arrow. I was so sick with it that I didn’t

think anything else existed. Then postpartum came and stole all of that away in no time flat.

I quietly struggled with postpartum. Hell, I'm still silent about it. The things that happened to me after I had a baby? The public barely knows about them. The story has been buried, weighing me down like a thousand-pound boulder strapped to my neck by a diamond and gold-encrusted chain.

Instead of talking about the mess I made of my life when struggling with mental health after I had Hart, I dove headfirst into the nonprofit space. I raised money, created products, threw events, created charities, funds, you name it, and I did it. If it was going to help even one person not to sink into a space they couldn't crawl out of, much like I did, I did it.

I did the therapy; I forgave myself. I got right with my mental health and put on a brave face for my daughter. I wake up every day, hoping to make her world happy and healthy. I smile at my ex even though I'm madly in love with him each time he walks out the door. I try to be better, marginally, each day I'm granted breath.

But in the end, I'm still living in fear. I'm still holding this story, completely untold, to my chest like cards I don't want anyone else to see.

What's even worse is that the public suspects it was Levi who fucked up, and that's why we ended. Why wouldn't they? He has the track record, the reckless past.

They have no idea that it was me. I was the one who cheated.

Typically, I try never to think of that period in my life. I shut the door on it in therapy, examined it, picked it apart with a fine-tooth comb. I am past it. I am past the guilt. But the decision still haunts me, and its consequences are stamped all over my life.

I had Hart when I was twenty-one. A baby myself, by all accounts. Living in the entertainment industry forced me to become an adult a lot quicker than I normally would have, but it doesn't mean I was ready to become a parent. Levi and I

were madly in love. We'd gotten married on a whim but it was a solid decision. Having a child so soon, though? That was a complete accident. We were having sex like wild animals, anywhere, anytime, and it's no wonder we ended up getting pregnant.

Her birth was difficult, the labor going almost thirty hours. I tore in two places, and my recovery was awful. I was bedridden for a week, and being a mother did not get off to the start I thought it would have. Then came the blues. More than the blues, as I would later find out.

I had severe postpartum. So bad, that I couldn't get out of bed most days, I couldn't bring myself to even hold Hart. Nursing her, or pumping for her, was like shoving needles into my body dozens at a time. Everything hurt, I felt trapped in my own mind, and Levi and I were not connecting like we usually did.

It was like all the chemistry and earth-shattering love we had together was just erased. Seeing him be so affectionate with Hart only made it worse, because I couldn't seem to fall for our daughter the way he had. I know now that my brain was imbalanced, that my hormones were completely out of whack and causing me to suffer on a deep mental level.

But I just couldn't work through it. For a long time, almost three months after she was born, I stayed in bed and couldn't bring myself to actually live.

That's when Vincent came into the picture.

He had been Levi's assistant for about a year, since around the time we got married. Since Levi had at least four assistants at all times, each working on different parts of his brand or personal life, I never got to know them well. Except for Vincent. There was something different about him. He would come around, and in a time when I felt like no one was truly listening to me, it felt like he got it more than anyone else.

My postpartum drove me insane. Out of my head. And that led to lust that wasn't there. I couldn't open up to Levi; I couldn't connect with him. But anytime I seemed to have a sour expression on my face, Vincent was right there, providing

me with a shoulder to cry on. This scenario started to bloom in my head, and I know now, after years of therapy and the right help, that I was creating this false narrative to bury my pain in. The moments with Vincent were a blip on the radar, a few minutes out of a horrible year of my life. But I built them up. I made Levi the enemy. My mind turned against itself because of my hormones, and my whole world was off balance.

One night, I was too many drinks in and found that Vincent was there. He'd been the only person I felt a slight positive connection to in those times. I'd been out by the pool at the house Levi and I had bought together, so happy to have somewhere to start our marriage. Hart was a tiny newborn, inside with a nanny caring for her. Levi was getting a rare night away from home, because I knew he was starting to grow tired of me and my attitude.

Vincent sat down next to me with his feet in the water, just like mine were. We talked, drank, and when he turned to me, put his hand on my face, and leaned in, I didn't stop him. It wasn't about him or that I felt anything for him or wanted him to be anything to me. I just needed to feel. *Anything*. He had become this person in my mind, and I thought he could solve it all. That lust was so improperly mislabeled in my brain, and I let him kiss me.

I wanted it to stop two seconds after it started. It was as if that kiss was the jolt to my system that I needed, but in a completely different way. It made me remember who I was, who I loved, that my husband was my soul mate, and I needed to get help. For him, for our daughter.

Of course, I didn't have the time to process any of that. Because just as quickly as it started, it swiftly ended when Levi came into the backyard, wrenched Vincent away from me, and sucker-punched him in the face.

Not a single whisper of it got out to the media, but Vincent got a hefty payday for what went down.

And me? My husband didn't look me in the eye for an entire year. That night, he took off, refusing to talk to me or

answer any call. The next day he came home, told me he wanted a divorce, and a week later, I moved out.

I lost everything: The love of my life. The stable family I wanted to provide for my daughter. The future I thought was sealed. All gone because of me.

Which is why sitting here—after as big of a blowout as Levi and I have ever had occurred just prior—with James ... it's a huge step. I'm thinking about a future I've denied myself for a long time. Even if this is just a first date. Because it feels different. I feel different.

I feel like I'm finally in control of how my life is going to go, and I'm sitting across from someone, even if we're only getting to know each other, who shows me that a future like that is possible. Even if it isn't with him, the idea of James shows me that I could have what I've always dreamed of.

“I'm glad you're taking the chance. I'm glad you asked me long enough that I decided to take it, too.” I hope my smile conveys just how happy I am to be here tonight with him.

In a more forward gesture than he's given me all night, James reaches across the table and laces his fingers with mine. The touch is solid, nice, and even holds some electricity. I wonder what it will feel like if and when he kisses me.

Still, Levi's words curl in my eardrum like a poison set to make my best intentions rot. Because they'll always be there, those dark smudges I feel count against me. No matter how distant the memories get or how hard I work to be better, I feel like they're lingering, waiting to be exposed.

She might have ruined us, but I made the bigger mistake. I can see that Sophie's indiscretion was minimal in comparison after I reflect on it after all these years.

I've kept her at arm's length, convincing her, and myself in the process, that she'll never have another shot with me. That all she is to me is the mother to my child. I've deprived myself of the knowledge that I'm in love with her, that I probably always will be.

That's never been more apparent than tonight when it physically hurt to let her walk out the door to another man. In all the years, the dull ache of loving her from afar and still feeling the sting of her betrayal has always been something I can push to the back burner. Then tonight happened. And I blew my lid. The mask was off, the disguise I've so carefully laid in place gone.

I'm losing her, and I've done nothing but demonstrate that I don't want her for seven years.

Looking back, even after I'd gone through my sabbatical and healing and thought I was this fixed person ... I'm not. My ego is still through the roof. I'm a cocky shit, even if I'm masquerading as a confident family man.

When I saw my former assistant kissing my wife, the first thing I thought was, *how dare a woman ever cheat on the likes of me?* I want to burn myself at the stake for that reaction. It was so selfish, so purely animalistic and wrong. I've had many sleepless nights thinking about how it was my first reaction.

I've had sleepless nights about so much that happened at that time. How I focused on him kissing my wife rather than why she was doing that in the first place. I focused on my fury; the betrayal running like hot lava through my body, and the optics of it all.

I'd loved her with so much intensity that, for a while, I was almost in disbelief. Divorce seemed like the only option, because how could I ever trust her again? How could she do that with our daughter in the next room? How could I have missed that something was so wrong, it would cost us everything?

In reality, Sophie was sick. She was ill enough to be diagnosed and had to go on medication. After she moved out, she did more therapy than any other person I've known. Her mother has not so subtly tried to clue me in to everything she did to try and heal after our separation.

I tried to drill it into my head, that she wouldn't have done it, perhaps, if she wasn't going through postpartum. But I couldn't fully convince myself of it. Every time I saw her in those early years after, I would be left wondering if she ever loved me the same way I did her.

From the moment of the incident, we tried to keep everything as quiet as possible—her postpartum, the kiss, me beating the crap out of one of my assistants. But, eventually, the media got ahold of the property records, realized Sophie had moved out, and then our divorce papers got leaked. And once outside influences got involved, the shit storm we'd created ourselves got a million times bigger. Everything from threesomes to adultery to murder to money issues was speculated about why we were getting divorced. Then, our daughter was brought into it, with horrible, filthy lies printed about all three of us.

It made us turn against each other even more. Not that we'd admit it, but every time an article came out, I'd wonder if a nugget of truth was printed in the paragraphs. I'm sure Sophie thought the same.

Our romantic relationship disintegrated past the point of being salvageable, and we turned to co-parenting. We rebranded ourselves as the modern family. Stored the ugly skeletons in the closets and moved on.

To make matters even worse, I never told her any of this. My heart was hanging on by a thread after I caught her kissing him. My world was shattered. I'd found this person who I loved above all else, and she could do that to me? I haven't been the same man since that day.

We haven't discussed any of it. Not the personal revelations I've made since or how her postpartum affected every area of her life. I know she would never have done that if she wasn't in that state of mind. I know it now.

But I've never broached the subject with her. For Hart's sake, we've always said the past is in the past. We need to be healthy and happy for our daughter to be so.

That's just it, though. We're neither of those things. Wounds are festering right under the surface, and it's evident by how I've been stewing the entire time she's been out that I'm not happy about anything.

After dinner with Hart, I put her to bed and stayed at Sophie's. Regardless of our fight before, I still have to talk to her about the tour, which will be happening soon. One of the downsides of living the kind of public life we do is that if we don't get to each other with information right away, we end up reading about it in the media. And generally, whatever they put out is not the full story.

I don't need my ex-wife seeing that I'm going on tour and hadn't discussed it with her at all before agreeing.

Sophie's heels click on the hardwood as she walks into the house through the garage door. I hear the trajectory of her journey until she walks into her main living space, where I'm sitting on her enormous white sectional facing her white and navy kitchen.

“Hey, Soph—”

Her hand flies to her heart, and I realize she didn't see me. "Holy shit, I had no idea you were still here."

Aside from us, the house is quiet. Hillary and Ariana went home hours ago, and I've just been twiddling my thumbs, thinking about how many mistakes I've made until she arrived home.

"Sorry," I whisper, holding up my hands in apology. "I sent Hillary home and stayed after Hart fell asleep."

Sophie stares at me, looking every bit as gorgeous as she did when she walked out the door at the beginning of the night. The house is muted in dim light, and that charged air that always seems to fall between us whenever we're in a room together sparks at my skin.

"Well, I'm home now," she says awkwardly, toeing out of her heels.

"How was your date?" The words come out like sandpaper.

Sophie snorts. "Seriously? Was that like taking a bullet?"

My ex-wife has a great sense of humor, though very few people know that about her.

I hang my head. "I owe you an apology. I reacted terribly before. I shouldn't have said any of that shit. Of course, it's none of my business. I want you to be happy. I'm really sorry about what I said, it was out of place. And rude, mean really. I'm sorry, Soph."

They were all the right things to say, but how come it felt like I was choking on glass as I said them?

"Thank you," she replies and leaves it at that.

The distance between us feels like an ocean, and I want anything to get under her skin as she stands across the room with her arms crossed over cleavage that peeks out way too temptingly from her black dress.

"I'm going on tour in, well, pretty soon. Matrix wants to do smaller cities, intimate venues, and they want it to be very hush-hush."

It's the information I came over here to tell her, but now I'm kind of doing it out of spite. I didn't have to stay here, I could have let Hillary stay in the house until Sophie got home from her date. But the jealousy got to my head, and I needed to see her come home. The thought of her spending the night with him? It ate me alive while I sat here waiting.

Understanding settles in her eyes, and she nods. "Okay, so you'll be gone for a few months? You're flying back in from time to time? Just let me know and we can figure out Hart's schedule."

I scrub the back of my neck, knowing it's shitty of me to ask for something this big after insulting her pretty badly before she left for her date.

"Actually, I want her to come with me."

Sophie blinks. Then blinks again. Then narrows her eyes and crosses the room.

"She's seven years old, Levi. She can't go on a concert tour, she has school. She has her life here. Hell, she has her own recitals and things she's involved in. Will you be gone before then? You just expect her to up and leave her whole world because you want her waiting in the wings?"

When she says all of those things, it makes me sound selfish beyond belief. But I know she's only freaking out like this because of what I said to her before she left.

"We can take a governess or a nanny. I'll hire a teacher. Of course, it will be Hart's decision, but I think she would absolutely love to do this. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and this tour will be all in the same country, so it won't be the chaotic travel of a European tour. We used to talk about it all the time, Soph! How cool it would be to bring Hart on tour, for her to see so many new things." I try to reason with her, because we would lie in bed at night once upon a time and dream of these things.

"And that's back when we were twenty years old and had no idea the effort it took to raise a child. We were reckless and talking in fantasies. We were also ..."

She trails off and looks away, swallowing so hard that I see her throat move.

“We were what?” Anger and something else itches in my veins, but I tamp it down.

“We were together, Levi. We were a family. It’s a very different conversation thinking about bringing a family on tour, with someone to watch the kids while the famous musician is up on stage for hours on end day after day. To have a support system there for the child. It’s a very different thing thinking about shipping my daughter off on a multi-city trip while you’re in rehearsals and concerts that she can’t and doesn’t want to be a part of all the time. Who is going to watch her? We’ll be sticking her with nannies or handlers twenty-four seven, which is exactly what we always said we didn’t want.”

My heart is practically bleeding in my chest. The end of our marriage is never more heartbreaking than when I’m thinking about all the things we dreamed of for our future. I can picture them all, the two of us each holding Hart’s hands or me snuggling up to my wife on the tour bus while our little girl snoozes in the bunk next to us. The three of us walking out onto stage at the end of each show or taking the day off to explore whichever city we’re in.

Those were the things I looked most forward to when Hart was born. An idea zips into my head, one that will let us have all of those good times.

“So come with me.” My words drop between us before I can think about what they sound like.

Sophie’s sharp intake of breath and the widening of her eyes signal that I’ve miscalculated in the way I said that.

“I mean ... not me. Us. Come with us. Come on tour. We’ll make it a family thing.” I’m scrambling, gesturing too wildly with my hands. “Just like we always wanted. You can bring whatever or whoever you need. Work from there. Hart can see what I do, she can really be a part of it like I’ve always dreamed. We don’t get to do these things forever, Soph. Soon

she'll be too old to want to do this, or maybe my career will fall apart."

She snorts, like that would ever happen. If only she knew I've barely written a song in six months. When she doesn't say anything and just chews her lip, standing feet from where I sit on the couch, I rise to walk to her.

The closer I get, the more the electricity sizzles between us. I see her catch fire from it too, those aquamarine irises going wide as saucers and her cheeks pinking up. I want to reach for her hand, but after the way I've behaved since arriving at her house, I think she might slap me if I try.

"Let's do this. Let's all go on tour. We would have a blast. It would be an amazing bonding experience with Hart. And it'll get us out of LA. Give us all some room to breathe."

There's something about being in other cities that's not this fame hungry one that makes people kind of leave you alone for the most part. Or at least you can get away with disguises better than you normally could.

Being this close, I can hear the sounds of her breathing, feel the heat coming off her. Had that guy kissed her at the end of the night? Had she been thinking about him when she walked in and found me here? Selfishly, in a place I can keep my secrets locked tight, I'm thinking about how I'd have her all to myself if she comes on the tour, too.

"I'll think about it," she finally says, and I know not to argue or persuade more.

"That's all I ask." I hold my hands up in surrender.

"Now, please, get out of my house. I'm tired and you've already caused enough grief tonight. And don't call me about this. I'll give you my answer when I'm ready."

Sophie is both teasing me and completely serious. Her dry sarcasm with a side of caustic has always been the thing that's drawn me to her the most. In the time we've been apart, however, I've come to admire her strength so much more than I ever did when we were together. The way she's held her own and not backed down on parenting decisions or the choices we

made on how to live life as co-parents despite what happened between us ... well, I respect it a hell of a lot.

“Night, Soph.” I nod in understanding.

We stand there a second more, and my gaze flicks to her lips. She notices, I know she does, because her tongue darts out to wet the full bottom one. The tension fills me like it’s about to bubble over. I swear, I nearly take a step forward. But then, from somewhere in the house, a thump sounds. It could have been Hart rolling over in her bed or just a natural creak in the walls.

Either way, Sophie takes three steps back, retreating with a severe warning look in her eyes.

I walk past her and out to the driveway, holding my breath the whole way. For seven years, I’ve been able to keep her at arm’s length. I’ve done this to myself.

And for some reason, tonight, I almost broke down and stopped the act.

After Levi's little bombshell, I had to get out of town.

Mom was already in San Diego visiting friends, and when she suggested I clear my head and bring Hart, I saw it as the perfect opportunity. A little time out of LA, maybe a trip to the zoo, and my two favorite women in the world is the perfect medicine.

"Mom, when can we see the elephants?" Hart shoves another handful of chips into her mouth and munches as we walk along.

I study the map in my hands. "Um, they're about a half mile away, so it'll be a walk, but we're in no rush. Let's go over there now?"

"You're lucky we got a less humid day or I'd be putting up a fight." Mom chuckles.

We've already been at the zoo for an hour and a half and have covered so much ground that I know my feet will be screaming at me later. But with an overactive seven-year-old who has a love of animals and wants to see every single one housed here before closing time, we don't have many other options.

"We should have rented a golf cart. Or you could have pulled some strings." Mom elbows me as Hart walks ahead of us, marveling at two massive, hundred-year-old turtles.

"I want her to have a normal childhood, remember, Ma?" I slide my sunglasses up my nose.

Mom harrumphs. “If you want that, take her back to North Carolina and make her get a job at the mall. As it is, people look her way every seven seconds once they realize who she is.”

It’s true, and I can’t deny it. We draw stares anywhere we go, especially my daughter. She’s the product of one of the most infamous marriages in Hollywood and the only child of the living legend Levi Truin. Her childhood will never be normal.

“Well, as normal as we possibly can keep it. Which means trekking and sweating to the elephants.”

I loop my arm in my mother’s as we walk along.

“Sorry to crash your trip,” I tell her.

She waves me off and presses a kiss to my cheek. “Don’t worry about it. Helen was being annoying anyway,. Three days is too long to stay in someone’s house. By night two, you’re both annoying each other with habits like leaving plates on the table or the amount of noise you’re making.”

“That’s true. Anytime Leslie stays with me, I want to murder her for how she scrambles her eggs.” One of my close friends in the modeling industry, who now lives in Paris, periodically stays with us when she comes back to the States.

“That’s why only mothers and daughters can live together without killing one another. We’re biologically predisposed to refrain from murder.” Mom smiles at me gleefully.

That has me laughing, and I notice someone filming us out of the corner of my eye. You become completely attuned, and unfortunately accustomed, to having your every move watched. I am usually a pretty private person these days; I model and work for my nonprofit, but I don’t touch my own social media, and I don’t go out socially. If I’m at an event, I’m working, and Ariana posts only commercial photos for my online presence to bring awareness to Full Hands.

Aside from those hours, I’m with my family, and I loathe when people track our movements or take pictures when they think I’m not looking. I have my daughter, a minor, with me,

and we're enjoying a nice day at the zoo. Does that person really need their five second claim to fame by posting my seven-year-old on their Instagram story for all to see?

But it's not worth posing that question to the teenage girl not-so-subtly following us now. I'd probably be the one getting skewered in the media if she posted that I confronted her about it.

"Hart, stay close! Security will want to keep an eye on you," I shout, louder than I need to.

Immediately, I notice the girl shove her camera in her bag. That'll show her. There is a security guard on premises that is keeping watch, but no one walking closely with us, so I'm kind of bluffing. But it does the job I want it to do and gets her off our back.

"How was your date the other night? I'm sorry I couldn't be there to watch Hart." Mom pats my arm where we have ours looped together.

"Don't worry about it." I don't let slip that Levi came over, that we fought, or that he waited for me until after I got home. "It was surprisingly wonderful."

She shrugs. "I'm not surprised. James is a great guy. I've been pushing you to go out with him since he started asking. You should always listen to your mother."

The woman who raised me nods wisely as if she always knows best. Usually, she does, so I can't even deny that. I study my mom for a brief moment; the same bone structure I stare at in the mirror, the same shade of skin. Just a little weathered and a little wiser. I realize it's a complete blessing that I, and Hart, get to spend as much time with her as we do. I never thought I'd be living in the same house as my mother when I became an adult or old enough that I have a child of my own. But I'm so thankful that I do. Our relationship has a completely different dynamic than it ever has before, and our bond is much stronger than any other time in my life.

"I will begrudgingly admit that might be true. But really, it was pretty damn good. Engaging conversation, he was polite,

brought me to eat great food, and there were zero red flags. He's honest, upfront, and seems genuinely interested. I mean, I guess I can't ask for much more at this stage."

"So, when are you seeing him again?" she pries.

Hart stops a couple feet in front of us to raise her camera and snaps a picture of an exhibit of gorillas all hanging out. One sits with his back right up against the enclosure and reaches down to scratch his ass. Ah, imagine being free enough to do that in public and knowing it wouldn't end up on a tabloid site?

"I'm not sure. He has a series of away games for some of his players, but we've been texting. He sent me flowers, or at least Ariana told me he did since I left home about twelve hours after our date." I huff out a laugh, but I'm kind of sad I missed them.

I could use a little dose of romance right about now.

"And why do I have a feeling that swift departure had something to do with that ex-husband of yours?" Mom speaks in a hushed voice so that Hart doesn't hear.

Sighing, I should have known she would know this trip isn't about a little fresh air away from Los Angeles.

"Your mind reading is scary good these days. I swear, you might be a witch." I point a finger at her temple. "Levi wants Hart and me to go on tour with him."

Hart runs over to Mom, motions a hand at her purse, and Mom produces a stick of her favorite gum from within. I press a kiss to her forehead, and my daughter is off again, skipping ahead of us.

"I wasn't aware he was going on tour," she says cryptically.

"Neither was I. Not until last night anyway. He thinks this could be a great family thing we could do, and he wants to show her how magical tour life is. He wants her to experience his concerts the right way. I mean, I don't disagree. Going on one of his tours is one of the craziest and coolest things I've ever done. But ..."

“But she’s seven, and has school and a life here,” Mom echoes all of my thoughts.

“Exactly!” I throw my hands up as if someone is validating me.

“And it would mean traveling for months with your ex-husband, who you clearly still have feelings for. Long nights and days watching him be the epitome of the perfect father. It won’t be easy to maintain the veneer you two have spread over the things you don’t talk about.”

That hits me like a two-by-four to the temple. “What the hell, Mom!”

The woman has the actual gall to shrug. “It’s true, we both know it. You’re just as scared to go on tour with him because of what it will do to you. Honestly, you’re probably thinking more about you than her.”

“I am not.” I blurt out, crossing my arms over my chest like a pouting teen. “Also, I knew you’d be on his side. Can’t you just back me for once? Think about Hart.”

Mom rolls her eyes like I’m being dramatic. “I’m always on your side, you know that. Even if you’re being a brat right now. And, of course, I’m thinking about Hart. Who is already growing up in a world far more privileged and insane than the one you were brought up in. Her life isn’t normal to begin with. Movie premieres on a Tuesday night? Birthday parties at mansions in Malibu where children her age are gifted hundred-thousand-dollar purses? Yes, she has stability and a life and you two are wonderful parents. But a couple of months being tutored from a tour bus won’t hurt her. Honestly, she should see who her father is, how he does what he does.”

“So you want me to date James, but live in cramped quarters with my ex for months? You are giving me whiplash, woman.” My head is spinning.

Finally, we make it to the elephants, and Hart is scooped up in a conversation with one of their trainers. I’m sure she’s talking the poor girl’s ear off, but she looks so happy and animated, I don’t have the heart to step in.

Plus, I need to hear my mother's ridiculous logic right now.

"I want you to be happy. Stupidly happy. However you can achieve that, I'm all for it. Do I want you to date nice men like James? Yes. Do I also want you to take life by the reins and take this opportunity to be very close for a period of time to the man you love the most out of anyone in this world? Also yes. The rest will fall in line. Hart's schooling, your business, the people you work with and who work for you. It can all be handled. Hell, you travel more than the average person and always seem to make it work. This time, you won't have to do so without Hart. She'll be right there with you."

"And what, leave my business and my home to just travel the country? I have a company! I have things I need to oversee in LA. You're just going to take care of the entire house by yourself?" I'm still not seeing how I can just up and leave my life for a while.

"Of course not. I'm coming with you." She smiles smugly. "It's been a while since I've gone on one of Levi's tours, and I love the rush of them. Plus, you said it yourself, Hart needs her life and stability. Well, no one better to bring that than me."

"Oh, I get it. This was all about you, huh?" My head bobs up and down like I finally understand.

Mom swats me on the butt as an elephant shoots a stream of water from its trunk. Some of the droplets get Hart wet, and her tinkling laughter clears some of the fog from my brain.

I'm so nervous and in despair about deciding to go on this tour. Of course, she's right. Everything can be handled. I have handlers to handle it. Most of these things will be taken care of for me, and if we need to return home once in a while, we do so.

But it's the emotional aspect that has me reeling. Being that close to Levi for an extended period of time? There is no way I can maintain the polite composure I've operated with for the last seven years. Hell, we were almost tearing each other apart over a date I went on. We'd let our masks slip.

What would happen when we were in cramped quarters night after night together?

“Of course it isn’t. This is about you, at the end of the day. It’s been years coming, getting this kind of undivided time with him. You’re telling me you’re really going to pass that up? This is it, Sophie. This is the chance you’re getting, and you better damn well take it.” She raises an eyebrow, and I know just how much my mother can see right through to the depths of my heart.

Because she knows how many nights I’ve cried, even if she doesn’t say it. She knows how I’ve pined for this man, how atrociously regretful I am for losing him.

And she wants to make it abundantly clear that this will be my chance, maybe my only one for the rest of time, to see if there is even an ounce of possibility that our love could be salvaged.

I guess I have no choice. Because if it’s a toss-up between giving into fear and staying home or risking everything to go on this tour and see if Levi could love me back again, it’s a no-brainer.

I’m going out guns blazing every time.

The headlines get more and more ridiculous by the year.

Lauren and Levi Go On Secret Album Writing Retreat

“Who feeds them this shit?” I ask Judd, who is standing at the top-of-the-line culinary stove in my kitchen that I barely use, stirring a pot of tomato soup.

“Probably your ex-writing partner. She was always crazy.” He harrumphs with his back turned to me.

Judd has a thing about Lauren, said she ruined me musically. “Anyone can see that I attended a listening party for that new artist on the label this week, plus I had a very public lunch in Malibu. There were a thousand pictures on social media. Pretty sure I’m not holed up in a house with Lauren.”

Judd shivers as if the idea is repulsive. “If you ever go near that tone-deaf woman ...”

Before I’d worked with Judd, a lot of my music had Lauren’s signature on it. A signature that Judd claims is contrived and uninspired.

I hold up a hand. “I know, I know, I get it.”

He moves to the griddle on my stove, where he’s now flipping thick slices of bread oozing with cheese. The butter scent alone is enough to make me drool, and I’m practically weeping at his kindness right now. We finished another chorus in the studio today, which makes a song and a half for the

album. And while Judd might be my best friend, he's also stepped in as kind of a pseudo-father over the years.

Two days after Hart was born, he came to our house and made us homemade grilled cheese and tomato soup. It's become a celebratory meal in our little circle now, and so here we sit in my kitchen.

My house is decorated in the hues of the jungle, and it's exactly how I wanted it: bright whites, light wood features, clean lines, and a shit ton of overflowing green plants.

About two years ago, I got into this plant daddy phase and went kind of crazy. I bought a bunch of books on how to keep plants, invested in the best irrigation systems for them, bought all the gadgets and things I could find on the market. Anyone who knows me well makes fun of me when they visit, because I basically treat these leaves and flowers like they're my kids. Hart jokes that I love them more than her.

I do love them, but not more than her. I've always wanted my house to feel very open, and with its pocket door sliding walls that make the outdoor and indoor living kind of seamless, it gives it that feel. The interior is very boho, but my designer stopped me short when I began suggesting macramé. I admit, I took it too far.

Scrolling further down the weekly roundup email of news stories on me that Allen, my publicist, sends, I see a headline that reads, *Sophie and Levi - Custody Battle Getting Nasty*.

"What the hell is this one? I have to tell Allen and his minions to stop sending these emails." I show him the headline and he rolls his eyes.

"Or you could just get on your fucking social media and tell them the whole truth. I don't know why you people even bother with this PR shit anymore when you have direct access to your fans." Judd looks at me like I've grown a third eye.

"They could look at fucking court records and see that Sophie and I haven't been to court in years, nor do we even have a custody agreement. This is just lies. It's insane how

they're allowed to print this." And it gets me so incensed that I have to slam my phone on the counter to stop looking at it.

"I hate to be one of those 'you chose this' people, but you did. And now you have the option of reporting it yourself, or you don't say anything and move on, knowing that shit is bullshit." Judd shrugs. "But what do I know? Only been doing this my whole decrepit life."

He turns the stove off and plates the grilled cheeses, then starts pouring the soup into a big glass bowl. I already set the table, so I walk to the wine fridge to grab us both a beer and get a juice box for Hart.

"I know you're right. It's still just so hard, even after all these years." You'd think after spending half my life in the entertainment industry, this wouldn't bother me anymore.

Maybe my friend is right, perhaps it's finally time to set the record straight on so many things. I've always been tight-lipped about my personal life, only letting things slip in my lyrics. But that leads to a lot of speculation and my fans "decoding" hidden meanings that aren't even really there. Maybe I should make this album my confessions.

Right when I need it, two clomping sneakers interrupt my thoughts.

"Uncle J!" Hart screeches, running into the room to launch herself at Judd.

"My peppercorn!" He catches her, swings her around, and then plants her on a hip as if she were a toddler and not a seven-year-old.

His nickname for her originated when she spilled an entire jar of peppercorns in his kitchen when she was a baby. They've been thick as thieves since, and I'm pretty sure Judd ranks higher on her list than either her mom or me.

"Did you make me grilled cheese?" Her eyes light up when she sees the plate on the table.

"Sure did, and put bacon in them just for you." His heavily tattooed hands ruffle my daughter's hair.

In our wills, it says that if anything happens to Sophie or me, my mother-in-law, Gloria, because I still think of her that way, will raise our daughter. But if we didn't have that built-in next of kin, I'd select Judd, hands down.

"How was school, babe?" I pop a kiss on her forehead as I take her from Judd and set her up in her chair.

She's still in her school uniform, and I know Soph always makes her change so she won't get it dirty during dinner, but I'm a little more lax on the rules.

"Good. We got our final parts for the concert next week, and guess what?" She bounces on her butt in the chair.

I set some carrots on her plate, part of my good parenting handbook, and then ladle out some soup. "What's that?"

"I get to play '*For You, I Would*' on the guitar!" My daughter claps her hands and beams with pride.

My heart puddles at my feet. "You chose to play that?"

She nods as she rips a hunk of grilled cheese off with her teeth and speaks with the food in her mouth. "Yup."

"I remember when your father wrote that song." Judd nods approvingly. "You play a better Gibson than him, though."

"Hey." I pretend to be offended that he's making fun of my guitar skills. "I can't wait to see it, sweetheart. You're gonna kill it."

"I know." Hart dances to the imaginary music in her head.

The song she's going to play is one off the album I wrote right after Sophie and I got married. It's a faster-paced love song, but a love song all the same. The lyrics detail how I wouldn't have done things in previous relationships, but since I met the love of my life, I'd do them all without complaint.

And now I'll have to sit next to the woman I wrote it about as our daughter plays it up on stage, even though we aren't together anymore.

Welp, I haven't thought about that before this moment. This is bound to be awkward, but Hart is so excited I'm not

going to tell her otherwise.

“Dad, are you dating Lauren Hap?”

The question comes out of left field and smacks me in the side of the head like a fly ball. My daughter, my tiny girl, who I held in my arms as a newborn, just used her sweet little voice to ask a question I’ve been dreading for almost a decade.

Well, I can’t say that’s the question I assumed she’d ask. I thought it would be more along the lines of if I’ve ever been with Lauren or what happened when we worked together. But considering what these magazines are printing, and what she’s probably hearing in school, it was just a matter of time until she asked.

Judd snickers on the other side of Hart, and I pin him with a look that says, *you aren’t helping*.

“No, sweetheart, I’m not. No matter what you read or hear from anyone, I am not dating her. And you can always come to me to ask those questions. You should know I would never start dating someone and not tell you. You’re a big part of that decision.”

There, I think I handled that like a responsible father.

Hart seems to digest this, and those big sapphire eyes gulp the information I’m giving her.

“But you were dating her?” She cocks her head to the side, looking confused.

I sigh and suck in a breath right after, knowing this conversation was coming someday but hoping it would wait a little bit longer.

“Lauren and I were writing partners, she helped work on my first few albums. It was before I ever met your mom, before I even met Judd. I’ve seen her a few times since, but we are not together and never have been.”

“So you didn’t love her like you loved Mom? But you don’t love Mom anymore.” My daughter is serving me harsh truths on a cold platter as she sips her juice box, and I’m flummoxed.

Judd leans back in his chair, a smirk painting his lips, and I know he's just fucking loving this. I want to deck him and scowl as if I am imagining myself doing so. My heart hammers in my chest, trying to scramble to come up with an answer.

"I love your mother a lot, in a different way now. I respect her, and I have admiration for her because she is a wonderful mother to you. Why are you asking me this?" I wonder aloud, frustrated that I can't focus my scattered thoughts.

She shrugs and spoons some soup into her mouth. "A couple of girls were talking about it at school, asking if you were on a honeymoon?"

I doubt she even knows what a honeymoon is. But my blood boils knowing that now it's affecting my kid.

"I'm not dating or marrying anyone. You know the media stories, honey, they're usually false."

"Lies from the mouths of asshol—"

"Language!" I shout at Judd, who clams up.

Hart giggles behind the hand she slapped over her mouth.

Judd winks at her. "Stick with Uncle J, I'll teach you all the bad stuff."

"You'll do no such thing."

"Well, you know Mom went on a date. She might have a boyfriend soon." Hart delivers this information as if it's not another fly ball to the temple.

"Is that something that makes you upset, honey?" I try to feel her out.

Hart, to my surprise, rolls her eyes. "Dad, I don't expect you guys to get back together. Half the kids in my school have divorced parents. I'm just saying I want Mom to be happy. And if she has a boyfriend, and he makes her happy, then I want you to be happy, too."

Her logic is so juvenile yet makes so much sense.

So why am I sitting here, trying to keep my jaw from hanging open, when she said she hopes her mother is happy with someone who isn't me?

“I saved you a seat.”

Levi waves at me from the middle of the front row, and I squeeze past parents while trying not to clomp down on their feet with my five-inch heels.

“I’m so sorry I’m late. Thank God I didn’t miss the lights dimming or people would be pissed.” My neck flushes in embarrassment, even though he can’t see it.

I’m never late. I’m super mom, or at least I try to be. But when a meeting with a major fashion label who wants me to anchor their Paris fashion week show runs over, I can’t exactly excuse myself to go to my daughter’s musical concert.

Levi makes a *psh* sound as I sit my ass down in the plush folding chair next to his. “They can all go suck it, though no one would say shit to you. How many of them have had nannies stand in for these things a thousand times?”

I have to tip my head in agreement. Now that the kids are getting older and remembering the absence of their parents, there seem to be more parents in the crowd than nannies. But still, not by much.

“Anybody perform yet?” I ask my ex-husband, and I don’t miss the way heads turn our way as we talk to each other.

More than half the people in this room are on their second or third marriages, yet it’s mine that is always speculated over. Levi and I could be sitting three rows apart in this wood-paneled auditorium, and people would still talk.

I try to ignore it, and mostly I've gotten good at that. Let them whisper. Levi and I know the secrets between us, and they will never see the light of day. No matter how much they protect me and put speculation on him. I have him to thank for that.

These oak walls outfitted in thick wainscoting and platinum plaques hold so much history, way more than I can even comprehend and way more than my lifetime of drama. A lot of people will call my daughter privileged, and she is, but you bet your ass if I could pull the connections and financials to get her into a school like this, of course, I was doing it.

From the pristine, stained-glass walls in the hallways to the vegan options in the cafeteria to the world-renowned educators and international scholars on staff, Hart's elementary school is head and shoulders above the one I attended.

"Nah. Been mostly name dropping and wealth speculation all around." Levi smirks, making fun of the other parents around us.

My ex is a relaxed rock god in the middle of suits and yoga moms. Whereas everyone else is either business casual, like me in my knee-length magenta work dress, or in upscale athleisure, Levi is rocking jeans with holes in the knees, a leather jacket, and a gold chain around his neck with a medallion in the middle that has our daughter's astrological sign on it.

I have to swallow the hot-guy-induced drool.

Thankfully, the lights dim, and I don't have to cover up the fact that I was just openly checking him out. Two of the other kids go on before Hart, a piano player who does beautifully with Mozart, and a little girl who raps one of the most viral songs right now, much to the embarrassment of her parents who seem to try to get her to stop the whole time.

And then our girl walks out, and I can't help that I tear up. She looks so small up there on the stage but so confident. Hart wields a guitar much like her father, like a weapon used to either gut you or heal you.

“She looks just like you,” I whisper, my eyes never leaving my daughter.

I hear Levi inhale next to me, and then his hand is wrapped around mine. It’s not necessarily romantic, but it’s bonding. We made that little wonder up there, and getting to experience her big moments like this, together is something we used to daydream about when she was still in my stomach.

At first, he’s just holding my hand. I’m not an active participant, with his palm and fingers just laying over mine like a weight. But then he shifts, moves marginally closer if that’s possible since we’re already smushed in these chairs like sardines, and laces his fingers through mine.

My heart catches, and something tingles down my spine. That feeling sparks a flame between my thighs, and I have to squeeze them together because why the hell am I getting turned on at a kid’s elementary concert? Just one touch, that’s all it’s ever taken from him.

Then our daughter starts to play, and I notice the chords immediately. While I should be focused on her, I can’t help the way my eyes snap to Levi, and his do the same thing at the exact same time.

She’s playing “*For You, I Would*,” and playing it beautifully at that.

Hart doesn’t sing the words, but in my head, I hum them as if they’re just as familiar as breathing. It’s a song about doing absolutely anything, sacrificing the world itself, for the girl he loves the most. I’ve watched Levi sing this on stage a hundred times, stood in the wings in dozens of countries as he played this song to screaming fans.

Those dark, stormy pools search my face, and I feel caught, found out in the middle of this crowded room. The love that’s never gone away has to be clearly shown on my face, and I hope beyond hope that somehow he knows it’s never ended for me.

Even if we have no shot, even if he’s only holding on because we’re sharing something for our daughter, that tiny

part of me who hoped we'd someday repair this stands up a little straighter.

Levi opens his mouth as if he's going to say something, and then my eyes drift back to Hart. She's playing the ending of the song, and I know this moment is about to be over. Stolen moments, that's all I get from him now. For seven years, I've claimed any shred of love he might be vulnerable enough to send my way. I feast on it, hoping it holds me over until next time.

What a fool I am.

I pull my hand out of his, even though my heart cries out in protest. And then she's done, the performance over. I leap to my feet and clap loudly while Levi does the same, shoving his fingers in his mouth to whistle loudly. Our daughter looks thoroughly embarrassed and thoroughly proud of herself.

We sit back down as she walks offstage and say thank you when some of the parents lean over to us and say we have another star on our hands. And we don't speak about what just passed between us. I know we'll never speak of it again.

I follow Levi, who drove Hart, to my house, where we all planned to have a celebratory dinner after the concert.

"What're we having?" Hart rubs her stomach as we walk into the house.

"Barth made spaghetti and meatballs, the kind with the cloves of garlic that you love."

Because while I want to be super mom, I also know my weaknesses. And that is anything having to do with food and the kitchen. Our lifestyle affords us a chef who can make my daughter delicious meals that I would otherwise burn? I'm taking advantage.

"Mom, we're home!" I call into the depths of the house.

My mother rushes into the foyer and dives for Hart's cheeks, kissing them. "Your mom sent me a video on the way home. You were so good, my love! I'm so mad it was only two tickets per kid. I should have snuck in."

"I'll play it for you again if you want, Nana." Hart beams.

"I'd love that." My mom grabs her granddaughter's hand and drags her to the living room.

I'm afraid if I hear her play that song again, I'll lose it, which is why I excuse myself to the kitchen to start warming up the food.

"You need help?" I hear that smooth voice that haunts my dreams come up behind me.

"I think I'm okay." My nerves are rattled, and I really need him away from me, but here he is.

"Soph, I don't want to push, but I really need a decision about the tour." Levi sounds guilty to be asking.

I bustle around so I don't have to look at him, popping the baking dish full of spaghetti and meatballs in the oven while placing a tray of breadsticks beside it. The salad Barth put together is in the fridge, and I take it out before stacking plates to set the table with.

Levi blocks me in between the counter and the kitchen table, gently taking the stack of plates from my hands as he pins me with those stormy eyes.

The temperature in the room reaches a blazing heat, or maybe that's just me whenever he looks at me these days.

I have to audibly swallow before talking because my throat is so dry. And that pisses me off, because I'm not the same silly, carefree girl lusting after him like I did when I was a teenager.

"I know that." I try not to scowl. Something is happening to me where I forget the confident, put-together woman I am in front of him. "We'll need to find an excellent tutor to come along, and she will not be spending the entire tour cracked out on sugar and over-stimulation."

That entire gorgeous pop star face lights up like a Christmas tree. “So you mean to say ...”

“That, yes, she can go. *We* can go. I’ll accompany her as long as some of my assistants and staff can be on and off the road with us. But there will be rules and structure. This isn’t like tours past we’ve gone on, we’ll have our daughter with us.”

He nods like a bobblehead. “Of course, absolutely. The crew will have parameters, there will definitely be some guidance on how the tour will go. We’ll keep the whole thing very low-key, and I’ll, of course, be aware of her needs and yours at all times.”

I know he’s only telling me everything I want to hear because I just agreed to it, but it is kind of sweet how excited he is.

“Can we tell her during dinner?” He clasps his hands as if praying to me.

I roll my eyes. “You’re going to make me regret this, aren’t you?”

Levi is nearly twitching in his seat as we sit down and start serving the garlicky, steaming heaps of pasta. Mom and Hart are talking about something, maybe a movie they recently watched, but all I feel is the thousand-watt smile of my ex-husband directed at me. I don’t know if I can take much more of this, and I just want it out there so I can stop second-guessing myself.

“Hart, we have something we’d like to talk to you about,” I start.

My daughter looks at me, raises an eyebrow, and casually says. “Are you guys having another baby?”

My mother chokes on her water, and my jaw drops open. Levi laughs. I think purely out of the ludicrous thought of it.

“What? No!” I nearly shout. “What would make you say that?”

“Well, I don’t know, you just sounded so weird and serious.” She shrugs in the way only a kid can when they’ve absolutely floored their parents.

“Dad and I have been talking, and he’s going on tour—”

“Aw, come on, Dad! No! I don’t want you to leave.” She throws her napkin off her lap and onto the table.

Levi looks at me, raising his eyebrows as if he’s giving me the win of being able to tell our daughter and stop this mood on arrival.

“We’re all going on tour. You and I are going to join Dad.” I smile at her, expecting what happens next.

Our daughter jumps up, nearly knocking her chair over with her momentum, and shock widens her eyes. “We’re going? We’re really going! We get to watch the concerts and be roadies and do all the things the band does.”

“Okay, maybe not all the things.” Levi bites his lip, and I know he’s thinking about one of the times we all almost got arrested back in the day.

There was the time we technically broke into, or maybe stayed too late at, a concert hall after hours, tipsy off champagne, so Levi could serenade a bunch of us. We’d almost been booked and charged, and if not for Judd, we probably would have been.

Levi had been reformed then, he’d done the whole cleaning up his act thing, and nothing ever got out to the press. But we were still kids with millions of dollars at our disposal. We were bound to get in some trouble.

“But yes, you get to come to rehearsals and I want your input on the shows. I want you to play with me on some songs, definitely ‘For You, I Would,’ after tonight. Well, only if you want to,” he says nervously, as if his daughter doesn’t worship the ground he walks on.

“What? Of course I want to play on stage!” Hart screeches, and I’m not sure her decimal level could get any higher. “Nana, you’re coming, right?”

“I’m coming.” Mom nods her head, laughing at her granddaughter’s excitement.

The conversation buzzes around me as all three of them ramble about what we’ll do on tour, which cities we’re going to, and if Levi will allow Hart to get an Instagram account so that she can post covers of his songs from the concerts.

But I’m in my head, thinking again about how I’ll have to distance myself emotionally from the man who I still, very much secretly, love.

When Mom volunteers to help Hart get changed into pajamas, I start the cleanup process. Typically, Hillary works a nine-to-five day. We don’t need someone on at night to clean up our messes. I have two hands, I’m fully capable of cleaning a few dishes. Plus, it grounds me in this fantasy world I usually live in.

As I’m putting the plates in the dishwasher, I feel him, more than hear him, enter the kitchen.

“Thanks for that, Soph. She’s so excited, it’s making me look forward to it more than I already was.” Levi’s smile is contagious.

“Yep, no problem. She’ll have a blast.” It’s a generic answer, but my brain is occupied.

“What’s on your mind?” Apparently, he can tell.

I sigh, not wanting to start another argument but knowing that I need to set boundaries for myself if I’m to survive this tour. Setting down the dishrag I was just using to dry off some silverware, I set my shoulders to address him.

“We’ll take a separate bus on the tour. So that you and the band can function, and we can have our own space. I know it’s probably in the budget, and we wouldn’t want to put a damper on things. The kids and the ex-wife on the bus doesn’t lead to a fun night.” I chuckle like it isn’t gutting me to say this.

But I know how touring works. We did a huge, international one before we got married. Late nights, partying, stupid pranks, and everything in between. Levi might be older

now, but we are still young. My twenty-eight might feel like fifty some days with all the life I've lived in this short span.

Levi blinks at me. "We'll stay on the same bus."

"Levi, I don't want Hart around that shit." My tone is low and warning, and I turn because I really don't want to get into a fight.

I busy myself by packing up the leftovers, but then he's right next to me, taking the container of meatballs out of my hand. Before I know what's happening, his face is inches from mine, and he stoops down so that our eyes are at the same level.

"There will be no shit, Sophie. Don't even come at me with that, as if I'd do anything around my daughter. I've barely had more than one drink a month for the past three years. I'm as sober of a musician as they fucking come, so don't put that label on me, first of all. I invited you on this tour because I want to spend time with you. The two of you." He catches himself. "This tour is about us as a family, sharing in the thing we built and the thing I'm still trying to create for my daughter. We're going to make memories together. I'm not there to live out some bachelor fantasy as an almost thirty-year-old man. I'm not going to sow my wild oats. Have more faith in me than that."

It feels like the boiling point between us will bubble over at any moment, and the air I should be breathing is trapped in my lungs. How do I tell him that it has nothing to do with him sowing his wild oats and everything to do with the fact that I'm not sure how I'll survive sleeping next to him in a cramped bus bunk for months on end?

"Okay." I feel like I squeak the word out like a fearful mouse.

"This is going to be amazing, Soph."

He's too close, I'm too aware of the touch of his hand on my arm, and when he reaches out to tuck a lock of my hair behind my ear in what must be a gesture to reassure me, my knees tremble.

After all these years, this man has the power to render me defenseless. This tour will be the ultimate testament to that. Either I'll keep it together, barely, for the sake of our daughter

or I'll finally break down and confess that I want no other man but him, even if it means facing rejection once more.

Two weeks of nonstop meetings, shuttling Hart to and from school and activities, sleepless nights in the studio with Judd, too many media questions later, and we're a few days out from the tour.

The whole thing moved at light speed, just like Lyle said it would, and my fans are rabid with anticipation. Tickets for the first ten shows, the only ones on sale at this point, are already sold out or being sold for way over market value on secondary sites. Since we're only playing small venues and won't need the full cavalry of a stage crew or set designers, pulling together this grassroots tour was pretty simple.

Okay, not simple, but I have people I trust and have been working with for years who got it done.

The buses are loaded down in supplies, Hart's tutor has been selected, and Sophie is still coordinating things with Full Hands and all of her people, but we're on our way.

With the tour coming, Allen, our publicist, set up a full spread magazine article on the Truins. Our family, the brand. He's been waving his magic wand to make us one for years, so it's no surprise that we were asked to do an article about the family unit for *Dash Mod Magazine*.

When Sophie and I got married, we did an entire photo shoot with Mark Hoffman for *Dash Mod Magazine*, the magazine everyone wanted to be in. He is one of the most renowned photographers of our time, and she'd been draped in

white silk while I'd gone nude except for a wisp of white satin boxers. The whole thing was whimsical and sexy.

Then we posed again for the magazine when Hart was born, our little newborn chunk gracing the cover when she was barely four weeks old. This is tradition for us, to mark major life moments by giving an interview to *Dash Mod*. I guess now is as good a time as any since Sophie and I have been successfully co-parenting for so long, and it's our first family tour.

"Levi, just a couple more solo shots." Mark, who was hired once again to do our shoot, stares at the camera like the master he is.

I cross my arms over my chest, my familiar leather jacket creasing at my inner elbows. I give the camera my signature smirk, the one I know can have thousands of fans screaming by flashing it in the middle of a concert.

"Perfect." He chuckles. "This should have them all drooling. God, I love a relaxed shoot. High fashion is great, but this is when you really see people."

He moves around me as I pick up my guitar and strum a few chords. Honestly, he's right, this is as natural of a photo shoot as I've ever done.

"All right people, we're moving on to the next setup!" someone calls from behind the lights blinding my eyes right now, and I step out of the cocoon of umbrellas and backdrops and fluorescents.

Around me, people work quickly and efficiently, the magazine's staff doing their job like a well-oiled machine. We're in some warehouse in the middle of downtown Los Angeles, but it seems cramped with so many people in here. The scent of the fried chicken from the craft services table is calling to me, but I'm pretty pumped about getting to do this shoot. It's not every day I get to work with Sophie, and it'll be Hart's first kind of grown-up time being in the magazine.

They bring in a blood-red backdrop, and two assistants carry a velvet, cream-colored couch with ornate gold legs right

onto it.

“We’re going for a very ‘first family of music’ kind of vibe, and these photos are going to be iconic.” Mark claps his hands. “Speaking of first family, can we have Soph out here?”

If there is anyone who loves Sophie more than I ever have or could, it’s Mark. He dotes on her, fawns over her, and drops the word muse profusely in her presence.

Sophie and Hart walk onto the set, and my lips spread wide in a smile.

“No freaking way.” My legs take me quickly to them as I scoop my daughter up in a hug. “Where did they find these?”

“Some very resourceful stylists got them.” Sophie grins, doing a little twirl. “Although I think I could have found this one in my closet.”

My ex-wife and my daughter are wearing tour T-shirts from some of my past lineups, with Sophie in the one we sold at the concerts right after the two of us got married, while Hart is in the first merchandise ever produced for one of my tours.

“This is incredible.”

“Like I said, the most powerful family in music.” Mark waves a hand over Sophie. “If this isn’t the first lady! How gorgeous does she look?”

My eyes run over her body encased in tight blue jeans that mold to her curves and ass, up to the concert tee that someone has shredded and dyed to make it look hip and vintage. Her arms are sparkling with some kind of body glitter someone has put on her, and she looks absolutely radiant. Her makeup is heavy and smoky, but it makes her look even more mysterious than the woman who is always weighing people silently, assessing them with that sixth sense of hers. She’s the girl at the rock show come to life, every musician’s fantasy. This woman is every fantasy of meeting some music addicted bombshell and taking her back to your trailer where you dismantle each other’s worlds using your bodies.

“Gorgeous,” I murmur, meeting her eyes.

I hope it's just me who feels like the two of us could burn this place to the ground if we simply touched. More and more lately, it's getting harder to co-exist. At the concert, when I held her hand, the need to confess all the feelings I'd been holding back for seven years loomed so dangerously that I nearly choked holding them back.

"Thanks," she mouths, because people have already started spinning around us, making magic happen so we can get the perfect picture for the cover.

"All right, Hart, my beautiful angel, come sit on the arm of this couch here." Mark motions for our daughter, and they have a little pep talk as I look on.

"These photos are going to be amazing." Sophie beams as she looks at our girl. "Her hair is so rock star."

Hart has a ton of braids crisscrossing her head that the stylist wove red ribbons between, and they all lead to long curls over the original concert tee she's wearing.

"I know, the idea for this shoot is great. Brings me back." Our eyes meet and my chest warms. "Remember that tour?"

I point to the logo on her chest and realize I'm staring at her tits. I hope she can't see the blush painted on my cheeks. Shit, since when did I become so bashful in front of a woman I used to make scream with my cock inside her?

"I do, very well." Sophie chuckles, oblivious to my perusal of her body. "The night we got drunk in London and went to walk around Hyde Park."

"It was fucking freezing." The memory steals over my brain. "Weren't you wearing that little leather mini skirt? And I had to steal you away into one of those public toilets you have to pay for? We ..."

I trail off, because the things we did in that public toilet were ... well, completely indecent.

Now it's Sophie who is turning scarlet, her eyes dilated with the past, and perhaps lust.

“You two, come, come!” Mark claps his hands, breaking our spell. “Levi, you’ll be sitting, legs spread wide, and Sophie, I want you kind of leaning, almost laying your beautiful face on his knee.”

I freeze for a moment, thinking this might be too intimate. What will Hart think, seeing her parents like this? Is it confusing to her that we operate so much like a family when Sophie and I are not together? She’s already had questions lately.

And will Sophie be comfortable with this? What if she doesn’t want to—

“Levi, today, please?” My ex-wife is looking at me like, *why are you standing around like a dumb puppy?*

Right, this is her job. She doesn’t think anything during a photo shoot is weird or would have a double meaning.

We move into position and it’s like the puzzle pieces click into place. The room seems to come alive, and while we’re looking at the camera, everyone on set seems to be witnessing some type of wonder. Their eyes are misty or wide, and you can feel how special this is. I feel like I’m observing us from above, so proud of how far we’ve come and about what we’re about to embark on.

“Mom, I need a drink,” Hart whines after more than twenty minutes of holding still on the couch.

“Okay, I’ll grab it. Can we take five, everyone?” Sophie commands the set like the supermodel she is.

No one objects, and I’m happy they’re respecting that my daughter is a child who isn’t used to functioning like a professional. Sophie walks off in search of a water for Hart.

“I always forget how light you guys travel. What’s it, just you two and Hart today? You’re the dream team, you know that, right? I have reality stars in here demanding more shit than you bona fide legends do. You two are so fucking cool, and it shows. The epitome of the modern family,” Mark gushes, complimenting us left and right.

As Sophie walks back under the hot lights brightening the backdrop and helps Hart drink without splashing anything on her clothing, I wonder to myself if that's how the public views us now.

What would they think if they knew the ugly truth of our divorce?

The universe has conspired against me to make me lose my goddamn mind.

That's the only way I can justify loading up the smallest suitcase I've ever traveled with, putting it and my daughter on a tour bus consisting of a fold-up kitchen table and six bunk beds stacked three on top of each other, and exactly one, that's right, *one*, bathroom. Oh, I forgot about sharing said bus with my kid, my mother, our crazy pseudo-uncle Judd, my second assistant since Ariana is handling things back in LA, and wait for it ...

My ex-husband. Ten weeks, twenty cities, and hoping I don't have a mental and emotional breakdown.

"Are we really driving all the way to Arizona?" Hart's mouth hangs open as we all settle in for the six-hour drive.

"Yep, we should be there by the afternoon, and then you'll be coming up on stage with me." Levi wraps her up in a hug as he sits on one of the bench couches along the wall of the bus.

"But how will we do that all in one day?"

Her seven-year-old brain doesn't comprehend that Phoenix is only about six hours away and that the people accompanying her father on this tour are seasoned professionals. They could put on a stadium festival with two weeks' notice if push came to shove. Plus, they all worship Levi Truin along with the rest of the world.

“A lot of talented people working together, and a little music industry magic.” Levi chuckles. “How you doing up there, Buck?”

Buck, the driver of our bus who will be like a family member on this tour, does nothing but chuck up a peace sign in my ex’s direction to signal he’s all good.

“I don’t feel so good.”

When I turn to my second assistant, Sammy, she’s so green she looks like a ripe pepper.

“Oh shit, I’ll get the Dramamine.” Judd rises with a sigh, having been on many a bus and knowing the look of car sickness when he sees it.

“Deep breaths and head between your knees, sweetheart.” Mom rubs her back as Sammy bends forward.

It’s a small crew of us, and I’m glad Levi respected my request to keep our girl safe and comfortable on this tour. All of his assistants and band personnel are traveling on the other bus, or we’re meeting up with local crew members in each city who can do the jobs without having to travel.

“Is she gonna puke?” Hart asks with all the bluntness of a child.

“Nah, she’ll be fine. I’ve seen grown men scale the bunks of these things on a belly of tequila.” Judd brings over the Dramamine, shakes two out of the bottle, and helps Sammy take them.

“What’s tequila?” Hart asks him.

My inhale of breath tells Judd he should definitely not answer as he’s already said too much. “Nothing, babe. Uncle Judd was just being silly. Sammy will be fine now. Should we play some cards?”

“Card games? On a rock and roll tour bus? This was not what I pictured,” Mom speaks up, taking her head out of the paperback she tucked into when the trip started twenty minutes ago.

I immediately look to Levi and smile. He does the same, and I know what he's thinking of.

"This one night, after I'd first met Sophie and she came on one of my tours, our bus broke down on the side of the road on some rural highway in Arkansas. It was pitch black, the lights on the bus weren't working, and basically nothing was working. Thank God it was warm, or we would have been fucked."

"*Levi*," I scold him.

"Sorry." He grimaces as he looks at Hart. "Anyway, a bunch of the crew guys had lighters, and so we scrounged up some candles. Playing cards was the only non-electric thing we had to pass the time, so we sat on the side of the highway in candlelight, playing poker and war and rummy until someone came to fix the bus. It's become tradition ever since."

"What do you like playing the best?" Mom asks curiously.

"Spit," Levi and I say at the same time, and then we both laugh.

"There have been many an argument over who is the better player." I smile to myself because those arguments would usually end with us back in our bunk, making up with each other.

"I don't know how to play that." Hart pouts.

"We'll teach you along the way. But for now," Levi reaches into the bag at his feet as the bus rumbles along, "we play Uno."

"Dad! You brought Uno?" Hart jumps up and down in the seat. "But Mom is going to beat us all."

I pat myself on the back. "The reigning Uno champ."

"I didn't realize you were so well versed." Judd chuckles in my direction.

"Oh, they play every Sunday night," Mom tells him.

It's been a tradition since Hart was about four. She played it at preschool one day and begged us to buy the simple card

game. Now we play it almost every night after Sunday dinner, a tradition both Levi and I insist on because it keeps our little family feeling like a unit.

Judd looks me over then as if seeing something beneath the surface that not even I can put a name to. “Of course they do.”

Goose bumps litter my skin because it’s clear that the man who is basically Levi’s father and brother wrapped into one can tell what I truly feel about the world’s most beloved singer. I duck my head, hoping he breaks the moment so that he can’t take any more of what I might unintentionally be showing.

“Nah, I’m going to whip her butt,” Levi declares and sits on the floor of the bus as he starts dealing cards.

Hart joins him, and soon Sammy is feeling better. So much, in fact, that she breaks out a bunch of the snacks she brought. Popcorn, chocolate-covered peanuts, gummy worms.

If this whole tour is going to be card games and junk food, maybe it won’t be as much of a struggle as I originally thought.

“**A**nd then I’ll be there to pick you up. Oh! I’ll be there to pick you up.”

I sing the lyrics to one of the very first songs I wrote when I was fifteen, and my daughter plays her guitar alongside me. Below us, three hundred people belt the song at the top of their lungs in a modern theater that looks like it was carved straight out of the side of a mountain. The light fixtures twinkle stories above us, hanging faux candles on steel rods.

The place is electric, and if I had any doubts about doing this grassroots tour at all, they’re completely erased. This is *music*. Tonight is everything it’s supposed to be about. People coming out to a venue that isn’t gussied up, it’s just the fucking band and a mic and incredible lyrics.

It’s me, bonding with my flesh and blood, watching my kid get to play an instrument she picked up seemingly from the day she was born. It’s her mother and grandmother in the wings, rocking out with tears rolling down their cheeks at how well she’s doing up here.

Neil, my drummer, finishes us out with a stunning solo, and I release a breath, sending my gaze skyward in thanks to some bigger being, before snapping my attention back to Hart. The crowd is going wild as I pick her up, and we wave like maniacs.

“Thank you so much, Phoenix. This was truly one of the greatest nights of my life. You made it that way,” I nearly shout into the mic.

They're on their feet, those hundreds of people making way more noise and energy than a stadium of a hundred thousand. These are real fans. The ones who truly wanted to be here and heard about it through the grapevine.

"That was so cool!" Hart fist pumps in the air as she's still in my arms, our bodies now engulfed in the darkness of backstage.

"Oh my God, babe! That was incredible!" Sophie runs at us, scooping Hart out of my arms and hugging our daughter tight.

"Mom!" Hart struggles to break free. "I'm a cool musician, I can't be seen being all babied."

Sophie rolls her eyes but doesn't let go. "Too bad, I'm babying."

"Levi, that was wonderful. The best I've seen you sing in a while." My ex-mother-in-law wraps her arms around me.

"It was a great idea to do this."

"And it'll bring some great inspiration, too." Judd winks as he comes up to fist bump me.

I know what he's thinking; we need to get back to the tour bus quickly so that I can write. Tonight is the kind of night where, in my youth, I would usually pull an all-nighter. I'd throw back a few drinks, settle in with a notebook, and write until I couldn't feel my hand. The buzz and rush of the crowd, the electricity of the words that had been sung from my lips ... it all helped in my process.

But there are things to do. Interviews to give, fans to hug, venue managers to settle up with. I'm not the kind of star who just disappears to an after-party. I take care of business and that's what got me the reputation I have in this industry.

Hopefully, the magic will stay in my veins and translate to paper when I'm able to get back on that bus.

Hart is asleep in my arms by the time we exit the venue, having fallen asleep in my dressing room as we signed autographs and dismantled the sound system. Sophie has been

back and forth between calls with the boots-on-the-ground for her nonprofit and Ariana, who is setting up the next beauty campaign Sophie is due to shoot for the large makeup brand she's the face of.

It's dark and mostly quiet until we step onto the sidewalk, and a gaggle of about five photographers comes at us.

"Shit, I guess we couldn't keep the tour locations a secret for long?" I mumble to Sophie, who is shielding her face as she walks alongside me.

I tighten my hold on Hart and tuck her face into my shoulder so they can't get a good picture of her, then reach out to grab Sophie's hand in mine. We are a unit; we move as one. It doesn't matter if we're divorced or whatever the hell else is happening, I will always protect her.

"Levi, how is it traveling with the family? Are you and Sophie reconciling?" a paparazzi shouts at me as flashes pop in our faces. "Or is Lauren going to meet you out on the road?"

My feet move faster, and I will Soph to stay with me. Judd is trying to push us along, but these assholes are blocking our path. Even out here, in Phoenix, where there are literally no paparazzi, we get hounded. I understand we signed up for fame, but this is what takes it to a new level.

Sophie is pressed against me as we launch ourselves into the van that is going to bring us back to the tour bus.

I sit with Hart in my lap and then reach for her hand once more after we're all seated and the wheels leave tire marks on the pavement from how fast we pull out of there.

"You okay?" I squeeze her fingers in my palm.

She nods but looks frazzled. Her blue eyes are cloudy with thought and maybe doubt. I hate that we are forced to hear our problems shouted back at us daily.

Neither of us says anything more, not in the presence of all these others, as we ride back to the bus. We arrive shortly, help each other change, and put Hart in her bunk, and then I slump onto the bench couch up front with a bottle of beer.

After finishing most of the bottle, I pull out the notebook Judd hinted at earlier. And to no avail, I'm still staring at it five minutes later with no words coming out of my pen.

"A blank notebook? Don't think I've ever seen one of those in your hand."

Sophie's quiet voice, and the words she speaks, sends chills up my spine. Not because she necessarily scared me, she'd have to be as quiet as a church mouse to go undetected in these cramped quarters. But because she knows what I do after concerts. She's seen how pent up with lyrics and melodies I am that they clog my head until I get them out.

Her steps are quiet as she walks to the fridge, pulls out the same type of beer I have, and takes a long drink. There is something effortlessly sexy about a gorgeous woman drinking a beer.

She's in a soft gray pajama set with a button-up top as she comes to sit down across from me on the other bench couch against the wall of windows. The night flies past behind her head; nothing to see but the whizzing highway lights we're passing at top speeds. We're headed to Denver for two nights of shows and then out to Texas for a while. Sophie's only grown more beautiful with age. Not that we're old by any stretch, but when you fall in love with someone at twenty and watch them through many birthdays, you appreciate the mature features that seem to sneak up on you. She's a woman now, elegant and demure, but also bold and powerful, all at the same time. The certainty radiating off of her at all times is intimidating and is such a dichotomy with the person I left all those years ago.

Just another thing to kick myself over. I left Sophie at her lowest point, a time when I should have supported her. But I didn't. I let my ego get in the way, and I'm not sure if she's ever forgiven me for that. Quietly, in the deepest part of her heart, I think she's probably still hurt over it, and that makes me ache.

"I can't write," I confess, because if there is anyone who knows my process and my creativity, it's her.

She blinks, then once more, and moves across the bus to sit down beside me. “What do you mean?”

I shrug, unable to look at her. “I can’t seem to write anything. It’s like all the creativity in me shriveled up and died. Haven’t been able to write a complete song in six months. There was a time, you know this, where I could write an entire album in a weekend. Now? I just can’t. I don’t know. It’s like my mind is this empty cavern whenever I set pen to paper.”

When I look over at Sophie, her expression is one of genuine concern. “That’s not like you at all. What’s going on?”

And without realizing she does, she lays a hand on my knee. Just a single point of contact, and my blood rushes to my cock. It’s a gesture of caring, of comfort, and I’m fantasizing about all sorts of things. Jesus Christ.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know if I’m just in a slump, or nothing is inspiring me. Judd thinks it’s got to do with my personal life.”

“Well, maybe it does. What’s happening there?” she asks cautiously. “Are you dating?”

That paparazzi got into her head outside the venue, I know it.

I cut a look at her. “Despite what random photographers yell at us, you know I’m not. Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe nothing is going on and so I have nothing to write about.”

Sophie’s eyes lock on mine, and I think she just realized how close we’re sitting to one another. It would take nothing for me to lean over and press my lips to hers. To thread my fingers in her hair, to remember the way it slipped past the pads of skin.

She clears her throat, but her voice is raspy. “Maybe it could be happy, what you’re writing. Something about Hart? Or about your friends.”

I don’t have many friends, and she knows that.

“Or it could be about love.” This pops out of my mouth when I intended to keep it inside my skull.

The moment Sophie’s sapphire irises widen, I notice it. Her lips part, as if to take in a tiny gasp, and I shift. Our knees knock together as the bus rumbles over a bump, and my arm slides along the back of the couch until she’s almost surrounded by my body. Every cell in me tingles with the awareness of how close we are, of how badly I want to kiss her.

Sophie’s pink tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip, and I watch her eyes drop to my lips. The moment is so charged that it feels as though someone lighting a match could send this whole bus up in flames. In seven years, we’ve never been as close to giving in to temptation as we are right now.

“Mom?” a small voice comes from somewhere in the bunks, and although Hart isn’t able to see us, it snaps Sophie right out of whatever was about to happen.

Rigidly, as if her limbs are robotic, she stands. “What’s wrong, baby?”

She asks the question as she backs away from me, back into the sleeping quarters area of the bus. But I don’t miss the way she tracks me or the flush of her cheeks.

Or the fact that she was going to let me kiss her. And how, suddenly, I feel like I have a thousand things I can write down in this notebook.

A week later, and we're in Dallas, and the concerts just get better and better as we move states on this tour.

The feedback has been amazing, and my fans are loving the stripped-down versions of the songs and performances. Stadium tours are all glitz and glamour, but these small crowd events are more like singalongs, and I'm having an absolute blast.

Plus, having Hart here is the best decision I've made in a while. The energy she brings to my soul, just to see her watching me or having her on stage with me, it's priceless. And seeing the way she connects with the music and the fans, it's like looking into her future and watching how incredible she's going to be. No matter if it's with music or something else.

Sophie left for two days to fly back to LA to do a modeling shoot and to approve some line items for their big Full Hands fundraiser in a few months. Tonight was her first back on the tour bus or at a show, and I swear my heart hasn't stopped beating double time since she stepped into that cramped bunk space.

Our almost kiss the other night has been playing on my mind in a loop, and for as much as I love my daughter, I wish she hadn't interrupted us. Everything in me is desperate to remember how it feels when her mouth is on mine.

"Something on your mind?" Judd comes into the dressing room I've been in for nearly an hour.

Gloria took Hart back to the bus to get her in bed, and I've been avoiding everyone by locking myself in here. Sophie didn't come to the concert tonight, begged off that she was too tired from the travel, and the night just felt off. When I said I was missing love the other night and that's why I can't write, I don't think I was that far off.

I've been staring into the wood grain of the makeup vanity in this tiny room for the better part of an hour, wondering if we could overcome everything to love each other again. If that would even be possible. If Sophie would even be interested in that.

"A lot of things on my mind," I mutter, wishing I had some whiskey on hand.

"Mind sharing with the class?" He sits on the arm of a tattered beige chair in the corner and crosses his arms over his chest.

I sigh, knowing I should confess but not really wanting to. "It's Sophie."

"What about her?" He's feisty tonight, I can feel it.

Judd never was one of those friends who let you get away with shit. He'd poke or devil's advocate the bejesus out of you.

"I just ... I'm happy she's here. I wanted this tour to be for Hart and me, but I can't deny that having her here has been a highlight. And I can't figure out if I should tell her that or not. If it would be weird."

There, that sounded platonic.

"Well, that's because you're in love with her. Probably why this tour feels different. Oh, and you should absolutely tell her. But please tell her you're in love with her, because I hate the obvious sexual tension. You two need some serious makeup time so we all don't have to smell the pheromones any longer."

Wait, *what?*

"You've always said that the relationship Sophie and I have with each other is wonderful. That we support each other

and put our daughter above all else. I'm confused?"

"And privately, to myself, I've always known that you two kids are so in love, you can barely keep the feelings out of your expressions when the other walks into the room."

My best friend, my mentor, just blew me out of the hypothetical water. "Wait, what?"

"You've been in love with that woman since the day you met her. But I knew you needed space after the whole Vincent thing, so I let it go. But come on, Levi, seven years is a bit too long."

I'm gobsmacked. I think my jaw might be on the floor. "You're telling me that the entire divorce, the seven years after, and each time I seemed to be struggling with it, you actually thought we should be together?"

"Well, yeah, but your dumb ass had to figure that out. No amount of anyone telling another person something has ever worked out."

"Says the guy who speaks his mind on literally everything ever. Well, I guess except for this." I feel like flipping him the bird.

Judd sighs, uncrosses his arms, and then crosses them again. I really wish I had that fucking whiskey now.

"Listen, do I think you both made mistakes? Absolutely. Do I think you've grown in your time apart? Yes. Are you both great parents and could you have been if you stayed together? You are, but I'm not sure it would have worked if you couldn't get past the hurt. It's been a long time since then. It's clear as day the love never went away. The reason you can't write? Probably because you've been holding in your feelings for the woman who was your inspiration. And have done so for seven years. It's time, Levi. It's time to heal the hurt, to fess up. Even if she can't accept it, you have to tell her."

His words echo in my ears as I try to digest them but are interrupted the minute the door swings open and hits the wall behind it.

Sophie barges into my dressing room, and both Judd and I clam up like it's completely obvious we were just talking about her.

Not that I have to worry about her inquiring as to what it is we were talking about, because she looks so frantic that I immediately stand up and go to her, touching her arms and speaking in a low voice. She must have raced over here because she's in sweats, and she wasn't even at the venue tonight.

“Soph, what is it?”

Her eyes search mine for a split-second before her hoarse whisper comes out.

“August died.”

I don't think I've ever seen more diamonds and neon colors at a funeral than I have today.

In fact, nothing about this funeral is like a funeral at all, but I guess that's August for you.

August Maldino was a respected fashion designer, advocate for the LGBTQ+ community, and one of my earliest friends in Hollywood.

The media used to call us the Millennial Moguls, kind of like the Rat Pack in the nineteen sixties, but for more modern times. We were a group of eight up-and-coming celebrities, and the power we thought we had back then was dangerous but also exhilarating—young, crazy, free, and most of us in love. The group formed naturally, with Levi and one of his first friends in Hollywood, Rogers, a TV actor who'd won many Emmys, inviting some of the group to a VIP table at one of the hottest clubs back then. Once I met Levi, we fell hard and fast, and I came into the group. August was already a part of it, along with some other notable celebrities who had made major career moves since then. And a couple who hadn't.

The ballroom, because it was so August not to have his death celebrated in a stodgy funeral home, is swathed in black silk and glittering crystals. Mourners don his designs, from animal print to mini-skirts to actual leotards and no pants.

Levi takes my hand in his, wrapping it around his bicep so he can escort me through the room. He had to postpone the next Dallas show due to flying back to California for this, but

it wasn't like we wouldn't have come. August was family, even if we'd grown apart over the years. At the beginning of our marriage and my rise in Hollywood, August and the Millennial Moguls had been there when I felt like no one else understood what I was going through.

"Oh, Soph, I thought I'd see you here." Rudolph Meyers runs up to me, his big frame engulfing me in a hug.

Rudolph is the only athlete of the Millennial Moguls, and he still plays professional basketball. He's almost seven feet, and I feel like a miniature version of a person next to him, but he's the biggest softie around.

"It's so good to see you, though I hate that it's here," I tell him, releasing the black satin suit he's wearing as he ends our hug.

"August gave this to me for Christmas three years ago." He looks beside himself with grief. "Levi, so good to see you."

Levi hugs Rudolph, the gray linen suit he's wearing rumpling as he does. I have on the same gray linen material only in a floor-length, short sleeve dress with a Peter Pan collar. The set was a gift from August to us long ago, and they both still fit.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe he's gone," my ex-husband says, shaking his head.

When I had a crew member bring me to the venue to tell Levi, I'd been frantic. I couldn't believe one of our closest friends had died, and the only person I wanted to sit with in that news and grief was him. Levi had been beside himself as I told him how August had been found, of a heart attack alone in his Bel-Air mansion. We'd both cried, hugging each other like lifelines.

"He was so much larger than life. I can't believe he's gone. And that he was alone."

Rudolph's assessment has me tearing up all over again. This is what I can't understand, because he was always the life of the party. He was so young. An angel taken way too soon.

“Hey, guys.” Ingrid Wilder walks up, another member of the Millennial Moguls who I haven’t seen in years.

We all hug her, and then she rocks back on her heels. “If there was ever any way to go, I guess this would be it. With everyone wearing your designs, no matter how ugly.”

That has a little chuckle, a reverberation of humor, going around our small group. Then again, Ingrid always was the one to supply that. She’s one of the most iconic female comedians now with her own late-night talk show, but back then, she’d been hot on the standup scene and just breaking in.

“And there are some real doozies,” I agree.

And just as I say it, my eyes latch on to a flash of red moving through the room.

“Ah, I see you’ve spotted her.”

That comes from Norton Cummings, the chef extraordinaire. He’s to my left, having just walked up to the group, and one of the only members of the Millennial Moguls whom I still keep in touch with. We hug affectionately until I see Katie, his wife, and then I abandon him. Norton and Katie are two of my closest friends in LA, and I’m so glad to have some reinforcements. Especially because of who I just saw.

“She’s been schmoozing like it’s an award show.” Katie rolls her eyes, and I snort.

“Why is she here?” I wonder aloud, because I know, for a fact, she wasn’t friends with August.

“Probably heard he was coming.” Norton smacks a hand to Levi’s pec and the two embrace.

“Ah, no.” Levi looks anxious when he spots Lauren Hap through the crowd. “Can we all just go out to the parking lot and smoke or something?”

“We don’t do that anymore, remember?” Ingrid chuckles.

“Ignore her.” Katie waves it off. “The media will only speculate more if you make a break for it. There is nothing going on, we all know it even if I haven’t seen you in awhile.”

When we all look over, Lauren is talking to another actor. It's not necessarily scandalous that she's here, but with all of the media coverage of her and Levi lately, it feels like she's trying to capitalize on it. And if I'm being honest, their relationship and the coverage of it has always made me uneasy. Around Lauren, I do feel like the woman who stole him ... even if everyone knows that's not the case.

The service is beautiful, with tributes given from almost every major fashion house August worked with throughout his career. There is a runway of sorts, with many of his past models and muses walking to showcase his designs. Impromptu, someone pulls me out of the crowd, and I oblige, walking on the makeshift catwalk to show the attendees my dress.

Then August's favorite opera singer gets up to perform and there isn't a dry eye in the house. After that, flutes of champagne with pomegranate seeds are passed out and there is a toast. The whole thing is beautiful and purely August.

And during it, Levi doesn't drop my hand. A few times, as tears leaked from my eyes, he leaned over to kiss my forehead. We felt, just for a moment in time, like *us* again. Like anything could happen, and nothing in the world could rock us or break us apart.

Aside from the comment from Rudolph about me dating James, which he must have heard from the man himself because he's his agent, the day goes smoothly. I do find it a little odd James told someone about our date, but maybe he knew I was friendly with Rudolph. I mean, a lot of people know that.

When our old friend mentioned my neighbor, Levi went stiff with awkwardness and dropped my hand. It's probably not a great idea to mention to him, or in front of him if I was talking to Mom, that James and I have been texting since the tour began. And that he wants to fly out to one of the cities and take me on our next date.

Sure, I am still in love with my ex. And there is clearly something happening, though I never get my hopes up

anymore. But I can't just bank on it coming to fruition. I've done that too many times to count, only to be completely heartbroken when it didn't. So going on another date with James, who is a perfectly nice guy, is the only option. I have to keep moving forward, even if I have to force myself.

"I'm going to run to the bathroom," I tell Levi as he starts talking to Rudolph and Norton about the betting odds on an upcoming baseball game.

He pats my hand and is almost hesitant to let it go. "Okay. We should leave in about five to get to the plane."

The trip is going to be a whirlwind one because we're due back in Dallas by tonight for his concert tomorrow. Plus, I can't wait to hold Hart after a day like today.

The dress is a nightmare to get off as my bladder screams at me, and I end up just hiking up the stiff material. I've worn worse things to events and award ceremonies and mastered the art of either not peeing all night or maneuvering in ridiculous ways to do so.

The bathroom door opens, shuts, and then the sink runs. I think nothing of it, finish my business, and go to walk out of the stall.

That's when I realize who followed me in here. I should have known, since I broke off from Levi, that she'd find me. Lauren stands at the wall of sinks, slicking some lip gloss on. The dimples set into her heart-shaped face seem to smirk a little. She picked the smallest scrap of fabric August ever designed and paired the red bandage dress with a crazy amount of gold chains that fall right into her cleavage, bringing the eye right there.

I don't know if I should talk first. She's the one who came in here after me, and we've never had that many confrontations. No, in all honesty, Lauren and I have never even overlapped that much since Levi's working relationship with her was over shortly after we got married.

"Sophie, it's really good to see you." She practically gushes, and the caution flag in my brain seems to fly.

“Lauren, I didn’t realize you’d be here.” It’s not exactly passive aggressive, but August was our friend, and it doesn’t feel right for her to be here.

“Well, it’s an industry thing, you know? Levi was really close to August when we first started writing together. I just ... I didn’t realize you two were so close, still.” As if she hadn’t seen the co-parenting stories about us over the last seven years.

“We share a daughter, who is the most important thing in the world to us. And Levi is a good man, a good friend.” Lies, but Lauren doesn’t need to know I’m still in love with my ex.

She grabs a paper towel and dries her hands while looking at me in the mirror. “Hm, I guess it’s weird your marriage didn’t last then. Or maybe there was another reason.”

My body goes ice cold. Before I can sputter out the words to ask what the hell she’s talking about, she turns on a heel and exits the bathroom.

She knows. In my bones, I feel it. I’ve never seen Lauren do manipulative, but I suspected at the beginning of my relationship with Levi that something was amiss with her. Now, I saw it for certain.

Someone must have told her something. She would never have said it that way if she didn’t know something. The only person who knew the full story had been very well paid off, and the rest of our staff was like family.

Everything in me is in panic mode as I go to find Levi, who is across the ballroom talking to Morgan Christen, a director nominated for an Oscar this year.

“Morgan, good to see you. Levi, one second? Hart is on the phone,” I lie and use the excuse of our kid because no one will question that.

He cocks his head, knowing my mom would never let Hart call us while we were attending a funeral, but doesn’t say anything as he follows me.

The corner we congregate in isn’t exactly private, and anyone looking on might think something fishy was

happening, but at least it's quiet, and we can talk somewhat freely.

"Lauren followed me to the bathroom," I whisper.

His body goes rigid, and he turns to locate her in the crowd. "Are you kidding me? She really has some nerve, I'm about to tell her off—"

"Levi." I snap my fingers to get his face to turn back to me. "She insinuated that she knows why we got divorced."

"She couldn't know that." He seems dazed by all the information.

"Well, I think she does." I shiver with the thought that she holds power over us.

"There is no way. Unless there was a leak. Only a few people know, and ninety-nine percent of them would never tell Lauren."

"Unless it's ... Vincent." Speaking the name of the man I cheated on him with is probably not a wise choice, but these are dire circumstances.

Levi's face goes dark, clouding with anger.

"We have to figure out how she knows." I grip his arms, because I want him to tell me it's going to be okay.

"If she even does," His tone is unsure. "She could just be bluffing. She's been on me about writing together again, this could just be a play."

I chew my lip. "I don't know."

I hate how insecure this woman, who didn't even win the man if that's the game we're playing, still makes me feel. It brings me back to a time when, while I was in such puppy love with Levi, his fans were tearing me apart for not being her.

Ten minutes later, we're out in our car after saying our goodbyes and headed for the airport.

"Today sucked." He sighs, leaning his head against the back of his seat.

“I can’t believe he’s truly gone. We’re so young. He was so young.” I’m rambling in my sadness, but the grief has crept in after leaving the beautifulness of the funeral.

“Life is too short.” Levi looks at me, and there is such meaning in his eyes.

It’s almost as if he’s trying to address the night on the bus where we almost kissed. No, where he almost kissed me. Of his own free will. It was a thing I’d dreamed about for years, and it almost happened.

Did he want to try again? The energy in the car shifts; it’s palpable.

Then my phone goes off, and we’re interrupted once more.

When I pick it up and see what Ariana has messaged me, I nearly drop my phone.

“Levi ...” Everything in my body goes numb and extremely flushed between hot and cold all at the same time.

Because what I’m staring at is a blind item, or celebrity gossip with all the names retracted.

And there is no way this isn’t our biggest secret, being shared with the world, only without our names attached.

I shove the phone at my ex-husband, and he reads it aloud.

“This millionaire singer and his once wife but always baby mama didn’t breakup because of his infidelities. Not at all. Rumor has it that she cheated on him with someone from their joint camp.”

My blood boils. My heart shatters into a million pieces. But mostly, the dread is the overwhelming thing controlling me.

The whole world is going to know I cheated on Levi. The thinly veiled anonymity that makes it clear who the people in this blind item are is so transparent it’ll only be a matter of time before legitimate news sites pick this up.

“Fuck,” Levi mumbles, throwing my cell to the carpeted floor of the back seat.

“Everyone is going to find out.” I don’t realize I say it out loud until Levi’s glare is burning a hole in my cheek.

Is he pissed? Will this open up the gaping wound that still exists between us? The one we never talk about. The *Vincent* of it all.

“We’ll figure it out.” He finally sighs, looking away from me and out the window.

The dread is back in full force because that wasn’t reassuring at all. If anything, I feel like the shitstorm is headed straight for us, and the scandal is about to embroil us. The backlash of the media and the fans. The eyewitness accounts that will be false and wrong. Instead of this friendly reputation we’ve built, we’ll be labeled as the same kind of disgusting celebrity couple who can’t be faithful or rational.

But worst of all, my daughter is about to find out everything I’ve tried so hard to grow from, everything I’ve hoped to hide from her because she won’t understand that I ruined our family.

Being irritated with Sophie about this makes no sense, but here I am.

I can't help that it grates my nerves. That every day of this past week, including the four concerts we've done during it, feels like the day my life will unravel in the most public way possible.

Lauren knows why Sophie and I divorced, so it seems, and I can't help thinking that the other shoe is bound to drop. If I know my ex-writing partner like I think I do, there is no way she's going to keep this to herself. After rejecting her offer to work together again, I feel like she's decided on the warpath out of revenge.

The question is, who told her? There could only be a handful of people, and the majority of them still work in my or Sophie's camp, so there is no way they'd be spilling the beans.

That leaves Vincent, who was paid a pretty penny to keep this quiet. If he's going around telling people, he'll have more than the legal system to answer to.

My fists squeeze until my nails dig into my palms, and I have to exhale a deep breath into the dressing room.

We're in Austin, due to start the next concert in an hour. But with this little problem on our hands, we thought it wise to meet with our attorney and cover our bases before questioning anyone.

Sophie puts her phone down between us, and the voice of our lawyer, Kathleen, stretches in the distance between us. Judd sits in the corner, along with Gloria, who has been irate since she learned that Lauren knows. Last night was a bit of a clusterfuck of trying to communicate things while Hart was on the tour bus. The space has no place for a private meeting, and yet we needed to talk about the possibilities of this getting out. Allen, our publicist, is also in on the call to propose the ways in which we could control the narrative before or after the news breaks.

“So, now that we know exactly what Lauren said, thanks Sophie, I think we can assume that whatever information she has won’t stay under wraps for long. The woman has a history with you two, and it sounds like she’s done trying to play nice in order to advance her career. We need to have a strategy in place if she goes to the press.”

Allen is only speaking facts, but I hate them. I wish I could jump through the phone and slap my hand over his mouth, even though he has no part in any of the shitstorm that’s about to bowl us over.

“I think we also need to do some covert digging into who could be feeding her information. Do you suspect anyone on your teams? Has anyone recently been let go?” Kathleen asks through the phone.

My eyes flash to Sophie, and she shakes her head. “No one on my end. The people I work with have either been here for years and are loyal as anything, or they arrived after Levi and I were already separated.”

“Same here. No one would dare go to Lauren with this.”

“That leaves one person,” Gloria mumbles.

She was so fucking pissed when she heard about what happened. Gloria has always let Sophie and me work our own things out, except when it comes to Lauren. She has made it clear several times, both in our marriage and after we divorced, that I should have done more to discourage the narrative around my old writing partner.

“Do we know this isn’t Vincent?” Just saying his name makes me grind my back molars together.

Sophie is staring holes into her shoes, shame radiating off her.

Kathleen speaks up. “His NDA was ironclad, and after the settlement, he legally can’t say a thing. But I did check up on him, assured he hasn’t spoken a word of this to anyone. He confirmed.”

“You spoke to him?” My ex-wife’s voice shakes.

Some crazy, irrational monster inside me bares its teeth. I hate the thought of Sophie even thinking about him. I know how insane that is because they never had anything, and she regrets it immensely, but it’s there inside me all the same.

“I did. He swore up and down he kept his mouth shut. I mean, I don’t know that I one hundred percent believe him, but he’d be an idiot to run to Lauren with this. Plus, he doesn’t have anything to gain if she’s the one who comes out with it.”

“Kathleen makes a good point, but we have bigger issues than who. The fact is, this news is probably coming out. Or we should prepare like it’s going to.” Allen takes over the call.

“About the blind item, what do we do?” Sophie asks, chewing on her fingernails nervously.

“Well, I did get it taken down, but obviously it’s everywhere. People are speculating, and a good amount of fingers are pointed in your directions. So we have some options. One, issue a vague statement saying you’d like to keep the details of your divorce private and that you wish the public to respect the child in the situation. I don’t think that’s the smart choice, but we can play it. Two, deny everything she says and stick to the same story we’ve always peddled; you were young, you fell out of love, but remain great friends and co-parents.”

I think I hear a chuckle from the corner, and I’m pretty sure Judd is patronizing me, but I decide to ignore it.

“Or, and I vote for this option because I just think it’s been a long time coming, we go for the truth. Sophie runs an

organization that deals with postpartum and how it effects women. Tell your story, Sophie. Talk about how you felt. Detail how your partner didn't understand your choices, and how you two resolved things so that you could become partners in parenting. Sure, the public might not like you for a little, but I think it will be far more endearing to actually explain what you were going through and what led to it rather than hiding it any longer."

"And Levi will be painted as more of a saint and golden boy than he already is," Gloria chimes in. "No offense, sweetheart, you know I love you as a son-in-law, but we all know you get the good boy edit and I'm looking out for my daughter."

Judd nods his head in her direction like she's completely right in what she's saying, and I can't fault her. Some of my annoyance dissipates, because I'm just as much to blame here.

"Levi isn't without his own issues in this. If Lauren knows it all, the punch he delivered to Vincent is going to be brought up. He's going to look, for lack of a better word, like a jealous asshole. And the fact that your assistant was paid off will be scandalized as well. But it's in my professional opinion that rather than deny these things, you talk about them. Give a sit down to a journalist you trust. Hell, do a social media live with me sitting next to you to prompt you about what you can and can't say. Denying anything ever happened will only make you look guilty against allegations that sound like they could have happened in a reality TV show. Actually coming out and telling your side is the only way we save this."

Allen has left us all gobsmacked, but it's Sophie who clears her throat.

"You think we should do this before or after she goes to the media?"

"Well, it's always better to tell your side first, obviously. But if you need some time ..."

"We need some time." She looks off, away from Gloria, Judd, and me, then rises to pace.

“That’s fine, Soph, take some time. Just not too much.” Allen tries to reassure her.

“In the meantime, I’m going to get one of my PIs on it, do some sniffing around to see if we can’t suss out who is behind all of this,” Kathleen adds.

“Thanks guys,” I say, and we all say our farewells before hanging up the phone.

The four of us are left with more questions, uncertainty, and a dressing room that feels stifled by the *what ifs*.

“We need to be in the wings in about thirty minutes,” Judd tells me before going over to hug Sophie.

She curls into his embrace, and I wish like hell it could be me giving her that kind of comfort even if I’m stupidly, unfairly mad at her. I’m just pissed at the situation in general. It hurt like fucking hell going through this in real time. I never wanted to do it again. And I’ll have to watch Sophie suffer the most. She has the most to lose in this.

“Of course, this shit is getting out now, just when we were really settling into a good groove.” I blow out a breath, my annoyance still rippling just below the surface.

Sophie stays quiet, but Gloria snorts and then hands me my ass. “None of this would be happening if you’d dealt with this years ago. The thing with you and Lauren has cycled through the media numerous times, and you’ve never outright just shut it down. The approach was always to look like the bigger people, to take the high road. Well, I always thought that was bullshit. Don’t imply that Sophie is the only one to blame here. This is a long time coming, and you two should have just told the truth years ago. I know this is Hollywood, but we’re still in the real world. At least that’s how I raised my daughter to be.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Though, *is it?*

“No, by all means, blame me. We should probably talk about this anyway, since we’ve never done so directly.” Sophie jumps in now.

“Talk about why we got divorced? I think that topic has been covered thoroughly, *Sophie*.” And even if it hasn’t, I

don't feel like traveling back to a time when she cheated on me.

"I'll be outside." Gloria squeezes her daughter's shoulder, shoots me a warning look, and then leaves the dressing room.

"You think I *want* to talk about this? That I'm going to have to tell the world about the single worst day of my entire life? Of course not. But if we're not united on this, it's going to be a hundred times worse. We're the greatest co-parenting partners in the world, remember?"

She says the last part sarcastically, as if the whole facade we put on for the world is one we've been lying about to ourselves, too.

"Fine." I cross my arms and raise an eyebrow. "Should I talk about the part where you kissed my assistant, or did you want to do a sit down interview on how you had to pull me off of him?"

"I don't know, Levi, why don't I talk about how I was out of my mind with postpartum depression, hiding it from my husband, and then he walked out on me while saying we had to keep it all quiet?"

She drops the bomb that detonates between us, her scarlet cheeks puffing up and sucking in with each labored breath.

It's the first time I've ever heard her talk about what happened in those terms, and something clicks in my mind. "Wait, what—"

"This is what happens when you let rumors run rampant for a decade and never speak out." She waves her hand at me as if brushing off the explosive matter still floating between us. "You even gave them the newest fodder with that photo of you two."

My teeth snap together because we're just going around in circles, bringing up old wounds. "I told you, that was nothing and a mistake on my part. One I let Lauren know would not be replicated again."

"I was with you for years, Levi, and I am still the other woman. To everyone out there, I will always be the other

woman. I still see the theories constantly, about how so many of your songs must be about Lauren. Now she knows all of this private information about us. Do you want to be with her? You want that life? Just put me out of my misery, Levi.”

I’ve met my limit. My heart can’t handle another second.

“You were never the other fucking woman. From the time you showed up in my life, you were the only woman I could ever see. Everyone wants to make Lauren and me some epic story. What they don’t know is that I never even looked at her. Never once thought twice about it, even with all the late nights and months in the studio spent together. There was only ever you, for me. And you’re the one who kissed Vincent, but I’m the one who walked away. You want me to tell the world that? Fine. I will. I’ll tell them, once and for all, that I made the biggest fucking mistake of my life not staying with you. That I was so blind with hurt, I couldn’t see that my wife was sitting in front of me, hurting so terribly inside and I never noticed. Every single day of this tour, the mistake I made has been staring me right in the face. It’s been clear to me for much longer than that. We’re more than co-parents, Sophie. Let’s not kid ourselves. I’ll stand up for you until the death, I’m sorry I haven’t done so in a public way sooner. But you were never my second choice. If anything, you’re the only woman I’ve ever seen. The world could be crumbling, and my focus would never stray from you.”

When the last word leaves my mouth, my chest could cave in, that’s how empty it feels. I just spewed every pent-up thing I’ve felt for the last seven years.

A tear slips down Sophie’s cheek, and she keeps opening and closing her mouth, but nothing comes out.

Suddenly, the door opens, and one of the assistants to the crew manager pops his head in, oblivious that a pivotal, life-changing discussion is happening.

“Levi, they need you to test the mics.”

I nod, one single curt gesture, and he disappears.

One last look at Sophie, at how her mouth dangles open and shock paints her big blue eyes, and then I'm striding out. I just left my heart open on the floor. We just got into one of the worst fights of our entire relationship, and I just can't stand to sit in that pain right now.

After the concert, I sit at the front of the bus, in the passenger seat next to Buck, and write four complete songs until the sun begins to rise through the windshield.

“**O**ur next auction item will be a waterfront stay at a beautiful four-story home on Lake Travis!”

The host, a local Austin radio DJ we hired for tonight’s benefit, is up on stage, doing her best to entice the audience to bid their hard-earned dollars toward charity.

When Ariana suggested we do a couple of events that coincided with the tour stops, I thought it was a wonderful idea. Not only is it a great way to make Full Hands more visible to the public, because most of our events usually take place in LA, but it also gives me the opportunity to partner with local organizations. Eventually, I want my nonprofit to be nationwide, and meeting people with boots on the ground who can help get those chapters up and running when it comes time is important.

A paddle raises from a table up front, and the host calls out five hundred dollars to start with. Internally, I give myself a little high-five. Tonight’s event has been a success, in an outdoor venue with twinkling lights under the stars while the most beautiful steers I’ve ever seen pace in an open field next to the tables.

The tables are bare wood with overflowing wildflowers, the best barbecue in the city has been devoured by everyone in attendance, and we’ve all been sipping on vodka martinis all night. The atmosphere is jovial, with a live cover band doing country songs. The auction has been more lively than any I’ve ever seen, and I’m considering doing all of my events here

because the LA crowd would be considered a wet blanket to these spirited folks.

“Sold! To the man in the camel-colored jacket. Enjoy those jet skis, sir!” The host points at him, and the man with a handlebar mustache stands and takes a bow before sitting back down.

I clap along with everyone else, and a genuine smile paints my lips—the first in about twenty-four hours.

“You doing okay?” Sammy asks, sidling up to me.

She’s not the confidant I have in Ariana, but Sammy has been with me for awhile and knows the inner workings of my family and my business. She knew that something was up when I returned from the venue last night. When Levi didn’t show up for hours after the show, it probably wasn’t hard to piece together.

“Getting there, but going back to the bus is going to be ... strained.” I say it through my teeth.

“I can always book us a hotel if you want. Call it a spa day, Hart will go crazy for that. If she gets to commandeer the hotel pool, she’ll have a blast.”

The people who worked with me are too good. They know what makes me and my daughter tick.

I grab Sammy’s hand and squeeze affectionately. “I really appreciate that. I’ll think about it.”

But thinking about that would mean thinking about the Levi of it all, and I really couldn’t go there.

I can’t think about what Levi said last night, or I’ll start spiraling. That I am the only woman he’s ever seen. That he made the worst mistake of his life walking away from me and insinuating that he should have fought harder to stay together. That he regrets not being there for me and that for seven years, he has wished he admitted all of this so we could put it behind us.

No, I can’t think about any of that. Because if I do, I will go off the deep end, and right now, I can’t afford that. Because

I have a benefit to run. I have money to raise. Our little family unit has the matter of Lauren to debate, and we need to decide if we're going to the press first or if we're waiting for the hurricane to engulf us before we start making statements.

I've waited for this man to say these things for seven years, and now it's like my mind won't let me fully process them. That, and the fear that he has said them but doesn't want to act on them. Cut to the example of him slamming the door on his way out of the dressing room and then not talking to me since.

Up on stage, the band has taken over for the final few songs, and I see the event coordinator, Lily, wave me over.

"Will you grab the number of that gentleman who asked how else he could help?" I ask Sammy.

She nods, then touches my elbow. "Oh, also, word from Ari is that there are no new rumblings online."

My head bobs with curt understanding. I've had all of my assistants checking hourly to see if there is any Internet buzz on the blind item about Levi and me. So far, nothing has blown up, but it feels like we're walking a tightrope poised right above a tank full of sharks.

"We all set with this then?" I ask her.

"Almost twenty thousand raised tonight. I'd say that surpasses what we were hoping for."

The butterflies in my stomach do a little happy dance. "Way surpasses. Ah, I'm so excited. This gets us that much closer to the nurses program. Imagine how many new mothers we're going to help."

I imagine what it would have been like if I'd listened and hired a night nurse. I'd been too prideful, wanted to do it like my mother had. But postpartum didn't care how much money you had or what kind of help could be provided; it attacked nonetheless.

I shake off the dark thoughts and focus on the good we are going to do.

“When will you announce the new initiative?” she asks.

“We’re close, still processing the applications of the women who applied for it.” But it’s coming, just a few more puzzle pieces to line up.

This chunk of donations will help with that.

“Well, let me get these people their prizes. I’ll see you back in California?” Sammy asks, knowing she’ll be coordinating from there for a few days.

“I’ll be back in a few weeks again, I have a shoot with Renfray.” The fashion house that launched the careers of the best models picked me as their cover girl, so to speak, two years ago.

I need to keep reminding myself of that fact since my modeling days are numbered. Hitting thirty is when a lot of my breed dies off, career-wise, and I’m expecting it.

The guests are either making their way to waiting Ubers or town cars, or waiting for all the auction items to be doled out or information being taken for the trips we raffled. That’s when I hear the gruff voice at my back.

“Been meaning to get out to one of these. Thanks for putting it on here.”

I turn and nearly drop the flowers I was collecting to take back to the tour bus for Hart and my mom. Towering over me is the most intimidating man in the music industry. He’s a genius, a capstone of country music, and one of my biggest idols. Wearing all black, with a shaved brunette head, piercing light blue eyes, and ropes of lean muscle covered in tattoos on every inch of skin visible, he would be frightful to anyone he stood toe-to-toe with.

Me? I’m just in awe.

“You’re Dane.” My brain short circuits, and that’s all I can seem to say.

“I am.” The man doesn’t smile, he never does from what I’ve seen, but the corner of his mouth does tic up fractionally.

I choke out a breath. “I’m sorry, wow so this is what it feels like to fangirl. It’s never really happened to me.”

I’m so embarrassed it’s laughable, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“Big fan of your work too, so I get it. Your nonprofit work, to clarify.” And then he blushes a little, letting me know that he’s most definitely looked at some of my modeling work.

“God, that’s mortifying. You’re just my favorite artist of all time and we’ve never met. Which is strange, you think we’d bump into each other at some point, right?”

He shrugs. “I don’t go out much. Especially when I’m in LA.”

That’s an understatement. Dane, no last name needed, but it’s Rivers, and I only know that because I’m such a huge fan, is one of the greatest country artists of all time. With his soulful singing, his story is known around the world. He grew up in a rural part of Texas and was told he’d never amount to anything. He was abandoned by his mother and father and lived on his own in a house from the time he was thirteen, avoiding the system by working odd jobs and still attending school. He dug his way out when he was discovered at a bar in Austin one night when he randomly got up on stage and mesmerized everyone in the crowd ... so much so that they let him play until the middle of the night. He’d only been sixteen at the time.

All the things I, and the world, know about him are because of his lyrics and songs. Otherwise, Dane is an extremely private person who never grants interviews and has done as many media appearances in his entire career as I have in the last month. Aside from concerts, you never see him in public.

So I’m floored he’s at my event.

“Thank you for coming tonight.” I extend the courtesy but am confused as to why he chose to come here.

He rubs the back of his neck. “I’ve actually been a long-time contributor to Full Hands, just always kept it anonymous.

But I figured you were doing such great work trying to get your nurse program off the ground that I had to finally come out and meet you. Made sense since you were in my city.”

The man says these short sentences as if they aren’t the most baffling things in the world.

“Um ... wow. I didn’t realize postpartum issues were—”

I cut myself off before saying *close to your heart*, because I have no idea what he’s been through, and that’s part of the problem. And since I know nearly everything about him from his music, having been such a fan since his early days, I do know he has a teenage daughter he’s been the single parent of for most of her life.

“You could say I’ve had some experience with them. It’s a really important issue that there is not nearly enough of a spotlight on. So I wanted to thank you personally for the work you’re doing. Not many celebrities that I respect, but you’re one of them.”

I swear, all of my fangirl dreams just came true. Like I said, I don’t get star struck. But this man made one of the most fundamental albums of my entire life. His music shaped who I am. They’re the most important songs in my life—don’t tell Levi.

“That is the biggest compliment coming from you. Truly, I’m humbled. And I agree, it’s an issue not a lot of people talk about one talks about. That’s what I want to change.”

Dane nods, his brooding mask never slipping. This guy is like a shadow, a darkness you’re never sure you’ll figure out. But right here, with me, I have a feeling he’s saying and showing more than he has to most people in his entire life.

“I want to help. Anything you need, I’m here for it. Money, support. Shit, I would even perform or do some charity concert for the likes of you.”

And then, my lady parts be damned, he smirks.

If I wasn’t already in ridiculous tangled-up love with the father of my child, I might ask this man if he wanted to take me back to whatever reclusive forest he traipsed out of.

“Don’t say those things, because I will definitely hold you to them. I hate to ask this, but I have to know, why me? Why this cause? You’re not ... well, you’re not known for saying or doing anything publicly outside of your music. In fact, hasn’t it been years since you toured?”

My inner-Dane fan geek is really showing her ass tonight.

He grimaces. “Yeah, about five years. I just dislike people? I know everyone says that, but I really don’t like going out and socializing. I started singing because it’s me. I’m not a person if I don’t have music. That just happened to make me famous, but I don’t want to be.”

“I know something about that.” I smile an all-knowing smile.

He nods conspiratorially. “I want to put out music and be left alone. But sometimes, there are things that happen that are more important than what we want. Supporting your nonprofit is one of them. So while I fucking hate the idea of fans and questions, I’ll do it to raise money for this.”

With the way his eyes go black as he says the last part, I know he’s seen the worst of what postpartum can do.

“Well, damn, then, just as a fan, I’m making this concert happen.” I let my voice come out lighthearted, because I know it’s what we both need. “Thank you for telling me all of this. You’re really going to help make a difference.”

He holds out his phone. “Put your number in. I don’t have assistants or any of that shit, I just do what I want when I want. With who I want. So I can reach you to plan.”

This guy is the fucking coolest person on the planet, and I have no idea how he exists in the world. I do as he asks and hand it back to him.

“It would be weird if I told you how much I’m geeking out over you doing a performance for Full Hands, right?”

“Probably. Thanks for being as cool as I thought you’d be, Sophie.” He throws up a peace sign and walks off.

As surreal as this entire night has been, meeting my idol has to be the best part of it.

At least I can ride that high as I'm driven back to the tour bus to whatever awaits my heart, which is already hanging on by a thread.

Levi and I haven't spoken about what he said to me.

Actually, we haven't spoken, period, in a week. Well, not anything that would be of any consequence. To the outsider looking in, we've kept it just about as cordial as we always do. We sit at family dinners with our kid and friends, we coordinate schedules so that no ball gets dropped, we ask if the other needs help when it pertains to the parenting of our daughter.

But addressing the fact he told me he is still in love with me? Yeah, no, we haven't touched that with a ten-foot pole for seven days.

To be clear, we haven't had the space to have such a discussion. It's kind of hard to have a crying, screaming match, or a really emotional conversation depending on which way Levi and I were going to eventually take this, when you're cramped on a tour bus for days on end with your kid, mother, and a bunch of grumpy band roadies.

So, we haven't spoken about his revelation in a week, and I'm nearly bursting at the seams. Not to mention, he's been throwing me heated glances and loaded gazes for seven days. I feel my body turn into one single electric live wire any time we're within feet of each other. It's like my hidden love and attraction to him has intensified since his confession, and I don't know how much longer I can hold it in.

I'm like a kid the night before the first day of school, lying in my bed, full of anxiety, wondering if tomorrow will bring a

wonderful surprise or the worst hell of my life.

Unfortunately, I will have to wait longer to find out. With two days off from shows, which is a rarity on this tour, we decided on some family time, just the three of us. We pulled into Memphis late last night and decided to have some fun this morning.

We take Hart to a museum and then to the zoo because our girl loves nothing more than being at a zoo all day. Though it's torturous to be around my ex-husband without having discussed everything between us, I'm happy to have some down time to spend with my daughter.

And since he won't be up on stage tonight, Levi told her he'd take her to see a movie later. Leaving me with nothing to do, or ... maybe something, after all.

"James called me last night. He's in town for a basketball game and wanted to get dinner tonight," I tell my mother as she opens takeout containers of Thai food on the table in the hotel suite we booked for the night.

Levi is staying in the room next door, and Hart is currently over there getting a guitar lesson.

"Are you going to go?" My mom doesn't look up at me, but I can sniff out the loaded tone of her voice.

I've been lackluster about the offer all day but haven't turned it down. I know I should go, that it's the right thing to do. I should keep putting one foot in front of the other, especially since Levi hasn't made any attempt at alone time now that it could be possible to get some. If that's any indication not to get my hopes up, I should just take this date with James.

"I think so?" My voice sounds so unsure in my own ears.

Mom sighs loudly. "Are we finally going to talk about what's going on between you and Levi, or should I butt out?"

I begin to sweat, that's how anxious I get about talking about this. "Is it weird if I say I feel like a teenager discussing my love life problems with you at this age?"

“Well, considering you were at Paris Fashion Week as a teenager, I’d say we’ve regressed back to a more normal state of life, if this is what we’re discussing.”

My head cocks to the side, considering this. “Yeah, I guess my formative years weren’t spent very normally. Maybe that’s why I’m so fucked up.”

She hits me on the head with a plastic fork. “Hey, you’re not fucked up. I raised a smart, capable daughter. Act like it, please.”

“Then why do I feel like some stranded princess, up in a tower, waiting to be rescued and not sure if that day will ever come?” For a second, I let myself mope. “Levi and I had a ... well, for lack of better terms, a blowup the other night. In Austin. After the phone call. I mean, I guess you and Judd kind of knew that was going to happen, and it did. He said ... a lot of things. Some wonderful, and others not so much. But we haven’t spoken since, and I feel like I’m waiting in this purgatory that I don’t know if he’ll ever release me from. What if he regrets telling me those things and is just sweeping it under the rug?”

Mom walks to me, puts her hand on my cheek, and I feel like I could cry at this moment. Sometimes, you just need your mama.

“You’ve always been far stronger than you give yourself credit for. Slay the damn dragon yourself, climb down from that tower, and go on with your happy ending. Talk to him, Soph. It’s been far too long of watching you two suffer because no one will break the ice. This polite, co-parenting ice that has always driven me crazy. And if it doesn’t work, fine. You go get your own happily ever after somewhere else. But you are far too smart and far too beautiful to be waiting around in some stupid, self-imposed tower.”

Tears leak from my eyes, and she pulls me in for a hug.

“Oh, baby, I know. Sometimes I forget, and I think you do, too, that you’re still so young. When I was your age, I hadn’t even had you yet. You have a seven-year-old. Becoming a mother, the responsibilities that come with that, plus

everything you went through with postpartum and then a divorce heaped on top of that ... you've lived a lot of lives, honey. But you're so young. You deserve happiness, you deserve a little bit of crazy and impulsive decision making. If admitting you're in love with Levi is that decision, I'm all for it. Plus, there is no way that boy will turn you down, he's so blindly in love with you, I'm surprised he's not bumping into walls constantly."

I swipe at my tears and laugh as she pushes me back, gripping me by the shoulders.

"You two have suffered too much not to get a happily ever after like in the movies."

"Thanks, Mom. I needed that. I've been so in my head, and you're right. I just need to man up and talk about everything. It's the silence that's killing me, that's been killing me for seven years."

"Yes, you do, you both do." She holds up a glass noodle spring roll for me to take. "In the meantime, nothing like a good food to fix that heart."

"What do I do about the date tonight, though?"

Mom chews on her lip. "Well, I don't really think you're interested in James. He's a very nice man, but part of me thinks you'd be giving him the wrong idea by going. Then again, you'd be giving someone else a very good reason to bring out the green monster of jealousy."

"Mom! That's horrible. I'd be using James, and he doesn't deserve that."

"I mean, you could tell him flat out what's going on the minute you start the date. You probably owe him an explanation anyway if you're not going to go out with him again. But it can't hurt to kill two birds with one stone by telling him that at a dinner where Levi thinks you're on your way to falling in love. Nothing like seeing what he might lose to get a man to fucking act right."

I shake my head in disbelief. "You give morally unsound advice."

“But morally unsound advice that you know is a damn good idea. Don’t tell me you don’t want to see that man jealous.” She wiggles her eyebrows in my direction.

I just shake my head again. But I also know that my mother is playing the exact kind of game I want to.

As we’re spooning noodles, chicken and rice onto plates for everyone, the door to the hotel room bursts open, and my daughter comes running through.

“Mom! Dad taught me how to play a five minute song!” Hart’s face is shining so brightly I can’t help but be infected with her happiness.

“That’s awesome, sweet pea. I want to hear it.” I take her guitar out of her hands. “After dinner.”

“But, *Mom*, you said you were going out after dinner!” Hart protests, unintentionally outing me to her father.

I guess I kinda shouldn’t have mentioned to my daughter that I was going on a date with a man, but I’d wanted to prepare her if I did end up going out. I’m always going to be upfront with her about what’s going on with any new man in my life.

“You’re going out?” Levi’s eyes snap to mine, and he walks forward from where he was lingering at the door earlier.

I shrug, and that little game my mother suggested infuses my blood. “James is in town for work and asked if I wanted to go out tonight.”

I am pretty sure my ex-husband’s jaw drops open in shock, but he recovers quickly as I keep the nonchalant act up.

“You’re really going to go on a date?” Levi’s eyebrows bob up and down like he’s trying to insinuate something.

Considering he hasn’t spoken to me for a week about what he admitted, it serves him right that I might go out on a date. Honestly, maybe Mom is right. I have to explain to James why I don’t want to see him again, anyway. He’ll understand, he knows my backstory. We’ve only been out once, and while it

was nice, I owe him an explanation. We're still neighbors, and he's a wonderful guy.

And it really would serve Levi right to get a little jealous. It's spiteful for me to want him to feel a little of what I felt when I saw those pictures of him and Lauren. And who knows, maybe it'll spur some action on his part.

"Well, actually, yeah. He's in town, and we had a nice time when we went on that first date. So I think I will go." I sit down next to where Hart is setting up and act as if nothing affects me while I set my napkin on my lap.

The muscles in Levi's neck strain. Hard. "Um, don't we have *things* we need to talk about?"

I shrug. "We can talk when I get home from my date."

"Would you stop saying date?" he mumbles under his breath, but I still hear it.

"Levi, would you like to stay for dinner?" Mom gives him a shit-eating grin.

He's rubbing his temples, almost as if he wants to spill his guts right here in front of our daughter. Those stormy gray eyes shift between her and me, and then they're almost pleading with me. I shrug again, pop a piece of curry chicken in my mouth, and then smile.

That's when he narrows his eyes, and I think he's catching on to my game but does nothing more than purse his lips and let the muscle in his jaw pop.

"No," he growls at Mom and then turns on his heel to walk out of our hotel room with a quick slam of the door.

"What's up his butt?" Hart rolls her eyes, none the wiser, and scoops up an entire forkful of noodles, then shoves them in her mouth.

"We're about to find out." My mom grins gleefully.

I'm playing with fire, but I hope the end result is the warming of my damaged, frozen heart. And not it's burning at the stake.

Once, about five years ago, we were on the verge of losing both houses due to a wildfire that got out of control and was headed straight for our neighborhood.

It raged for three days, teasing us and leading us to think it might dissipate, only to rear its ugly head again. It sent panic through us, and I remember being so fucking angry that everything we worked for might be gone. I knew we'd be fine, but at the moment, it was like this pent-up rage I just wanted to spew everywhere.

The ding of the elevator in the hallway sparks another brush of fire in me. Just like that wildfire, my fury cannot be contained, cannot be managed. I've sat in waiting, and it's only spread, threatening to destroy anything in its path.

I march out into the hallway and nearly smack straight into Sophie.

"Jesus, Levi!" she hisses, backing up before our bodies can touch.

The skintight jeans and black top that slices into her cleavage are so enticing that I almost pin her up against the wall and take my fury out on her that way. I've been spiraling for hours, and this pent-up frustration needs to go somewhere. To be honest, it's been building for years.

"What, you didn't go home with him?" I nearly spit because I can't control how furious I am.

“Are you drunk?” She leans toward me, narrowing her eyes, and I know she’s trying to sniff my breath.

I wave her off. “Come the fuck on, you know I’d never drink a drop with Hart in my care. And that’s where she was, since you decided to go on your little date. Answer the question, why aren’t you back at his hotel right now?”

The image of him undressing her, of her kissing another man, it’s enough to make me go apeshit.

“You’re being ridiculous.” She rolls her eyes and attempts to walk past me to her separate hotel room.

Side-stepping her, I block her path. “After everything I told you in Austin, you went out with another man. Did you let him kiss you? Are you choosing him over rebuilding the life we could have for our daughter? You know exactly how I feel. But again, you chose another man.”

“Your room. Now.” Sophie’s eyes are slits of anger as she points with authority, and I go like a puppy who is about to be scolded.

I should know that she’s about to school my ass, but I’m so blind with rage that I can’t think straight. She was out with him tonight. Another man. When I’ve been stewing over how to tell her I love her and want her back. I open the hotel room door, walk inside, and she’s hot on my heels as she quickly closes it.

Then she’s up in my face, finger wagging.

“I know you are not coming at me about who I can and cannot date. How I can spend my time. We haven’t been together as a couple in years, and I think I’ve paid the price. I think I’ve punished myself enough. Or is that why you’re here? You want to rub a little more salt in that still-gaping wound? Remember, *you* left *me*, Levi. I was the one who fucked up, but you were the one who walked out. I’ve been right here, for years, on the sidelines of my life. And I’m done with it. It’s been days, a goddamn week, since you admitted you still love me, and you’re the one who has avoided talking

about it. It's always hot and cold with you, and I'm taking back my own power. If you won't address it, then I'm done."

My heart drops, cracks into a thousand pieces, and I'm not sure my lungs are functioning because of it. Everything I've been holding back just snaps, and desperation bleeds into my voice.

"I'm furious because I still love you. I always have. There isn't a way I can make myself stop; I've tried for seven years. You cheated on me and I still want to take you into my bed and keep you there for all of eternity. You shouldn't have gone out with him because you should have gone out with me, and I should have fucking told you that seven years ago. I should have stopped this before it started. I never should have served you those divorce papers, but I already told you that and you've said nothing in response."

She throws her hands up, and it feels like a thousand flames are incinerating us. "Seriously? After all these years, you're going to start making declarations? And then what, expect me to just sit and wait quietly while you pondered what to do next? What did you want me to do with that, Levi? You stormed out after saying it, and perhaps I thought you regretted it. You're so good at sitting back and letting everything happen to *me*, but once you're unhappy with how I'm acting, I'm supposed to bend over backward to change for you."

"I never said that! But ... goddamn it, I didn't know how to handle anything! I was heartbroken and *losing you*." I whisper scream back at her, and I hope to God that Hart and Gloria are sleeping through this next door.

"And we both suffered immensely because of you not talking about it. Just like you aren't now!" She whisper screams back.

Sophie's face is red, and she's panting with anger rolling off of her in waves. And I'm done denying that I'm not head over heels, cosmically in love with this woman.

I move like a viper, fast and undetected, until she's in my arms. Then, for the first time in seven years, I take her lips.

Sophie lets out a little gasp before our mouths meet, but I'm not stopping. I've waited nearly two thousand and five hundred days to kiss her, and with the sexual energy we're being doused in right now, there is no stopping this.

Kissing her is coming home. It's healing. It's also every fantasy come to life. The excitement of doing something you know might be wrong but feels so fucking right.

Our tongues dance a torrid number, lashing together and plunging like we can't breathe without the other one's mouth on ours. Her hands fist in my scalp, the bite of pain accompanying it a welcome pleasure. I grab her by the waist and shuffle us backward as she bites down on my bottom lip, the sting of it driving me to the brink of insanity.

Sophie's legs hit something, the mattress, and I try to push her back onto it. If I don't drive myself into her in the next few minutes, I'm going to lose my fucking mind. All the anger, love, distrust, and words unspoken are clashing together at this moment.

But she clings to me, fighting me for control. I grab her wrists, pinning them behind her back with one of my hands as if she's in cuffs. Then I attack her neck, sucking on the spot that makes her moan to the heavens.

"Aw, shit ..." She yelps, her hips bucking forward almost as if it were involuntary.

I know her body like the strings of my guitar. I know what she needs plucked, strummed, or smoothed. I know the right chords to play in which order, and when she comes, it's the greatest symphony I've ever heard.

My mind, my body, my weeping cock, they all crave that sound right now.

Before I can get my hands on her, hands supplant on my chest and push me back with force. I'm startled and nearly trip backward, but my need to get a read on Sophie's expression keeps me upright.

Her blue eyes are heavy with lust, but her mouth, which is swollen and red from my kisses, is pinched together in anger.

And when she speaks again, her voice is husky but quiet.

“No, I didn’t go home with him tonight. I shouldn’t have even gone on the date in the first place, and I told him so when he picked me up. Because you can’t force yourself to want to be with someone when there is only one man in the entire fucking world who consumes you. I owed it to James to tell him the truth, because he’s a decent man. One who shouldn’t get trapped in our fucked-up love story. There, are you happy? I fucking love you. I always have. Always will.”

Everything in me is paralyzed, like my breathing and heartbeat stuttered and forgot to come back online. I take in this moment, one that feels like an entire chapter of my life is closing and another one is opening. I feel it in my bones as it happens.

“You own me,” I tell her, cupping her face. “We may be fucked up, but I wouldn’t want it any other way. Because then I couldn’t have you. And that’s what I want. I love you. There is so much to figure out, but if I’m not inside of you in the next minute, I’m going to die.”

I watch as the shiver vibrates Sophie’s perfect body.

“I’ll die too. We’ve waited too long ...”

She doesn’t have to say another thing. I’m on her, our mouths fusing together. She whimpers into my mouth and I eat the sound up, swallowing all the lust and desire she’s feeding me with. Her top comes up and over her head, her bra gets thrown to the floor, and my hands skate down her smooth curves. I fit my palms in every place I haven’t been permitted to touch in seven years, filling them with her breasts and rolling her nipples between my fingers.

Sophie pitches forward, her teeth nipping at my neck and sending goose bumps down my spine. Her small hands come up and under my shirt, pushing the material until I’m forced to take it off with a chuckle.

“Too many clothes,” she mumbles, and I feel the exact same way.

Before I can work on her jeans, she drops to the floor in one fluid motion that also takes my sweatpants and boxers down with her. My cock, hard and burning, bobs freely.

“Fuck,” I hiss, because the image of her lips so close to the appendage I want to lodge deep inside her is enough to make it start leaking pre-cum.

Sophie winks, the devil actually *winks*, before swallowing almost my entire dick in one long motion.

My breath ceases. I throw my head back to the ceiling as Sophie sucks me. She pulls me into her mouth with such suction that I think I might have a heart attack from the pleasure.

Looking down, I thread my fingers in her cornsilk strands and move with the motion of her sucking me off. And she’s looking up at me, straight in the eyes. She’s glorious, shameless, free. She knows she’s the best lover I’ve ever had and is proving it tenfold. She’s taking her power, exactly the way she said she planned to, and I’m hopeless. A goner.

That familiar sensation, the tingling in my balls, sends alert signals to my brain. Sophie is about to cup my balls with her hand, and I have to stop her before she pushes me over the edge.

“That wasn’t how that was supposed to go.” I pick her up and toss her on the bed, my dick sparking with the need to release.

She’s a tangle of hair and jeans as she scurries back to the pillows.

“I was supposed to taste you, to feast. And you took control. But that won’t happen again tonight.”

I’ve always been a selfish lover when it comes to her. And by that, I mean, I need complete control to whisper filthy things in her ear, won’t stop until she comes first, plus multiple times after, and get satisfaction when she bends herself into positions so that I can fuck the breath out of her.

“You’re not the boss of me.” She juts her chin out, and even though we’re making love to one another, there is still a

battle going on.

All the things on the table that need to be dealt with are still here, right between us, even if we're giving ourselves to each other. But Sophie is still hanging on to that part of the distance she thinks she needs to give herself.

I pull her jeans off, hooking my thumbs into her thong and pulling that away. Naked and squirming on my bed is not a sight I thought I'd see with Sophie in it again, and my heart lodges in my throat. For as fucking turned on as I am, I'm also aware of how in love I am right now. Yes, we love to fuck like rabid animals, but there have also been times when I've been inside this woman for an hour, just lazily fucking her, because I want our bodies connected. She's the love of my life, and reuniting after all this time has me nearly levitating.

I bring her underwear to my nose, sniffing it, and her eyes flare. "When it comes to the bedroom, I'm always your boss."

She shakes her head but lets out a moan. I move like a viper, kneeling between her legs, both of our bodies bare now.

"Yes." I insert one finger into her dripping wet pussy and pump it. "I." Another finger. "Am." A third finger.

Sophie's hips buck as I fuck her with my hand. I watch every tiny movement, from the sparks in her eyes to the way her mouth opens like a ring as if predicting her own orgasm. And when I reach up with my thumb and grind it into her clit, she detonates just the way her body was anticipating.

I drag her mouth to mine and swallow her cries, feeling her jerk out the last of her climax onto my fingers. I'm coated in her release, and I can't wait any longer.

There is no talk of condoms or protection or any of that. I love her; she loves me. We already have a child together. I'm not doing this if I can't feel her raw, wrapped around me and pulsing.

When I push into her in one long stroke, our mangled cries combine. I'm kneeling above her, my dick fully seated inside her wet, heavenly pussy, and all I can do is stroke. I can only

seem to repeat one action, a buck of my hips against her core, until we're both sighing and wriggling.

"Talk to me." She moans, her eyes searing into mine.

"Sorry." I nearly choke, unable to push words from my throat. "I just ... I want to look at you. I want to watch as I fuck you, as you come on my cock for the first time in ..."

Just talking about her orgasm, the one she has when I'm inside her, makes the tip of my cock start to leak. If I don't get a grip on myself, I'll blow my load way too soon.

"You know how you need to get me there." Sophie's legs are wrapped around my waist, and her arms are around my neck.

I'm pressed to her by her own doing, and she's the most singularly beautiful thing I've ever witnessed.

I press my palms to her face, look straight into her eyes, and talk.

"You come for me, and me only. I want every single moan, all of your pleasure. I want you to dream about my dick, think about it when you're out as if people could read your mind and see how starved you are for my cock. You feel that? You feel me fucking you? You are mine. I own this. And you own me. I want your nails digging into my back."

As if directed, Sophie skates those long, red daggers across my skin.

"I want your lips taking mine. I want to see you on your knees, giving me pleasure just as quickly as you can take it away. To me, you are it."

She's quaking, so close to the edge that I can feel all the muscles in her pussy squeezing like a vice around my cock.

"I love you, Sophie. *Come*. Come for me."

Her eyes roll back, and her entire body goes limp as she shakes through the climax rocking her system. It's my cue to let loose, and I do, pumping my hips violently as if I might die if I don't come. And then, in an instant, every ounce of blood in my entire body moves to the tip of my cock. Pleasure zeroes

in, making my jaw go slack and my world turn upside down. Then I'm coming, shooting deep inside her, the feeling of complete bliss overwhelming me.

Sophie and I cling to each other, sweaty and breathless. Then I feel her press a smile into my neck.

I make love to her two more times, unable to stave off the hunger that seems will never be satisfied now that we've tapped back into it.

And when she falls asleep, breathing softly beside me, I grab my notebook and write.

I write of love and commitment, of euphoria and everlasting happiness. For the first time in forever, the words flow out of me effortlessly, because she's here. Back where she belongs.

I wake in the early morning hours to Levi scribbling furiously in a notebook.

The sheets are pooled around his waist, and I know for a fact he has nothing else on because I'm naked as the day I was born myself. We had sex so many times that I'm not sure if I'll be able to walk today.

"Hey." He notices I'm awake and sets his things aside, sinking down into the pillows to circle his arms around me.

"Whatcha doing?" My sleepy voice is hoarse.

Levi smooths back a lock of my hair and plants a gentle kiss on my temple. "Writing songs."

"You're writing." I grin, almost not believing we were back in a bed together with him dreaming up songs until the early morning hours.

How many nights had we done this when we were married? Made love like wild animals and then drifted to sleep next to each other? Then I'd find him, like I just did, hair all tousled, with a pencil behind his ear, chewing on his lip as he put lyrics together.

It's insanely sexy.

"I am. I couldn't write because you weren't here. You weren't with me. You became not only my muse, but my inspiration. You, Sophie, *you* were the reason I wanted to be a better man. I hope you'll give me that chance again. I know I

fucked up, royally. I said some shitty things and have put blame on you when I'm just as much at fault. We need to—”

Laying a finger to his lips, I silence him. “I'm in your bed, aren't I? You must know that you're doing something right. And also, that I love you and can't seem to quit, so I'm shit out of luck in ever trying to move on. Yeah, we need to talk. Yeah, I'm not happy with how you spoke to me last night. But it's four a.m., we just screwed each other's brains out for hours, you're writing songs finally, and I probably need to sneak back into my room so our daughter doesn't suspect anything. I'm not sure right now is the best time to talk.”

Levi chuckles and nods. “But I don't want you to leave. Let's just tell Hart in the morning, she's probably wished for this.”

I shake my head furiously. “No, that's the one thing I won't budge on. Until we talk this all out, and everything with the leak and Lauren is resolved, we're not telling her. She deserves to hear things from us when they're solid, and if we can't—”

“Nope.” Levi cuts me off, cupping my jaw. “Don't even say it. We will work this out. We're going to get on the same page, we're going to be together. I don't want you to worry about telling our daughter because you think she'll be devastated once we fall apart. That's not happening. I'm not going anywhere. I told you last night, Sophie, I love you. You are end game for me, always have been. It just took me a while to pony up and admit it. We can wait. I see what you're saying. Just don't think it's because this might not work, because it will.”

Gulping, I try to swallow the fear I have. “I want to believe that, but I'm scared. It's been so long, with so many things dividing us, and I love you too, but we both know that sometimes it isn't enough.”

He kisses me sweetly before pulling back. “I think we've survived enough shit in this lifetime. We deserve the happy ending. It's going to happen.”

I lean my forehead against his and sigh. “I sure hope so. I should go, though. Our daughter should not see her mother doing the walk of shame.”

As I get dressed and Levi watches with appreciation, I feel like I’m floating on air. Never in a million years did I think my night would end that way. Sure, he was pissed when I left, but I didn’t think my mother’s plan would actually work so well. Not that it didn’t hurt like a bitch when we were yelling at each other. His words were barbed wire, wrapping around me until I could barely breathe. But then he soothed the wounds, admitting everything I’ve wanted to hear for ages.

The date was nothing but a means to end, and I feel better about letting James down in person. He understood the complications I have in my life and was a complete gentleman when I asked if he could keep under wraps what I told him about Levi and me possibly giving it a second chance. James is a good man, probably one who deserves a woman much less complicated and entangled than I am.

But Levi is a better man for me. He’s always been the one. Last night just sealed that. Even with seven years gone by, we were explosive. The absolute fate and magic I felt when he was inside me, when we were moving as one ... I’ll never find that with anyone else as long as I live.

So yes, we have a lot to sort out. But I’m trying not to doubt this fresh start we have and instead choosing to fully dive into love with him again.

When I move to the bed, leaning over to kiss him straight on the mouth, he grips the back of my neck and deepens it. When our noses brush as I regretfully pull back, he looks me in the eyes.

“Soon she won’t have to, because you’ll just stay in my bedroom all the time. It will be yours equally.”

A thrill races up my spine at the thought of that possibility.

Four hours later, I’m sitting at the breakfast table with Hart, who is still half asleep watching some cartoon as she

bites into her chocolate chip waffle, when Levi and Judd walk into our hotel room.

“Morning.” Judd salutes me and whistles a bird noise at Hart.

She sticks her tongue out at him, and he swoops in to take a bite of her breakfast. “Hey!”

“Mm, got any more of those, peppercorn?” He rubs his stomach.

“On the hotel cart.” I point to the white tablecloth on wheels.

“Did you guys order the entire room service menu? Jeez.” Judd chuckles as he loads up a plate.

“Mom said she was really hungry this morning and let me pick whatever I wanted.”

My gaze collides with Levi, who raises an eyebrow at the really hungry comment. Everything south of my waist lights up like the Fourth of July because he knows exactly why I’m so famished today. The corner of his mouth ticks up, and he bites his lip, almost like he’s thinking of exactly how he’d eat me if no one else was in the room.

Jesus Christ, the man is a sex god.

“How was your date?” Levi raises an eyebrow as if he’s being so undercover and amusing.

“It went well, thanks.” I blush even though I try my hardest not to.

“I’m sure it did. Did you go to Connelly’s? Because that restaurant is great. I bet you got your fill.”

He’s not being subtle, not at all, and he’s lucky our seven-year-old doesn’t get innuendos. Me, however? My clit is pulsing with a phantom heartbeat that belongs only to him. Because, of course, now all I can think of is Levi filling me with his dick over and over again last night. And this morning.

Judd clocks the interaction and takes hold, like a fisherman clamping down on a wriggling bass. “What did *you* do last

night, Levi?”

“Wrote six songs for the new album.” Levi bobs his head as if this isn’t the biggest feat.

Mostly, I think he’s trying to avoid the fact that Judd was insinuating that we got up to very dirty activities last night.

“Did you now?” Judd looks right at me, a megawatt smile on his face. “I just wonder where you found the inspiration.”

My cheeks have got to be the color of a red carpet right about now.

“Just came to me. Finally.” Levi grunts at his best friend and mentor, silently telling him to shut it.

“I bet they did.” Judd chuckles as my mom walks in.

“Morning, loves.” She kisses my head where I sit and gives Levi a squeeze on the shoulder as she goes to get her coffee.

If she noticed I didn’t make it back to the room last night, she says nothing. Obviously, she wouldn’t go there in front of Hart, but the whole situation is just awkward. Mom is far too smug in her expression not to know something happened, so either she thinks I fucked my neighbor or my ex-husband. I’m not sure which is worse for her to assume as a mother.

“Sleep okay?” I ask her. “There are eggs Benedict over there for you.”

She claps her hands excitedly. “You really know how to treat your mama. And yes, this hotel is quite nice. Mark this one on the list of places to stay on the next tour.”

“The next tour?” Levi chuckles as he hands her a plate, and they both start scooping breakfast items.

“Yes, I’m having a great time with my two girls, my favorite musician, and this odd duck.” She hooks a thumb at Judd. “I don’t know why we didn’t do a family tour sooner. It’s been, honestly, some of the best times of my life.”

She comes to join her granddaughter and me at the table. I smile at her, then cover her hand with my own. “Me too.

Thanks for inviting us, Levi.”

When we look at each other, the love between us has got to be lighting up the whole room. The sudden urge to just announce to the closest people to us that we’re back together, or at least trying to be, overwhelms me. But I bite the inside of my cheek, holding it at bay. Levi and I have a lot to hash out, and until that happens, we can’t go making spontaneous declarations and promises.

After all, everything we’ve done has been for the comfort and happiness of our baby.

The last show in Memphis is happening tonight, and then we’re headed to Nashville. Then comes New York City and the East Coast for the last couple of weeks of the tour. I can’t believe it’s coming to a close so soon, it’s felt like no time has passed at all.

I hold Hart’s hand as we stand backstage, watching her father do the thing he does best in this world. He’s an amazing dad and the man I love with my whole heart, but if he could do one thing in this universe, he would have to pick singing. There would be no other choice.

Levi’s voice transports you to another dimension. It makes all of your worries go away, and goose bumps rise on your skin. It’s the type of voice that can’t be taught or honed, he was just born with this angelic fucking gift and should use it until it’s all gone.

“Isn’t Dad so cool?” Hart never takes her eyes from her dad as he bobs his head in time with his guitar strokes.

But when I look at him, his eyes are on me. Not front and center, on the hundreds of fans in the crowd cheering for him and singing his songs. But on *me*, in the wings, my gaze locked and unable to stray.

That gray gaze packs a punch right to my heart, rendering me defenseless. It says, *I love you*, so loudly that I’m not sure how everyone in this entire building doesn’t know we’re back to being us.

“This next song goes out to someone who has the most beautiful soul I’ve ever come in contact with.” Levi’s smooth voice smirks into the mic, and the crowd goes wild.

Everything in me freezes because surely they have to know it’s me. Does Hart? My head moves on a slow swivel to find that no one is watching me.

Well, scratch that. Judd is watching from where he crouches just inside the curtains, out of view, and his brow lifts slightly. I shrug, almost a non-movement, to give some kind of confirmation. I’m not sure I should, since Levi and I haven’t talked about a thing, but I can’t help it.

I want to claim this next song as mine.

Crowd my bed, crowd my mind,

I want you on them all the time.

We fell apart, came back together,

Now there’s nothing we can’t weather.

Keep my heart in yours, our heart forevermore,

This love will keep us pure.

Levi’s eyes flutter closed as he belts into the microphone, almost making love to the mic and stand. I’m frozen, hot chills going up and down my spine. He’s all I can see as the lyrics penetrate my brain, and I’m certain that one of those “hearts” is supposed to be Hart, for our daughter.

The sudden urge to walk out on stage and have him wrap me in his arms is so intense that my foot actually moves a step. Then I remember myself and where I am. It’s not the time for a public makeup, though my heart and body desire it more than anything.

The show ends, and we’re shuttled into the back cast room for a rare meet and greet. Levi hasn’t done many on this tour since it’s billed as a family bonding thing between all of us, but demand has been high and so he decided to do one.

My ex-husband poses with fans, laughing and chatting with them as they're brought in group by group by the theater manager who runs this venue. Hart sits in a chair close by, talking to some fans if they address her. I watch her as one does an air guitar on their stomach and know that they're talking about her playing. My daughter gestures wildly, her face lighting up as she talks about something that has to do with music.

It scares me that she wants to follow somewhat in her father's footsteps. She's talented—there is no denying that. But a musician's life is hard, especially one where you're standing in the shadow of one of the most prolific musicians of a generation. Not that Levi and I put her there, but everyone else will. She'll be compared to her father her entire life.

My wish for her is that she can just ignore those voices and step into who she truly wants to become.

I'm standing off to the side, and although I've had a few people come up to ask me for a picture, this isn't my night. These fans are here for Levi, and I'm kind of out of the spotlight these days. I'm considered past my prime in my industry and am one hundred percent okay with that. My focus is my charity these days, and whenever celebrities start waxing on about that, I find we're placed in a different category.

"I wonder if that song was about Lauren," a fan wonders aloud, unable to know that I can overhear her.

"Nah, has to be about Sophie. Did you see the way he kept looking off stage? What if he was singing to her? God, that's romantic."

My heart thumps, and the back of my neck trickles with sweat. On the one hand, I kind of love hearing that someone—anyone—thinks Levi and I getting back together is romantic. We've been through so much in front of the public eye that it's hard to remember if people really liked us together.

Not that I should be worried about that, but when your entire life and career are built on public opinion, it's hard not to.

“Maybe you’re right. That would be an honest to God fucking love story,” the other fan gushes back.

My stomach swarms with butterflies, because I want our love story so bad. Part of me can’t help but wonder the next time I’ll be able to be alone with Levi. Everything in me itches to find a moment alone and devour each other.

The last group is brought in, and they’re asking a ton of questions about his new album and some festival he’s rumored to play at.

Then one of the girls, a teen with scarlet braids scattered all over her scalp, turns to me.

“Is there any way you two would get back together? You’re just relationship goals and I’m obsessed!” the girl gushes about us as if she knows us.

I used to find this weird, being told about my relationship by people who didn’t even know us. But now I understand it more. We’ve shared so much of ourselves from a young age, both with and without each other. Our fans feel like they know us on an intimate level.

Levi looks at me, winks, and then gives these teenagers his signature musician smirk.

“Never say never.”

“**A**nd no one else is here?”

I keep my voice low, but Judd hears me as we walk through a darkened street. It’s essentially empty, and there is only one car outside of the studio when we walk up to the building.

“I followed your instructions. This is risky, though. I want to point that out one more time. If he’s the leak, you’ll only piss him off. Maybe he’ll tell his whole story.”

“Maybe, but we need to fucking know. Definitely.”

Nothing more has been spilled about our divorce, but the tabloids can’t get enough of the guessing game. Did one of us cheat? Did we abuse each other? Who else was involved?

It’s always been speculated that I cheated, and for years, I’ve taken that accusation. To protect Sophie, because I couldn’t care less if people know the details. But now that they’re so close to being revealed, especially in a way we don’t want them to be, I know it’s time to get stories straight. It’s time to tell our truth in the way we want to.

Which is why I need to shut the Vincent door once and for all. It’s the reason for this meeting.

There are still no leads on how Lauren found out about our divorce or Vincent, and though no more news has come out, Kathleen is still trying to piece it together. We’re competing against some kind of clock, it’s just one we can’t see or prevent against.

That is why I asked Judd to reach out to a music industry friend of his and pretend that they were in search of an assistant to hire. And that this person just happened to get Vincent's name from somewhere and wanted to interview him for the job at a studio in downtown Atlanta. It's how we got him here.

I have to look him in the eye and hear him say it isn't him leaking information to actually believe it's true.

This chapter has got to get closed. I want all the ugliness put out there into the world, and this is the first step. To clear up all that's happened between us and be with Sophie once and for all, the truth needs to set us free. Otherwise, we'll be weighed down by this and hiding for the rest of our lives.

We are the stolen kiss, a brush of a hand, her ass in my palm when no one else is looking. Since Sophie and I slept together in Memphis, we've been hiding every intimate interaction, avoiding reality. I want all of her, all the time. Now that I've gotten my first taste in years, I thirst for her. My hunger is insatiable. The other night, we stayed behind in the dressing room in Nashville, claiming we had a call with Kathleen. But we were just screwing each other's brains out and then cuddling like teenagers before we had to go back to the bus and pretend we were nothing but partners in parenting.

Tonight is just one more puzzle piece to fit in on the way to us being together at long last.

The minute we walk into the studio, the asshole turns and has an instant reaction.

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me." Vincent throws his head back as if this is unbelievable and gets up to leave.

"Sit." I point at the chair, crowding his space.

The bastard has a look of fear in his eye and does as I say. I don't normally like to throw my power and celebrity around, but this fuckwad made me feel small once upon a time. He took advantage of my wife. He looks much the same as he did back then, only this time I have weasel-lensed glasses on.

Vincent will always be a snake in my eyes, nothing is going to change that.

“This is some fucking bullshit. I slunk off, and I left you and your pack of liars.”

“More like you took the money and ran. Let’s not get cute.” Judd is seething.

My mentor doesn’t get angry about much, but this piece of shit fucked with his family, and he doesn’t stand for that.

“Just leave me alone, dude. What the fuck do you want?”

I want so many things. I want to pummel his face in. I want to erase him off this earth. I’ve never felt murderous tendencies until I met this guy, because what he did ruined my life. But I have to focus, because I’m trying desperately to get it back.

“Who did you tell about what happened that night with Sophie?” I nearly spit, because just having to discuss this makes me want to rage.

Vincent, with a little weasel smirk on his face, rolls his eyes. “No one, you made sure of that.”

I’m so angry, all these years later, that I couldn’t sniff this guy out for who he really was. And apparently, still is.

“Answer the question. Did you tell anyone?”

He glares at me as I hover over him. “No, I didn’t. I respected the contract. Not that it was my fault at all. Your wife kissed me, and then you—”

My hands clench into fists, and Judd steps between us. “You really don’t want to go blaming a woman who was not in her clear frame of mind. Plus, we all know you knew that, don’t we? I saw what you were doing back then.”

That shuts Vincent right up. Apparently, he thinks I can be toyed with and disrespected. But put Judd in his face and he’s cowering in the corner. Rightfully so.

“Don’t talk about my wife.” The snarl that rips from my throat is primal.

Vincent looks around Judd. “But she’s not your wife anymore, is she? You kicked her to the curb after she had her tongue in my—”

“I’m going to fucking—”

Judd’s arms wrap around me, and I see nothing but red. The color of the blood I want to spill, because I didn’t get him good enough last time. This prick is a leech.

“Stop this.” Judd’s voice in my ears brings me marginally back down to reality. “Think of what you have to lose, not how good it would feel to rearrange his face.”

Vincent looks scared now, and he gets up and starts backing toward the door.

“Not so fast.” Judd lets me go but remains between us. “You swear you didn’t tell a soul? No media? No friends?”

“I didn’t say shit. Leave me out of this. I was done with you people years ago. If you ever bring me somewhere like this again, I’ll sue.”

And with that, the coward bolts from the room.

I’m shaking with anger as I plant my hands on the unplugged soundboard, breathing slowly in and out as I convince my heartbeat to slow.

“Well, I guess we know now. Do you believe him?” Judd blows out a tense breath as I try to control my anger.

I punch the board, not caring if I wreck the technology. My hand stings, but at least some of the fury ekes out.

“Against my fucking better judgment, yes. He doesn’t seem like he wants anything to do with it. Which should make me happy but it just pisses me off more.”

“Because we’re back to square one.” My best friend and mentor reads my mind.

“So if he didn’t tell anyone, how the hell did it get leaked?” The question comes from Judd.

But mine is, when will the leaker tell the world the real information that was posted is truly about Sophie and me?

The beep of the lock on the hotel door kicks my heartbeat up a notch, and under the sheets, I arch my back instinctively.

Only Mom knows I snuck out of my hotel room and into Levi's, and I hope Hart doesn't wake up looking for me because it'll be mighty awkward to explain where I ran off to.

But we're keeping this a secret, at least for a little bit longer. Because we still have no clue how information is being spread. Kathleen's private investigator thinks he may be onto something, but until we have concrete evidence, it's all just smoke and mirrors.

"Hey you." I meow, like a cat in heat.

Jesus, I'm so horny for him, it's shameful. That is, if I had any shame. I don't because I know Levi is just as sex-crazed as I am in this phase of our torrid little sneaking around.

But the minute I get a glimpse of his face, I forget I'm naked in his bed, waiting for him to come fuck the daylights out of me.

"What's wrong?" I hop up, the sheet falling away and revealing me bare as I go to wrap my arms around him.

"Fuck." He catches me, his eyes going wide at my body but then falling again.

"Are you hurt? What's wrong?" My voice is panicked.

“I’m fine. I’m okay. Everyone is okay. Well ... sort of.” He runs a hand through his hair, walks around me and out of my touch, and plops down on the end of the bed.

I go to sit beside him, completely comfortable that I have no clothes on. One, I’m confident. And two, there is nothing this man hasn’t seen my body do, including pushing out a full-grown baby.

“I’m sorry, Sophie. I’m so sorry.” His voice cracks as he buries his face in the crook of my neck. “I went to see Vincent tonight.”

My entire body freezes. “What?”

Levi shakes his head. “He targeted you. I can see that now. All those years ago, you weren’t in your right state of mind. You were vulnerable. I had no idea what to do, and so instead of doing anything, I ignored it. And he was a snake, moving right in to assume that role and manipulate you. The guy is a piece of shit, as low as they come—”

“Levi.” I run my hand up and down his arm, trying to soothe him and stop the rambling. “Back up. Why did you go to see him?”

His breath whooshes out, and I think I see tears glistening in his eyes. “Judd set up a meeting because I asked him to. I had to look him in his face and see if he was telling the truth. He is, Soph. He’s not the leak. That pisses me off because I’d love a reason to pummel him.”

I rub his back, wishing I could take away the pain in his eyes. “You said you knew I wasn’t responsible ...”

It’s the first time he’s ever acknowledged my postpartum in all these years.

Now tears are leaking down his cheeks, and it cracks my heart wide open.

“You were sick, Sophie. You barely got out of bed, and you didn’t want to hold Hart. I was a twenty-one-year-old kid with a newborn and a wife who had gone from this bright, shiny thing to ... gone. That’s how I felt. You barely spoke to me in those months after Hart was born. I had no idea what to

do. So, like an idiot, I started blaming you. I got angry, and that only made me want to ignore you more. So much so that I drove you into his arms. He was waiting to swoop in, waiting to take advantage of you. Postpartum depression affects twenty percent of new mothers. You clearly had it. I'd look into your eyes and you weren't there. It scared the shit out of me. And then when I saw you kissing him, the betrayal and nausea just overcame me. Our life went from perfect to terrible in the blink of my eye, and I wanted someone to blame. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Soph."

"You researched postpartum statistics?" His entire speech shocks me, completely takes me aback.

"You run a nonprofit dealing with postpartum, you don't think I've read every single piece of research and information you put out?"

This has my jaw dropping. "I didn't think you concerned yourself with anything Full Hands did."

"I'm trying to tell you, Soph, I've never stopped loving you. Even when I couldn't accept that so much of the blame was on me for not seeing how sick you were, when I'd convinced myself you ruined us, I loved you. So damn much. Hearing that prick talk tonight, I saw how he used your postpartum to his advantage. I'm so sorry I never apologized. I'm sorry I wasn't there to do what a husband should have done and take care of you. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to admit my fault, to say that I was an idiot and a piece of shit for everything. I've wasted years of loving you in silence when I could have just gotten over myself."

I can't help the lump in my throat when I speak. "I was lost. It was like every day I woke up, I saw darkness. I couldn't wipe the fog away or tell you what I needed. And the more distance you put between us, the less I wanted to try. Until it all came to a head. When I saw you punching Vincent, I thought I deserved that. That I deserved to see two people hurting so much, because I caused that. It took a long time for me to get right, to understand what I'd gone through and how it affected you, too. And yeah, it hurt like hell not to be with you for seven years. But in a way, it also made me stronger. It

made me the kind of woman I'm proud to show my daughter each day. Our daughter. I forgive you, Levi. I love you. I'm not hurt anymore. They are all lessons learned that brought us to this point, and I'm choosing to move forward with you. Forever. Because you're the one I want."

"Thank you." He breathes, hugging me to him.

We sit there, forehead to forehead, just breathing each other in for what feels like an hour.

"I love you," he whispers into my mouth before kissing me after a while.

I respond back, telling him the same thing, using my tongue. We communicate with our kisses, our bodies, the way his hands skate over my skin and mine undress him.

"I'm going to make it up to you forever."

"Then I'll never forgive you, simply so we can keep doing this," I joke.

"Make me beg. Please." He smiles into my skin.

"I can't believe you said 'never say never' in front of Hart the other day to that fan. She's going to get her hopes up," I lament, even though he's currently licking one of my nipples.

Levi's head raises, and the scruff dotting his jaw is enough to make me even wetter. "Shouldn't she get her hopes up? I mean, look at what we're doing right now. We should probably just tell her anyway, I'm tired of keeping this a secret."

"It's only been two weeks." I chuckle, then inhale a gasp as Levi's thumb brushes my clit.

"And I'm already just about spilling the beans every time we're in the room with other people. Let's bite the bullet, Soph. I want to be together in every way possible. Publicly. Privately. Nakedly."

That has me laughing even as he's running his fingers up and down my slit. "So you wouldn't be with me if we couldn't get naked together?"

“Don’t kid yourself, half the reason you’re with me is for my dick.”

I fist it, pumping up and down his big cock. “That’s true. My dildo and vibrator just don’t get the job done the way you can.”

He drops his head to my stomach, licking my belly button in a way that shouldn’t be sexy but totally is.

“Don’t fucking say that. Because now I’m picturing it. And are they in your suitcase because I want to see you use them on yourself right fucking now.”

“You’d rather me use toys on myself than you getting to use your own tongue? Or better yet, dick?” I swivel my wrist while jacking him off.

“Yeah, scratch that. Toys another time.” He crawls up my body, positions himself, and then we’re both cursing as he pushes all the way into me.

“Fuck, you are the best feeling I’ve ever experienced in my life.” Levi’s abs contract as his hips jut against me.

I want to say ditto, but he steals my senses. So I reach up, smoothing my thumbs over his jaw as he moves slow and calculated in and out of me.

We never break eye contact as he gives me all of him, steady and measured, with both of us scrambling for breath every time he’s balls deep. And even though I usually need his words to get off, there is something heady about this kind of love making. I feel drunk, seduced, and captured by him.

He turns his head to press a kiss into each one of my wrists, his cock moving deeper than before, and it sets me off.

I tumble over into the abyss, knowing he’s coming with me and that we’ll both catch each other before we hit the ground.

Broadway is lit up in spectacular lights, the various advertisements for shows and musicals grabbing our attention.

“Dad, look!” Hart points across the street at a shiny billboard advertising a play, and her voice is almost drowned out by all the noise of the city.

“Any one you want, kiddo, and I’ll sing the songs after for weeks” I joke.

She giggles and swats me, but I headlock her gently and kiss her skull.

New York City is one of the last tour stops, and with a rare day off, we weren’t spending it anywhere but Broadway.

When Sophie and I were married, this was one of our favorite places to visit. We’d walk through Central Park, get lunch, or grab drinks at barely lit dive bars where no one knew our names. I bought her flowers on the street, we’d bring food cart hotdogs back up to our suite, and we’d bask in the chaos of this city. It was such a different feel than Los Angeles.

We still love it. When Hart insisted on seeing a musical on our day off, neither of us protested in the slightest.

“Was I a cute baby?” she asks.

“The cutest.” Sophie grins, and it’s genuine.

After we made love a few nights ago, we stayed up talking about those days. About our separate feelings of the first few

months of Hart's life. I shared all of my happy memories, and Sophie welled up when we talked about her first Christmas. We weren't even together then, but it had been picturesque, with both of us coming together and putting aside our feelings to watch a baby Hart gnaw on toys and not know how to rip open wrapping paper.

And now here we are, back in New York City, a place that holds so much meaning for us, Sophie and I can't stop making heart eyes at each other.

No, seriously, whenever we have a moment alone here, we're making out like teenagers. Last night, Hart turned around to fill her water cup at the fridge, and I had my tongue down my ex-wife's throat.

Over eight years ago, this is where I got down on one knee and proposed to her. How I yearn to call up one of my assistants back in LA and have them overnight her original ring here so I can give it back in a serendipitous way.

But it's too soon, and I'm not even sure if I want to give Sophie her first ring or buy her something new. Is there bad juju associated with that piece of jewelry, or would she want it to symbolize that we've always been in each other's hearts? I don't know, I'm not a big jewelry guy, but I am a big meanings guy, go figure I'm a musician. So I have to think it over more.

Plus, does Sophie even want to be married again? I know she wants us, wants this, but what if she'd rather just carry on without a title? Personally, I want the whole shebang to show the world how committed I am to her, but this is her call.

"We have about an hour before the show starts. Want to do a little shopping?" Sophie gets a devilish grin on her face as she looks at our daughter.

I roll my eyes. "The only person who can out shop you is your mini-me here."

They both laugh like they have me wrapped around their fingers. And they do. They so do.

Gloria walks up with a hot dog in hand. “I think I could eat a billion of those.”

“Nana, you’re going to get a stomach ache.” Hart giggles at her grandmother.

“Hey, chickadee, I saw a store with puppies over there, cute little Australian shepherds. Want to go pet some?”

“Oh my God, yes!” Hart bounces up and down. “Mom, can we take one home?”

Sophie glowers at her mother. “I’m going to get you back for that one. If Nana wants to adopt a dog, I’ll allow it.”

“Oh, *Nana* doesn’t need a dog.” Gloria smiles knowingly.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” Hart is pulling Gloria down the sidewalk.

We watch them go. “I’m going home with a dog, aren’t I?”

Sophie tucks her hair behind her ear and looks up at me all shy-like. “We’re both suckers, huh?”

“Anything for her. And for you.” The flirt in my grin is so obvious, it’s a wonder that the people milling around us don’t feel the sexual tension.

There is nothing more I want to do in this world than hold her hand as we walk down the street. To do normal couple things. To take us out of this reality where even a slight gesture will be blown up and speculated about.

Spotting paparazzi is an old party trick by now, and I know there have been four guys following us since we stepped out onto the street from our hotel.

“Should we duck into a restaurant?” Sophie raises her eyebrows and throws her chin back, trying to make me aware that the photographers are on us.

Just by walking alone, without our daughter, there will be tons of headlines. If I yawn, they’ll probably turn it into a scowl and say that we were in a huge argument through the streets of New York.

“Yeah, if you’re hungry. I wanted to pick out a music box for Hart. I heard about this store where they make wooden carved ones and she’d love that. But I’m always up for food, you know me.”

I try to make it seem like I’m not catching on that we’re being watched like hawks because it’s kind of funny to watch her squirm. We haven’t had the talk yet, the one where we decide what we’re actually doing. Are we going to announce that we’re back together? Is Allen just going to put out a press release? Do we just post a story to Instagram and say that’s that?

The first person we need to tell is Hart, but I’m being reckless and romantic, and you know what? Fuck it. We’ve had so much strife, we’re going to have more because it’s just on the horizon, and I want today. I want normalcy, for once in our goddamn lives, and I want to kiss the woman I love on a stupid afternoon walk just because I want to.

“We should get off the street. There are paps behind us and we don’t need the coverage.”

“Oh.” I blatantly turn around, look straight at them, and wave.

Sophie’s jaw nearly drops to the dirty, littered sidewalk we’re standing on. “Levi, what the—”

But she’s cut off. Because I take her into my arms, dip her back a little, and kiss her full on the mouth. Why not give them a little show? That’s what they want anyway.

And what I want is her, so desperately that I can’t help but turn this into a little make out.

When we break apart, with my cock yelling at me from inside my jeans, Sophie looks more than dazed.

“You realize those are going to end up on every news site in the world, right?” she murmurs, and I still have my arms wrapped around her waist.

“Let ’em talk. I’m in love.” I kiss her cheek gently.

“Careful, a girl could really get used to that. And we’re not crazy kids anymore.”

“Eh, fuck it, they say any little thing about us anyway. Didn’t we learn long ago to just do what we want? And I want you. So what, if the whole world knows?”

Sophie sighs. “We’re going to have to tell Hart.”

“Let’s tell her. But let’s see our musical first. That’s dramatic enough for one afternoon.”

She chuckles as I hold her hand and lead her down the sidewalk.

The paps follow us, and three hours later, rumors of our reconciliation nearly break the Internet.

“I can’t believe you wrote the whole thing. Without me. Without even consulting me.”

Judd looks dumbfounded as I hand him the notebook; the pages creased and scribbled on but holding twelve perfectly written and slaved over songs.

“I mean, you said the tour was going to be good for my creativity.”

He sits down at the island in my kitchen, the stool scraping on the floor, already pouring over my words and lyrics.

“Levi, let’s both agree that the tour had nothing to do with your creativity. It’s because you have Sophie back, point-blank.”

The tour was a whirlwind. We’ve been back in LA for five days, and sometimes I still have to pinch myself and remember that it even happened. Ten weeks, and it came together in two. From a professional standpoint, that is a goddamn miracle, not to mention impossible.

Not even three months, and it feels like my entire life has changed. For the better, but still, a seismic change, nonetheless. That’s why this album came flowing out of me, as if putting pen to paper was as easy as breathing. These new songs are my soul, translated down into that notebook.

“Well, thanks, Judd. I appreciate the vote of confidence.” Sophie strolls into my kitchen, her workout shorts dotted with sweat as she goes for the fridge and grabs a bottle of water.

I watch her throat as she chugs, her hair clinging to her face. She's sweaty and glorious, and I want to lay her down on that fucking counter in front of us and sink myself into her.

"Damn, this is good. Please, don't fuck this up." He points at me and then to my ex-wife, lover, and who I hope to someday make my wife again. "When can we get in the studio?"

"Tomorrow? I'll block off the whole day. We'll work an all-nighter." The thought makes my heart race.

This album is going to be different. The songs I wrote on the road, up in bed late at night as Sophie slept next to me, while I watched her with our daughter backstage ... this album is a complete ode to her. I can't wait to sing these songs, to tell her through my music exactly how I feel about her and where I want our life to go. After all the pain, we finally seem to be getting it together.

"You're on. I'll bring the whiskey." Judd fist pumps into the air.

"Oh God, am I going to be picking you guys up at three a.m. totally wasted?" Sophie smirks.

"What's wasted?" Hart calls from the couch.

I didn't realize she was eavesdropping on our conversation, and I cringe knowing what Sophie and I are about to do. We wanted to give our daughter a little space and time to readjust to home and school life before we spoke to her about us getting back together. If anyone at school has mentioned the thousands of articles about our kiss in New York, she hasn't said anything. But it's just a matter of time, and I'm tired of pretending that Sophie isn't sleeping here on the nights I'm supposed to have Hart. She drives home, then jogs around the block and sneaks in when our kid is asleep so that I can spend all night exploring her body. It's ridiculous, and I'm ready to be fully open with every single person who matters to us.

"Levi." Sophie hands me her phone, and I read the headline of the article someone must have sent her.

The Truins are Back, Baby! In big, bold letters, they announce our reconciliation and then detail it further in the subhead. *Levi and Sophie spotted kissing on streets of NYC amid swirling rumors of divorce secrets.*

“Shit.” I breathe through my nose, extremely aware that Hart is sitting right behind us and we just ignored her question.

“We have to talk to her.” Sophie chews her incredibly sexy bottom lip.

I get momentarily distracted, have to gulp, and then I agree. “Let’s just bite the bullet. No time like the present.”

“Nothing. Hey, sweet pea, turn that off for a second?” Sophie walks over, eyeing me like I’m supposed to be in on the plan.

Hart protests as I give Judd a get lost look, and he salutes me before walking off to some other part of my house.

Sophie is sitting down next to our daughter, and I sit my ass on the coffee table in front of the two of them so that we can all see each other.

“Dad and I have something we want to talk to you about.”

My heart is hammering in my throat, and from the way Soph is twitching, hers is too.

“What?” Hart looks bored.

I reach my hand out, covering my daughter’s small one. “I know we have always been a family, but recently, Mom and I have been trying to work on our relationship. To make us a family once more. To all live under the same roof. I love your mom and I know you don’t remember a time when we were together in a different way than we are now, but we want to try to do that.”

Hart remains silent, but her eyes go big.

Sophie smooths our daughter’s hair off her face lovingly. “We both love you so much. And I know you’ve never seen us together in that way, and so we don’t want to overwhelm you. We want to hear what you have to say, and anything you feel is weird or scary, you can always talk to us about it.”

“You guys are going to be married again?” I can see her tiny brain connecting all the dots.

Sophie chuckles. “Yes, we are going to be together.”

“And married,” I add in, because I can’t help myself.

Sophie stills, I see it in her muscles, but she doesn’t turn to me for clarification. This is about our daughter, who she puts above all else.

“Can I be in the wedding?” Hart clearly has no problem, and her childish brain has moved on to the next subject.

“Slow your roll. We really want to know, are you okay with this? We want you to be completely comfortable and—”

Hart rolls her eyes and cuts Sophie off. “Mom, stop. This is like every kid’s dream. Their parents getting back together? It’s basically the goal.”

“We want you to know that above all else, we love you very much. That will never change. You are our first priority always.” Tears prick my eyes as I think about our family unit becoming whole once again.

“Of course, Dad, duh. I’m the kid, I’m supposed to be the alpha dog.”

That sends Sophie into a fit of giggles. “Who told you what alpha dog means?”

“Uncle J.” Our daughter shrugs.

I pull her in for a hug, and she protests, but I keep her there, pressing kisses to her forehead.

“I need poster board for my school project,” Hart informs us as I let her go, completely moved on from the very heavy and serious discussion we were having.

Sophie blinks but seems to latch on to anything that can bring the conversation to a close. “I can ask Ariana or Sammy to grab some.”

“No, because I wanted to go so I can get the gum I like.” She pouts.

“Well, I would take you right now, but my car has a flat.”
A product of no one really taking care of my house for three months.

Sophie was good about keeping some assistants back in LA to tend to things.

“Let’s take the motorcycle,” Hart chirps.

“Absolutely not.” Sophie rolls her eyes. “I’ll just change it for you. Where is your spare?”

“Uh, what?” It’s like she’s speaking a foreign language to me.

“Your spare? And do you have a jack? I can change it.”

“You can change a tire?” My mouth hangs open.

She huffs and gets up. “Of course I can. I did have a life before you.”

“This I’ve gotta see.” I hustle after her as she struts out to my garage.

Lo and behold, an hour later, my spare is on and tightened. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve maybe ever seen, and my dick is so hard by the time Sophie straightens from where she’s been bent over with her ass in the air that I might say fuck it and do her out here so our daughter can’t hear.

“You just ... you just changed that tire.”

She has a grease mark on her cheek, and I can’t help my thumb jutting out to swipe it away.

“That I did, superstar. See, I still have some tricks you haven’t seen.”

“Marry me.”

It’s meant to come off as a joke, but my voice is so deadpan that Sophie actually drops the wrench she’s holding. When I don’t follow that up with anything else, partially because I’m in shock I actually said that and partially because I mean it and don’t want to take it back, she nearly chokes on the words in her throat.

“You’re serious?”

I nod slowly. “Yes. I was trying to wait as long as possible to bring it up. I had to stop myself from having your ring flown out to New York to get down on one knee there. But we’ve told Hart. Everyone else in our lives know. And I’m done waiting. I don’t need to see if this withstands everything on the horizon for us. I don’t need to know anything else. I love you. I’m not going anywhere. I want you to be tied to me in every way, and I want me to be tied to you. We don’t need to have a wedding, unless you want one, of course. I’ll call someone up and marry you right here, right now. But I’m asking you to. Marry me ... please?”

She’s inhaling through her nose slowly, and I see how wide and tear-stained her eyes are. She’s smiling through all of it, a giddy, ridiculously happy smile that gives me all the answer I need.

“Yes. I want to be married to you. I always have, since probably the first moment I met you. I want to wear your ring, whichever one you want to give me. I don’t even care, the only thing I want is to call you my husband again.”

“Thank God.” I lunge for her at the same time she lunges for me.

And maybe I do get a good handful of something in the garage before Hart hunts us down to take her to get poster board.

Levi's house is quiet as I wash my face, taking my time to apply all of the products I usually smooth on.

My mind races in the silence, going over every detail of my meeting today. All week, I've been in meetings and strategy sessions for our big gala that's happening in less than a week. This is Full Hands' most important event every year, it will be our fourth time putting it on, and we have the most RSVPs we've ever gotten. The auction items are everything from a luxury car to a stay in a mansion on Lake Como. The people coming are celebrity names that will get coverage for attending.

I'm nervous as hell. My anxiety is at an all-time high, and yet I can't freaking wait. The good we're about to be able to do is indescribable. If the event donations net what we are projecting they will, we'll be able to launch our night and day nurse program in the entire state of California. And then we can work on moving it out over the country.

"You okay, baby?" Levi walks in shirtless and grabs his toothbrush.

I'm in the middle of pouring serum into my hands and nearly drop the bottle. He's so good-looking it hurts sometimes. Lean waist, modest muscles, and a swagger that says everything you need to know about what's in his pants. Add in gray sweatpants and I'm in love with a walking porno.

"Yeah, just thinking about the gala. I'm nervous." I try to smile but it's brittle.

“It’s going to be amazing, stop it. You could do this in your sleep.” He spits his toothpaste in the sink.

I shiver, almost jumping up and down from the nerves. “I’ve never been as good in front of audiences as you. Honestly, it’s still strange I fell into this life. You’re such a natural when it comes to everything fame brings. I feel like an awkward fish out of water.”

Levi snorts. “If you can’t see that you were born to be a star, I think you might be fucking blind.”

“*Hey.*” I swat him with my hand towel.

All of my products are splayed on the counter, and I’m tired of schlepping them back and forth to his house and mine when we switch where our sleepovers are going to be. We haven’t spent a night apart since we got back to LA, but that means packing overnight bags to stay at his place.

I wouldn’t stop doing this, though. Doing our nighttime routine, side by side is such a simple yet pivotal thing. These are the moments I wished the most for when we were separated. Just the normal, everyday things that become ingrained when you love someone for a long time. We were just getting started on our life when our divorce capsized us, and I have a lot of resentment toward so many things.

But, as I’ve done every time this wave of regret hits, I try to push past it. I remind myself that things happen for a reason, that I wouldn’t erase any of them because then I wouldn’t be the person I am today. I wouldn’t have the strong mental health I have today. I wouldn’t have the company I have today.

I have no clue if I’d be standing next to him in this bathroom if we hadn’t gone through all we had. So I can’t regret it.

“I want you to move in.” Levi circles my waist, swaying us like there is music when the silence still rings in my ears.

His gaze is on all of my products, and I know he’s thinking the same thing that I am.

“What if I like my house better?” I do a little faux lip pout.

“Then I’ll move in there. I don’t care either way, but I don’t want you to ever leave my bed. I want to brush my teeth with you every night. I don’t want Hart to keep going back and forth. I want us together, all the time, under the same roof.”

On paper, it doesn’t require much. Ariana could have a move set up in less than twenty-four hours. But it would get out.

“The rumors are already flying, and if they spot a moving truck, it will stir up even more. We still don’t know who is out there with information about the divorce.”

“Do we care? I mean, really, we’re already together.”

I hit his chest and am momentarily distracted by how solid his bare pecs are. “Of course we care. Hart is going to see that, whatever it is. She’s going to hear about Vincent.”

“So we explain it to her. She’s a smart little girl, she will understand and comprehend these things if we frame them with the truth. I don’t look like a good guy, I understand that. But if and when I tell her I was protecting her mom, she will understand. And she’s the only one I care about finding this out. The public? The blogs? The media? I don’t give a fuck. They weren’t a part of what happened then, and I don’t give a shit about their opinions now.”

I drop my head to his chest, breathing in his minty scent. “Your confidence makes me feel marginally better.”

“I’ve kicked myself for a long time for not admitting my true feelings. For not making amends with you. Over time, I realized the only thing that mattered were the two women that I loved and the small circle we kept around us. That’s still true. The money and the fame could end tomorrow. It doesn’t change the way I feel about you, or how I want to protect our daughter.”

“Well, damn, way to make all of a girl’s insecurities just vanish.” I chuckle, because he managed to say the perfect thing. “Do you think we should have Allen put out a statement?”

He nods. “What else do we pay him for? Yeah, I’ll text him. Let’s just fucking do it. Everyone basically knows anyway. Maybe if we confirm, it’ll die down.”

“Yeah, right.” I press up on my toes and kiss him, just because I’m allowed to whenever I want now.

Levi shifts my head, holding it in his hands, so he can deepen the kiss.

“You smell like banana,” he murmurs into my lips.

“It’s my serum.” I point to my face.

“Mmm.” He chuckles, licking my cheek like he’s a dog. Then he moves to my neck, sucking at the spot that makes my knees buckle. “God, you’re fucking delicious.”

“I can think of somewhere that tastes even better,” I respond greedily, because the way Levi eats me is something sinful but incredible.

“Please, show me.” He sinks to his knees on the bathroom floor and pulls my underwear out from under the long cotton tee I’m wearing. I kick them off my ankles and spread as Levi’s rough touch, callused from all the guitar playing, swipes up my thighs. The shudder that runs through me is heady, and I need to hold on to something, but he pins me to the spot when his tongue licks up my center.

“Oh my God ...” I exhale, gripping his scalp.

He laughs against my clit and my hips buck forward, which apparently is the sign that he’s allowed to feast. Because he does. That magical tongue works me like the sweetest fruit, sucking and pulling every shiver and scream from me.

“Quiet,” he demands, because I’m probably going to wake our daughter up.

But I can’t help it. And him demanding me to do something only makes me more turned on. When Levi shoves two fingers into me unexpectedly, I see white spots dot my vision.

“Come on my hand, Sophie.”

And when he says that, I'm done for. I convulse, shattering as I abandon all feelings in my limbs. He must hold tight, or catch me, or something, because as I come down from the high of my orgasm, I'm laid on the bed and he's pushing the sleep shirt up and over my head.

He sheds his clothes, moving over me, and I feel him throbbing and hot at my center. My hand reaches between us, feeling the smooth hardness and fisting him just the way I know he likes. He hisses between his teeth, pumping his hips into my hand, keeping eye contact the entire time.

"Ride me." He sighs into my ear as I stroke him, my thumb pressing bluntly on the head of his cock.

Rolling us, my legs automatically straddle him. Levi holds his cock up so that I can slide down on it, my hands on the headboard behind me.

"Fuck, baby. You're a dream." His fingers roll my nipples, and I adjust to the size of him.

Stars pop on the back of my eyelids, every sensation zeroing in on where we're connected. His rough hands explore my body as I rise up and sink back down on him, every movement bringing us both closer to the edge. There is nothing like this. I could live eight thousand lifetimes and there would be nothing like Levi and me.

Feeling him like this, having him look at me like this? It's like living inside the sun. My body is so hot, my heart on the edge of bursting, and still, I want more.

"I want to make another baby with you. I want to come inside you and know that we're creating another life."

My eyes snap open, and in Levi's face, I can read complete seriousness. Thinking about that, that we could be fucking to make another baby ... it should scare me. Instead, it's the biggest turn-on ever.

"*Gah.*" I moan loudly.

His thumb enters my mouth, a silencing tactic but one I use against him. Because I suck it deep and watch his eyes nearly bug out of his head. That's when he changes the pace,

grabbing my hips and taking control. I'm no longer riding him. No, I'm positioned above him while he drives up into me, racing each of us toward the edge of madness.

One particularly hard thrust and I'm coming, trying to silence the wail threatening to burst from my throat. Levi stills for a second and then I feel wetness coat my thighs as he explodes in me, still pumping even as he climaxes.

“I love you.”

He whispers it in my ear as I lie on his chest, unable and unwilling to move because I finally feel like I'm home.

When I asked Hart what she wanted to do for Sophie for Mother's Day, she responded that she wanted to take her to an amusement park.

I think she meant that she wanted to ride her favorite roller coaster for the thousandth time, but sure, we'll say it was for her mom. Which is how we end up there on Mother's Day, waiting on line while splitting a pink fluffy cotton candy.

"This is the best day." Sophie smiles, her sunglasses glinting on one of the most gorgeous days we've had all month.

"Can we ride that swirly one again?" Hart begs us.

"I liked it better when all she wanted to do was ride the baby rides." Sophie grips her stomach. "If I ride another thing, I think I'll be sick."

"Come on, Mom, don't be a wuss." Our daughter acts twice her age.

Sophie gasps. "Well, if you're bringing out the big guns to intimidate me ..."

"I'll take you. Let Mom go have a drink." I kiss Sophie's cheek.

"Nah, I'll come with. I wouldn't want to be a wuss." She chuckles and takes both mine and Hart's hands.

People around us stare blatantly, and I try not to ask them why they're staring. I mean, I know why they are. When Allen

contacted *Dash Mod Magazine* to run the story about us getting back together, celebrity news sites nearly blew a gasket. Social media is flooded with opinions and comments. I've gotten a dozen questions in the drop-off line at Hart's school.

"Everyone is staring." Sophie notices as I bring our joined knuckles up to my mouth and kiss hers.

Hart makes a gagging noise but then just smiles, and I know she's extremely happy that her mother and I are back together. It feels like things are clicking into place for the first time in a very long time. I'm the happiest I've ever been, our family is as strong as it's ever been, and I've never been more in love with Sophie than I am right now.

"Let them stare." I shrug. "It means we finally did something for us, and people are taking notice. Honestly, the attention is kind of ... satisfying. I want them to know how much I love you."

"You're so sweet, Dad." Hart looks at me like she knows exactly the kind of person she wants to be with when she grows up.

Oh shit, she's going to end up with someone exactly like me, isn't she? Fear creeps into my brain and I shut it out. Dad worries will end me if I have to think about the under-qualified idiots who are going to try to take my daughter.

Then Sophie's tinkling laughter drifts into my ear, and I turn to watch her. She's being hugged by a giant dog mascot.

My wife, which is what I'm referring to her as from here on out, and my daughter pose for a picture with the costumed animal. It's the best kind of Mother's Day I could have asked for. Where we walk around a theme park like the normal people we typically aren't on any other day of the week.

And watching Sophie, her blond hair glinting in the sun, the pain and hurt all lifted away and made better ... it's addicting. I want her to smile that way forever.

We go on a few more rides and end up in a burger joint, chowing down on cheesy bacon burgers and french fries.

Sophie and I split a milkshake like we're going steady or something, and it's just the type of romance I'm trying to woo her with.

Because if I can't charm my wife a little more, what am I doing on this earth?

We all walk hand in hand as we exit the restaurant, and by the time my foot hits the colorful pavement, I can sense something is wrong.

People are staring, but this time the whispers start. The hair stands up on the back of my neck. They start taking pictures of us. Every. Single. One of them.

Our security, who has been keeping a safe distance all day and letting us enjoy some normalcy, steps in.

"Mr. Truin, we should go."

"What's going on?" Sophie asks, and it's too loud because people are looking.

"*Mom ...*" Hart's arms circle her mother's waist, and I can see the fear in her eyes.

"It's okay, honey," Sophie reassures her, and I reach out to rub my daughter's arm absentmindedly just to let her know I'm here, too.

"What's happening?" I speak low and close to my security.

"The information about your divorce, Mr. Truin? It's out. A full exposé article on some gossip site, but it's spreading like wildfire. We need to get you out of here."

My heart drops. It's happened. The thing we were hoping to avoid. The ugliness we kept contained all this time has made its way to a place where everyone can judge it and use it against us.

"No." Sophie's voice is hollow as she shakes her head like she refuses to believe this.

"Get us out of here," I demand, and they're on the move.

I scoop Hart up so that the journey is faster, and she wraps her arms around my neck like she used to when she was a

baby.

The car ride is silent, the air crackling with fear and nerves and anxiety that could make someone have a fucking mental breakdown. Sophie squeezes my hand so tight I think I might lose all feeling in it. Hart sits in the middle of us, her breathing erratic, and I know I need to calm her down and tell her everything will be all right, but my mind is just spinning at a thousand miles an hour.

I have so many questions, questions that no one in this car will be able to answer. I don't want to look at my phone and make a harsh noise when Sophie reaches for hers. *Not in front of Hart*, my eyes tell her.

As soon as we get to Sophie's house, Hillary whisks Hart away for a special cookie snack she made her. Sophie's housekeeper gives us a look, and it's clear that everyone in our orbit has been briefed about the news that just came out.

The minute Hart is out of sight, Sophie collapses in my arms.

"What if she sees this, Levi? What if ... what if this brings up all the bad memories between us again? I don't want to lose you. Who would do this? I have so many questions, I can't stop, I feel like I'm going to lose it."

I pull back, my eyes severe as they try to smack the information into her brain.

"I am not going anywhere. Until the day I die, I'm with you. This means nothing in terms of us. Just a blip on the radar that we will get through. I love you, do you hear me? You are my everything, and don't think for a second I'm not going to stand by you and protect you through all of this. Do you understand me?"

She nods like her neck isn't strong enough to hold her head up, bobbing up and down as tears leak from her eyes.

"I love you. We will handle this; everything will be okay."

I say the words to her because that's what you say. But in reality, I have no idea if they are true.

Two hours later and there is an emergency session happening in Sophie's living room.

Allen and his team have assembled a full-on tactical station. Katherine is here and has been shouting into her cell phone for the last twenty minutes. Lyle showed up out of nowhere with Judd, and Ariana and Sammy haven't pulled their heads out of their phone screens once.

"Okay, I have an update." Katherine comes in, her heels clacking on the floor.

I'd be so fucking scared of her if I didn't have her on my side.

"The leak is Lauren." She drops the bomb and gives us all a minute to process it.

"I fucking knew it." Sophie hisses, and there is murder in her eyes.

"Goddamnit." Judd shakes his head and paces, and I know he's thinking about what he could commit without getting caught as well.

My breath stutters for a second, but when it comes back, I spew every question I've had.

"I don't understand. No one told her anything, so she never knew? So how does she know? I got to Vincent and made sure he was tight as a—"

"Don't say it. Our daughter is in the other room." Sophie gives me a warning glare as if she knows the crude language that was about to come out of my mouth.

Katherine sighs. "My private investigator got to the bottom of it. It took him a while because this connection is so surprising, it's somewhere we wouldn't ordinarily look. Lauren happened to randomly bump into the owner of a security system company. His company is a highly used service, particularly by celebrities. They were on an island

together, both on vacation, and got to talking. I guess they dated for some time. I'm not sure in what regard since the paper trail to back this up is pretty vague. But the gist of it is, this guy is the owner of the security company whose cameras and technology you guys used on the house you bought when you were married. Apparently, she finally manipulated him into checking the footage from your cameras. And he agreed. She saw everything that happened that night, or maybe he combed over the years of footage and found it. Anyways, she knows exactly what happened from that night. Clearly, she knows nothing about the state of anyone's mental health or what led up to it, just the indiscretion and Levi punching his assistant."

Fuck. Fucking fuck.

"I'm going to sue the ever-loving shit out of that guy. He will wish he was never born," Sophie seethes, and it's anger I see in her eyes now, not fear.

Good, anger we can use. I walk to her and take her hand, wanting us to be one united front here.

"Then why did she just release this recently? Just to fuck with us? What?" My head is spinning.

Allen speaks up now, as if a lightbulb just came on in his brain. "No, because Levi didn't want to play into her charade. Remember that lunch they had months ago? And then all of the articles came out? That was her plan. She wanted him to be convinced into working together ... maybe more. When he shut it down immediately, she knew she was sitting on a goldmine. And after the funeral, it was the perfect setup for her. She's been waiting for years to hold something over your heads."

"You're absolutely right." Judd looks like he's ready to hunt her down himself. "This has to be illegal."

"Oh, believe me, it is. I'll be filing every motion I can come Monday morning." Katherine has a smug, shark-like smile on her face.

“But that’s not going to solve your problem,” Allen points out.

Lyle jumps in, too. “What you have is an image problem. You two have been concealing this for years. Hell, I don’t fault you for it, but you have technically lied. Or at least omitted. Your fans are not going to be happy about that.”

One of Allen’s cohorts speaks up, “Not only are they not happy, they’re downright irate. They want explanations, they want to know how severe the fight was, they want to know everything.”

She’s pointing to the screen, and I almost don’t even want to know what social media is saying.

“Well, that leaves us one option.” Allen shrugs.

“I’m afraid to ask.” Sophie squeezes her eyes shut, and I run my hand down her cheek.

Our publicist looks right at me and says, “It’s time to the tell the truth.”

If the truth will set me free, then goddamn it, it's time to tell mine.

I had Lyle set up this show, a last-minute acoustic concert that would be filmed and the video distributed to every news site that wanted it. Which would be everybody. The story I am about to tell will be juicy, public fodder, and one hundred percent the truth that Sophie and I lived.

I'm nervous as fuck. Haven't stopped pacing the dressing room and was assured by Lyle that the tickets to this thing sold out in under a minute when they went live. Sure, I could have jumped on social media or written something for one of our preferred magazines, but this is me. Music and my fans are all I care about. I need to sit down on a stage and just talk out every single thing I went through on that day and the time period leading up to it.

"This is the best way you could have done this." Sophie sits in the corner, with her elbows on her knees and her legs jiggling.

"I know that. I do. Doesn't mean it isn't fucking scary." I run my hands through my hair for the thousandth time.

Sitting down to test if that feels better, I hear the chair across the room squeak as she rises out of it. Sophie wastes no time straddling my lap and wrapping her arms around my neck. I grab the back of her neck, needing to feel any semblance of power as I drag her mouth to mine. She tries to

keep up with my kiss as I attack her lips in a harsh and frenzied manner.

Her hips gyrate, grinding her thong-covered pussy across my lap. My eyes nearly roll into the back of my head.

“Want me to make it all better? You know I can suck the pain right out.” Sophie’s sex-crazed voice hits my ear and sends sparks down my spine.

How easy it would be to unzip my jeans, fist my cock and bury it deep inside her. The need to lose ourselves is at an all-time high, but we need to both keep level heads. What I’m about to do can’t be fixed or soothed. I need to sit in the unease and live with it. We created it.

“Baby,”—I take her wrists and fist them behind her back —“as much as I want to make us both feel good, I’m not sure it would be healthy or healing right now.”

She sighs and rests her forehead against mine. “No, you’re right. Should we have told our stories before it eventually got leaked? Got ahead of it? That article was scathing, and so inaccurate.”

By now, we’ve both read the article. It painted her as a cheater and me as a scorned lover. It’s so clear that the account given was in Lauren’s words. There it is in bold print for the world to see that Sophie kissed my assistant when Hart was a newborn, and then I pummeled him. But it’s clear that whoever the source is didn’t know the whole story. There’s nothing about Sophie’s postpartum or the financial payoff that Vincent received. There’s zero mention of our divorce proceedings. So it’s true that Lauren orchestrated all of this because the only information the article has is about the one night in question. The only night that the security company would have seen any drama unfolding on the cameras on our property.

“Maybe. But either way, it was our story to tell. That was private, and someone did the nastiest thing and made it public. Not only that, but they lied. This is our opportunity to set the record all the way straight.”

Sophie is still straddling my lap, her ass pressed against my cock, when a crew member knocks, opens the door a crack, and tells me it's time to go on.

"I love you," I whisper against her mouth before kissing her gently.

"I'm so proud of you." She hugs me hard.

That hug is like regenerating energy to my battered soul, and I realize the gesture is almost more intimate than any sex act.

When I walk out onto the stage, there is mild clapping. I don't know if anyone in the crowd came tonight simply to see what I would say. Honestly, I'm sure there are more than just fans in the four-hundred-person crowd. I clock the two cameras filming my every move from the corners of the stage and know that this will be spliced together and sent to every media outlet who requests it.

My band isn't on stage yet, so clearly the crowd knows this show will be different. I'm not even sure I'll play after I tell this whole story. I owe it to the people who bought tickets, but will they even want this?

I take one big deep breath and begin.

"Evening, everyone. It's really good to be here with you tonight. And if you don't mind, I'm going to start things a little differently." I pick up the mic, sit down on the edge of the stage, and gather my thoughts.

"Obviously, you have all seen things in the news about my wife and I in the last week. It's probably no secret that I was going to address it tonight, and I want to do so. I want to tell you the full truth, even if it's ugly. Because what's been told by anonymous sources, who obviously feel scorned or some type of way toward us, is not even half the story."

Whispers go through the crowd. *Did I take a dig at Lauren? Yes. Would I someday expose her?* Maybe. But today is about our truth, about telling the story of what my family went through.

“I thought that the foolishness I pulled when I was a stupid teenager first coming up in the industry was bad. That was nothing compared to what I’d go through as a married man. I may have quit a crazy lifestyle, but I was still reckless. I thought I had conquered the world, and no one knew more than me. I got married with no expectations that life and pain would interfere, and that was naive of me. Then we had our daughter, and my whole world changed. For the better, but as anyone in this room who is a parent knows, your life becomes about that baby. Hart is the single most precious thing in my life, and unfortunately, I missed something that ended up causing my divorce.”

I’ve gotten permission from Sophie to talk about it all, but I hesitate. This is it, these are the big secrets no normal person would have to expose. But I guess this is the price we pay.

“When Sophie had our daughter, she suffered from postpartum depression. For those who don’t know, this is an imbalance of hormones that leads to irrational thoughts, mood swings, depression, harmful behaviors, and sometimes even suicidal ideations. For a long time, even as recently as ten years ago, it was something a lot of women didn’t talk about. I know that my wife has said she felt she couldn’t voice it because it would mean she wasn’t a good mother. Obviously, that’s not the case at all, but we all know mental health is a hard beast to conquer. From my end, it looked like my wife wanted nothing to do with Hart. Most days, she couldn’t get out of bed. She couldn’t function like she had before; this bright, beautiful woman who’d stolen my heart. She wouldn’t talk to me, not that I understood what was going on. I never asked her explicitly what was wrong, I’d never been educated on postpartum and couldn’t understand why she was acting the way she was.”

This is the hardest part, and I have to rip off the Band-Aid.

“Which only silenced her more; it only pushed her away more. Eventually, into the arms of a person who was manipulating her. I didn’t see what was happening until the night you’ve probably all read about. Except, of course, you’ve been given no context to why it happened and the

details that were published are, by all accounts, misleading and false. Sophie was not herself at all. She could barely think straight, as I've said. When someone who had lied about his intentions got her in a compromising position, he took advantage of her weakness. He kissed her. I walked in on it, and the betrayal and heartbreak I felt ...”

I shake my head, trying to push through the images and the knot in my gut that still arrives whenever I think of that night.

“I felt like the sky was crashing down in giant pieces right onto my head. I love Sophie, I love her so much sometimes I can't breathe when I look at her. I've always felt that way. And to see her doing that with another man? It rocked me to my core. Did I punch him? Yes. Absolutely. I took it too far, I should have reined in my temper, but I was incensed. Putting my hands on him was wrong, but what he did to my wife was worse. He used her, gained access to our lives to take advantage of her. I put my trust in the people I let into my life and my home, and he ruined that. Sophie was distraught and remorseful, but I was stubborn and my ego was out of control. I couldn't get past it. I paid the assistant off to never speak of what I did to him, and then I sent my wife divorce papers. We were young, things seemed so out of control and it felt like my heart was in a million pieces. I couldn't even look at Sophie and didn't grasp what she was going through. Those were extremely dark times, and it felt like the best thing to do for our daughter was to go our separate ways.”

My breath is shaky as I pause, taking a sip of my water. All the eyes in the room are zeroed in on me, and I know I have to keep going.

“What happened that night was private, but I know we signed up for this life. There was always a chance it would get out. But please, I'm asking you on a human level to consider what the world might think of you if the worst thing you'd ever done was told to millions and millions of people. Sophie and I are not the people we were that night. We are not our worst mistake. In the seven years following, we have grown and healed and sought help. We have fallen back in love, or maybe just admitted that we never stopped. I want my family

to be as strong as it can be, and we're finally in a place where that is happening. I hope you all, and the world, can give us the forgiveness and grace to do that.

“So there you have it. The full truth. I'm not trying to hide details or make excuses for the wrongs I committed. But there is never just one side to a story. The gossip and rumors you hear surrounding this, they don't have the information. I just gave all of it to you. I hope it clears some things up, even if you don't continue to support my wife or me. Just know that I'm very sorry for any pain I caused, and that this is the honest recounting of the events surrounding what you read about.”

The entire theater is silent as I stare at a spot on the back wall, zoning out. I have no idea if I just signed our death warrant or explained why this topic is so sensitive to my family. I don't know if they believe me or if I care that they do.

All I know is, the weight that's lived inside my chest for nearly eight years has finally vanished. I feel like I can breathe again.

Then, from somewhere in the first couple of rows, a woman stands up. She looks at me, puts a hand over her heart, and says, “Thank you.”

Then another woman stands and says the same thing, followed by a man and his wife. I can only assume these people have been through something similar or maybe are struggling through their own crisis right now.

If our story normalized even one of their experiences, I can say it was worth it.

The big band plays a rocking tune and the dance floor lights up, people trying to swing dance in their floor-length ballgowns.

I sway in Levi's arms, a smile lighting my face, my nerves for the night almost gone. The whole event space looks like a star exploded in here, with midnight-blue accents floating around the silver and gold decor. It's decadent, beautiful, and it seems like every guest here is genuinely having a great freaking time.

Our silent auction is racking up the donations, or so Ariana has been informing me. It's my job to schmooze and thank, so I've barely stepped off the dance floor.

"You ready for your speech?" Levi asks, looking way too sexy in his tuxedo.

His dark hair is slicked back with some sort of gel when his locks usually look like he's been running guitar picks through his scalp for hours. Don't get me wrong, I love him in nothing, but in this tux, he's a different breed of lethal.

I sigh, hugging him tighter to me as if some of his onstage confidence will rub off. "No. Maybe. I don't know. I'm not as good at this as you are."

After Levi's show the other night, the Internet began to sway a little bit in our favor. His story touched the crowd and a lot of the people who saw it on morning shows across the country the next day.

We agreed that I also needed to share my truth, and what better place to do so than at my event. The whole night is about helping mothers with postpartum and discussing the difficult situations that arise from dealing with it after birth. It doesn't mean I'm not terrified, though. I was nervous enough having Levi talk about my postpartum struggles, but to publicly explain them myself? It's been one of my biggest fears since everything happened.

“Pretend it's just me. Explain it to me. Tell me everything you wanted me to know but couldn't voice when you were in it. No one else matters, just you and me. Remember that, and remember that I love you.” His eyes bore into mine, and I draw strength from his unwavering support.

I take a deep breath as he massages the back of my neck, and when the band announces that dinner is being served, butterflies light up my belly. Because I know this is it.

Ariana gets up on stage to talk a little bit about Full Hands, what we're planning to do with the funds raised tonight, and the harmful things postpartum can bring. I'm waiting just off stage but surveying the crowd. They seem bright-eyed, if not a little tipsy, and everything about tonight has gone off without a hitch. Well, unless you count the head chef coming down with the flu, but his backup is just as good, and we had it under control before the night even started.

That's show business for you.

“And now, our fearless leader and selfless founder, Sophie Truin!”

I nearly miss my cue thinking about the chef-swap, and my notes tremble in my hand as I plaster a smile on my face and walk up the couple of stairs to the stage. The mic looms in front of me, and when I get to the podium, I have a moment where I want to bolt.

But then I see him. Levi, standing at our table when everyone else in the room is sitting. He nods once, winks, and then sits down. And that's all I need. I'm talking to him and only him.

“Postpartum is often a topic that any mother who has experienced it or is currently going through it is ashamed to speak about. That’s what it does to you. Not only does it steal your joy, your sense of self, the love you wanted to feel for your newborn, and so many other things ... but it also silences you. The chemicals in your brain are telling you that everything happening is your fault, and if you voice them, it will only make you look and feel worse. That the people around you will never understand what you’re feeling.”

I take a pause because here is where I get personal.

“And that is exactly what happened to me. My daughter Hart is the best thing that has ever happened to me. My pregnancy was perfect, my marriage was perfect, and I thought we were heading into the next perfectly happy chapter of our life. Once she was born, everything changed. I couldn’t seem to clear the gray fog that seemed to hang over me. I barely got out of bed. I had no desire to see my daughter, to hold her, to experience all of her firsts. My body and mind turned against me. I was in pain all the time even though there was nothing physically wrong with me. The worst part of it all was that I couldn’t voice it. I couldn’t tell my husband how much mental anguish I was in. I couldn’t express what was happening, because I didn’t actually know internally what or how I felt.”

I hear a snuffle, and I know another woman who has gone through this is probably relating to everything I’m saying. Since starting Full Hands, I’ve heard so many similar stories to mine.

“There have been a lot of stories floating around about my husband and me, our divorce, what happened. And this was where it started. Postpartum robbed me of almost everything good in my life. It was a silent thief, and I was drowning. Because of it, I made some of the biggest mistakes of my life. Yet, looking back, I’d change none of it. I can now realize that some of the actions weren’t my fault. I was operating from a place of not knowing which way was up; my hormones and mind were against me. I got medical help, I learned about prescriptions and how they could help. I began researching postpartum and working on myself in therapy. I met other

women with similar stories and heard staggering statistics about how many new mothers suffer from this. All that is to say; my experience and regrets led me to starting this charity, and so I would never take them back. With your help and donations at events like this one, we can help so many women who are in the exact same spot I was in. Who have no idea what their bodies and minds are doing, and just want to feel the way they thought they would after giving birth. I've refrained from talking about this for such a long time, and it all ties back to that shame. I was embarrassed about how my life unraveled because of a mental health issue I couldn't prevent. But no more. Taking the sting and shame away from postpartum is half the battle. And once we do that, with the help of organizations like Full Hands, we can begin to tackle the hard work of providing support, therapy, and real services to new mothers. So, thank you for coming to our event, and thank you to everyone who worked so diligently putting it together. Please consider donating, and tell all of your friends in high places about us. Have a wonderful rest of the night!"

The room erupts into applause, and I duck my head, both so proud that I spoke out finally and humbled that they received my story like they did.

I come off the stage, and Levi takes me in his arms, hugging me tight. Even though my eyes are blurred with tears, I feel more honest and light than I have in seven years.

"I'm so proud of you," he whispers, and I pull back so that our lips can meet.

People begin to come up to me, survivors of postpartum, older women in Hollywood, and couples alike, to thank me for my story and say that they lived through similar things.

And then, I see a familiar face coming toward us, and my stomach takes a nosedive.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Ariana says at my side.

"Levi, Sophie, what a wonderful night."

Lauren tries to weasel her way between us, but Levi holds firm to my hand and basically makes us an impenetrable wall. He glowers, not saying a word, and I know he wants so badly to put her in her place but refrains from doing so.

“I’m not not saying anything because we’re in public, just so you know,” he says to me while she can clearly hear it. “But because this is your event, and I respect your work way more than I need to call out bullshit on some fraud.”

If anyone wanted to pop out and yell *burn* right now in Lauren’s face, it would be warranted.

The thing is, I’m fine with calling her out myself, I don’t need him to do it.

“What are you doing here?” I ask her point-blank, in no mood for bullshit after what she’s done to my family and now showing up at my event.

“I came to support this amazing charity.” She scoffs at me as if I’ve offended her.

“Lauren, you have no place here. It’s unthinkable that you think this would be appropriate considering all you’ve done.” I shoot it straight with her.

She ruffles like I’ve just disturbed her feathers. “If this is a cause near and dear to my heart, maybe I want to pursue it. You don’t know what I’ve been through. And you can’t prove a thing about anything.”

Her eyes shift to the side, and it’s obvious she’s lying. And that right there is why this woman will always be more lethal than me. She walks around like a saint while hissing incantations under her breath. There is nothing she’s not above doing, which makes her a threat to my family.

That’s why so much of celebrity and fame is just smoke and mirrors. Who will listen and believe your lies? How can you sway the public in your favor? I’ve never been too good at that game, which is why I always seem to get burned.

I don’t keep my voice down, and I’m sure there are people around listening to this, but I do keep my dignity.

“That might be true, but it doesn’t make you any less wrong. My husband has never had anything but a working relationship with you. He married me, had a child with me, and now we are back together. You can spread any kind of lie or out of context video you want, but he and I, and you, for that matter, know the truth. You need some life preserver to save your career and targeted us to do so. If showing up here and causing a scene is what you need to do, I guess I can’t stop you. I can just say that tonight was about raising money for women who actually suffer, and anyone trying to gain clout or fame off of that is going to answer to some power higher than me.”

Someone around me whoops out an excited yell, but I keep the most neutral look I can possibly muster on my face.

“You ... you ...” she splutters, turning red and angry with frustration and embarrassment.

Around us, some people start to take photos or chuckle, and that’s when Lauren storms off.

Levi high-fives me, and while I feel like we’re all petty, mean girls, we’re not. She tried to ruin my family, disgrace my name, and hurt my daughter. She deserves everything coming to her.

An ominous shadow of a man makes his way to us, and I smile when I see who shakes Levi’s hand.

“Nice to meet you, man.” Levi looks a little starstruck himself, which is exactly how I reacted when I met him.

Dane nods respectfully, not saying a word, then turns to me. He’s ego, mystery, and reserved power in an all-black tux ensemble, tattoos peeking out of the collar of his shirt.

“That was really something. You’re the bravest woman I’ve met.” Dane nods at me, still not smiling but looking quite satisfied that I got up there and spoke the way I did.

“Well, it takes an army to get in this headspace, but thank you.” I nod in appreciation.

“I meant what I said, you name the way I can help and I’ll do so.”

“Write a very generous check?” Ariana grins.

He actually cracks half a smile. “I already did that. But any way I can get the message out, please be in touch.”

“I will. Thank you for all of your help thus far, and for even coming tonight.”

“Yeah, I’m about capped at my max for social interactions, so I’m heading out. Have a good night, guys.”

And with that, he ghosts back into the crowd, disappearing.

“That guy is so fucking cool and stealth.” Levi shakes his head, mystified.

“Tell me about it.” I chuckle. “Now, are you taking me home or what?”

He pulls me into his arms and spins us. “Your house, or mine?”

“Mine, definitely mine. Except you’re not leaving anymore, so I guess it’s yours, too.” My voice is hopeful, and it’s not a question, but I hope he’ll agree.

Levi taps his chin. “Depends. Do I get to build a recording studio in the basement?”

I roll my eyes. “Is it always about the music with you?”

He chuckles. “If you haven’t figured that one out yet, then you have no idea how I landed you in the first place.”

“It wasn’t your music. It was your ridiculously hot body. I’m really only with you for that.” I pull him in by the tie until we’re nose to nose.

“I think that’s my cue to leave. Good night, lovebirds. Don’t get caught doing it in the back of your car by the paparazzi,” Ariana comments sarcastically before melting into the crowd.

“Should we try it anyway?” Levi wiggles his eyebrows at me.

I hit him in the shoulder. “Absolutely not. They already have the whole embarrassing truth about our divorce. I don’t need them having vagina pictures in their possession, too.”

“I’d love to have those in my possession. Alas, I get the real thing. Although, if we all live under the same roof, does that mean we’ll have to be quiet during sex because of our kid?”

That has me throwing my head back in a laugh. “Uh-oh, the things we never considered when we were simply co-parenting.”

In the end, Levi does take me back to our house. And he still manages to get his hand under my dress in the car.

“I don’t think I’ve been here in ages.”

My hand skims along the soundboard in one of the recording rooms at Hart Studios, nostalgia prickling my throat.

“Remember when you rode me in the studio and I wondered if we could record the sounds of our fucking and lay it down on a track?” Levi smirks shamelessly at me.

My cheeks are burning. “Yes, did you actually ever put that on a song?”

“No, but now that I think about it ...” He rubs his jaw with a devilish glint in his eye.

“You’re too much.” I roll my eyes and take a seat in one of the rotating chairs, sipping my coffee.

Hart is at school, and we both have the day off, so when Levi said he wanted to stop by the studio to grab something, I, of course, suggested coffees from our favorite cafe nearby, and off we went.

“Come in here with me.” He grabs my hand, and I stand, walking into the studio with him.

“You haven’t been in here enough? I’ve barely seen you in days.” He and Judd have been hard at work to get the new album ready.

According to Judd, Levi is being a staunch perfectionist on this one, though they’re nearly halfway through. It’s been the earlier hours of the morning when I finally feel the mattress

dip and am usually awoken to Levi between my legs. He calls it getting the last of his creative juices out before he can sleep.

It's been two weeks since the gala, and my speech about postpartum has been getting so much coverage, Allen has been booking me on multiple talk shows for the next couple of weeks. While I'm nervous to keep talking about my journey, which ultimately includes the divorce, I'm happy to rip open some old wounds if it means the nonprofit is getting national attention.

Since we both shared our truths about what happened between us, and the Vincent of it all, the reaction has been fifty-fifty. Would I have loved for the whole world to sympathize with us? Absolutely. Do I wish they saw us as this perfect couple with no flaws and no backstory? Yes, of course.

But that isn't reality. There are always going to be people heckling you and rooting for your downfall.

However, there have also been people coming to our defense. Women in my DMs telling their stories about postpartum and thanking me for having the courage to speak up about it. Other people who have reached out and want to work with my charity. The response from the people who matter has been gracious and positive, so I guess that's all we can hope for.

"Which is why I want to show you what I've been up to." The boy who stole my heart at nineteen smiles only for me.

I swear, my heart audibly says *aww*. He's too damn charming for his own good.

"You could have just played them for me. Made me a mix CD." I sit down on the stool opposite him as he picks up a guitar.

Talk about swoon city.

"Why didn't I think of that? How romantic would that have been. Although now I think it would be a playlist or some shit."

We both laugh, because I'm not even sure you could burn a CD now.

“No, really. Judd is the only other person who has heard these, and you’re the one I want to hear the entire thing, top to bottom, before anyone else.”

“Sing for me then, superstar.” Seriously, am I really going to tell my very hot husband no when he says he wants to sing me love songs?

So he does. Levi sings me the album, accompanied only by him on guitar for some songs. And not just some of his newest material, but the entire album that he and Judd have been working on.

It’s a tapestry he weaves with his voice, about love and heartbreak and family above all. The words are beautiful, bringing tears to my eyes and sewing back together the pieces of us I thought might have been lost the first time around.

But it’s when he gets to the last song, a tribute to my struggles after having Hart, that I lose it. Levi’s voice cracks as he sings about darkness and uncertainty, about wanting so hard to love this brand-new soul but not knowing how. I realize, then, that penning this album was his therapy. That this is the final step we need to heal.

After he’s done, I stand and move between his legs where he sits on his stool. We embrace for a while, crying into each other, bleeding out the last parts of regret and hurt our bodies contained.

When we leave the studio, we’re whole again. Renewed. Facing this life as a united front, in love until we can’t possibly be together any longer.

Pool water splashes up into my face as Hart does a cannon ball, soaking the loungers by the side of the pool.

“I give it a ten.” Sophie gives our daughter a thumbs-up.

“Mom, you can’t say every single jump is a ten.” Hart rolls her eyes.

“She can because you’re perfect.” Gloria shushes her granddaughter.

“What if I do a belly flop?”

“Please don’t. Then you’ll hurt yourself and you’ll be crying for me to come in and drag you out,” I plead with my daughter.

“And Daddy can’t get his new ink wet until next week.” Sophie does a fake little pout in my direction, as if insinuating I’m being a wuss.

“Let’s get him.” Gloria sends a splash my way from where she’s floating on a noodle in the pool.

Right after the gala, I moved into Sophie’s house and never looked back, and true to my word, construction on a basement recording studio is in progress. Just in case I need to do some work at the house. After all, since being back with Sophie, my creativity has skyrocketed to a point where I want to write all the time.

But when Judd came over and Hart insisted we all go out in the pool before Sunday family dinner, I knew I couldn’t go

in. I'm drying out my latest lyrics, tattooed on my left forearm, a tribute to my daughter and the woman I love the most in this world.

"I wouldn't be so forgiving if it wasn't very romantic." Sophie plops down on the lounge next to me, her wet bikini doing nothing to calm my over-hyped libido.

We can't get enough of each other these days. Obviously, we're making up for seven years, but it's even more playful and fun as we try to avoid getting caught by our daughter. Who knew sneaking around behind the backs of your kid, and I guess your mother-in-law too, would be a form of foreplay?

"Kiss me," I challenge her.

She lays a wet and sloppy kiss on my lips, to which our daughter makes a puking noise and I get splashed again, this time from Judd.

"I love you," I tell her so only she can hear.

Sophie blinks at me in this way she's been doing since we got back together. Almost like she can't believe this is real. Sometimes, I have to pinch myself, too.

Not that it's been all easy going. Of course, there were lots of opinions, both negative and positive, about the way in which we told our version of the story that Lauren leaked. Some people believed us, some were sympathetic, while others wanted to cancel us and never hear from us again. We take it in stride, like every detail written about us, there is only one morsel of truth in it and the rest is usually bullshit. It's why we decided to tell it in our own way.

But we did have to sit Hart down after both of our very public confessions and talk over the details we knew she could grasp. She had a lot of questions, ones we tried to answer honestly. She knows our deepest, dirtiest secrets, and that may be too much for a seven-year-old. But I'd rather her hear it from us than some kid at school who reads something with no context.

Our daughter was definitely moody and distrustful in the days after we had that talk. I think she figured out what most

kids do at some point; that her parents are only human, not these statuesque moral people that kids often put on a pedestal. I hate that she had to learn that, but again, I'd rather she know the truth.

Today, though, all smiles. It's Sunday dinner, her parents are living under the same roof, and everyone we love most is at the house. Plus, Barth is making a feast, and there is no way anyone can be unhappy when they're eating his food for dinner.

"Y'all ready to get back out on the road soon?" Judd poses the question.

"Another tour? We just got home, and Levi hasn't even finished the album." Sophie does a double take.

He shrugs. "This new album will be done soon and Lyle is bound to be beating down the door to get you back out on the road."

"I'm ready! I want to play on stage again." Hart raises her hand before diving under to do a handstand.

Her skinny little legs kick back and forth in the air, and Gloria grabs an ankle to mess with her. My kid is fearless, especially when it comes to what she wants to do musically. It should scare the shit out of me, because if anyone knows how this industry chews up and spits out the young ones, it's me. But she has the right people around her, her mother and I would never let anything happen to her.

"I'm not going back out on the road until this woman marries me. Again." I take Sophie's hand, bring it to my lips, and kiss her wet skin.

She blushes, and Gloria claps her hands.

"We have to have a wedding!" My mother-in-law shouts just as Hart tries to flip her off her noodle.

"I don't want a wedding." Sophie shrugs. "We did that. I just want to be married. Can't we just undo the divorce paperwork?"

She says this like she's already agreed to marry me. Which, I mean, she has. Way back when. But we also haven't discussed it since. The article leaking, our publicity campaign, and then me moving in took precedence. But to hear her agree so smoothly, as if it's just a no-brainer ... it makes me even more sure that this is the best decision I could ever make in life.

"If only it were that easy." I snort.

"You do know I'm an ordained minister, right?" Judd comments, raising his sunglasses so we can see his eyes.

"What?" Sophie sits straight up.

"Um, why didn't you tell us this earlier?" I narrow my eyes at him.

"Slipped my mind. And I thought you would want another wedding, albeit a small one."

"Why don't you just get married right here?" Hart walks out of the pool, throwing her wet little body down onto her mother's lap. "I can be the flower girl. Just need to go pick some flowers."

Sophie looks at me at the same time I look at her. I'm shirtless in a pair of black ripped jeans. She's in a wet, maroon bikini. The three closest people to us are already here, and the sun is shining.

"What do you say, baby, want to marry me? Right here, right now?" I smirk.

She takes a second, and I think she's taking in the moment rather than pausing.

"Absolutely." Her grin is radiant.

"Oh my God, I'm going to cry." Gloria scrambles out of the pool.

"Well, shit, I didn't even bring my uniform," Judd jokes, getting out behind her. "Let's do this, you crazy kids."

"We don't have rings," I say, thinking this is crazy, but at the same time, the most sane thing I've ever done.

“Mom, can you go grab two from my room? Who cares what they are, get me a big fat diamond later. Or maybe give me my old one. I don’t really care.” Sophie giggles like she’s swept up in the moment, because she is.

“I’m going to pick some flowers!” our daughter cries and scampers off.

“Let me go brush my hair and run a towel over me.” Sophie kisses me passionately before spinning out of my hold and jogging off.

“Everyone back here in five!” I yell, hoping they can hear me in their various places in the house.

Just like I asked, five minutes later, we’re all back on the patio, Sophie and I standing holding hands in front of the loungers while Judd says a few words.

And that’s how we get married, in barely any clothes, her with wet hair, Hart still wearing goggles as Gloria sobs beside us. It’s the best Sunday dinner I ever could have imagined.

We’ve had the fancy life, the crazy events, and over-the-top gestures. But if the last seven years have taught me anything, it’s that none of that matters. The only thing that’s important is our love, and we’re solidifying that right now.

We’ve been through the hell and the high water and made it out on the other side. From here on out, it’s our time to be happy, truly, ridiculously happy, in whatever way we choose.

Especially if that’s barefoot and wet on the pool deck, marrying the only woman I’ve ever seen since the moment I laid eyes on her.

EPILOGUE

SOPHIE

Two Years Later

“**T**here it is, in print and color.”

Ariana drops the magazine on the table in front of us, and we both stare at the image.

Levi and Hart on either side of me, hugging my ever-growing belly, the words “Baby Number Two” in bold print above our heads.

“And to think, I just put up a little pair of baby shoes on my Instagram.” Ariana palms her stomach, which is almost as full of baby as mine is, and laughs. “Ah, to be famous and have to announce in a national magazine.”

“It was either this or wait for someone to leak our own news, so we’re playing ball. Plus, they donated a hundred thousand dollars to Full Hands, so I made out on top if you think about it.”

“Oh, we made out on top all right, how do you think we ended up knocked up?” My assistant wiggles her eyebrows, and I throw my head back as I laugh.

“How is my little girlfriend in there?” I ask, pointing at her stomach.

“Giving me heartburn like she’s a fire breathing dragon.” Ari rolls her eyes, but I know she’d take every second of it to

welcome this little girl. “And little man? What’s he doing today?”

“Kicking my organs like they’re soccer balls.” I palm my belly, thinking about the baby boy who is floating around in there.

Ari is two weeks further along than I am, but we’re both entering the third trimester now, and these babies are going to be here before we know it.

It was no question whether Levi and I would give Hart a sibling; from the moment we got married out by the pool, he was trying to knock me up. I held him off a little by keeping up with my birth control, because I knew we’d have to get through a tour and did not want to be riding around with morning sickness on buses and planes. But the minute the Heart Whole Tour was done, we were off to the races.

The album is, as Judd predicted, a smashing success. It won Grammys, Levi’s fans went nuts for it, and the stadium tour was massive. We took Hart along to a European leg for the first time, and it was one of the greatest experiences of all of our lives. The reaction to the music was insane, but the songs were just that good.

Then there is the fully stripped-down version of the album that Levi put on sale simply to raise money for Full Hands. That album? It’s just him and me in the studio back when he played me all the new songs. It’s my commentary, and Levi explaining to me what he meant in the lyrics. At the time, I had no idea he was recording any of it, but it’s a gift I wouldn’t trade knowing about. Our conversation on those tracks is simply us, an us the world rarely ever gets to see. I hope they can understand our dynamic a little better. Well, that and the fact that it raised nearly half a million dollars for Full Hands.

The good we’ve been able to do with that money is out of this world. We’ve expanded our programs to ten more states, and the response to how it’s changed the way women are able to recover in the fourth trimester is incredible. We’ve also just launched a program to pay chefs in the area to cook and

deliver meals to our accepted candidates. These meals aren't just ordinary, they contain the perfect balance of vitamins and nutrients to help with healing and mental health after having a baby, plus take away some of the stress of cooking for their families while raising a newborn.

Of course, as a woman who is about to become a mother for the second time, all of this is important to me.

There is always the fear of going through postpartum again. It's in the back of my mind, haunting me. But I'm more secure this time. I'm armed with support and help. If it happens after giving birth to our son, I know where to turn and how to fight through it. My husband knows how to handle it, and everyone around us is well aware of the ways postpartum can manifest itself.

"God, you're glowing." Ari points to the picture again, and I look at our cover.

Allen has been on top of things since the Lauren leak. If we have news, we publish it, then and there. That's our strategy, because never again will someone control our narrative. We want to push the truth, and while I wanted to wait until I had the baby to tell everyone, Allen knew it was too risky.

Thus the cheesy yet adorable photo shoot, and all to raise money for Full Hands.

"I admit, we do look really cute. Hart was so honored to wear that big sister shirt." I run my hand over my daughter's face on the magazine page.

"Speaking of articles, did you read Dane's?" Ariana asks, opening up her laptop and getting to work.

I nod, grabbing for a strawberry on the tray Barth brought out a couple minutes ago. They seem to be the only thing I crave during this pregnancy, and I nearly moan when I put it in my mouth.

"I did. Interesting, that's what I'll say. Sounds like something went down there, huh?"

She smiles a sly, knowing smile. “I mean, look at the guy. If I had to trail him for three months to write a story on him, I think I’d fall head over heels, too.”

Dane ended up agreeing to a full five-page spread in *Dash Mod Magazine* along with a photo shoot, with all the money he would be paid going to my charity. He talked about things I’d never heard about his life before, including how postpartum affected the lives of those around him. But the way it was written, the snippets of the journalist interspersed through the deep dive ... it had me thinking there was more of a story there than even we got.

“Same. He’s just so ...” I grin because she knows the pull his music has over me.

“If I didn’t know you were talking about a literal god in the music industry, I might be offended.” Levi walks into the living room.

He heads straight for me, sinks to his knees, and starts talking to my very large belly. “Is Mommy talking about leaving me for a country singer?”

I run my fingers through his hair and tug, just a little too sharply and he grimaces. “Mommy is thinking about eating this entire bowl of strawberries, not thinking about other men.”

“How you feeling, beautiful?” he murmurs as he kisses my stomach.

Every time he does it, my heart is in my throat. I pray and hope that this time around, I can experience and acknowledge how wonderful of a father he is to a newborn.

“My feet are swollen, I pee every six seconds, and your son is sitting on my lungs, but otherwise, I’m happier than ever.” I grin a little sassily.

“Well, you want me to help you unwind, you let me know.” He winks, and I know exactly what he has in mind.

Levi takes my hand in his, massaging my swollen extremities one digit at a time. I sigh because it is possibly the best feeling in the world. He swivels my ring around my finger when he gets to my left hand and then kisses it.

In the end, he did buy me a new diamond. He did repurpose my old ring into this beautiful diamond band for Hart. It's a symbol that what we once had is never lost, just changed, and that our daughter was the glue that always held us together.

At least that's what Levi told us when he gave it to her. Which, of course, made me burst into tears.

Hart said she wants to have something made for the baby out of the remnants of my old ring that Levi kept. She is so excited to be a big sister, it's nearly all she talks about. Well, that, and playing the guitar. She's currently studying under Judd twice a week, and he calls her his nine-year-old prodigy.

"You coming to the studio with me?" Levi pulls me into his arms, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

"I don't think so, too much to do. With both of us going on maternity leave, we have to complete as many things as possible."

"Superwoman, I tell you. All while I finish this album. We're the definition of a power couple, you know?" Levi is close to finishing another album, one he and Judd started writing six months ago.

I hike a thumb at Levi and say to Ari, "Wow, who knew my husband was so humble? No ego in sight with this one."

My husband and my assistant snort at the same time.

"Can I stop anywhere on my way home?" he asks the dutiful husband question.

In the last two years, our marriage has been better than it ever was before we got divorced. Compared to the young newlyweds we were then, we're stronger and more resilient. Levi and I tackle things together, rather than keeping secrets or trying to keep up appearances. The love I have for him now is more mature and fiercer in its own way. It's a mutual emotion born out of trust, respect, and trudging through shit just to stay together.

"A strawberry and chocolate milkshake?" There is a little bit of pleading in my request because I could use it right now.

“Anything for you, baby.” He kisses me full on the lips as he gets up.

I hear him grab his keys off the counter as he calls, “I love you. Be home later!”

“I love you,” I tell him back, never not saying it anytime we leave each other.

“All right, let’s tackle the schedule.” Ariana whips me into work mode.

It’s just like any other day, with both Levi and I hustling hard to achieve the life we want for our children, both of them. But it’s always in the back of my brain, even as I play the role of boss, that at the end of the night, I’ll be getting into bed with the man I’ve loved since I was a teenager.

The world may see one of the greatest musicians of our time, but I get Levi exactly the way he is. No one knows just how lucky I am because he doesn’t show anyone else the realest, truest sides of himself.

Well, except for me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of romance novels such as *Fleeting* and *Love at First Fight*, Carrie Aarons writes books that are just as swoon-worthy as they are sarcastic. A former journalist, she prefers the love stories of her imagination, and the athleisure dress code, much better.

When she isn't writing, Carrie is busy bingeing reality TV, having a love/hate relationship with cardio, and trying not to burn dinner. She lives in the suburbs of New Jersey with her husband, two children and ninety-pound rescue pup.

Please join her readers group, [Carrie's Charmers](#), to get the latest on new books, exclusive excerpts and fun giveaways.

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