



WRECKED

A CHAOTIX BOYS BOOK

HARPER ASHLEY

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Harper Ashley

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*This book is dedicated to everyone who helped make this a possibility.
(And yes, there were a lot of you.)*

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Trigger Warnings](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty.](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty.](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Chapter Forty-Six](#)

[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Fifty.](#)

[Chapter Fifty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgement](#)

[Books By This Author](#)

Trigger Warnings

Alcohol Use

Drug Use

Attempted SA (SA does not take place and is stopped)

Domestic Violence (Not a major focal point, but it is mentioned)

Attempted Suicide by Overdose (Not a major focal point, but it is mentioned)

Miscarriage (Not a major focal point, but it is mentioned)

Mention of Hospitalization for Mental Health

18+ Up Mature Sexual Content

Chapter One

Juliet

My alarm blares from the bedside table and I curse myself for forgetting to turn it off last night. It's a Saturday, so of course I planned to sleep in. But those plans quickly slip away thanks to the loud beeping beside me.

Dammit.

I'm the type of person who, once I'm awake, that's it. As soon as my brain turns on, there's no shutting it back off. So I watch the ceiling fan spin above my head for a few moments as I blink my eyes into focus.

Two things are necessary to get any sleep: a fan on the highest setting and complete silence. The room is nice and cold, just the way I like it.

I've always been an anxious person, and for some reason, small noises have always driven me crazy. A ticking clock, a dripping faucet, even a bird chirping outside my window. God forbid I be forced to share my bed with a man who snores; I'd lose my mind.

"Jules, I know you're up. I heard your alarm." My roommate and best friend, Alyssa, calls from the kitchen.

I groan loud enough to know she can hear it.

"Oatmeal or fruit?" she asks.

"Both?" I shout back, my voice still scratchy from sleep.

I make my way into the kitchen and slide onto a bar stool and a bowl of oatmeal topped with chopped strawberries quickly appears before me. "Thanks, you're the best."

"I know." She winks before spooning a dollop of oatmeal from her own bowl into her mouth. "So, are you going to come with me tonight?"

Oops. I'd almost forgotten about the concert. She won two tickets to some rock concert in a contest at work and was

adamant that I would be her plus one. That wasn't really my scene, but it was also nearly impossible to tell her no.

"Who is it again?" I ask, and she rolls her eyes.

"Honestly, your complete lack of pop culture knowledge astounds me, Jules. It's Chaotix. You know, only the hottest band of the decade," she scolds.

Listen - I can't help if rock music isn't my thing or if I have no desire to be shoulder-to-shoulder with sweaty strangers all night.

"I don't know, Lys. I think I have some work to catch up on." I know that excuse is bogus, but it's worth a shot.

She shakes her head. "Nope, no way... You are not working tonight. You are going and that's that. It will be fun, I promise."

Fun.

Our definitions of the word are vastly different.

To me, fun is a good book and a cup of coffee. It's a movie night with wine and Chinese takeout. For Alyssa, it's getting dolled up and hitting the town. We are inherently opposite, but somehow our friendship works. Somehow she's my platonic soulmate in every way possible.

Our apartment is small but perfect for just the two of us. Alyssa works as a barista at a local coffee shop - when she isn't trolling for small acting gigs. After six months of searching, I finally landed an internship with a local public relations consulting firm, which means I'm now one step closer to my dream of becoming a publicist. My plan is to one day open my own private firm, but for now, juggling coffee runs and drafting portions of image proposals for my unappreciative boss Valerie will have to do.

"Okay, I *do* have a proposal to finish up before Monday though." I offer, but she shrugs it off.

"Great, so do it tomorrow then. Please, Jules! I don't want to go alone." She pokes out her perfectly pouty lip and bats her

eyelashes. This pout thing is always her go-to when I disagree with one of her schemes.

I groan. “Fine. I have nothing to wear, though.”

She claps her hands together. “Oh, that’s a nonissue. I’m sure I have something that will work.”

This was not going to end well for me. Our taste in fashion was in complete contrast, much like everything else.

“Great,” I mutter sarcastically.

After breakfast, I retreat into my bedroom to finish the proposal I was working on for Monday’s meeting. My objective is to come up with strategies and tactics to successfully improve the image of Naomi Keith, heiress to Keith Hotels and Resorts.

Her father hired us after a rather salacious video surfaced involving Naomi and one of her bodyguards. More specifically, the kind of video you’d find on Pornhub with millions of hits. Her father is famous for the empire he built, and his daughter is famous for her wild escapades and now, her sex tape.

I outline several possible angles, and when I reach the final bullet point, I can’t help but smile.

It’s good. *Damn* good. I know the team will love it, and I can already visualize Valerie rolling her eyes when the partners pat me on the back.

Valerie has made it clear since the first time I spoke up during a meeting that my very presence infuriated her. I knew I was meant to keep quiet and observe, but the words shot out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Unfortunately for Valerie and fortunately for me, the team was thrilled with my ideas. Her, not so much. Either way, I couldn’t let her get me down. I was going to secure a position at Acton Public Relations, and my bitchy supervisor wasn’t going to stand in my way. It’s not my fault that her ideas are stale and the partners want a fresh set of eyes on things.

I click save on the document, pull up the browser, and type *Chaotix* into the search engine. I want to know what I'm getting myself into tonight.

An array of pictures appear. I enlarge the first one; it's a group photo of what I assume to be the band. Each man is unnaturally gorgeous, of course. It's hard to make it in that industry without being easy on the eyes. Talent always seems to play second fiddle. The man who seems to be the leader is oiled up, shirtless, and wearing a pair of tight leather pants that lie low on his hips. His tan skin is tight over the muscles that line his abdomen, and a matte black guitar is strapped to his back. That must be Ryan Knox, the lead singer of Chaotix.

Okay, so he's hot. Like... *really hot*.

The drummer is sporting long blonde hair tied back into a messy bun, and the guitarist looks like he should be on the side of a bus modeling Calvin Klein briefs. The bassist has the most typical appearance of the four; even then, he's still one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen. He has short brown hair and reminds me of one of the jocks from high school that's now all grown up.

My eyes keep circling back to the front man, though. His emerald green eyes are haunting—like they are full of dark secrets and wicked deeds.

I click on a YouTube link for one of their latest music videos. If I thought the lead singer was haunting before, this was the cherry on top. He sings into the camera like he's staring into your soul.

"A crowded room full of faces I don't know,

They scream my name, and my head's about to blow.

Always there, I sit upon this throne-

Why the hell do I still feel so alone?"

The lyrics are in sharp contrast to the mood of the video. He's singing about feeling alone, but women that look like supermodels and are dressed in revealing bikinis throw themselves at him. They grind on his hard body and gyrate along with the beat as he belts out the lyrics.

The motive is to project as much sex appeal as possible. He certainly seems to enjoy their attention—confirmed by his hands roaming the body of one of the groupies.

I shake my head; this is *so* not the approach I would take. But then again, creating a brand for socialites and B-list celebrities slightly differs from creating one for an internationally bestselling and double platinum rock band.

I shut my laptop and head for the bathroom. A shower is exactly what I need.

The moment I step into the spray of hot water, all of the tension leaves my body. I run a razor over my legs. If I had to guess, whatever Alyssa has in store for me will be short, and I doubt stubble would be a good look. I remain under the water for as long as I can stand it before it begins to run cold.

As I wrap the towel around my body, Alyssa calls out to me from the other side of the door. “Jules, hurry up! I need to get in, too!”

I can’t help the sinking feeling brewing in the pit of my stomach. Why do I feel so uneasy about tonight?

It’s just a concert. Everything should be fine... *right?*

Chapter Two

Juliet

Alyssa spent half an hour curling my long blonde hair into the loose spirals she calls “sex kitten curls.” I wasn’t too sure about that description, but I promised her free reign with no push-back for once. She insisted on dark, smokey eyes and bright-red lips for my makeup. When I asked to see the damage in the mirror, she refused, saying that I couldn’t see until her work was complete.

When she laid out my outfit on the bed, I immediately shook my head.

“Not happening.”

She smiles. “You promised!”

That was another thing about our friendship; there are no broken promises.

“You couldn’t have picked something a bit more...?”

“More what?” she asks, raising a brow.

“Just more, Lys. As in *more* fabric. Are you sure that’s not actually lingerie?” I hold up some spandex thing that I think was the top, but truly could probably be worn as a pair of panties.

“You are Juliet 2.0 tonight, baby!” She laughs and thrusts the clothing in my direction.

When I finally look in the mirror, after a bit of a struggle trying to figure out how to even put the top *on*, I barely recognize myself. Alyssa is a miracle worker. It’s like she’s Frenchie from *Grease*, and I just got my badass Sandy makeover.

A black leather mini skirt clings to my hips, and a halter neck leopard print top shows the tiniest bit of my stomach and a moderate amount of cleavage. The top actually covers more than I expected, if I’m being honest. Lys decides on a pair of black boots and loads of layered jewelry to top it all off.

“Perfection!” she squeals.

Her outfit is just as daring. She slides on a dark maroon bodycon mini dress with fishnet tights underneath. When she walks out, I whistle.

“Damn, you look hot, Lys.”

She winks. “We both do.”

The arena is packed so tightly with people that I can barely move. Alyssa’s tickets are in the front row, but even then, we are shoulder to shoulder. The smell of sweat and alcohol permeates the space already, thanks to the close proximity. An electric feeling pulses in the air and I try to adjust to the loud overlapping conversations happening all at once.

The opening act is nothing spectacular; in fact, I can barely make out anything they are saying. The lead singer’s mouth is so close to the microphone that it comes out as a muffled mess.

Beams of light circle the band members as they play, and Alyssa jumps up and down, singing with them.

“Who is this?” I yell to her over the noise.

“Velvet Summer!” she yells back. “Aren’t they great?”

I nod my head unconvincingly, and she just rolls her eyes.

When they finish their set, the stage is cleared quickly. A crew comes in and completely transforms it within a matter of minutes. So far, this has been the most fascinating part of the night. The massive backdrop featuring the Velvet Summer band logo raises back into the ceiling and disappears from view as dozens of stagehands push their equipment off to the side. *Striking the stage* is what the drama teacher called it back in high school.

A voice comes over the speakers and begins to introduce the main event. The crowd goes wild as all the lights in the

place shut off. It's pitch-black, and I reach for Alyssa's hand. She gives it a squeeze in return.

A single spotlight suddenly focuses on the center stage, where a figure slowly ascends from beneath the floor. Screams erupt as the crowd begins chanting the lead's name, "Ryan, Ryan, Ryan!"

When he is fully visible in all his glory, you can almost taste the angst from every person in the arena. The air seems to vibrate with it. My mouth goes dry and goosebumps break out over my skin when my eyes fully take him in.

Like the photos I saw online, he is shirtless and looks like someone slathered him in oil before taking the stage. The contrast of the black leather against his tanned skin is sexy, and there is no denying it. He has dark hair and deep-set eyes that are the color of emeralds. Those eyes seem to scan the crowd before him, but he doesn't smile.

Slowly the stage fills with smoke, backlit with spotlights revealing the other band members.

The guitarist and bassist begin to strum, and I recognize the song as the one from the video. The drummer enters, adding to the beat, slinging his long hair as his head bangs in sync with each note.

As soon as Ryan Knox begins to sing, I can't seem to tear my eyes away from him. Though all the band members are magnetic, he has something else that draws you in just a little more. It's the eyes.

This time when he scans the crowd, his gaze seems to meet mine, and I am reminded of how I felt watching the video. Like he was singing to me, and only me. I get the allure now. He knows what he's doing. There is no telling how many men and women have left one of these shows convinced Ryan Knox saw them.

I expect him to move on to the next girl in the audience, but he doesn't. I feel the heat rising to my cheeks, knowing I must be blushing.

“Jules, he’s looking at you!” Alyssa screams. She grabs my hand and raises it into the air. “Dance with me. Let loose for once!”

I let the music fill me and allow my body to find its rhythm. Alyssa and I sway and laugh as she attempts to twirl me during the guitar solo. When my attention returns to the stage, his eyes are still on me and a smirk plays on his lips.

They continue to crank out songs, the beat getting faster as the crowd gets louder and louder. Ryan pauses to take a sip of water before speaking into the microphone.

“This next song was written after a long hard night on the road.”

God. His singing voice is beautiful, but to hear him speak? This man was *made* to be a star.

Screams erupt, and everyone in the audience, except for me, knows exactly which song he’s introducing.

The band starts to play another fast-paced beat. The lyrics paint the picture of a long hard night alright, one equipped with endless sex and lots of booze. Once again, his eyes find mine. I look away, trying to prevent myself from blushing any further.

It feels like it’s over before it even starts and suddenly the band disappears back into the black of the stage, making their exit.

The crowd slowly begins to thin out when the band is out of view.

“Let’s ask someone to take our picture!” Alyssa suggests. I nod, and she grabs the man’s attention to her right.

We pose, and he snaps the picture. After Alyssa approves it and thanks the man, we start to make our way toward the exit when suddenly a large man places his hand on my shoulder just as we reach the door.

“Ladies, would you like to come backstage?”

Before I can politely decline the offer, Alyssa’s squeals cut me off.

“Yes! Of course!”

My heartbeat thuds in my ears as the realization hits. What the hell is happening?

The large man leads us back into the arena and towards a door that is guarded by security.

“Alyssa...” I say, trying to keep my voice low.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Jules. Please, let me have this!” she pleads.

Well, how do I say no to that? Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, and what would typically be an easy “no” doesn’t seem so cut and dry.

I have instantly been transported into one of those cheesy plotlines where the band points out who they want to fuck from the crowd and has them brought backstage, and my best friend is eating it up.

I’m now starring in my own personal fanfiction.

The large man clad in all black says something into his earpiece and flashes a badge to the man guarding the door. Once we cross the threshold, we’re greeted by roughly a dozen other squealing female fans, all undoubtedly hoping to get a shot with someone in the band. The thought is nauseating.

I feel so out of place here, but I try to tell myself that I can handle a little discomfort for my best friend.

There’s a random assortment of seating scattered around the lounge area, and I can pick out the band members thanks to the cluster of women surrounding them. The guitarist leans against the wall as someone hands him a lit joint.

“Do you think Gareth would hook up with me?” some random blonde bombshell asks, leaning into me.

Her dress, if that’s what you want to call it, barely covers anything. Her body is insane, and I can tell that underneath the pounds of makeup, she’s a beautiful girl.

“Uh, I mean, you look hot? If I had to guess, that’s the only criterion, so you have a good shot.” Sarcasm drips from

my response, but she doesn't seem to pick up on it.

“Thanks, girl!” She reaches into her cleavage and lifts each breast so that they are basically spilling out.

“How do the girls look?” She shakes them at me, and for a moment, I almost launch into a lecture on self-respect and standards, but it's pretty obvious she doesn't give a shit.

“Perfect,” I say. “Now go get your one-night stand on, girl.”

The blonde squeals and makes a beeline toward the unsuspecting rocker.

“You're awful.” Alyssa laughs. She can see right through me, and I join in with her laughter as we watch the blonde throw herself at Gareth. They're against the far wall so it's hard to make out the details, but from what I *can* see, he doesn't seem to mind.

Chapter Three

Juliet

I scan the room, hoping to engage in some good old-fashioned people-watching while Alyssa lives out her fantasy of meeting the band. All of the guys seem to be here except for the frontman. I haven't seen him once since he left the stage.

A man wearing a T-shirt from the venue offers me a drink, and despite my best judgment, I take it. I can almost hear my mother's lecture about accepting alcohol from strangers in the back of my mind.

I've learned Gareth is the guitarist. He seems to pull in women like a magnet, and the girl from earlier is no exception. His hands lie firmly on her ass while she whispers God knows what in his ear. Then, there is Anthony, who prefers to be called 'Ant.' His long, dirty blonde hair has been tied into a bun, and he's currently playing tonsil hockey with a busty redhead. Neil is the bassist. He strikes me as the tamest of the group. His attention isn't on getting laid but on tuning his instrument and periodically hitting a bowl.

I dip my fingers into my drink and swirl the ice cubes around the glass. If I wore a watch, I'd check the time every few minutes. I'm counting down the seconds until we get the hell out of here before I catch some unspeakable disease just from being in the general vicinity.

"Unimpressed?" a deep voice asks from behind me, and I stumble forward.

When I turn to find the source of the question, I'm surprised to see the lead singer standing much too close for comfort. His breath is hot against my skin and the smell of whatever delicious cologne he's wearing makes me take a gulp. I step back.

"Quite, actually."

"I can tell," he retorts flatly.

We stand in awkward silence for a few moments.

“Should I be?” I finally ask.

He shrugs. “Most girls are.”

I laugh. “I’m sure.” He seems surprised by my remark.

“You seem unfazed by all of this. Not your first rodeo backstage, I’m assuming.”

I raise an eyebrow. His insinuation gets a rise out of me, but I have a feeling that was his goal.

“Not used to meeting women that aren’t star-struck groupies, I’m assuming.”

I know I have landed a shot to his ego when he clenches his jaw.

My mouth curves into a smile. “I know plenty of celebrities, and they’re just people.”

I gesture towards the harem of women fluttering around his bandmates. “If they want to treat you like gods, that’s fine. But at the end of the day, you’re just a guy with a record deal and a tour bus.”

He looks me up and down. The look in his eyes is hard to decipher. I can’t tell if it’s disdain or hunger, or maybe just amusement at my boldness. Either way, I’m not interested.

At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

“You know plenty of celebrities, huh?” he asks, challenging me.

“I’m a publicist,” I lie. It’s not like I’ll ever see him again, so what’s the harm in stretching the truth a bit? I mean, I *will* be a publicist. “So I see right through all this shit.”

“Interesting.” He leans into me, and his deep voice sends a wave of need through my body. I find myself clenching my thighs together in an attempt to soothe the ache. How is he having this effect on me? “Do you specialize in musicians?”

Well, Mr. Rock Star, at this very moment, I wish very much that I specialized in musicians... in more ways than one.

I shake my head. “Not particularly. At the moment, I’m revamping the image of a socialite gone wild.”

“So, in your professional opinion, how’s my image?” His tone is low, and I can feel a shiver crawling up my spine. I have never been one to lose myself because of a guy, but Jesus, this man, in particular, is an *Adonis*.

Confidence, Juliet. Just fake confidence.

“You’re obviously going for the unattainable and mysterious vibe, and judging by what’s happening in this room, it seems to work for you. I’m not a fan of the unattainable rock god thing, but that all comes down to personal preference. You have a specific target audience, and you cater to it. If I had to guess, pulling back women from the crowd for a more *intimate* fan experience is just another ploy by your management to keep in line with the rock star persona. However, I doubt you mind. The tight leather pants, the groupies, the oiled-up skin, and the rebel without a cause attitude? It’s all rather predictable if you ask me.”

I can’t tell if he is intrigued or offended by my assessment, and I wonder if I laid it on a little too thick.

“And you feel a different approach would be more beneficial to my brand?”

I bite my lip and consider his question. “Probably not. In your world, sex sells. I’m sure a straight-laced rock star wouldn’t be very appealing to the masses. In fact, your sales would probably tank the moment you stopped dry-humping models in your music videos.”

I meant that last part as a joke, sort of.

A smile appears on his lips. “What’s your name?”

“Juliet,” I say, growing more aware of our closeness with each second. I can’t explain it, but there is something about this man that makes my insides quicken. Keeping my cool is no easy feat.

“Ryan Knox,” he says, introducing himself. The way his deep voice purrs out his own name is intoxicating. “So, Juliet. Who do you represent?”

Fuck.

Abort mission.

The last thing I need right now is for my bosses to get a call that I was talking shit to one of the biggest stars on the planet.

As if on cue, Alyssa throws her arms around my shoulder and her eyes go wide as she realizes who I'm standing with. "Holy shit, it's you. Hi. I'm a huge fan."

I have never been more thankful for an interruption.

"Ryan, this is Alyssa. My best friend." I nod in her direction, and he flashes her a wicked smile. I roll my eyes.

"Hello, Alyssa. Your friend was just schooling me on my image. Tell me, do you find me mysterious and unattainable?" He directs the question to her, but his eyes never leave mine.

She giggles nervously. "Uh, sure. I guess."

"And predictable?" he continues.

The challenge in his eyes is mouthwatering.

Alyssa shakes her head. "Oh, no! I think you're incredible. You know, like, really incredible."

I'm not sure how to feel about her fawning over him, but I push away the unwelcome possessiveness just as quickly as it comes on.

"I don't know; I may need to fire my publicist. Clearly, I'm being steered in the wrong direction. Tell me, Juliet. Which firm do you work for? Or do you own your own? It seems you have quite a bit of knowledge when it comes to branding a rock star."

He's testing me, trying to figure out if I can back up all the shit I've been spewing out.

"Oh! Jules isn't a—" I grab her arm before she can reveal that I've just bullshitted my way into a very precarious situation. I can imagine the look on his face when she finishes that sentence.

“Jules isn’t a publicist; she’s just an intern.”

Not to mention our company has never even come close to representing someone of his magnitude.

“Alyssa, it’s getting late. I need to get home. That proposal isn’t going to finish itself,” I say, my eyes pleading with her to catch on.

“Oh, uh... yeah. Your proposal. For your client. Your... famous client. Because you’re a publicist,” she says.

Jesus. And she wants to be an actress? Please remind me to sign her up for the next improv class I can find.

Ryan’s face gives away his amusement.

I begin to drag my best friend toward the exit. “It was nice to meet you!” she calls out to him.

“You too,” he replies with an annoying smirk. “And Juliet, I hope to see you again.”

When we’re finally outside, fresh air slams into me. I let out a deep breath and try to steady myself.

“Oh my God, Jules. Ryan Knox was flirting with you. Like, actually fucking flirting with you,” Alyssa squeals.

His parting words to me didn’t seem like flirting. In fact, it felt more like a warning.

Chapter Four

Ryan

It isn't often that someone surprises me these days. The people I deal with are so predictable it's exhausting.

Not including my bandmates and manager, the only other people I am surrounded by are either on my payroll or want to fuck me. Don't get me wrong, sometimes the latter is a scenario I take advantage of, but it doesn't make for an exciting dating pool.

Meeting Juliet, the publicist who enjoys calling me on my shit and isn't intimidated by my fame, is the most exciting thing that's happened to me in quite some time.

Toss in the fact that she's stunning and has an absolutely delicious body with mouth-watering curves, and you can bet your ass I'm intrigued.

When she turned on her heel, I got a whiff of raspberries and vanilla, it must be her shampoo, and it took everything I had not to follow her out of the venue. The only thing that stopped me was the understanding that she wasn't like the typical groupie that graced the presence of the Chaotix boys. She's different.

She isn't the kind of girl you pull backstage for a quick fuck.

She's the girl you take your time with, the kind that makes you work for her attention and affection.

"Knox!" My bandmate Gareth calls out from across the room. He wiggles his eyebrows and cocks his head between the two women standing on either side of him, and I know all too well what that means.

I look back toward the exit, my mind still swimming with everything I'd like to do with Juliet's smart mouth.

"Not tonight," I finally mouth to Gareth.

There is no way I could end my night with anyone else's lips wrapped around my cock.

Gareth shrugs and puts an arm around each woman, leading them out of the room and towards one of the SUVs waiting outside.

Someone is going to have a good night.

I pull out my phone and tap a few times on the screen as my feet take me out the back doors and into the breezy night air. You don't realize how stuffy a concert venue is until you step back into the world.

The cars are lined up against the curb, and flashes of bright light begin to break out across the darkness.

“Ryan! Ryan! Over here!”

I raise a hand in the air and wave toward the row of paparazzi snapping photos. They're annoying as hell, but just like any of us, they're just trying to make a living. I remember those days when the only shows we played were in dive bars, and the only payment was a few free pitchers of beer.

I take my time getting into the back of the SUV; the least I can do is give them some decent shots. I'm well aware a good photo could mean the difference between making rent this month or facing eviction.

I also know that the shot they undoubtedly got of Gareth and his dip into the land of double trouble will fetch a pretty penny.

The driver gives me a tight smile when I slide into the back seat, and he wastes no time pulling out into the street. We ride in silence, and I'm thankful for the peace. It's a welcome change from the environment I just left.

I pull out my phone and tap on the screen until a list of every local Public Relations company in the state appears.

I click through each one and navigate to the pages that display headshots of the publicists on their payroll, growing more frustrated with each dead end that doesn't lead me to her.

There are only two options that seem plausible.

Either the firm she works for is too small for a souped-up website, or she lied. I'm more inclined to think it's the first

option. She knew too much and was too quick on her feet to have bullshitted that entire conversation.

“Going to make this hard on me, aren’t you?” I mumble under my breath.

“Sir?”

I look up and meet the driver’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “Nothing, sorry.”

He nods, and I train my eyes back on the screen.

You won’t be able to hide from me, Juliet.

Chapter Five

Juliet

One week later

When I walk into work this morning, the office seems to be buzzing with a strange energy I couldn't place.

"This is a disaster," one of the partners, Max, groans.

I take my place at the conference table. "Is everything okay?" I ask after watching him bury his face in his hands.

"No, Juliet. Everything is not okay." Valerie's cold voice cuts through the tension like a knife. "Everything is shit."

A pit begins to form in my stomach. "What's happened?"

There's no response to my question. Instead, everyone continues their conversation around me as if I'm not even there.

"We must find a way to swing this in our favor." Max's partner Jim says when he enters the room. "I need ideas. Good ideas. How can we come out on top of this?"

Max and Jim started Acton Public Relations together, and though the company had grown, they still maintained 50/50 control.

"Can someone explain what happened, please?" I ask, this time raising my voice so that I'm heard. Valerie shoots daggers in my direction. She can't stand when I try to be a part of the team, even though that is what I am here for. Since I first spoke up all those months ago, Max and Jim have insisted I sit in on every brainstorming meeting.

Max lowers his head as Jim speaks. "Naomi Keith overdosed last night; she's at Cardinal East recovering."

Well shit, that's not what I expected.

"Her father is beside himself. I don't know which is worse, that he found her like that or that he now feels her image is beyond saving. The man is at his wit's end," Max adds.

"That's awful. Is she going to be okay?" I ask.

“Seriously? Who fucking cares. This little girl has probably just cost us one of our biggest accounts,” Valerie spits.

I wish I could tell her exactly what I think about her heartless words, but all that would do is cause a rift in the office that would benefit no one. Especially not the broken girl in a hospital bed across town who is clearly battling some serious demons. This wasn’t just about making money; this was about someone’s life.

“TMZ is already having a field day. When I find out who leaked this, I’ll have their ass. They will never work in this town again.” I am not used to the anger dripping from Jim’s words.

“Ideas. I need ideas,” Max yells.

Valerie pipes up first. “Our only option is to shut up the media and sweep this shit under the rug. We pay off the news outlets, put a gag order on the hospital staff, and stick her ass in a rehab facility in Timbuktu where no one can find her.”

Instinct takes over, and I shake my head furiously. I don’t mean to, but I can’t help it.

“What, you have a better plan, intern?” she challenges.

“Look, the story is out. Staging a cover-up now will only add fuel to the fire. It will be obvious that daddy’s money made it all go away. How does that help in the long run? Why not embrace it?” Max and Jim eye me curiously, though Valerie looks ready to gag me and ship me off with Naomi.

“Go on,” Jim says, nodding in my direction.

“Okay, what does the world love more than a dumpster fire?” I ask, though I don’t give anyone long enough to offer an answer. “A comeback story, you know, gives the people something to root for. Mental illness and addiction are two of the hottest-button issues right now. If the goal is to make this girl relatable, why not let her advocate for something that a huge percent of the population battle with?”

Max scrapes his knuckles against his unshaven face. “And how would we do that?”

“Get the girl some help. Real help. Document the process. Show the good, the bad, and the ugly. Let her vocalize her struggles for once in her life without penalizing her for not being perfect. Then, we make her an icon for all the other people fighting the same fight. I’m thinking of benefits and galas in honor of charities that focus on these issues. Funneling tons of money into these organizations shows that Keith Hotels and Resorts cares more than just day spas and beachfront views.” I’m on a roll now, and I can feel it. “Give Naomi something that makes her feel like she matters, give her a purpose.”

Silence fills the room. Of course, Valerie has to be the one to speak first.

She glances between Jim and Max. “You can’t seriously be considering that? Do you actually think that shouting Naomi’s problems from the rooftops is a good idea? Our job is to make it seem like she isn’t a royal fuck up, not prove that she is.”

“Our job is to help our client, not just pretty her up and parade her around like a prized show pony.” I grit through clenched teeth.

“You think just bec—” Valerie launches into me, but Max holds up a hand to quiet her. Surprisingly, she obeys.

He takes a deep breath. “It could be crazy enough to work. I’m not sure that we have another option. It’s a risk, but it’s our last shot at this point.” His eyes meet Jim’s, and they share a nod. “Kate, call Mr. Keith. I need to run this by him. Juliet, I want your proposal on my desk within the hour.”

“Excuse me?” Valerie exclaims; the shock on her face is unmistakable. “Are you all forgetting she’s an intern? The ink on her degree is barely dry, and you want her to take the lead on an entire proposal? What, are you going to let her present it to Mr. Keith too?”

Max raises a brow. “In fact, I am. Juliet, can you handle that?”

I couldn’t hide the grin on my face if I tried. “Absolutely.”

Valerie storms from the room, and the door shuts behind her with a loud slam.

“Jim, you’ll handle that? I don’t have the patience this morning,” Max asks, referring to Valerie’s outburst. Jim nods. “And Juliet?”

I look up from my tablet, where I’ve already begun jotting down notes. “Yes?”

“If you pull off this pitch with Mr. Keith, I think it’s safe to say you’ve more than earned a full-time position here.”

My ears begin to ring, and I can feel the heat radiating over my skin. “Y-yes, sir. I won’t let you down.”

I have to pull this off. This is the next step toward my dream. All I have to do is convince Mr. Keith that this is the best way to save his daughter’s reputation and her life. If I can do this, I will no longer be an intern. Opportunities like this don’t often happen in the real world, and there is no way in hell I will let it slip away. Now, I have to barricade myself at my desk and write the proposal of a lifetime.

Well, as soon as I’m done puking up my guts in the bathroom.

Chapter Six

Juliet

After I finish the pitch, I try to keep from fidgeting mercilessly as I await Mr. Keith's response. The words flew from my mouth way too fast during the presentation, and I know my excitement must have been palpable.

"I don't think we've met," he eventually says in a deep, gruff voice. The dark circles under his eyes are a dead giveaway of the sleepless night he's endured after what happened with his daughter.

"Juliet is a newer addition to Acton PR, but as you can tell, she's quite passionate," Jim explains.

"I see that," Mr. Keith replies. "Tell me, Juliet, do you believe this is the best approach? Airing out my daughter's dirty laundry for the world to see? Don't you think we're throwing her to the sharks? This could easily turn into a feeding frenzy, and the media could tear her apart."

Well, at least I know now that his main concern is his daughter, not his image. I can work with that.

"Mr. Keith, it is clear that you love your daughter very much. I respect that, and I also respect that this is a terrifying move for you. You are right that this could lead to what some would consider social suicide. However, I honestly believe this is the only way to have a favorable outcome. I'm talking about a long-term favorable outcome. Sure, we can sweep it under the rug and keep forcing her to pretend she's fine. But when it happens again, in a month or a year? Why not take this as the opportunity to allow her to heal truly, and to become someone she can be proud of? Please give her a voice for once in her life. Don't ask her to be the heiress to Keith Hotels and Resorts; give her a chance to become Naomi first."

Mr. Keith clears his throat, and his eyes glaze over.

Shit. I've upset him.

"Juliet, Miss?" he asks.

“Warren. Juliet Warren,” I answer.

“Miss Warren, I believe this is the first time I’ve spoken with anyone like you. Someone who seems actually to care about my daughter’s future, not just the here and now and what is profitable. I feel that is something even I myself have struggled with over the last few years.” He rises from the table, and Jim and Max follow suit. “Tell me what you need from me, and I’ll do it. Gentlemen, it seems you’ve found an extraordinary addition to your team. Thank you for putting so much of your heart into this, Juliet.”

I brace myself against the wall once the men have left the room. Pure adrenaline is coursing through my veins at this point, and I am pretty sure that is the only thing keeping me from passing out. After a few moments, Max reenters the room and wraps an arm around my shoulders.

“Good job, kid.” His eyes are swimming with pride.

“Thanks.” I blink back tears. “That was incredible.”

“Your first solo pitch is always exhilarating. I didn’t expect it to come this soon, but you’re going to be a rock star, Juliet. I’m just glad to have you on our side. Not as an intern, but a real member of the team.”

His term of endearment makes me giggle.

“Speaking of rock stars, did I tell you I met Ryan Knox last weekend?”

“As in, Chaotix lead singer Ryan Knox?” Max seems surprised at my admission.

“The very same. The band pulled my roommate and me backstage after their concert,” I say with a grin. Recounting the sheer ridiculousness of the evening is comical. I leave out the part where I pretended to be an established publicist while analyzing every detail of his persona.

“And did you, by any chance, mention Acton to him at any point during your encounter?” Max asks, a strange look on his face.

“No. Why?” A feeling of unease begins creeping its way up my spine.

“You never mentioned the line of work you were in?” he continues.

“It may have briefly come up,” I say, my voice weakening. “Max, Why?”

He shrugs. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence.”

I want to shake him. “What is? What is a coincidence?”

“Just that the band’s manager put in a call earlier this week. They are exploring new options for a summer tour. We figured they were putting feelers out with all the agencies in the area, though I doubt we have a shot at landing the account.”

I can feel the bile rising to my throat again. Of course, it’s a coincidence.

“O-Oh, really?” I stammer out.

My fingers begin to fidget relentlessly behind my back as I try to hide my internal freakout.

Max nods. “How funny that you meet Ryan, and then they reach out for a meeting? Such a small world.”

Right. A small world.

“We’ve never represented anyone as big as them. I mean, why would they even have us on their list?” I ask.

“I thought the same thing, though after asking around, it seems like crazier partnerships have been made. The band’s business decisions are often quite unconventional. The art from their latest album came from a street artist they discovered while on the road, and I even read that they found their drummer in a dive bar in the middle of nowhere.” He shrugs. “We’d be idiots not to try at least. It could open up an entirely new market.”

My mouth goes dry, and my tongue feels like sandpaper. “You talk as if we have a meeting lined up or something. How

are we going to get them even to hear us out? It seems like a shot in the dark.”

Realistically speaking, a band of their caliber wouldn't even entertain a PR company that didn't already have clients of a similar range under their belt.

“Oh, we do. Have a meeting that is—Monday morning. As I said, it's a long shot. But hey, what's the harm in giving them a pitch?”

I still. “They are coming here? Like, to our office?”

Max laughs. “Of course. Isn't this where we meet with all prospective clients? I've already had Kate work out the catering and clear my schedule. I'll depend on you to have an arsenal of those home run ideas stocked up, too.”

“What? You want me in the meeting?”

I can barely contain the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside me.

“You're not an intern anymore, remember? Plus, I don't just want you in the meeting. We *need* you at that meeting. The fresh way you approach things is very quickly becoming an asset, Juliet.”

I nod, unsure of what to say.

“Anyways, take the rest of the day off, kid. You've earned it. Enjoy your weekend. We'll need all hands on deck for Monday's meeting with Chaotix's management.”

Max leaves me alone in the conference room again, and the only solace in his words is that the meeting is with the band's management team. Not the band themselves.

I'm not sure I can handle facing Ryan again. He seemed to find no issue with invading every square inch of my personal space, and I didn't seem to mind it at all. It was unlike me to be so attracted to someone that I could feel my body agreeing to things my mind would never entertain.

There was also the tiny nagging inner voice that seemed to believe that my chance meeting with Ryan Knox somehow put this chain of events into motion. That was ridiculous, though.

There was no way in hell a conversation with an ordinary girl backstage at a show would lead to this man seeking me out in this way. I doubted he could even pick me out of a crowd again if given the opportunity.

I push away the thoughts and head to my desk to gather my purse and jacket. What I couldn't get rid of was the glare Valerie shot my way as I walked out the door.

Chapter Seven

Juliet

When I step foot into the office on Monday morning, I feel like a new woman. I look like a completely new woman, too. I let Alyssa do my makeup, and instead of the typical black slacks and blouse, I opted for a dress that spectacularly accentuated my curves. Despite the pep talk, I'd given myself the entire ride to work, I still felt like a child playing dress-up in her mother's clothes.

"You look hot, Jules! The sexy professional thing you have going on is delectable." Alyssa had said as I left the apartment.

She has always been my favorite hype girl, and this morning I needed it more than ever.

"Give a girl a promotion and she turns into something completely unrecognizable," Valerie remarks with a sneer when she sees me.

"I think she looks great," Kate offers with a wink. "Wanted to make an appearance on your first day at the big kid's table, huh?"

I grin. "I guess so."

Even though I knew this meeting was with the Chaotix management team, I still felt this nagging need to look my best. Plus, I wanted to prove to the partners that I could handle the big leagues.

The dress isn't revealing by any means. It's knee-length and sports a conservative neckline. The only thing suggestive about it was that it left little to the imagination regarding what I'm hiding underneath. I know I have a decent figure; I just rarely put it on display for the world to see. It was more of a comfort zone thing.

"Are you ready for this?" Max says, clasping an arm around me. "You sure as hell look ready to take on the world."

Max was in his late fifties but had become somewhere between the older brother I never had and the father figure I

always yearned for. He'd taken me under his wing, and our bond was unmistakable.

"Yep, ready as I'll ever be. So what's the plan?" I ask, trying to fake as much confidence as possible.

Max goes over the outlines prepared by the senior account managers. They are pretty good, and I can't hide my surprise. While I knew we were a capable agency, I was curious if we could be competitive.

The conference room buffet table is covered with a glorious spread of fruits and pastries. A large assortment of coffees and teas is nestled in the corner, and printed copies of the proposals are placed in front of each seat. We certainly *look* the part.

I find my seat and place my tablet and notepad on the table. My hands are fidgeting relentlessly underneath the table, and when Valerie notices, she rolls her eyes. Of course, she is seated right next to me, as if I wasn't already on edge enough.

"Stop that," she seethes under her breath.

"Sorry, I'm just nervous," I squeak out.

Another eye roll. "It isn't like you'll even be speaking. Just sit still. You're distracting me."

I wish I knew why she was so hateful toward me. Jealousy is one thing, but she takes it to a whole different level.

The sound of deep laughter from the lobby causes me to straighten my posture. They are coming in.

"What a lovely and quaint office," a feminine voice coos. Her short jet-black hair is sculpted into a perfect pixie cut, and her pantsuit looks like it costs more than my apartment. She slides into one of the chairs and shoots me a warm smile. "Olivia Alton, nice to meet you."

I return her smile. "Juliet. Glad you could be here today."

Before I can even punctuate the sentence, Valerie also takes the opportunity to introduce herself. "Valerie Morgan, senior account manager."

Her fake warmth is nothing compared to the genuineness of the woman before us. Olivia nods, greeting her.

“Ah, come in, boys. Get settled,” the woman purrs.

My stomach fell to my feet. I see Gareth first, then Neil. When Ant’s long blonde locks come into view, I know what follows will surely bring another bout of nausea. I keep my gaze straight ahead as the men plop into the chairs.

“Gentlemen, we are pleased you decided to join this little meeting today,” Jim croons. “I know you all keep hectic schedules, so we won’t waste a moment of your time. Max, how about you get started?”

It takes every ounce of raw determination within me to avoid glancing over at Ryan. I can feel his eyes on me. I’m curious if he recognizes me or is trying to place why I seem vaguely familiar.

Max launches into the presentation, and I must say he nails it. Their ideas for the Summer tour are not groundbreaking by any means, but the sheer sureness with which he delivers them could fool most. When he concludes, the floor is turned over to the potential clients for commentary.

Olivia begins. “We’re looking for something a bit broader than just the tour. There will also be a new song released. It will be the highlight of each performance, and they will debut it at every venue. With that comes a music video.” She glances towards the band. “There has been contention among the guys on the direction of the video, and so far, the agencies we’ve approached haven’t been able to remedy that. I’d love to hear your thoughts.”

Max and Jim look at each other, and I know this is unexpected. They have yet to prepare for a music video, and the outlines focused solely on the tour.

Olivia continues. “I’ve brought a sample cut of the new song. It’s rough, but you can get the idea.” She presses play on the audio clip from her phone, and the room falls silent as everyone listens.

Ryan's unmistakable voice fills the room. It's another slow song that surprises me. Most of their set included fast-paced power beats that got the crowd on their feet. This, on the other hand, was smooth and sultry.

Experience the touch of my hands wandering all over her body,

tracing the contours of the work of art before me.

That wonderful tingling right under my skin when my fingers graze over her curves.

At what point did I know she had won?

The words are beautiful and vividly paint a story in my mind. I can picture this mysterious woman coming in and completely wrecking the world of a man so far removed from the concept of love.

*Was it the moment I pushed into her for the first time,
the first kiss, or her fingers laced in mine?*

*When we rose from the tangled sheets, I knew,
my fate was sealed.*

I know immediately this is a song that women all over the world will hear and swoon over. They will imagine it's about them, that a person could feel this way for them one day. It'll be an instant panty dropper.

When the short clip is over, Jim claps his hands together. "It's a hit; I can tell you that at the very least."

"Agreed," Valerie says in a low voice, directing her attention toward Ryan. "You sell it very well, you know."

I scrunch my face, roll my eyes, and look between her and Ryan, initiating eye contact for the first time.

Seriously, Valerie? Try to be a little less desperate.

When our eyes finally meet, there is a spark. A spark that I am more than likely imagining. I mean, it's hard to hear lyrics like that and not get a little turned on.

Olivia clears her throat. “Yes, we’re very excited about it. Now, back to the video. What direction would you recommend? What story would you tell?”

Max looks deep in thought, and the silence is deafening. God, please let someone speak up.

Chapter Eight

Juliet

Ant has turned two pens into makeshift drumsticks and is now tapping a tune using the glass conference table. Gareth looks completely over it, and Neil is at least trying to give the appearance that he's interested in what we may say.

I find myself fighting the urge to look at Ryan, and when I do, I wish I hadn't. His eyes are locked onto mine as if he is willing me to speak up like I did the night we met.

Valerie looks at Max. "May I?"

He nods, giving her the go-ahead to provide her input.

"As we all know, your videos are known for their sex appeal. Down and dirty, just the way your fans like it. Why fix what isn't broken? I see women reaching for Ryan as he sings, throwing themselves at him, believing the words are for them. The key here is to leave the meaning ambiguous and open-ended so that every poor soul out there can fantasize that they are the one getting their brains screwed out by him."

She seems pleased with herself when she shrugs, and Olivia looks underwhelmed, to both my surprise and horror. I say to my surprise because Valerie is right. All their videos follow the same storyline. Women throw themselves at the band, thrusting and grinding as the music takes a back seat. It's to my horror because I know how important this account would be to this agency, and judging by the disappointment on Olivia's face, we are a few moments from blowing it.

I take a deep breath. "Or, you could go in a completely different direction."

All eyes are on me, especially Valerie's. I can feel the heat radiating off of her.

"And by that, you mean?" Olivia asks, intrigued by my sudden outburst.

"Well, these lyrics don't sound like they were meant to be ambiguous. It's the kind of words that are meant for one

person, so tell that story. Tell the story of the bad boy who was immune to love until his kryptonite came along.”

More silence fills the space between us. The only exception is the large clock ticking on the back wall.

“Keep talking.” Olivia urges after a few seconds. Ant has stopped drumming on the table, and Gareth seems to be listening now.

“It’s like this; of course, women want to feel like they could get lucky enough to roll around in the hay with a member of Chaotix. But what would be the epic dream beyond that? To know that beyond being a meaningless fuck, it’s possible to tame even a man like that. Show the turmoil of a man so afraid to love, so closed off from it all, and then the release when he surrenders to it.”

I glance awkwardly around the room. Max is sporting a shit-eating grin that says, “I told you so.” Jim looks equally as pleased. I don’t even bother looking at Valerie; I already know what she has in store for me.

One corner of Olivia’s mouth curves into a smile. “Now that is something I can work with. Thoughts?” She directs the question to the boys. All three of them look at Ryan, and I immediately discern that he is the point of contention she referenced.

He leans back in the chair, places both hands on the back of his head, and speaks after what feels like an eternity. “Finally, someone gets it.”

Everyone on the Acton PR team lets out a sigh of relief.

“Alright, so it seems like we could be onto something. However, It goes without saying that this firm has never handled a client of this magnitude, though I am not sure, considering this latest development, that it couldn’t work. Be that as it may, it’s still a risk. Why should we choose you over a larger, more experienced agency?” Olivia crosses her arms and regards Max and Jim, then her eyes find mine.

“If you have to ask yourself that, then maybe you shouldn’t,” I say, the words coming out much more

confidently than I had anticipated.

“Pardon?” I know I’ve surprised her.

“It’s clear that these larger, more experienced agencies have a singular point of view regarding the Chaotix brand. Same tours, same music videos, same everything. If you want something new, something outside the box, you’ll have to switch up the scenery. You seem to be very good at what you do, Mrs. Alton. So are we. We may not currently have our toes dipped into this market, but that should only tell you that all our resources would be funneled into this project. Plus, our fresh ideas will never have graced your competition’s ears. It’s a win-win for both sides.” I finally take a breath and pray that I haven’t just blown this.

A smile reaches her lips. “I have a proposition. We’ll get your notes on the shoot, allow you to handle the project completely, and if it turns into something worth a damn, you’ve got the contract for the tour. Call it a trial run.”

Max jumps up from his seat. “I believe that is more than fair, Mrs. Alton. We’d be happy to assist in any way necessary.”

She scoffs. “Be careful what you ask for; these guys can be very demanding.”

“Ah, we can handle it.” Jim offers, rising to stand at Max’s side.

“Very well, you can excuse your team, and we can talk about logistics.” Olivia’s smile finds me. I return it, grab my tablet, and exit the room. Once out in the lobby, I resist the urge to begin jumping wildly around.

“Holy shit, I can’t believe that just happened,” I say to myself, my mind buzzing from the excitement.

“Oh, really? Because you made me look like a fucking idiot in there, Juliet,” Valerie sneers. “I’m a senior account manager; you understand that, right? How dare you jump in on my pitch.”

I shift uncomfortably. “I wasn’t trying to take over the pitch; I just saw that they were hoping for something a little

different. I just wanted to help the team land the account, Valerie. It wasn't personal."

There is nothing I can say that will make Valerie believe that I wasn't gunning for her. Her paranoia over my motives here has always been evident, and despite every effort to prove myself, she's always maintained her apparent hatred for me.

"Yeah, okay. Tell it to someone that buys your shit, Juliet. Your little charm may have worked on them, but it will be the other account managers that handle the contract... and *me*. Learn your place, and fast." With that, she turns on her heel and stalks to her office.

"Wicked Witch of the East Coast strikes again," Kate mutters under her breath as she takes a seat at the reception desk.

I let out a groan and lean against the wall. "What did I ever do to make her hate me so much? I don't get it."

Kate laughs. "You have more talent for this business in your pinky finger than she has in her entire body. She knows it; hell, everyone knows it. Jealousy is an ugly thing, sweet Jules."

I can't help but smile at Kate's endearment. "Thanks. That means a lot."

When the conference room door opens and the band members file out into the lobby, Ryan's emerald eyes find mine. The fluorescent bulbs make them almost appear to shimmer as he walks. He's wearing dark denim jeans and a plain black v-neck T-shirt. Without all the oil and leather, he seems much more *real*. Don't get me wrong, he's still a god among men- but in this setting, he doesn't seem so much like a figment of my imagination.

"Let's plan a call for Friday, Olivia. We can have all the fine print ironed out by then," Max says, outstretching his hand. She takes it and shakes it firmly.

"Good deal. I look forward to seeing you pull this all together," she states after releasing his hand.

Ryan is the last to exit the room. He tilts his head as if to ask me for a word. When I approach him, the air seems to vibrate. It's like when you're in science class in high school, and the teacher shows how different elements can affect each other when they are brought together.

"Ryan," I say once the space between us has been reduced to about a foot.

"Juliet. I had a feeling we'd be seeing each other again someday, funny how life works." The tone of his voice raises alarm bells. The knowing look he gives me, paired with the scheming smirk on his lips, tells me that finding Acton PR was no coincidence.

How did he manage to find me? He had little to nothing to go off of.

"How?" I ask, barely a whisper.

"Well, when you have an unlimited supply of grunts that are happy to locate anything you request and all the money in the world to pay them, it isn't so hard," he replies, matching my hushed voice.

I purse my lips. "Stalker."

He grins. "I prefer... *determined*. Let's say you made an impression that wasn't easy to forget."

Something happens that I am not accustomed to, and I'm at a loss for words. The silence only intensifies whatever cosmic reaction is happening in the air around us. Ryan leans into me and I can smell the minty residue from his mouthwash on his breath.

"I have to get going," he says after a beat, taking a step away from me and breaking the spell. "I look forward to working with you *very closely*."

The way he draws out the last word sends a shiver down my spine.

The elevator closes, and I feel like I can finally breathe again. This man is going to be a challenge. I can already tell. I

may be many things, but a woman who turns to putty over some sexy rock star is not going to be one of them.

Chapter Nine

Ryan

“I have to give it to you, Ryan; you might be onto something,” Olivia says with a smile as she slides into the back of a blacked-out SUV.

I give her a knowing grin and wrap my fingers around the door frame. “I told you we needed a change.”

It hadn’t been easy to convince the team to waste an afternoon hearing a pitch from an unknown PR company that had zero experience dealing with a rock band, especially when my only motive for forcing the meeting was to see *her* again.

“I won’t say it’s a home run just yet, but I do see the potential. It was a good call.”

Coming from Olivia, that’s as good a compliment as I can expect.

I wouldn’t know the difference between this company or any other PR firm in the city, not that I gave a fuck. I was only concerned with my own selfish desires, and those desires made making this pitch happen a necessity.

“I’ll connect later this week. Stay out of trouble until then.”

I give my manager a wink before shutting the door.

The Juliet I saw today couldn’t have been more different than the one from the concert, aesthetically speaking, anyways. She was dressed to fit into my world that night, but now she looked more... polished.

Those big curls were trained into a tight bun that hit right at the base of her neck, and the dark makeup was nowhere to be seen. This version of her was perfectly professional in every way.

Her fire still burned just as bright, though. There was no mistaking that. She couldn’t hide it even if she tried.

I saw the way her eyes cut, and her jaw clenched each time the woman named Valerie tried to silence her. It takes someone special to command the room when it's filled with people who have more knowledge than you in an industry, but there wasn't a shred of fear in her eyes when she spoke.

I knew it wasn't just me when Olivia's mouth turned from the normal straight line to a hint of a smile. My manager is a kind woman, but when it comes to business, she doesn't play around.

"Any day now, Knox," Gareth calls out from our car. "I'm hungry and hungover, and unless you want to deal with the fun that comes with that combo..." he trails off.

"Yeah, yeah. Coming," I reply, casting one last glance up at Acton PR before sliding in.

"Burgers or Pizza?" Neil asks, his eyes not leaving his phone screen. His fingers swipe across it, likely playing a game of virtual poker.

"The better question is do we want a low-key evening, or are we aiming to cause a scene?" I answer, mentally preparing myself for what I already know to be the answer.

If there is ever a chance to give the fans a random sighting, that tends to be the direction we take, especially when we aren't being supervised.

"I'm down for some chaos if you guys are," Ant says, a mischievous smirk already playing on his lips.

Neil groans but doesn't argue. He rarely does. On stage, he's all rock-n-roll, but the second we step off? He's just Neil, a guy who wants to smoke a bowl, eat some grub, and be left alone. He's also the grump of the group, but we love him all the same.

"Sure, whatever."

Gareth fist-bumps Ant in agreement, and I turn my attention to the window.

"Look up some local haunts," I say to no one in particular. "Olivia said to stay out of trouble," which earns me a

collective laugh from the boys.

We may be frequent flyers when it comes to the big apple, but that doesn't mean it's easy to keep up with all the hot clubs in the area.

I can't think of one night that has started like this that didn't end with the four of us sloshed out of our minds and our faces plastered all over every tabloid by the time the sun came up.

She knew better than that when she said it, but it's her job to say it anyway.

"Let's hit that Irish pub on the main drag and then play it by ear from there," Ant suggests, and I give the nod.

My bandmates launch into a discussion about something, but I can't seem to focus on their words. Instead, my attention is trained on the blur of buildings and cars that pass by the window. My mind is already honed in on the next time I'll see Juliet.

Chapter Ten

Juliet

The rest of the week was a blur. Between brainstorming meetings for the music video and trying to mentally prepare myself to face Ryan again, I'm exhausted. I've worked harder in the last five days than ever before, and it felt damn good to have that hard work appreciated.

Max was constantly expressing his pride and excitement over what I was bringing to the team, and for once, I could see my dreams *actually* becoming reality. I would never have guessed that the world of music publicity would be so exhilarating.

The call with Olivia went off without a hitch, and soon the weekend came and the adrenaline of the week drained out of me faster than a frat guy shotgunning a beer. It was nearly impossible to leave my bed right now but that was just fine. I needed all the rest I could get for the shoot.

"Jules, are you seriously going to be a zombie all weekend?" Alyssa had asked when Saturday finally rolled around and I was still sporting the same pair of fuzzy pajama pants and an oversized sweatshirt as I had the night before.

"You're damn right I am," I replied, plopping down onto the sofa with a bag of cheese puffs.

My weekend was flying by way too fast, and the anticipation for the shoot made it almost impossible to relax completely.

The Chaotix shoot was scheduled for Wednesday and despite Valerie's best efforts, there was nothing on this planet that was going to keep me from being there. This was my baby, and I was going to see it through. I was going to give this everything I had to make sure Acton PR landed this deal.

The hardest task so far had been casting Ryan's love interest. First thing Monday morning we were met with the headshots of dozens of hopefuls covering the conference table. Originally there were actually more, but this was who

remained after Olivia made her cuts. I guess that's to be expected when you need someone to play the love interest of one of the biggest rock stars in the world for their new music video.

We narrowed it down to a few options, but it was obvious that everyone was tired of staring at the endless stream of photographs.

“How about her?” Jim held up the portrait of a gorgeous brunette and wagged his eyebrows. “I’m sure Ryan would have no trouble snuggling up to this little lady for a few hours.”

I feel heat rising to my cheeks at the thought of him rolling around on a bed with her right in front of me.

Why the hell was I getting jealous over some guy I barely knew?

For God’s sake, Juliet. Pull your head out of your ass.

“She’s very pretty, ” I manage to say as kindly as possible. That sounded neutral and not at all jealous, right?

Valerie studies the woman’s features. “She’s decent enough. It’s not like there’s a better option at this point.

Decent enough? The girl was stunning. Her perfectly plump lips and heart-shaped face were something most girls would kill to have. But I nod along with her words as we all settle on the brunette—despite the fact that it irked me to no end.

“I’ll get Kate to put out the call,” Max said, leaving the room with the headshot.

By Tuesday, we’d finalized the set and cast. The video would be shot at a villa off Airbnb that had a killer view of the Atlantic coastline and went for over seven grand a night.

Wednesday finally arrived and I could barely contain my excitement. I hardly slept all night, my mind unable to relax with all the nerves. Between hoping the shoot went well and seeing Ryan again, it’s not surprising I spent the midnight hours tossing and turning.

We pull up to the lavish home and are immediately greeted by the production team. We'd gone way over budget to make sure that everything went perfectly, but Max and Jim didn't seem to care at all.

There were three rooms being utilized for the shoot, not including the pool. We had previously instructed the production team to stage lighting in the living room, one of the guest bathrooms that featured a massive clawfoot bathtub, and of course, the master bedroom.

Gareth and Ant arrive first, each carrying a bag of fast food clutched in their hands. Neil appears shortly after, and by the glazed over look in his eyes it's clear he stayed behind to smoke a bowl or something.

We were on a strict schedule to get the scenes filmed, and at this point, Ryan was still MIA. All of the model's solo shots were finished, so now we wait.

Olivia had been pacing the length of the villa for over half an hour, furiously shooting off one text after another. I would not want to be on the receiving end of those messages judging by the scowl on her usually warm face. The model we'd hired to play the love of his life sat at the foot of the bed, still looking just as thrilled to be there now as she had when she'd first walked through the door.

She had on a white robe provided by the wardrobe department, but I knew what was underneath. Her perfectly tanned skin gave the appearance she'd just returned from a stay on a tropical island, and although I didn't think it was possible, her lips were even poutier in person. She was on cloud nine.

Who could blame her? At any moment she'd be living out the wildest fantasy of pretty much every other woman in the world.

Gareth waltzed up and placed an arm around my shoulder. "Juliet, right? I don't think we've really gotten a chance to get to know each other." His voice is playful, and despite the greasy half-eaten burger in his other hand, he still smells nice. Like bergamot and clove.

I felt my body tense as a result of the contact. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“You know, you’re pretty hot for a stuffy PR lady.” He winked, and I know he meant it as a compliment.

“Uh, thanks,” I responded awkwardly. There was something about his boyish grin that made me smile. “You’re not so bad yourself, you know—for an egotistical rock star.”

He clutched his heart dramatically. “Oh baby, you wound me!”

We both laugh, and I’m grateful for the sudden release of tension that had been building thanks to Ryan’s lack of punctuality. Just as the guitarist’s arm draped across my shoulder again, Ryan finally decided to grace us all with his presence. His eyes land on Gareth’s arm, and a scowl instantly forms on his face.

There are deep-set bags underneath his eyes and his hair is disheveled. Not in a sexy way, but in an ‘I just woke up and didn’t have time to shower’ kind of way. Is he hungover?

“Glad you could make it, man,” the guitarist said flatly.

His response comes out as a grunt rather than words, and I take a small step forward. Gareth’s hand trails down my back, brushing against my ass before it falls to his side. I shoot him a playful, scolding glance. If he thought he was going to butter me up with his patented rock star flirting, he was in for a surprise. He throws up his hands as if to claim it was an accident, and I can only shake my head and laugh. It’s oddly hard to get mad at him with that charming, golden retriever smile on his face.

Ryan, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to share that sentiment. His glaring eyes follow Gareth’s hands as if he’s making sure they don’t accidentally drift anywhere near my ass again.

“Let’s get started; I want to get the bedroom shots done first. Those are always the most taxing,” the director said, snapping his fingers for everyone to get into place.

The model rushes over and immediately introduces herself to Ryan in a low, sultry voice. My eyes roll unintentionally, but no one seems to notice. Her name was even sexy too—Katarina. I force myself to look away when Ryan grabs her hand, shaking it, *touching* her.

Ignore it. He's not yours.

Before long, the cameras are rolling and both Ryan and Katarina drop right into character.

We're shooting the bedroom bits, and Ryan slowly pulls the grungy t-shirt he's wearing over his head and slings it onto the ground before methodically lowering himself onto the bed with her. His hands expertly trace every inch of her torso, just as the lyrics suggested. The new song, Sealed Fate, blares from the speakers to lead them. It wasn't easy to watch as the camera zoomed in for close-up shots of them. His fingers gently brushing against her skin, her gasping at his touch. It felt like we were intruding on a private moment, which was either a testament to their incredible acting chops or some real red-hot chemistry.

An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach as I watch him place a trail of kisses down her body. I turn away and find a seat off to the side for a quick breather. It doesn't take long for Gareth to appear by my side.

"First time on set?" he whispers, leaning in close so that his breath tickles my ear.

I nod, and he smiles. "It seems so... *real*," I whisper back to him, leaning in so that I don't disrupt the shoot.

"Yeah, that's the point, though. We have to make it believable. You know you did a great job on all this. I think the fans are going to love it." He seems so genuine, and I'm not sure why that is so surprising.

"I hope so," I say tentatively.

He leans in again and his lips are so close, they're basically brushing against my ear. "We always celebrate after a shoot. You should come, it'll be fun. Plus, you need to get to know your new clients." Gareth's voice radiates confidence

and the way words drip from his lips always seems to have a tinge of naughtiness.

Just as I am about to respond, the director barks an order at Ryan. “Knox, where’s your head, man? She’s the love of your life. Make us believe that.”

My attention snaps to Ryan. His eyes are not on the gorgeous model below him but on me and Gareth. Ryan looks like he’s about two seconds from jumping off the bed and strangling him.

The director’s voice booms again. “Earth to Ryan, I know you can hear me.”

Ryan ignores him and continues to stare. The frustration building in the room creates a thickness to the air that makes everyone uncomfortable, especially Katarina.

“Sorry, it’s hard to concentrate when I can hear whispering in the background,” Ryan spits out, emerald eyes furious.

Olivia looks in our direction and pleads with Gareth using her eyes to quiet down. “Let’s get this over with so everyone can get out of here, deal?”

He rolls his eyes and places his fingers over his lips, then slides them across, pretending to zip them shut. When she turns her gaze back towards the scene, he winks at me and rises from the chair.

That *asshole*.

Chapter Eleven

Juliet

The final scene was in the pool. It was dark outside now, and Ryan and Katarina were entangled on the steps. Their bodies were partially covered by the dark water, but you could see enough to know they were both completely naked. Well, at least that's what the viewers would think. The intimacy coordinator on set made sure of that. In reality, they both were wearing nude-colored briefs that covered them up, and Katarina had on some petals that covered her nipples.

Once the director felt like he had the shot, he called "Cut," and a few people from the wardrobe department met them both at the water's edge with towels and robes.

"I think I've got everything. Great job, everyone. This is going to be magic," the director said, a smug look of self-appreciation covering his face.

Ryan stalked away from the cameras and into a bedroom to put on some clothes and Katarina followed not far behind.

"A thousand bucks he bags her tonight," Ant says to Gareth when he joins us by the sofa.

"Hell, he'll owe me a thousand if he doesn't. She's been flashing those come fuck me eyes at him the whole time," Gareth says, laughing.

I try to push away the small part of me that can't stand to hear their exchange.

Why *wouldn't* he sleep with her? They're both gorgeous and after the show they just put on all day, there is likely a good bit of pent-up sexual tension. When Ryan reenters the room, he's wearing his grungy T-shirt again paired with some ripped-up black jeans. "What kind of shit are you talking about now, Gareth?"

Gareth shrugs innocently. "I have no clue what you're talking about, man."

They both laugh, and I am relieved that whatever the hell was happening earlier seems to be over.

Neil looks up from his phone long enough to ask what the plan is for tonight.

“I’m thinking Rafters,” Ant answers. “It’s chill, but not too chill. You know?”

Neil shrugs. “I’m down. Knox?”

Ryan nods and slips his phone from his pocket, and types a quick text. “Car will be here in 20.”

I suddenly feel awkward standing among the band, very aware of the difference in class between us. Here I am, a girl who has to count pennies and never goes out on a work night standing among a group of men who have more money than they know what to do with and zero responsibilities. Gareth, however, seems to be indifferent to the fact. “Thought about my offer?” he asks, his lips curving into a mischievous smile.

His smile is nice, and the bit of stubble that is present on his face adds a whole new layer of attractiveness.

“Please tell me you aren’t propositioning the publicist already, Gareth,” Olivia asks, walking over to the group.

I laugh, and she sends me a knowing look.

“Jesus, Liv. You act like I’m some predator or something. I just thought she may want to get to know her newest potential clients, you know. Get a feel for the band,” he says, putting on the innocent act. Quite convincingly, I might add.

“He wants her to get a feel, alright,” Ant mutters, and Ryan sends an elbow flying into his arm.

“Knock it off, asshole,” he growls.

“Well, you guys are doing a great job of convincing her to join you. That’s for sure,” Olivia remarks sarcastically. “Juliet, a word?”

I walk into the next room with Olivia, unsure of the direction this conversation is about to go.

“You did really great with this, and I’m not easily impressed. I like the way your mind works.”

Pride swells within me. “Wow, thank you.”

“Look, I know you’re young, but you have a real knack for this business. I really look forward to working with you in the future, and I see great things ahead.”

I want to pinch myself to make sure this is really happening. “It’s unorthodox, but I am going to make it very clear that you are to be very involved in our account with Acton PR. I understand you may not be an account manager, but it’s ideas like this that we’re looking for.”

Although it’s implied, I need to hear her say it. “You’re giving us the account?”

Olivia nods, and my hand clasps over my mouth to shut in the squeal that is threatening to jump out. I landed us the Chaotix account. *Oh my God!*

“We’ll start with the tour and see how Acton handles it. Then, we can discuss expanding on that relationship. I’m going to give the news to Max and Jim now, but I wanted to tell you first. They owe this to you. The guys seem to like you, too. That’s always a plus in my book.” My mouth remains open as I try to process the words coming out of her mouth.

I stand there for a few seconds, too shocked to respond. She laughs and places a hand on my arm. “You earned it, Juliet. Really.”

She leaves the room to talk with my bosses, and I relish the silence for a little longer. I’m reluctant to admit it but I do jump up and down a few times and silently scream like a little girl.

Holy shit. This is really happening.

I finally manage to compose myself and head back into the main space of the house where I left the band. I catch the tail end of a conversation with the boys that piques my interest.

“Lay off it. You aren’t screwing with her,” Ryan says to Gareth. “The publicist is off limits.”

Gareth scoffs. “Who died and made you the King, asshole? And who says I want to screw with her? She’s fucking hot and seems cool as hell. Maybe I feel a spark or whatever!”

Ryan growls and takes a step toward his bandmate.

“Dude, chill out. He was just kidding,” Ant says in a low voice, aware that a few of the crew members are now listening.

“I’m serious. Back the fuck off,” Ryan continues.

Enough of this—I inject myself into the conversation before it can go any further.

“Back off of what?” I ask, pretending not to have heard anything.

Neil just grins and looks between the three of us. “Awkward.”

“Nothing,” Gareth and Ryan say at the same time.

“Oh-kay...” I say before pulling my phone out of my purse. I have probably a dozen unread text messages from Alyssa, undoubtedly probing for information about the shoot. The last few bring a smile to my face.

Alyssa: I swear to God almighty if you don’t answer me, I’m going to blow!

Alyssa: JULES

Alyssa: You better be dead or wrapped around one of those boys like Christmas lights on a Fraser fir.

My best friend may be able to hide her southern roots from everyone in the big city, but her little comments like that give it away every single time.

Juliet: We just finished. Sorry. I wasn’t checking my phone.

“So what will it be, Juliet? Are you down to party with Chaotix tonight?” Gareth asks, staring directly at Ryan.

Alyssa: Spill. Now.

Juliet: They asked me to go to a club with them tonight.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m pretty wiped out after today,” I say, trying to focus on the three little dots signaling my best friend is typing.

Alyssa: Are you fucking serious? If you say no, I’ll NEVER forgive you!

“Aw, come on. A few drinks will liven you up,” he urges.

Juliet: I can’t go out clubbing with them, Alyssa.

“I’m tired, plus my attire is not exactly club material.” I make the excuse and immediately wish I wasn’t such a buzzkill. I’m wearing my best jeans and a white blouse that hangs slightly off my shoulders. It’s a cute outfit, but definitely not a clubbing outfit.

Alyssa: Juliet Elizabeth Warren, stop being such a little bitch. Grow some lady balls and go party with the rock stars.

“I think your attire is just fine,” Gareth says, flashing me a flirty smile.

“She said no,” Ryan grits out.

Alyssa: Publicists have to be comfortable with famous people, Jules. Live a little.

She’s right. I hate that she’s right, but she is.

“Okay, I’ll go. Damn, you’re pushy,” I joke, and Gareth beams in response. Ryan has the exact opposite response to my agreeing to join them. To show his displeasure he simply lets out a grunt and walks away.

Max walks over and wraps me into a massive bear hug. “Good job, kid.” I smile into his chest. I know that Olivia has shared the big news, and I’m just as happy for him as I am for myself.

“It was a team effort,” I say, and he hugs me harder.

“How did I get so lucky? Of all the hopefuls to walk through my doors, how did we end up with you?” When he says things like this to me, it’s hard not to feel emotional.

A horn honks outside, it must be the car Ryan arranged to take them to Rafters.

“Uh, Max. I don’t need a ride. The guys asked me to go out to celebrate with them.” I feel as if I’m asking my father for permission rather than telling my boss about my plans.

He raises an eyebrow. “Oh, alright. Well, keep your phone on you. Call me if you run into any... trouble.” He makes sure his message is received loud and clear by the band.

“We’ll take *good* care of your pride and joy, Max. No worries,” Gareth says smoothly.

Max narrows his eyes at the man.

“Don’t mind him; he’s harmless. All bark and no bite, ain’t that right, Gareth?” Ant jokes.

The guitarist uses his hands to form a halo above his head. “Guilty as charged, I’m an angel. Honest.”

We all laugh, except for Ryan, who is now several steps ahead of us, making a beeline for the blacked-out SUV parked out front.

As soon as I slide into the backseat of the car, I pull out my phone to send a quick reply to Alyssa. I’m sandwiched between Gareth and Ryan, and I glance at both to make sure they don’t see what I’m typing.

Juliet: I’m in their car. If this goes badly, I blame you.

I don’t wait for a response, instead sliding the phone back into my purse. I stare out the tinted window and watch as the villa fades into the distance. I run my tongue over my teeth to keep from biting my lip. The last thing I need is to draw blood before being seen out in public with Chaotix. The rapid fluttering in my stomach does little to calm my nerves, and I count down the minutes until I can pour some ice-cold liquor down my throat to relax.

Chapter Twelve

Juliet

Nothing could have prepared me for the experience of going out in public with Chaotix. We're immediately bombarded with thousands of flashing lights and screams the moment the driver opens the car door. I cover my eyes with my hand, momentarily disoriented and seeing stars from the screaming crowd and blinding lights. A large hand presses into my lower back, gently and confidently leading me toward the club's entrance. I can't see whose hand it is but I assume it must be Gareth. He seemed to have no issue touching me before, so it's not surprising that he would swoop in now to help me get through. I allow him to guide me, leaning back into his broad frame for balance as the crowd around us screams and swarms our group.

The guys are immediately let in, but the bouncer stops me and asks to see my ID.

Well, that's embarrassing.

I pull out my wallet and hand the large balding man my ID, and he nods, allowing me to enter. It's this moment of pause when I realize that Gareth is standing in front of me. I turn around and am shocked to see that it's Ryan who helped me through the storm of flashing cameras. It's Ryan who kept me safe and grounded me during the chaos of the moment. His hand is hot against my shirt where it still rests possessively on the small of my back. His emerald eyes meet mine for a moment before he nods at someone in front of us and he presses me forward again, ushering me into the building.

We are led up a set of stairs and into a private, roped-off section of the club that has a large table and wrap-around booth seating around it. The bottle service woman flashes her best smile to the men and completely ignores my existence. She's wearing a barely there, strapless mini-dress and heels that make my ankles hurt just looking at them. "The usual?"

Neil nods and she rushes off to bring them back whatever the hell 'the usual' is.

They must come here often to be so familiar with each other.

I keep thinking that Ryan will release me any second, but his hand remains pressed against my back as I slide into the booth, with him following right behind. This means that somehow I've now found myself sandwiched between him and Gareth once again. The overstimulation of the pulsing music paired with the dark room and the feel of both men pressed against me is the only reason why I don't jolt when I feel Gareth's thumb suddenly graze my thigh.

Shit. What should I do? Rambling it is.

"Is it always like this? When you go out, with all of the cameras and the screaming?" I ask Neil and Ant, surreptitiously ignoring the two men on either side of me and the searing heat of each of their hands against me.

Ant laughs. "Yeah. You get used to it, eventually."

I shake my head. "I don't think I could ever get used to that. I couldn't even see for a few minutes."

Neil, who seems like the quietest one of the bunch so far, speaks up. "I dunno dude—it's still weird as hell if you ask me. Sometimes those people know more about me than I know about myself." The other three guys all chuckle.

I can't even imagine what that must be like.

"Hey, it's part of the gig," Gareth adds, shrugging.

The bottle service woman returns with a tray piled high with drinks. She hands them out, and when her eyes land on me, she can't hide her disapproval.

You know what, I get it sister. I have no clue what the hell I'm doing here, either.

Ryan gets the woman's attention and says pointedly, "You should probably ask what she wants instead of just staring at her."

She is flustered by his comment and her cheeks blush bright red, but she recovers quickly. "Of course, sorry! I was

trying to figure out where I'd seen you before. What can I get you, sweetheart?"

Uh-huh, sure.

Somehow I am able to refrain from rolling my eyes. "Jack and Coke, please. Make it a double." The bottle service woman nods and leaves to go grab my drink.

Ryan removes his arm from behind me to bring his beer to his lips and I go cold, missing his heat. When he touches me, it's electric—like a shockwave rolling through my entire body. And when that touch is gone? It's like everything goes all dark and frigid. I feel ridiculous, but my body responds to him in a way I just can't explain.

"Jules, we can call you Jules, right?" Gareth asks as he circles his thumb against my leg slowly

"Yeah, of course." I nod, casually.

"So, Jules, how old are you anyway?" He leans into me a bit after he asks the question. The music is blaring, so I know it's just so he can hear my response.

"23," I say, loud enough so he can hear.

"Oh, to be 23 again." Ant laments.

"And you guys?" I ask.

I learn that Neil and Ant are both 28, Gareth is about to turn 30, and Ryan is 31. If I already didn't feel like a child after having my ID checked at the door, I do now.

When the waitress returns with my drink, I toss it back quickly. She eyes me curiously, and I nod and raise my finger on the rim of the now empty glass to let her know I'd like another.

The alcohol finally hits my system and my skin starts to tingle and warm. I hope that after another, I can work off the nerves that are radiating throughout my body and actually *try* to relax a little. Although Gareth's thumb on my leg was not exactly... relaxing.

Something seems to catch Ant's attention from across the club. "Models, 10 o'clock." He downs his drink and gets up from the table. "Who's going to be my wingman?"

The waitress returns and I down the Jack and Coke, relishing the burn at the back of my throat.

"Nah, man, I'm sitting this one out tonight," Neil says, leaning back against the booth.

When neither Ryan nor Gareth volunteers, Ant throws his head back in frustration. "Come on, don't do me like that."

I laugh. "Why exactly do you need a wingman?"

Ant smiles. "Two rock stars are always better than one rock star." This elicits a laugh from me, a deep, true laugh that happens once I relax. *Thank you, Jack Daniels*

"So what's the game? You flank them on either side and corner them into talking to you?" I ask, genuinely curious about how this works.

"Oh, my lovely new friend, there is no need to corner them. They approach willingly," he responds with a smirk.

The waitress returns with a tray of clear shots that are "courtesy of the ladies over by the bar."

Ant gives me a look that says, "See, told you."

I grab one of the shot glasses and down it.

Ugh, Vodka.

"How about a wing-woman?" I ask, ignoring the gross aftertaste. As soon as the words leave my mouth, I immediately wonder where the hell they came from. Clearly, the mixture of alcohol and the killer vibes of this place have me growing those lady balls Alyssa mentioned.

"Hell yeah!" Ant cheers and I motion for Ryan to let me out of the booth. Ryan doesn't move, and his emerald eyes gleam with a challenge. The liquid confidence currently having a party in my stomach makes me remove Gareth's hand and instead shimmy between Ryan and the table, removing myself anyways. Ryan chuckles and I feel his hand subtly

brush my ass, but I'm out and standing by Ant before it can be much of anything. I look back and those haunting eyes stare back at me, intrigued and amused. Gareth is next to him, leaning over to whisper something in Ryan's ear before they both laugh.

Ant and I each take another shot before we make our way back down the stairs and through the crowd, walking towards the small group of insanely tall, insanely glamorous women who look like they just stepped off a runway. God, their waists were smaller than my freaking arm.

"Anthony Adler," one of the women purrs as she steps forward, her pursed lips painted hot pink. I recognize her from an ad campaign for Chanel's spring collection. The only other face I can pick out is Katarina, Ryan's love interest from the shoot today.

"Alicia, baby," he says, sliding up next to her. "I sure have missed that pretty face of yours."

Katarina gives me a tight smile, likely wondering why I am here with the band.

"Who is this?" Alicia asks.

I start to introduce myself, but Ant beats me to it. "This is Juliet, our badass new publicist."

Alicia's eyebrows raise. "My publicist is a grumpy old witch named Frieda. Where the hell did you find her, and where can I get one?"

I giggle as Alicia looks me up and down with a wink, and Ant shakes his head. "I don't know but find your own, baby. She's ours."

The way the band has taken me in with open arms is heartwarming. I'm not presumptuous to assume it's always like this, so organic and comfortable. But a tiny part of me glows with happiness that they all seem to like me so much already."

"Always so stingy." Alicia chides, sliding a finger down his chest.

“Where’s Ryan?” Katarina asks, directing the question at Ant. He nods in the direction of the booth, and she rolls her eyes. “This playing hard-to-get shit is getting old.” The whine in her voice rubs me the wrong way.

Ant shrugs. “Maybe you just aren’t trying hard enough.” He flashes me a devious grin, and she lets out a *‘humph’* before marching towards the booth.

“Sometimes he just needs a little push,” Alicia says, laughing into Ant’s neck.

I find myself turning to watch the exchange that takes place near the balcony. Katarina walked right up the stairs and was now leaning her body towards Ryan, her cleavage level with his line of sight. She laughs at something he says, then slides into the booth next to him, pressing herself against him. A pang of jealousy hits me hard, and I almost don’t hear Alicia talking to me.

“What? Sorry,” I apologize for zoning out.

“Dance. I said, ‘Let’s dance, little Miss Publicist,’” she repeats, grabbing for my arm and dragging me towards the dance floor.

A tall woman with dark skin and intense hazel eyes is gliding across the floor carrying a tray of multi-colored shots in long tubes. Alicia reaches for a few and thrusts one filled with some purple mystery liquid in my direction. I let it slide down my throat.

Berries. It’s good, really good. She hands me another. This time, the liquid is orange. I throw it back, and she cheers.

“Seriously, I want your card,” she says when Ant is out of earshot. I laugh, mainly because I don’t even have cards yet, and also because a stunning model is currently twirling me around the dance floor like we’ve known each other for eons.

I can’t remember the last time I did something like this. Dancing with a stranger I barely know, and having a damn good time. Actually, I can. It was my sophomore year of college. I went out with the girls from my dorm hall and spent hours drinking and dancing my heart out. That’s about the time

I realized just how important my dreams were, and when I started focusing solely on my schoolwork.

This was the first time I felt completely free in so long. Who would have thought it would be with a famous model and a few rock stars?

Chapter Thirteen

Juliet

I know the alcohol is the only thing keeping my feet from killing me right now. We've been dancing for what feels like hours, and each time the woman with the tube shots comes around Alicia grabs one for each of us.

When a pair of smooth hands snake around my waist I don't even flinch. The stranger's body presses into mine, and I go with it. We move in sync with the thumping beat of the music and when I make eye contact with Alicia she gives me an approving thumbs up. Everything seems fine until he suddenly moves his hands to grab my hips a bit too tightly.

His hands continue to move and trace my curves, stopping just before he reaches my breasts. I try to slide out of his grasp, uncomfortable at the sudden shift from dancing to groping, but his hold just becomes tighter.

I turn my head and see a tall man with dirty blonde hair looking down at me. His eyes are dark brown and full of lust. I try again to get free of his hold to no avail.

"Hey, I need to go check on my friends," I say, trying to keep the panic from my voice.

He presses his lips to my temple, and his voice is thick like molasses. "Your friends are fine, baby."

I take a step forward, but the man slams my body back into his. "Feisty, aren't you? I like that."

"Seriously, let me go," I say far more assertively than I did the first time. The music is so loud, I doubt anyone else can hear us, and I don't see Alicia. She must have gone to grab another drink.

His fingers dig into my waist, and I try to shove him away but it's no use. "Aren't you a little tease?" He asks. He's drunk, like really drunk. His slurred words are a dead giveaway, and the smell of liquor hits me in the face when he speaks, making my stomach turn.

I try to slam an elbow into his ribs, but he's too strong and keeps my arms locked. "Dude, fuck off. I'm not interested."

He laughs at me, and my skin pricks, fear taking over the anger. Apparently my attempts to get him to release me are humorous.

"She said fuck off," Alicia yells out, back at my side. I am suddenly more grateful for her than she will ever understand.

"Run along; we're busy here." He shoos her away and turns our bodies to face the opposite direction. He begins to walk me toward the bathrooms.

When I feel him begin to plant sloppy kisses down my neck, I want to vomit. Tears begin to prick at my eyes, but I push them away. I have never been in this situation, and frankly, I have no clue what to do.

Where is Alicia? He moves us through the crowd so easily that now I can't see her again, especially with his tall body blocking me from the view of the dancefloor.

"Please stop. I don't want you to do that." I'm begging now, but he doesn't seem to care.

"Women like you always play hard to get, but we both know this is exactly what you want." His assault continues as I try in vain to wriggle away.

With each attempt to free myself his grasp on me tightens. The closer we get to the dark hall that leads to the bathroom, the more hopeless this seems. Nobody pays us any mind, and no one sees me struggling to get free or hears my pleas for him to let me go.

Just as we're about to enter the bathroom, I squeeze my eyes shut, praying that this ends soon so I can run away. Until something slams into the man, ripping him off me, and when I open my eyes, he's on the ground.

Ryan's chest is heaving rapidly as he lifts the man by his shirt, ripping it in the process.

"Touch her again, you sick fuck, and I'll end you. Understand?" He leashes another brutal punch to the man's

face, breaking his nose with an awful crunch. Ryan releases him, and his body makes a thud as it hits the floor again as he groans in drunken pain. Bouncers flank the area.

“Get him the fuck out of here,” Ryan booms, voice undone with fury and they do as he says. He turns to face me with wild eyes. “Are you okay?”

I nod, but I doubt it’s convincing.

“Jesus, Juliet. I went to get the guys when he wouldn’t listen.” Alicia cries out as she shoves through the crowd and wraps me in a hug, her expression panicked. She turns to Ryan. “I told him to fuck off, but he just kept grabbing her. I didn’t know what to do and was trying to find Ant when he disappeared with her! I’m so sorry Ryan.” Her arms recede as Ryan steps back into my space and looks me over.

He lifts my shirt slightly to reveal the red marks in the shape of the man’s fingers, where he dug them into my skin. Darkness takes over his features, and he turns as if he is ready to hunt the man down. “I’m going to fucking kill him,” he growls.

Gareth grabs his bandmate and tries to calm him. “Man, it’s over. They threw him out. The bouncer is waiting outside for the cops. Just relax. Juliet is ok.”

“I want to leave,” I say quietly. I’m not sure that anyone will hear me over the commotion, so I repeat myself. This time much louder. “Please, I want to leave.”

Gareth rushes towards me. “Of course. I’ll call the car. Just come sit down for a minute.”

Ryan already has his phone out, tapping furiously on the touch screen. “Already done. I’m taking her home. Call your own car.” He tells the others, and after hearing the hardness in his voice, no one argues.

“Sure, okay,” Gareth responds. He directs his attention back at me. “I’m so sorry that asshole did this to you. That won’t happen again.”

I nod, unable to form any coherent words at the moment. I allow Ryan to lead me out of the club and into the car waiting

outside. I don't even look at the car as reality goes a bit hazy and I go into shock. But it smells like expensive leather. Ryan gently helps me in the car and buckles my seatbelt for me before walking around to the driver's side. He's getting in as the engine revs and comes to life.

Once we'd been driving in silence for a while, my thoughts start to slow and I realize I never gave him my address.

"Where are we going?" I ask him, my voice coming out as more of a whisper.

He clenches his jaw. "I just needed to ride around for a bit to calm down. So I don't go find that prick and fucking kill him."

I look towards the driver, who is ignoring us completely. "I live in the Chantilly Apartments, off Broadway."

The driver nods without giving any other indication that he was paying attention to us.

"I'm okay now. I was just scared," I say, trying to calm him.

Ryan shakes his head. "Why the fuck are you trying to calm me down? You're the one who just got assaulted."

He has a point.

"Um, I don't know. You are just so angry, and I-"

He reaches to check the red marks again, but I stop him. I place my hand over him to prevent him from seeing them. "They're still going to be there; there's no point in looking again."

I leave my hand on his until he finally withdraws it. We ride the rest of the way to my apartment in silence. When we pull up to my building, I expect to exit the car and retreat inside. However, he follows me.

"You don't have to walk me. I'm okay, I promise. I'm just going to get into my PJs and watch my comfort show, *The Bachelor*," I say, trying to force myself to sound sure of the words I'm saying.

He ignores me and proceeds to escort me all the way to my door.

When I reach for my keys, he lets out a deep breath. “I haven’t been that worked up in a while. I’m sorry if I scared you.”

I pause and turn to face him. “Thank you. I forgot to say that earlier.”

Our eyes are locked on each other.

“You’re welcome,” he says in a low voice.

“Hey, at least my first night out with the band ended with a bang,” I remark, trying to lighten the mood a bit. This earns a small smile from him, and I feel a sense of accomplishment.

He leans against my door frame. “Yeah, well, don’t get used to it. I’m not letting you out of my sight next time.”

His promise sends a rush through my body.

I slide the key into the lock and turn it, and the door cracks open. “Thank you again. I actually had a great time tonight. Well, until that drunk asshole decided to grope me.”

He scoffs. “Talk about a shit way to end things. I’ll see you later?”

I nod.

I know it’s time to walk inside, but the thought of breaking eye contact with him seems painful. I muster up the last bit of courage I have in me and lean into his body, wrapping my arms around his waist and into his soft t-shirt. I hug him for a second, and when his arms envelop me, I melt into him, getting a whiff of his cologne.

Before I let go, I rise to my tiptoes and plant a single kiss on his cheek.

“See you later, Ryan.”

He’s still standing there when I step into my apartment, which makes it so much harder to shut the damn door, but I do. Once it’s shut, I sink to the floor and let out all the tears I’d been holding in since that man tried to force himself on me.

I let them fall freely until the thought of Ryan saving me overpowers the pain. The image of him slamming the pervert into the ground, of him threatening to end him if he ever touched me again. The way he glared at Gareth for showing interest, the way he proclaimed I was off limits.

I force myself to my feet and slowly make my way to my bedroom. My bed is calling my name. Those thoughts of him push away those of the drunk man at the club, and when I finally fall asleep, it's to dreams of Ryan Knox's fingers brushing against my skin.

Chapter Fourteen

Ryan

Every time I close my eyes, I see that piece of shit with his hands on Juliet. I see him pulling her toward the bathrooms with that look on his face that makes it clear what he planned to do as soon as he was alone with her. The terrified, helpless look in her eyes.

He wanted to *hurt* her, to force her to do something she didn't want to do.

I see him flat on his back; fear smeared all over his pathetic, drunken face.

Then I see her face. Her trembling bottom lip and tear-filled eyes as she gazes at me in fear.

My heart clenches at the memory, and my fists follow suit. It's a memory that is seared into my brain.

"Sir?" the driver asks, eyes meeting mine through the rear-view mirror.

We're still parked on the curb outside her apartment building, and I realize I still haven't told him where to take me.

"Take me to the hotel," I clip, training my eyes on the brick wall to my right.

I should have gone inside and made sure she was really okay before I just left her alone and *fuck*, I don't want to.

My phone buzzes repeatedly in my pocket, and I know without looking it's Olivia. Somehow she always finds out when one of us steps out of line, and me laying out some guy at a club will be a red alert on her radar.

I suck in a breath and let it out before opening the string of messages.

Olivia: Where are you?

Olivia: Is she alright?

Olivia: Get her home safe and call me in the morning.

My brows furrow, and it's hard to hide the surprise on my face. I was expecting a lecture, not concern over Juliet.

I type out a quick response before leaning back in the seat.

Ryan: She's home. I'm headed back to the hotel.

Anger is still pulsating through my veins, and I can't stop it.

I slam my fist into the empty seat next to me and let out a curse, "Fuck!"

The driver ignores my show of rage, and I'm grateful for it.

It takes every single ounce of self-control not to tell the driver to take me back to the club on the off chance that the asshole is still waiting outside to be picked up. I'd love a few minutes in a locked room with the fucker.

Or to turn straight around and take me back to Juliet's apartment so I can watch over her. But there's no way she'd allow that.

I may not know much about Juliet, but I feel strangely protective over her already. Hell, if I hadn't been pulled off the guy, there is a good chance I would have beaten him to a pulp.

Or killed him.

Chapter Fifteen

Juliet

There were two things that made Monday morning almost unbearable. The first was the sight of the deep bruises left by the drunk man at the club when I got out of the shower. It was a harsh reminder of just how close I had come to a situation that would have changed my life forever. The second was the fear that somehow news of what happened that night would get out, and then my professional reputation would be ruined before it had even really begun.

I could already see the headlines.

Chaotix frontman Ryan Knox gets in a fight at a local club during a drunken night out with new publicist

Yeah. That would be a fantastic way to start out my career. Rock stars getting caught up in drunken brawls was nothing new, but throw in that bit about his publicist? You know, the person who is supposed to prevent things like that from happening? The person whose one true goal is to steer clients clear of bad publicity? Not a good look.

Thankfully, and also miraculously, there was absolutely no sign of a story anywhere. It was as if the horrible event had never even occurred and that was *perfectly* fine with me.

The one saving grace of the day was the look on Valerie's face when she found out I'd landed the account for Acton PR. Not only that, but that I had been taken out by the band to celebrate. I could have sworn I saw actual smoke come out of her ears when Max announced the news to the entire office.

On Tuesday a large bouquet of roses was delivered to the office. There was no hiding my surprise when I saw the note scratched out on the attached card.

Thanks for being the best wing woman. - Ant

P.S. Neil didn't help even though he thinks he did.

The gesture was kind, and I knew it was his way of making sure I was okay.

Our next meeting with Olivia was scheduled for Friday, and I'd spent every waking hour preparing for it. Now that we officially represented Chaotix, there was so much to do that it made my head spin. My days at work were spent either brainstorming with the senior account managers or locked in my new office furiously drafting proposals.

It was a three month tour, slated to begin in Washington and finish up in Dallas. There were multiple stops along the way, which meant coordinating everything from venues to promoting ticket sales. We needed to map out press junkets, promo opportunities, transportation, and security. There was so much involved, so many tiny moving pieces to make sure this was a success.

When Friday finally rolled around, I took my place at the conference table and patiently waited for Olivia to arrive. When she finally did, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed to see that she was alone this time.

She made a beeline for me and wrapped me in a tight hug. "There's my favorite budding PR queen!"

I can't help but smile at her words. "And there's my favorite manager; good to see you again, Olivia."

Valerie's disdain at our interaction was palpable. "Miss Alton, I hope your drive was a pleasant one."

Olivia nodded and found her way to a seat opposite us. Her dismissive demeanor towards Valerie brought a sense of sick pleasure to me, though I'd never admit it out loud.

Max lit up when he greeted Olivia, and we wasted no time getting into the meat of our discussion.

We outlined our ideas for the tour, and she seemed to really love them. Olivia made a few suggestions here and there and crossed an item or two off the list, but overall the meeting went surprisingly well. We had less than two weeks to iron out the rest of the details, and that time crunch made my anxiety skyrocket. I always knew things moved fast in the world of rock and roll, but damn this was not for the faint of heart.

When we neared the end of the meeting, Olivia turned to both partners and folded her hands in her lap. “There is one last thing we need to finalize. As you can imagine, tours with these guys can get a little... wild. We are all also aware of the fact that this is your first time handling a tour, so I assume you do not have tour publicists on hand. However, that will be a necessity. We need boots on the ground, or in this case, boots on the bus.”

Jim shifts. “Yes, Max and I have discussed this a bit. While we don’t have a designated tour publicist, we have very capable employees here that would be up to the task.”

Um, what? A tour publicist? Boots on the bus? I swear my heart skips a damn beat as I realize they want someone from Acton to actually go on tour with Chaotix. I should’ve realized they would request this. I thought I was prepared for everything we would cover during today’s meeting and I’m kicking myself for missing such a clearly integral piece.

“Yes, I don’t doubt that. It goes without saying that this is a 24/7 gig. There is no room for slip-ups or mishaps out there. It’s all the stress of PR with the added hardship of being on the road. It takes a very special type of person to handle that responsibility,” she continues.

“We understand and respect that, and would only assign the task to someone we felt was truly capable,” Max responds coolly.

Valerie shoots me an overconfident glance. Obviously, she assumes this will be given to her to take on. The thought of her being on the road with the guys makes my skin crawl.

“Very good. It also goes without saying that I have final approval on who you select.” Olivia adds, and for a split second, she meets my eyes.

Oh shit. There’s no way!

Surely I’m just misreading whatever type of smoke signal she is trying to send my way but there is no way she wants *me* to be the tour publicist and travel the country with Chaotix.

There's no way Acton would allow that for someone so new to the team.

"We will put our heads together and call you next week with our thoughts," Jim says, clearly not wanting to discuss this in front of the entire team. "It's a big decision we won't take lightly."

Olivia nods and rises from her chair. On her way out, she calls to me, "Oh, Juliet. I saw a rough cut of a few scenes from the video. I think you are going to be very pleased when you see the finished product. It looks incredible."

"Really? I can't wait to see it!" My voice is a little too enthusiastic.

Her warm smile lets me know she enjoys my excitement over these things. "We'll talk soon, alright?"

And with that, she saunters out of the office and into the elevator, her toned calves flexing with each step. I stand there for a few moments, staring at the closed elevator doors. I watch as the lights count down to the ground floor, and snap back to reality when Max's hand clasps onto my shoulder.

When I jump he takes a step back. "Sorry, I zoned out a little," I say, sheepishly.

"You've done well with all this, kid. I want you to know that. I'm so proud."

I lean into him. "Thanks, I learned from the best."

He always loves when I butter him up like that. "We both know I don't deserve the credit for that, but I'll take it gladly."

When I get home, Alyssa is out for the night, and I find a note on the kitchen counter. It's one of her little quirks that have become common practice in our household.

Swiped right on a hottie, meeting him for drinks. Don't wait up. ;)

I roll my eyes and leave the note where it is. If there was one thing Alyssa loved to do in her free time, it was troll dating apps for potential beaus. She'd never really had much luck with anything serious, but there were the occasional few that stuck around for a few weeks.

Alyssa was stunning, funny, and honestly a hell of a catch. Her taste in men, however? Not so great. She always went for the model types who were all brawn, no brain, and a whole lot of baggage.

The idea of meeting a complete stranger at a bar and going home with him was hive-inducing. Sure, I loved sex as much as the next girl... but this whole shift towards apps like Tinder and Bumble was a concept I couldn't get behind. There was so much pressure! Plus, it gave me major Investigation Discovery vibes. I preferred to meet men the organic way, in person, where you can really get a feel for who they are.

It had been a while since I'd gotten laid, and I was okay with that. My brush with the drunken predator further solidified that. The idea of a strange man I didn't know touching me right now made me nauseous.

Plus, I was too busy to even think about sex right now. This tour needed to have my undivided attention. Anything else would be an obstacle on my way to success.

No distractions, I promised myself.

Suddenly a shirtless Ryan Knox invaded my mind, images of him thrusting into a mystery woman I couldn't quite make out. Running his hands over her skin; sweat dripping from his perfectly chiseled body that looked like it was carved from stone.

I groan loudly and close my bedroom door behind me. I crawl into my bed and bite at my lower lip.

Dammit, Juliet. I said no fucking distractions.

"Fuck it," I say aloud, reaching underneath the covers and allowing my fingers to slowly trace over my belly before reaching down to the place that needs relief. My finger slides over my slit, letting the wetness create a slick pathway.

I picture the Chaotix frontman in front of me, leaning against the door frame. He's tall, broad, and has the most perfectly tanned skin. A pair of jeans hang low on his hips as he saunters towards me.

I dip a single finger inside, covering it in my excitement before pulling it back out and circling my clit. Slowly at first, and as my imaginary rock star comes closer, picking up speed.

My fingers move in a perfect rhythm and my climax builds, my flesh hot under my hand.

I maintain eye contact with my mirage, picking up speed as I circle the swollen bundle of nerves.

He moves forward until he's standing over me as I work. His eyes follow my fingers, and I can almost feel his rough hand against my inner thigh. Goosebumps break out over my skin and I moan loudly.

"Oh, God." The words tear free from a ragged breath, and I press my thighs together tightly trying to soothe the throbbing ache.

My body is no longer filled with blood, it's pulsating with pure need and desire.

"Don't stop," he orders, his voice deep and tone firm.

I nod and force my thighs to spread wide for him. My pulse thumps loudly in my ears.

My fingers continue their assault, dipping in and out then sliding over my crease. The evidence of my overwhelming desire leaves them wet and shiny.

My thighs tense and I brace my heels against the bed, digging in. The orgasm is wound so tightly inside of me that it feels like I could burst any second. I arch against the sheets.

I writhe against the bed as my release sends shockwaves over my body.

I watch as Ryan disintegrates right before my eyes. He's gone and I'm alone, lying in a puddle of my own satisfaction.

So much for not getting distracted.

Chapter Sixteen

Juliet

You could say it was officially crunch time. There was exactly a week before the tour was kicking off and at this point, it was just fine-tuning minor details. It still amazes me that we've somehow managed to pull this off so far. Work had been chaotic, but seeing everything slowly falling into place was unbelievably gratifying.

"I've finalized the hotel accommodations for the duration of the tour," Kate said to Max when he asked for a status update. "I was able to book the same hotels as the band." He nods in approval.

Both partners asked Valerie to come in for a quick meeting, and most of us assumed this would be the day they informed her she would be the one going on tour. Her smug expression as she closed the door behind her made it clear she shared the same thoughts. I watch through the large wall of windows that separates my office from the main lobby and wait for the celebratory look she'll shoot my way when she leaves.

It doesn't take long for the door to open, and when she exits, there is a newly present mask made of complete fury on her face.

She heads straight for my office, the sound of her heels hitting the tile floors echoing with every step.

When she storms into my office and slams the door behind her, I know nothing good is going to come out of this conversation.

"Either you're fucking Max, or you're fucking someone from the band. Hell, maybe you're fucking all of them," she spits out.

"Excuse me?"

She laughs, and the sound sends chills across my body. "That's the only explanation. Why else would they pick you? I've paid my dues. I've proven my worth here. What have you

done? Spun some pretty words and batted your eyelashes? Fuck you, and fuck this place.”

“Valerie, I have no clue what you are talking about,” I say, honestly.

She stares at me, and my blood runs cold. “You’re really going to play dumb? You are seriously going to look me right in the eyes and lie to me?”

She’s lost it.

“Look, I know you don’t like me, but I haven’t done anything. I have no clue what you are so pissed about. I have a lot on my plate right now, and this—” I gesture between us, “isn’t helping.”

I fully expect her to launch into me again, but to my surprise, she doesn’t. Instead, she stares. It’s then I notice the tears brimming in her eyes.

“I’ve dedicated everything to this job. Everything. And you just waltz in and take it without even realizing what you are doing,” she says, her voice barely audible.

“Valerie, I—” She holds a hand up to stop me from finishing my sentence.

“Forget it. Have fun on tour.” And with that, she exits my office.

I sit in stunned silence for what feels like an eternity. Her words replay in my mind over and over.

Have fun on tour. Have fun on tour?

As if on cue, Max steps in and takes a seat in one of the chairs facing my desk. “Well, I was hoping to tell you myself.”

The look on my face must give away my complete and utter shock, confusion, and horror.

“She said—Valerie said I was going?” I manage to say. “You want me to go on tour with Chaotix?”

Max nods. “Olivia insisted, actually. She feels you’ve already formed the beginning of a professional relationship with the guys, and to be honest, I think she prefers your

company over Valerie. We explained that you were new and that your experience was far from what it needed to be to take on something like this. That's not to say I don't think you're good, because you are. One day you are going to be the best there is, but you aren't there yet. However, she does have the final say."

I shift uncomfortably in my chair, unsure of what to say.

"I feel very conflicted over this decision, Juliet. You need to understand that. On the one hand, I am thrilled that you will get to experience something like this. On the other hand, I am terrified that we are throwing you into the deep end with weights around your ankles. At the end of the day, you will have the full support of the team behind you. We will be on standby at all times to assist you in any way possible, and if you ever feel overwhelmed, you have to be honest about it. This is your sink or swim moment, kid."

I physically can't speak. No matter how hard I try, nothing will come out.

"Juliet?" He asks, worries etched on his face.

I feel like I'm going to hurl. In fact, I'm about 99.9% sure that it's going to happen. I stand from my desk and make a mad dash for the bathroom, where I expel my breakfast into the toilet. Once there is nothing left to come up, I splash cold water on my face.

I look at my reflection in the mirror. My blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and mascara now streaks my face from the water. I look like hell. A damp paper towel gets most of the makeup off, but there are still faint remnants.

Evidence of my meltdown.

I take a few deep breaths and try to steady my racing heart.

When I finally step back out into the hallway, Max stands ready to wrap me into one of his famous bear hugs.

"Can you do this, kid? I won't send you if you can't. We'll just have to explain to Olivia that you simply aren't ready. There is no shame in that, you hear me?" He isn't my boss right now, just a man who cares deeply for me in a paternal

way and doesn't want to see me get eaten alive by the crazy world I would be stepping into.

Now that I've released all of my initial shock into the porcelain throne, I can finally make a coherent sentence.

"Do you think I can do this?" I ask, meekly.

Max tightens his grasp on me. "I think you can do anything, Juliet, but only if it's what you want to do."

I think hard about that. Do I want to do this?

If—by some miracle—I am able to pull it off, it would be a game-changer for my career. Most publicists just need that one big break, that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to skyrocket them into the big leagues. The real big leagues.

This could be my shot.

At the same time, if I fail miserably, it could be the end of my career. Wouldn't that be the icing on the cake? A girl, full of promise, snuffed out because she took on something too big too fast. It would be hard to ever be taken seriously in that world again. Sure, I could return to the world of reforming the images of fallen socialites. But is that what I really want? After all of this, after experiencing this side of things? I'm not sure I could ever be content.

These last few weeks of being fully immersed in the world of music publicity have been some of the most exhilarating moments of my life. I had never really considered this area to be the one I wanted to pursue until now. It was exciting and stressful and more of a challenge than anything I had ever done.

"I can do this." The words come out of my mouth, and I believe them. I *can* do this. I can prove to him and everyone else that even though I'm green, I was made for this.

I can see him battling with my response, conflicted with his emotions. "Okay, then you're doing this."

When he releases me from his arms, I decide right then and there that nothing will stop me from making sure this tour

goes off without a hitch. I make an unbreakable vow to myself that I will remain focused, and that I will do whatever it takes.

Chapter Seventeen

Ryan

“Please be serious, boys,” Olivia says through an exasperated breath. “We’ve got to power through this, and then you can scatter back to your playpens.”

Gareth leans back into the plush sofa and props his boots onto the glass coffee table. “Playpens? Really, Liv?”

His attempt at earning a smile from her is unsuccessful.

“This tour is a big deal, and I need the four of you to be on your shit. No funny business and no bad publicity.”

“We got it,” Neil says with a nod.

“We’ll be on our best behavior,” Ant adds before crossing his hand over his heart. “Scout’s honor.”

Olivia sinks into her desk chair and exhales. “You four will be the death of me.”

She opens her laptop and begins to click quickly through emails.

“By the way, Juliet will be joining us on tour. I expect you to warmly welcome her and treat her with respect. I know she’s green, but I wouldn’t take this chance on her if I didn’t think she could do it.”

What the *fuck*?

There is zero chance that I just heard that correctly.

“Oh, shit! Hell yeah.” Gareth hoots, and when he high-fives Ant, my skin goes hot as fury rips through my veins.

I stare daggers at my bandmate. He would *not* use this as an excuse to make her his new flavor of the month. Fuck no.

If looks could kill, I’d be down a guitarist. Which currently doesn’t sound all that horrible.

“Juliet is coming on tour?” I ask, needing to clarify that my brain hasn’t descended into some sketchy drug-induced hallucination.

Olivia nods, never raising her eyes from the screen.

“Her firm has booked her into the same hotels as you so she can stay close and keep an eye on you. I want you to take her input and try incorporating some of her ideas.” She stops talking and types out a few words before continuing, “I want to be clear, crystal clear. There will be no funny business when it comes to Juliet. You keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all fucking times, or I will throw your ass off the ride faster than you can pluck out a chord. Got it?”

She focuses on Gareth as if he is the one out of the four of us that would target the publicist. He gives her a wicked grin, to which she responds by throwing a pen from her desk at his face, ping-ponging it off his forehead.

“Get that stupid smirk off your face, Gareth. I’m serious. She’s off-limits. Untouchable. This gig is a huge deal for someone like her, and I won’t have it ruined over some ridiculous urge to eat the forbidden fruit just because it’s shiny and new. You will keep things professional at *all times*.”

“Shit, Liv. I get it. I won’t fuck with her, promise.” If only I believed him, but that wicked smile is still on his stupid face, and I have the sudden urge to wipe it off myself. Maybe with a fist or two.

I’ve seen the way he looks at her when she enters the room. His eyes canvassing her, raking over every single inch of her body like she’s the cherry on top of his dessert.

“Bottom line is this,” She leans back in the chair and clasps her hands over her stomach. “You’ve made it to the top. You may think the hard part is over, but your trials have only just begun. Getting there is one thing, but staying there? That’s the real challenge.”

“We understand,” Neil answers for all of us. “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

She looks at Ant, waiting on his agreement. “Yeah, we’re tracking, Liv.”

I give a brief nod, and she returns it.

“Okay, good.” She pushes away from the desk and stands. “Now that that is settled, I’ve booked you for a late show appearance to plug the tour. Talking points and prep cards are at your place, and so is your wardrobe. I’ll have a car to pick you up tomorrow morning. You’ll have a long day of filming promo, so get some sleep.”

Understanding her final words as our dismissal, I begin toward the door.

“Ryan, stay back for a moment.”

I watch as my bandmates leave her office and roll my eyes when Ant gives me a look as though I’ve just been called to the principal’s office.

When the door closes, Olivia crosses the room, so we’re able to talk face-to-face.

“How are you doing?” she asks, her managerial voice completely gone and replaced by the much softer and much more maternal one she reserves only for me.

I hate that she pities me.

“I’m fine.”

“Have you gotten any news?” she prods, even though answering these questions is the last thing I want to fucking do.

“The home health nurses said today was a good day. She went outside for a few hours, even painted a little.”

Olivia’s hand finds mine, and she squeezes it. “You’re one of the good ones, Ryan. She’s so lucky to have you taking care of her.”

I hear the words, but they aren’t true.

I’m not a good man, never have been, and never will be. Taking care of the most important person in my world doesn’t make me a good man. It makes me selfish. I don’t want to live in a world where she doesn’t exist, so I do whatever it takes to keep her here.

Even though most of the time, it isn’t her.

She's been slipping away for a long time, and I can't seem to accept it.

So I pay for the facilities and the fancy therapists, and I keep her tucked away from the rest of the world. I keep her safe from herself.

Chapter Eighteen

Juliet

“What the hell do you even pack to go on tour with a rock band for three months?” I groan, plopping onto my bed.

Alyssa is furiously ripping through my closet, tossing items of clothing into a heap on the floor.

“You’ll need plenty of comfort items for the road, business attire for when you’re in badass publicist mode, and of course some sexy little numbers for what comes in between.” My best friend plops down next to me. “I wish I could come with you.”

If only. These next three months would be so much easier with her by my side.

“I still feel like I’m going to wake up any minute and this is all going to be a part of some elaborate dream,” I admit, still not quite sure how my life has changed so much so quickly.

“I sort of feel the same way. You went from being an intern to the real deal overnight, and now all a sudden you’re packing your bags to go on tour with a rock band. It seems pretty unbelievable.” Alyssa leans into me. “But if anyone deserves this it’s you. You work harder than everyone else just trying to prove yourself, and now you finally get to show the world just how incredible you are.”

I sigh. “Unless I screw it all up.”

“You won’t. You’re Juliet Warren, and Juliet Warren doesn’t screw things up.” Her confidence in me makes my heart swell.

“Are you sure you can’t crawl into my suitcase? I’m sure nobody will notice.”

She laughs. “Get up, you’ve got to finish packing. Tomorrow morning is going to be here faster than you know, and we still have a ton of shit to do.”

The next few hours are spent raiding both my closet and hers, deciding on which outfits make the cut. She tries to be sly and puts a few racy dresses into my bag without me

noticing, but I decide to let it slide. To be honest, I have no clue what I may need, so my plan is to be as prepared as possible.

When both suitcases are wheeled to the door, I feel like I can finally relax. The only thing left is my toiletries and makeup bag, but I can't pack those until I get dressed in the morning.

"Pizza?" Alyssa asks.

"Pizza sounds good, pepperoni with banana peppers?" It's my favorite, and even though she always picks off the peppers, it's always what she orders.

We spend the rest of the night downing two bottles of red wine and binge-watching reruns of *The Bachelor*.

"You know, Jason Mesnick is still my favorite. Ben's hot and all, but there is just something about that sexy daddy," Alyssa says as we watch a rose ceremony filled with tears.

I scoff. "No way. He pulled the biggest dick move of all time. How can you propose to one woman, decide you picked the wrong one and dump her, then ask the girl you sent home out immediately after? That was a train wreck. Talk about not knowing what you want."

We have this argument every single time we watch this show. Alyssa always prefers seasons full of drama and unexpected endings.

"Oh, whatever. They ended up married with kids and are happier than ever. He made the right choice," she retorts, and I roll my eyes.

She has a point, but the guy will still go down in my book as a total jerk for what he did.

When the wine is gone, and our giggles have run their course, I know I need to get some sleep. There is still so much uncertainty about what tomorrow will bring, and the last thing I need is to be grumpy and exhausted trying to face it.

I knew that today would be full of surprises, but the first came when I realized that the whole tour bus thing was nothing like what I pictured. In my mind, it would be like the movies. You know, everyone crammed in a bus basically sitting on top of each other as we crossed state lines.

In reality, very few people actually rode on the bus. The guys did, of course. Along with a large man who I later found out was a bodyguard. Olivia traveled separately and met up with the band when they reached a hotel or venue. Occasionally the guys would have guests that traveled with them for a few days, but for the most part, it was just them.

Olivia informed me that I was going to be with her for most of the tour, so we could talk business in between stops. However, she thought that sticking it out with the band until the first stop would be good for us. To give me an opportunity to “bond” with them.

“When we finish up in Washington, you’ll hang with me for the rest of the tour. I won’t subject you to that zoo of a tour bus for any longer than necessary,” she’d explained, to my relief.

I was already nervous enough without having to worry about spending every single waking hour with them.

My suitcases were placed into a compartment below the bus with several other bags. Once everything was buttoned up, I finally made my way inside.

It was nicer than my apartment, though that wasn’t saying much. There was plenty of seating and even a small kitchen area equipped with a microwave and mini-fridge. I imagined it would be stocked with beer, and when I saw the assortment of liquor bottles lining one of the tables, it seemed my hunch was correct.

In the back, there was a room with a full-size bed, a bathroom, and in the hall, two sets of bunk beds. I knew being on the road for days at a time must be rough, so it was nice that they had places to sleep it off.

A quick survey of the situation raised a question in my mind, though.

Where the hell was I supposed to sleep?

It was a 42-hour drive to Washington from New York—if we drove straight through without stopping. Obviously, that was impossible. Olivia told me it would be more like two and a half days before we arrived. That meant I would be sleeping here, on a bus, with four rock stars and their very large bodyguard named Wayne.

“There she is!” Gareth exclaimed when he stepped onto the bus. “Are you ready for the ride of a lifetime?” He’s wearing a pair of light gray joggers that hang just right on his hips and an old concert T-shirt with the sleeves cut off.

I think so.

“Of course,” I respond, pulling confidence from somewhere unknown.

The other three members of Chaotix file onto the bus, and when I see Ryan, my nerves go haywire. Seeing him after what I did the other night feels wrong in all the best ways. I’m surprised to see the lead singer in a pair of gym shorts, but somehow it still works for him.

“Hey, I wanted to thank you again for taking me home the other night,” I say when he is close enough to avoid the others from hearing. “That was kind of a mess, but I really appreciate you getting me home safely.”

He nods. “No problem.”

And with that, he lays down on one of the bunk beds.

Weird.

He was much more talkative the other night. I shrug off the awkward encounter and take a seat on the large sofa.

Ant offers me a beer. “It’s eight in the morning,” I reply, hoping that he’s kidding.

“You mean it’s beer-thirty,” he remarks, popping open a bottle of brew.

I shake my head and laugh. “Knock yourself out. I think I’ll hold off for now.”

I spend the next several hours talking with the guys, minus Ryan, who still hasn’t emerged from his place on the bunk bed. He’s been sleeping since we pulled off the lot.

“Does he always sleep the entire trip?” I ask, not directing my question at anyone in particular.

Gareth is the one who answers. “Ole Knox had one hell of a night last night. He’ll be sleeping that one off for a while.”

The group laughs, and I am obviously missing an inside joke.

“Oh, you guys went to the club or something?”

Neil lets out a dramatic breath. “Nah, a party at some execs house. Throw a bunch of drunk assholes under one roof, and chaos and calamity ensue.”

“I was totally fucked up last night,” Ant says.

“No shit. I peeled you off the living room floor at 2:00 a.m.” Neil says under his breath.

The drummer shrugs, “Hey, when Alicia hands me a drink, I’m not turning it down. I was hell-bent that last night was going to be the night for her and me.”

“And it probably would have been if you didn’t get so sloshed you passed out at her feet,” Gareth says with a chuckle. “I think the only one who got lucky was Knox. Katarina has had her laser beams set on him since the video shoot. I’m just glad he finally let her get it out of her system.”

He was with her?

My chest tightens as I imagine Ryan with Katarina. I try to force the image from my mind, but it’s no use. I see their naked bodies writhing together and it is like a lead ball in my stomach.

“Let her get it out of her system?” I ask, confused by his choice of words.

“Yeah. Ryan never fucks around with the same girl twice. He probably just wanted her clingy ass to move on,” Gareth responds, casually.

The way Gareth talks about this as if it’s the most normal thing in the world makes my stomach turn. “Don’t get me wrong; she knew it would be a one-and-done kind of deal. No expectations, no one gets hurt.”

I nod, trying to pretend that this isn’t the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard, and dutifully ignore that tiny piece of my heart that is breaking. I had this man pegged all wrong. The gentleman who came to my rescue and took me home was obviously a figment of my imagination. Or worse, he had planned on making me the next of his hit-it-and-quit-it victims.

I guess he really *was* just another rock star playboy.

Not a chance you’ll make me just another notch in your bed frame, rocker boy.

Chapter Nineteen

Juliet

It's around 4:00 p.m. when Ryan emerges from his slumber. His hair is a mess, and the bags under his sleepy eyes give away just how wild his night must have been.

"I feel like I got hit by a truck," he mutters, grabbing a beer from the fridge.

Ant pats him on the back. "Poor baby."

The guys laugh, and Ryan lets out a groan, bringing the bottle to his lips.

"Is more alcohol really the solution?" I ask, and his emerald eyes meet my own.

"Hair of the dog, baby," he responds, toasting the bottle with the air. "The best way to kill a hangover."

When the word *baby* leaves his lips, I hate the way it makes me feel. I hate that it excites me. And if I'm being honest, I hate *him* for making me feel this way.

The more the guys drink, the more they open up with me. They're regaling me with crazy fan stories. I haven't laughed this hard in a really long time.

"I'm serious. She was hiding in the dressing room. All curled up in a ball behind a rack of clothes. When she jumped out, I screamed like a fucking girl! She straight up attacked me, and I have never in my *life* been so terrified of a woman," Gareth recounts the night a crazed fan somehow snuck into his dressing room, hoping to catch him changing and jump his bones.

"Oh my God, what happened?" I ask.

"Well, after Wayne heard my high-pitched scream from the next room, he busted in and dragged her out."

Wayne pipes up, "Kicking and screaming the whole way out, too. That one was something else."

“I’ve got that beat,” Ant remarks. “Remember that sweet-looking little old granny at the meet and greet in Jersey?”

The bus erupts in laughter as they all clearly remember.

“Oh no, what happened?” These stories are great, and I can only imagine how this one is going to end.

“The crazy woman plopped out her fucking dentures and asked me to sign them! She thrust them into my hands before I even had time to react. I will never get over that. They were slimy and disgusting, and there was a crowd around us, so it isn’t like I could throw them back in her face.” His face turns green from the memory.

Neil can barely speak, he’s laughing so hard. “And the best part? The paparazzi snapped a picture at the exact moment the teeth landed in his hands. The look on his face was fucking priceless.”

There are tears coming out of my eyes from laughing so hard. “Holy shit. That’s pure gold. So, did you sign them?”

“He sure did, and then rushed off to a bathroom to disinfect his entire body,” Neil answers.

“It was right after our first album blew up. I wasn’t used to all the attention and had no fucking clue what to do,” Ant offers up as we all continue to laugh at his trauma.

Gareth turns to Ryan. “How about you, Knox? What’s your craziest fan experience?”

Ryan looks deep in thought. “Probably the time some delusional chick had convinced herself and her entire family that we were secretly engaged. She had photo-shopped pictures of us together all over her house. She spent her life’s savings on concert tickets but told everyone I sent her the passes for free. I finally had to set the record straight during an interview with Access Hollywood when the story got out. She then proceeded to slander me all over the media, telling anyone who would listen that I ditched her after the fame went to my head. This psycho convinced a lot of people of that shit.”

“Fuck, I forgot about crazy Stacy,” Neil says. “For a while, I thought she was going to hunt you down and tie you up in her basement.”

Ryan shudders. “You and me both.”

I clasp my hand over my mouth. “That’s literally insane. Like, lock her in a padded room with a rubber duck, insane.”

He nods. “That was probably the craziest thing that’s happened to me. I still get freaked out when I think about it.”

The conversation shifts after that, and before long, the guitars are broken out, and a full-blown jam session ensues. It’s amazing to watch them unplugged like this, without all the theatrics. I remember my first impression of the band- that their talent played second fiddle to their raging good looks and raw sex appeal. Now, I know I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Listening to them harmonize and goof off with covers of classic hits is a surreal experience. Before long, they are able to convince me to start drinking with them. Gareth boasts that he can teach me to play an entire song on the guitar, despite the fact that I’ve never held the instrument in my life.

To my surprise, with the help of his expert guidance, I am suddenly playing “Sweet Caroline” while everyone sings along. Wayne and I even pipe in with the *bum bum bums*. Granted, the entire song is just a series of the same three chords.

When the driver stops to refuel, Ant and Neil get out to stretch their legs and load up on gas station pizza. Gareth begins to pluck out a melody I don’t recognize on the guitar, and I find myself mesmerized by the way his fingers dance across the strings.

“I have a question, actually,” I ask, suddenly nervous. I just remembered that I still haven’t figured out where I will be sleeping tonight.

“Shoot,” Gareth says.

“Um, Where do I sleep?”

Ryan is the one who answers. “The bedroom. We normally flip for it, but we can take the bunks for now.”

Thank God. I wasn’t looking forward to cramming into one of those small bunk beds, especially since I had no clue if these boys snored.

“Oh, okay. Great.”

Gareth stops playing. “You aren’t tired yet, are you?” He seems disappointed that I may leave the party and go to sleep.

“Not yet,” I say with a smile. His face brightens, and he returns to his guitar.

When everyone is loaded back onto the bus, the jam session continues. I sit back on the sofa and observe the men in their natural habitat.

The way they let loose so freely when they play is sort of magical to see. An idea pops into my head, and without even meaning to, I am thrust into PR mode.

“Holy shit, an unplugged special edition!” I shriek, and they all look at me like I’ve gone mad.

“Huh?” Neil asks.

I jump up from my seat. “It’s brilliant! A special release of your first album, but done completely unplugged. Strip it down to acoustics and leave all the fluff at the door. Slow down the songs. Reinvent them! It’s like nothing you’ve ever done before, something fresh.”

The band looks at one another, considering my idea. “It’s actually a really good idea.” Ryan finally says, and a sense of accomplishment washes over me. “There’s been a ton of success with albums like that in the past.”

“You could even test the theory at some of the shows on the tour. Play an unplugged version of a song and gauge the crowd’s reaction. If they hate it, no harm is done. But if they love it...” I continue, “You’ll know it will be a smash!”

Gareth smiles. “I’m down. Talk to Olivia about it, and see what she thinks.”

Ant and Neil also agree that they are open to the idea. A surge of energy strikes me as I already begin planning out the entire thing in my mind. Their first album was self-titled *Chaotix*.

“And to stay on brand with the whole raging sex appeal, we could call it *Chaotix: Stripped*. A play on the nakedness of it all. America’s favorite rock stars stripped down to their raw, authentic selves.”

I know I’m spiraling, talking way too fast, and getting way too excited about something that may not even happen. Olivia could hate the idea, but for now, I am over the moon.

“And to think, when I first met you, I thought you were just a pretty face,” Gareth says, sporting a mischievous grin. “Those wheels are always turning, aren’t they?”

I nod. “Yeah. It’s sort of the way I’m wired, I guess. When inspiration hits, you gotta run with it while you can.”

The mood on the bus is electric. We’re all having a blast, singing at the tops of our lungs and playing drinking games. At some point, I stumble to the bedroom, kick off my shoes, and crawl into bed. The room spins a little, but it doesn’t take long before I’m dozing in and out of consciousness.

All of my nervousness about this tour has completely faded away and has since been replaced with pure excitement over what will come next on this incredible adventure.

Chapter Twenty

Juliet

Waking up on the road seems surreal. I am so used to my routine, but here? There is no schedule and no alarm blaring at 6:00 a.m. At least for now, until we arrive in Washington, I feel more carefree than I have in years.

I dig out a pair of yoga pants and a T-shirt from the small tote I packed to get me through these few days on the bus. I throw my long blonde locks into a messy bun on top of my head and swipe a makeup wipe across my face. I never fall asleep without washing it off, but last night there was no way I was doing anything before crashing.

I glance at my phone, 8:30 a.m.

I haven't slept in this late in a while, and it feels good. When I walk out of the small bedroom, I see that the guys all seem to still be out cold. Wayne's large body is stretched out across the sofa, so I settle into one of the booth seats in front of the dining table after grabbing a yogurt from the fridge.

"You always up this early?" Ryan asks, his deep voice still husky from just waking up.

"Normally earlier than this," I answer, slipping a spoonful of the vanilla Greek yogurt into my mouth.

He opens a cabinet and pulls out a granola bar. He surprises me when he slides into the booth with me, his broad shoulders touching my own.

"Did I wake you?"

He shrugs. "No, I was already awake. Ant snores like a damn freight train when he's been drinking."

Thank God I didn't hear him.

"I actually slept pretty well, better than I expected to."

I lean around him to peek over at the sleeping men just as Ant lets out a loud snore.

“So, what do you think about life on the road?” Ryan asks. “Is it every bit as *magical* as you pictured?” The sarcasm in his voice is apparent.

“Well, it’s not like the movies. That’s for sure,” I answer.

“How so?”

“For one, there’s not a horde of groupies riding along. Secondly, no one is doing blow off the countertops.” I’m only sort of kidding about that last one.

Ryan laughs. “Nah, no blow. Just pot occasionally. You really thought there would be groupies with us?”

I shrug. “I mean, maybe. That night, backstage? There wasn’t exactly a shortage of them.”

He takes a bite of the granola bar. “That’s different. Shows are a whole different world. In here, we’re just the same guys we were before getting signed. We like keeping those worlds separate.”

I shift a little, turning so I can see his face. “How long have you guys known each other?”

“Shit, I’ve known Gareth since we were kids. We grew up on the same street. Neil moved to our hometown during junior year, and we adopted him into the group. We started playing in his garage and slowly working our way up to real gigs. For a while, it was just the three of us. We planned some half-assed tour to try and get our big break but ended up just playing a bunch of shit-hole bars for a few weeks. That’s how we met Ant.”

Ryan’s sudden openness with me is nice, and all I want is for him to keep talking. I could listen to him all day.

“We set up to play at a dive bar in Oklahoma. This kid with crazy hair and wild eyes jumped on stage and asked if he could be our drummer for the night. We said *what the hell* and the rest is history. He loaded up in our van with us the next day and has been with us ever since.”

I smile, picturing his memory. “That’s an incredible story. Look at you now.”

“Yeah, life is funny like that sometimes. Truth is, none of us ever expected we’d make it in this business. We just got lucky; I guess.” He crumbles up the wrapper from the granola bar and puts it into my empty yogurt cup. “What about you? What’s your story.”

“I don’t really have one. I figured out pretty young what I wanted to do with my life, and I dedicated most of my time to getting to where I am now. I live with my best friend, Alyssa, in a small apartment. We met in college, though she never graduated. She wants to be an actress. We’re like yin and yang, but it works.” My story pales in comparison to the rags-to-riches tale he just shared.

When he rises from the booth to throw away the remnants of our breakfast, I take the opportunity to stretch my arms above my head. Apparently, my shirt rises just enough for him to see the faint yellowing bruises that still remain from my encounter at the club and it stops him in his tracks. Within seconds he is back at my side, sliding my shirt up so he can examine them.

“Fuck, you still have those marks?” His calloused fingers graze my skin, and my breath hitches in my throat.

I want to push him away, but this closeness is intoxicating.

“It’s not a big deal. They’re almost healed.” I say quietly.

To be honest, I haven’t spoken about what happened since that night. The whole ordeal was humiliating.

“Yeah, well, I should have killed that motherfucker for touching you,” he grits through his teeth.

I slide my shirt back down, covering the marks. I think he will pull away, but instead, he takes my cheek in his hand. “If some shit like that happens on this tour, you tell me. Okay? I won’t always be able to watch you, but if anyone screws with you, I want to know about it.”

Unsure of what to say, I nod. His hand rests there, and when he uses his thumb to brush a stray strand of hair from in front of my eyes, I almost come apart at the seams.

Our breathing has intensified, and I know he feels it too. This strange flash of electricity seems to spark whenever we touch.

Just when I think everything is about to burst around us, that this magnetic pull is milliseconds away from causing us to crash our lips together, a groan from the sofa snaps us back to reality.

Ryan's hand jerks away from my face, and just as quickly as it began, the moment is over.

Wayne's mountain of a body shifts on the sofa, his weight causing it to creak. "What time is it? Why are you assholes up?"

"Sorry man, Ant was snoring loud enough to raise the dead," Ryan says, apologizing to the bodyguard.

He gets up from the table and finally tosses our trash into the bin.

The sudden distance between us brings me back to my senses.

What the hell are you thinking? He just slept with Katarina, he doesn't want you and YOU don't want him... right?

I am here to do a job, not swoon over the most unavailable man on the planet. My job, I remind myself, is the reason I'm even on this damn bus to begin with.

There are two things that could effectively ruin my good name in the PR world. One, if this tour turns into a complete bust. The other? Word getting out that I messed around with my client. I would never be taken seriously again.

I already feel like I have everything to prove. I'm young, inexperienced, and have a shaky resume. If people thought I was hooking up with someone from the band, it wouldn't be a huge leap to come to the conclusion that was the only reason I landed the job.

Not to mention it would give Valerie the validation to all the horrible things she's always suspected of me.

Forget that.

I've worked too hard for this, and I won't let some little schoolyard crush on a rock star mess things up for me. Even if he is the most delicious man I've ever laid eyes on.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ryan

I just came way too fucking close to making a massive fucking mistake. Wayne may be on the payroll, but I don't doubt for one second that if he saw anything more than friendliness, he'd call Olivia the moment this bus came to a halt.

The amount of shit I would have to listen to if anyone saw me kissing the new publicist would be out of this world.

No fucking thank you.

I have every intention of claiming every single inch of my sweet Juliet, but it won't be on a tour bus surrounded by prying eyes that will rat me out to *both* of our bosses.

My mind is back on the bruises that mark her perfect skin and the face of the disgusting bastard who gave them to her. His face that I should have fucked up even more than I did, and if given the opportunity, I would waste no time in doing exactly that.

She's still sitting there at the table, right where I left her. Her hair is falling in her face, and I fight the urge to brush it away again.

A loud snore erupts from Ant, and I can't help but laugh when Neil nails him in the head with a pillow from the top bunk.

"What the hell, man!" he yells out, the hit jarring him immediately from his deep sleep.

"You sound like a fucking garbage disposal, Ant," Neil responds, voice slow and raspy.

"More like a chainsaw with a dull blade," Gareth adds, sounding equally as exhausted. "Next tour, I'm petitioning for separate buses. This shit is for the birds, bro."

Now that the gang's all present and accounted for, I know there can be no more contact with her.

It will raise too many red flags, and I don't feel like fielding questions left and right. Especially with Gareth's newfound interest in our dear little publicist.

That, I was going to nip in the bud.

I might not be able to let on to anyone that she has consumed my every thought, but I can sure as hell make sure Gareth stays the hell away from her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Juliet

I keep my distance from the guys for the rest of the trip to Washington. Instead of hanging out with the band, I stay in the bedroom glued to my laptop. I've spent the past few hours on the phone with Olivia pitching my idea for the special edition album.

She loved it.

"You see? This is exactly why I wanted you. My gut is always right," she says before we hang up.

I confirmed everything was in place for the concert and even leaked to the tabloids that Chaotix would be staying at a different hotel across town than they actually were. I hoped that would prevent mass pandemonium when we arrived, and it worked.

Ant called me an evil genius and Neil gave me a fist bump.

"Badass, J. We're normally swarmed, and that blows after spending a few days on that bus," Gareth commended as we walked into the hotel.

It was obvious Ryan could tell I was being distant, though I'm sure he just thought our little moment had freaked me out. He would try and find reasons to talk to me, but I would keep my answers short.

In the lobby, he nudged me with an elbow and handed me my room key. "We're all on the same floor."

I took the key and nodded, saying nothing and keeping my eyes trained forward.

He raised an eyebrow, smirked, and then gave me a look that made me even more nervous. Making me nervous seemed to be a talent of his.

He looked at me like I was a puzzle that needed to be solved, a safe that needed to be cracked. He was trying to figure me out, figure out why all of a sudden I was avoiding him like the plague.

He looked at me like a challenge, and that was terrifying.

Jesus, I hope he doesn't think this is me trying to play hard to get or something.

When I was safely in my own room, I collapsed onto the bed, pulled out my phone, and texted the one person who could talk me out of this funk.

Juliet: I wish you were here. I'm so on edge right now it's insane.

Alyssa: What's up? Is everything okay?

Juliet: My head is all over the place. I'm stressed, distracted, and need to get my shit together.

Alyssa: Distracted? You? Since when?

Juliet: Since I keep having weird moments with Ryan that make me want to rip my clothes off.

Three dots pop up on the screen and then disappear over and over. She obviously doesn't know how to respond to that.

Alyssa: I'm sorry, WHAT?

Alyssa: Forgive me, but I fail to see how that could be a problem...

Of course she would say that.

Juliet: It's a problem because I work for him. It's a problem because I'm trying to prove that I can handle this job, that I DESERVE this job. Not that I screwed my way to the top.

Juliet: Also, he apparently only hooks up with a girl once. If I do it, I'll be stuck having to work with a man who only views me as a one-night stand for the next three months.

Alyssa: Oh shit. Yeah, I see your point.

Alyssa: Wait, what do you mean he only hooks up with someone once?

Juliet: According to the guys, he doesn't do strings. What better way to avoid attachment than never sleeping

with the same person more than once?

Alyssa: That's fucked up.

Alyssa: Definitely don't hook up with the sexy rock star, then. You're not a hit-it-and-quit-it kind of girl.

I roll onto my stomach and sigh.

Juliet: Help me de-stress, please.

Alyssa: Head to the bar and have a few drinks. I know there has to be some swanky joint at that fancy hotel.

I think about her suggestion. A drink would help, but I also want to stay holed up in this room for as long as possible.

Alyssa: Stop overthinking and go get a drink.

Juliet: How is it possible that you can still read my mind from across the country?

Alyssa: I'm just good like that. Now go. Love you lots.
XX

I unzip my suitcase and pull out a black dress. When I take in my appearance in the bathroom mirror, I realize pretty quickly that I need to touch up my makeup. I look like I've been on the road, and that isn't exactly the vibe I'm going for right now. I take down my ponytail and run my fingers through my hair.

When all is said and done, I look decent enough. I slide on a pair of ballet flats, grab my purse and room key, and head to find the bar. The only thing keeping me from letting my anxiety completely overwhelm me is that I know for a fact that the guys will avoid going down to the lobby. It would take a few minutes before word got out, and the place would be overrun with screaming fans in no time.

The concierge points me in the direction of a small bistro that doubles as a bar after 6:00 p.m. I take a seat on one of the bar stools and order a gin and tonic. Today calls for something a little stronger than usual.

"Mind if I sit?" an attractive man asks, gesturing to the empty stool next to me.

“Go ahead,” I coolly reply.

“Business or pleasure?” he asks, flashing me a megawatt smile.

I politely return the smile. “Business, you?”

“Bachelor party for my soon-to-be brother-in-law.” He glances over his shoulder at a small group of men taking shots. “This is apparently the pre-game; we’re heading to some club around the corner shortly.”

He extends his hand to me. “I’m Jack.”

“Juliet, nice to meet you. Congratulations on the wedding. I’m sure that’s exciting.”

He shrugs. “I guess. He’s a good guy. My sister could have done much worse.”

He orders a beer, and we make small talk for a while. He’s an investment banker from Tacoma, has a black lab named Rosco, and seems quite hell-bent on getting me to join them at the club.

“I have a big day at work tomorrow, but I would love to otherwise.” I lie. I do have a big day, but I am not even the tiniest bit interested in going clubbing with four strange men. If Alyssa were here, she would have already agreed for both of us.

He’s a good-looking guy, and I would be lying if I said I wasn’t enjoying his company, but that didn’t mean I wanted our meeting to extend beyond these four walls.

“You mentioned you’re in public relations. Which area specifically?” he asks.

I take a sip from my third gin and tonic. “The music industry,” I respond vaguely.

He seems surprised. “Really? That’s interesting. What exactly do you do?”

“Well, being a publicist for a musician or a band is pretty vast. It can involve setting up events with the press, planning

concerts and tours, and maintaining their overall image. It depends on the client and what their specific needs are.”

He laughs. “So, keeping them out of trouble?”

“That can be part of it,” I say with a chuckle. “Bad press can kill someone’s image.”

The bartender asks if Jack would like another beer, and he nods. “I imagine that can be a difficult undertaking when dealing with musicians. They always seem to find themselves in hot water.”

A gasp from a woman seated at a high top causes us both to look up.

When my eyes make it to the front door, the cause of her shock is apparent. All four members of the band stroll in, clad mostly in leather and looking like four gods who’d just been dropped onto planet Earth to mingle with us *mundanes*.

“Holy shit is that—” Jack begins.

“Yep. That’s them,” I say before downing the rest of my drink.

The guys make a beeline in my direction, and when Jack finally connects the dots, his mouth hangs open. “Wait, you work with *them*?”

I offer a tight smile, but can’t hide the proud feeling growing in my gut. I worked with *Chaotix* and *that* was so cool!

“There’s our favorite publicist,” Gareth says with a grin. “Who’s your friend?”

I introduce Jack to them, and he plays it pretty cool for the most part. It’s clear he’s trying to hold his shit together and not look like he’s totally freaking out. I may not have known him for long, but it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to tell his mind is mid-spiral. I didn’t peg him as the type to even know who they were, but I was quickly learning that everyone did.

I keep feeling Ryan’s gaze on me, so I continue looking everywhere but at him.

Avoiding someone like him isn't exactly an easy feat.

“As much as I hate to leave, we have a bachelor party to get to. I've been trying to convince her to come with me tonight, but she's been turning me down,” Jack says playfully.

I shake my head and smile, but I suddenly feel awkward that he just made it clear he's interested in me in front of them. “They have a show tomorrow night, and I have to prepare for it. I really enjoyed meeting you, though, have fun tonight!”

Jack excuses himself, but not before asking for my number. He hands me his phone, and I save my contact information.

It doesn't take long before the band is pulled in a thousand different directions by fans requesting autographs and pictures.

A woman shoves her phone into my hand and asks me to snap one of her and Ryan. She presses her lips to his cheek and motions for me to take it quickly. I know the look on my face gives away my annoyance, but I oblige nonetheless.

This goes on for a while, and somehow I have turned into the freshly anointed Chaotix camera girl.

Not one person acknowledges my existence other than to thrust a phone in my direction and demand a photograph with the band.

When a slimy-looking man with a professional camera walks through the door, I know the word has gotten out. So much for keeping a low profile.

“Lemme get a group shot,” he calls out to the guys.

I move to step out of the frame, but Ryan has other plans. He throws an arm over my shoulder, and I am forced to remain in the picture.

“Who's the lady? I need a name for the feature,” the slimy man asks.

“Juliet, our new publicist,” Ryan answers loudly.

He types my name into his phone and snaps a few more candid shots before slinking off to a corner. He continues to

watch us, undoubtedly hoping to catch something juicy to beef up his material.

“I’m going to head back up to my room. It’s getting late, and tomorrow is a big day,” I say before asking the bartender for my tab to be closed.

Gareth waves her off. “Put it on our room.”

I decide against arguing and thank him instead.

“I’ll walk you,” Ryan says. He begins walking towards the exit, not giving me the chance to decline his offer.

We make our way to the elevator in silence, and even when inside, neither one of us speaks. I can feel my pulse increasing rapidly with every step. Despite all my efforts to avoid him today, he still somehow managed to get me alone.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Juliet

I walk a few paces ahead of him towards my door, but by this point, the silence is driving me insane. Against my better judgment, I turn to face him.

“What happened to keeping a low profile?” I ask, crossing my arms.

Ryan shrugs. “Olivia wanted some press to hype everyone up for the show tomorrow.”

I should have guessed that, though it irritates me that she didn’t give me a heads-up.

He takes a step towards me. “My turn to ask a question. Why have you been weird lately?”

I bite my lip, unsure of how to approach this discussion. “I don’t know what you are talking about.” It’s obvious my answer isn’t going to be good enough.

He tilts his head and raises an eyebrow as if to say *I don’t buy that*.

“I’ve just been trying to focus on the tour, you know, to make sure everything runs smoothly.” I step backward towards my hotel room door.

He moves forward again, slowly closing the space between us. “Mhm, so it has nothing to do with me?” His amber scent envelops me and the air turns electric with tension.

His voice is lower now, and I swear his eyes have gone a shade darker.

“No, of course not.” I use every ounce of willpower in my body to make that sound believable, but the devilish smirk on his face tells me I’ve failed. He continues towards me until my back is pressed firmly against the door.

“Why are you so nervous around me then?” he asks, standing so close I can almost feel his breath against my face.

Oh, I don't know, maybe because you are quite possibly the most attractive man on the planet? Maybe because you have a reputation for being an unapologetic womanizer? Or maybe, just maybe, because I work for you?

All of the above are the answers that run through my mind, but I don't say any of them out loud.

I reach for my room key and slide it into the lock. "You don't make me nervous, Ryan Knox."

"I didn't peg you for a liar, Juliet Warren," he whispers into my ear and I can almost feel his lips on my skin. A small whimper escapes my mouth before I have a chance to stop it.

The surge of lust that races through my body is almost enough for me to temporarily forget all the reasons this is a horrible idea, almost. "I'm not going to fuck you." I finally manage to say, and he takes a quick step back.

Surprise mars his perfect face. "What?"

I steady myself. "You heard me. I won't sleep with you."

He runs a hand through his hair and blows out an exasperated breath. "Mind telling me why?"

I run through the list of reasons in my mind, trying to decide which one is the safest answer. My door is now cracked, and I am so close to escaping.

Do I want to escape?

I scold my inner voice for the thought. Of course, I do.

"I work for you. It's inappropriate," I say quietly. Yes, that's the best route to take. I am a professional woman here to do a job, not get all hot and bothered every time this man looks at me.

His mouth twitches into a smile. "Is that it?"

Damn you, Ryan.

"Yes, well, no. It doesn't matter. Either way, it isn't happening." I bite my lip, trying not to focus on his eyes.

God, they are beautiful.

If I thought my heart was already racing, that was just the warm-up lap.

“It matters to me. If you didn’t work for me would that still be your excuse?” His cool, confident voice has me off balance. The way he asks the question is as if he’s negotiating a business arrangement, not trying to sleep with a woman.

I laugh awkwardly. “Look, this conversation shouldn’t happen.”

“You know, I actually think it should. Come on, Juliet. Tell me.” The boyish grin on his face is unraveling me.

If I don’t get inside my room soon I’m not sure my self-control will win out.

I cross my arms again. “Well, I do work for you. I want to be taken seriously and not have everyone on the planet think I landed this job just because I screwed the lead singer. Not to mention you have a horrible reputation when it comes to women.”

He thinks about my response. “How could anyone say you got the job because you slept with me if it happened *after* you were hired?”

This man.

“It doesn’t matter what the truth is. It’s how it would appear,” I answer, firm in my resolution.

He nods, conceding that I have a point. “Valid point. However, what makes you think anyone would ever know?” He winks, and for the first time during this entire conversation, all temptation to lose myself falls away.

It’s like I took a cold shower, and all the lust has been replaced with recognition and clarity.

“You see? That’s my point. I’m not a *fuck once to get it out of my system* kind of girl. I get that’s what you are used to, but that’s not me.” I say, thinking back on my conversation with the band about Katarina. “Sure, it would probably be incredible. You could probably make me feel things that I didn’t even know I could feel. But at the end of the night, I

would regret it. I would regret letting myself get so caught up in the elusive Ryan Knox that I compromised who I am. Plus, we have to deal with each other for the next three months. Do you really want to be stuck with your one-night stand for the rest of the tour? I sure as hell don't."

He stares at me, completely stunned. He opens his mouth to speak but shuts it quickly.

"Now, if you don't mind, I am going to bed now. We have a big day tomorrow. Thank you for walking me to my room." My voice is confident now, all traces of uncertainty long gone.

I turn on my heel and begin to walk into the room, but his hand catches mine, and he pulls me into his body. My heart stops, and when I look up at him, there is something different about the way he is looking back at me.

"You're different than most women. You know that?" he says in a hushed tone. "I know you think you've just put me in my place, but all you've done is make me want you more."

"W-what?" I stammer, instantly hating that I can't form a coherent sentence. Hating his *effect* on me. I'm dwarfed by his massive frame, and suddenly all that confidence from seconds ago is gone.

His breathing has become more rapid, and I can feel his heart hammering against his chest.

"I'm not trying to play hard to get, Ryan. I'm serious. I meant what I said." I try again to regain my composure, but my body is betraying me with every second I am in his arms.

"I know, that's exactly what is driving me fucking crazy right now." His grip on me loosens, and he tilts my chin up so that I have to face him again. "I'll respect it, but that doesn't mean I'll like it."

Still unsure of what to say, I nod. When he finally releases me, the loss of contact causes physical discomfort. Even though I know I'm doing the right thing, it feels so damn wrong. All I want to do right now is say, "fuck it" and pull him into my room. I want to let him do unspeakable things to me,

to make me come over and over again until the regret doesn't even matter anymore.

It does matter, though. I know that if I give in, it will be me who ends up getting hurt when he drops me like a bad habit the next day. It would be me that hurts every day after that when I have to work with him and pretend nothing happened.

“Goodnight, Juliet,” he says as he walks away from my doorway and towards his own.

“Goodnight, Ryan,” I reply, almost in a whisper.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ryan

Part of me wonders if it's the sharp sting of rejection making my head spin with thoughts of her, but deep down, I know that isn't true. Juliet Warren has consumed me, body and soul since the first time she opened her pretty pink mouth backstage.

Every word, every movement, every single thing about her has me so fucking wound up I'm surprised I haven't spontaneously combusted.

"I won't fuck you."

Her words play on a loop in my mind as I pace the length of my suite.

I told her I would respect that, and I will. But that doesn't mean it doesn't fucking suck.

It isn't like her reasons aren't valid.

She does work for me, and mixing business and pleasure is a pile of shit no one should be eager to step in.

She's also right about her professional reputation.

If word ever got out about our little tryst in the sheets, she could be fired. Or blacklisted. Or both.

You don't exactly have the best reputation with women, either.

I roll my eyes at the voice in the back of my mind reminding me that I haven't always treated the ladies in my life the best, especially the ones I've met since the band got big.

No matter how badly I want her, I know it's wrong. But that doesn't do much to appease the need. All it does is fuel my fire, and me? Well, I like a challenge.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Juliet

The next morning was a blur. If I thought everything that had come before was a rush, it was nothing compared to this. The band nailed their press interviews, and when the horde of screaming fans chanted their names, they generously stopped to sign hundreds of autographs. It was incredible to see them be so adoring towards their fans, doting on them, and indulging their every request. When I previously thought of rock bands, it wasn't the *kindness* I saw in front of me. Even the... well, *weirder* fans, like when a grown ass man asked Ryan to sign his bicep so he could get it tattooed on the next day.

“Wild, huh?” Olivia asked when we finally got inside the arena where tonight's show will be held. “Can you imagine being so loved by complete strangers?”

I shake my head. “Not at all, actually.”

“Honestly? I'm not sure I would want to,” she shares, her candidness catching me off guard.

“Why do you say that?”

Olivia crosses her arms and takes in the massive empty stage in front of us.

“Right now I get to experience both sides of this world. Maybe not in the same way the guys do, but I see how they are treated. How they are worshiped. I see the parties, the nights that turn into mornings and into nights again, I see it all. It's a fantasy. I also get to go home after a long tour and see my family. I get to leave this all behind and have normalcy. I can go to the grocery store with my wife and daughter, and not have to worry about being mobbed by adoring fans in the canned goods aisle. It's nice to get to live the fantasy for a bit, but I always love going home.”

I thought about her words.

“There is no normalcy for them anymore. After their first album went platinum everyone knew their names, their faces.

They can barely check their own mail without being swarmed.”

She was right. I couldn't imagine being recognized everywhere I went. Never having privacy again, never getting to enjoy the little things like a walk through Central Park or catching a taxi to the coffee shop.

“Remember that, Juliet. There will always be a camera around, always someone watching and listening. Waiting for you to slip up. I know it's your job to handle the PR, but this world is new to you. You may be used to paparazzi catching your socialites in a compromising position, but you have no clue what it's like for them to follow your every move.”

I nod, grateful for the reality check.

I think back to the night in the bar, and the night on the bus where I'd given in and had drinks with the band.

It would just take one time for that to come back to bite me. One time where I let my guard down and someone snapped a photo.

“I understand,” I reply, and she nods. The smile she gives me is genuine.

“I want you to succeed here. I like you, Juliet. I think this could really be what you are meant to do, but I also know this world can swallow you whole. It's easy to get caught up in the glamor of it all.”

We walk up the stairs leading to the stage and look out at the thousands of empty seats.

“Can you believe in a few hours this place will be completely packed out?” I ask her, my awe not easily hidden. “All of them, screaming and cheering.”

I turn and face the set design, seeing bits of my own design intermingled with the ideas of my team.

“And I had a part in it. This—” I gesture out towards where the fans will be, “I helped make this happen. It's so surreal.”

I'd never been backstage at a concert of any type before, and this time, I was standing just out of sight of the fans. On stage right, where I had the best view in the house. I watched in awe as the guys nailed every single number. I cheered and clapped with the crowd, and smiled when they caught me dancing along.

"This is incredible!" I yelled over the screams and loud music.

It felt like I was living a dream.

I took out my phone and took a short recording to send to Alyssa.

The lights dimmed and I knew it was time for the new song to debut.

Ryan walked out to center stage, his guitar slung over his back and sporting a wicked smile on his face. He dragged the mic stand with him as he made his way to the edge. That man sure knows how to wear a pair of tight leather pants.

"You may have heard from a little birdie that we have a new single," he said, his lips pressed to the microphone.

He was covered in sweat, and the look he was giving the crowd was earth-shattering.

"You wanna be the first ones to hear it?" he called out to the fans, and they responded with a thunderous roar of approval.

"I said, do you wanna be the first ones to hear it?" he called out a second time, and this time the response was even louder. The noise of the crowd was so deafening, my ears rang a little.

Gareth began playing the beginning notes to the song, and Ryan tilted his head toward the lights above. Ant's drums join in at the same time Neil begins to pluck the bass. Ryan takes a breath before pressing the mic to his lips. His deep voice

crooned the lyrics, and I watched as the people in the front row melted like putty in his hands.

He was selling it, alright. He was making every single man and woman come apart at the seams with every syllable.

Was it the moment I pushed into her for the first time,

He caressed the mic stand like a lover.

the first kiss, or her fingers laced in mine?

When we rise from the tangled sheets I knew,

my fate was sealed.

I was so entranced by the performance, and when the song came to a close, I found myself cheering for an encore just like the audience.

Of course, the band obliged and immediately launched into one of their top hits.

When they came off stage, each of the men were dripping with sweat and pure adrenaline. I took a step back so they could pass, but when Ryan's gaze locked onto mine I swear my knees almost buckled.

Seeing him like that, up close, sweat coating his skin.

He nodded towards one of the assistants who held out towels to the band members and barked out a quick order. "Get her some water."

Nothing could compare to seeing him coming off the biggest natural high that a man like him could possibly experience, well, it was intense. His breathing was ragged, and he looked at me like a lion getting ready to pounce on unsuspecting prey. Add in the fact that despite everything going on around him he was concerned about my hydration?

God, that was hot.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Juliet

“Hell yeah!” Ant called out, slamming the sticks down onto the first flat surface he came to. “That was epic, man. Epic!”

He was right, it was epic.

I followed the band and the security team through the narrow walkways and into a dressing room. There were various bottles of unopened liquor on the tables and a large array of snacks waiting for them.

I watched as they fist-bumped and congratulated each other on the show, and each member specifically mentioned how well the debut single had gone.

When Wayne entered the room he gestured towards the door and Neil gave him a knowing smirk.

The guys filed out and into the larger open area beyond the dressing room. The swarm of women lining the walls brought back memories of my first Chaotix experience. This was the part when the band selected fans from the audience to be brought in to entertain them.

You could tell each of the boys were still riding the high from performing. Sweaty, shirtless, and ready to party. They passed around bottles and joints, and I tried to blend into the background as best I could.

The more alcohol that flowed, the more glaringly obvious my sobriety became. Olivia’s words played in my mind, and I knew it wasn’t worth looking unprofessional by grabbing a drink. Even if I did feel embarrassingly out of place.

Gareth leaned against a tall storage container. He reached for a halfway-spent cigarette that was lodged in the lips of a busty redhead. Her hungry eyes followed it up to his own lips. He took a long drag and then whispered something into her neck.

Neil and Ant were surrounded by a trio of women. The three of them combined had on less clothing than me, and they looked young. Too young to be wearing next to nothing and cozying up to rock stars.

I scanned the room looking for Ryan.

An elbow slammed into my side and I lurched forward.

“Oh shit, sorry!” a tiny blonde offered with a sheepish smile.

I rubbed at the area and tried to match her smile. “It’s fine”

Her eyes traveled down my chest and rested on the backstage pass I wore around my neck.

“Are you, like, with the band?” The excitement in her voice was sort of cute.

“I work with them, yes.”

She took a step toward me and threw up her arms. “Seriously? Can you like, introduce me?”

She clearly liked to wave her arms about when she spoke, which explained the slight ache in my ribs.

“Uh, I don’t know. I mean—” I looked around and gestured towards the boys who were already chatting with other fans. “It seems like you could probably just go do that yourself. They won’t bite.”

That last bit was meant to be a joke, but the devious look in her eyes said she wouldn’t mind one bit if one of the Chaotix boys sunk their teeth into her.

“Oh, we bite, just not hard. More of a.... nibble, you know?”

Ryan’s voice made me jump, and the satisfied grin on his face made my cheeks redden.

The blonde’s eyes lit up like she’d just caught Santa Claus shoving gifts under her tree on Christmas Eve.

“Oh my God. Ryan Knox. Hi, I’m Mollie.”

Ryan extends his arm and Mollie leans into him. She looks up at him with stars in her eyes.

I shove the tinge of jealousy down like bile. There was no reason to be jealous. He was a celebrity meeting a fan, showing her an acceptable amount of affection to say thank you for the support and love.

His finger twirled one of her curls and leaned down so their faces were dangerously close.

“Strawberries?” he asked after sniffing the strands, and she bit her lip.

“My shampoo.”

Her sweet voice had gone breathy.

“I love strawberries, especially the ones covered in dark chocolate.” His tone matched hers, breathy and sensual.

I suddenly felt like I was intruding. Like I had no business being a part of their *intimate* conversation.

“Alright, well that seems to be my cue,” I said, breaking the tension building between them. “Have a good evening, you two.”

I made it very clear I was unimpressed with him canoodling this random groupie in my face, but in the same breath, did I have the right to be upset? No. Ryan Knox owed me not a damn thing, and he could screw any mindless groupie he wanted. I just couldn’t stand to stick around and watch it happen.

“Bye!” Mollie called out as I turned on my heel.

I couldn’t even hate her for it. She was clueless.

I spoke to no one as I made a beeline for the elevator. I don’t think I stopped to even think or breathe until I made it outside. The row of cars waiting to take everyone back to the hotel was already there, and I wasted no time sliding into the backseat of the first one in line.

“I’m ready to go back now, please.”

I know it came out cold, but I didn't care right now. I just needed to get back to my room so I could soak in the large jacuzzi bathtub and watch trash TV.

It didn't take long to make the short drive back to the hotel, and when I finally made it to the room I immediately stripped off the slacks and ruffled top I'd worn to the show. My underwear hit the floor and next came the bra. I reached for the plush white robe that hung in the closet and wrapped it around my naked body.

This hotel wasn't like the ones I usually stayed in. It was much nicer and grander. This was the kind of place that gave you an expensive robe with matching slippers. Not to mention the tiny jars of bubble bath and sugar scrubs, and packets of bath salts. It was pure luxury.

I twisted the stopper in place and began to fill the tub with steaming hot water. I selected one of the packets of salt that smelled like lavender and vanilla and sprinkled it in.

A single knock at my door made me drop the small clear packet into the tub. I turn off the water and fish for the packet. "Just a minute!"

It must be a hotel employee, or maybe Olivia planned to have something delivered to the room.

I made sure the robe was secured tightly around my body and unlocked the door. I pushed it open slightly, just enough to see who knocked.

Ryan's large frame came into view, and my breath hitched.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Juliet

“If you’ve locked yourself out or something, I don’t--”

Ryan pushes into my room and backs me against the wall.

His emerald eyes are wild and feral.

“What the hell are you doing?” I try to sound confident in my words, but the truth is being this close to him is making my heart slam against my chest.

“I knew it,” he replied, his eyes darkening by the second.

I scoff. “Knew what, exactly? That you’re deranged and just completely crossed every single professional boundary by barging into my room?”

He shakes his head, mocking me.

“That you would get jealous the moment I gave anyone else the time of day.”

It takes every bit of self-control not to squirm.

“I wasn’t jealous, I just have no interest in watching you whore yourself out to some random girl in Seattle.”

He inches closer so that our bodies are so close to touching that I can almost feel his heat.

“Admit it,” he growls out, clenching his jaw.

I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“There is nothing to admit. Just because I don’t want to sit third-wheel while you fuck your way across the west coast doesn’t mean I want you.”

His head dips down until his forehead is pressed to my jaw, his lips so close to my neck that there is no way he can’t feel my pulse quickening.

“Admit it.”

This time it’s only a whisper.

I close my eyes, trying to imagine I am anywhere but here. The heat building in every single part of my body makes that nearly impossible.

Think of Alyssa. Think of work. Think of snotty Valerie and her shitty ideas. Think of anything, literally anything but the God of a man standing before you.

It's no use.

"I—I can't," I exhale, and he brings his palm to my cheek.

His thumb traces tiny shapes on my skin, and I shudder.

"I mean it, Ryan. We can't—I can't.

His hands land on each of my shoulders and trace the length of my body until they reach the curve of my waist.

He brings his lips to my ear, and his voice is so raspy I can barely hold myself upright any longer.

"Tell me to stop touching you, and I will. All you have to do is tell me to stop."

When I say nothing, his eyes go black.

His hands travel further until each palm rests under my ass. He hoists me up, and my legs wrap around his waist instinctively. He carries me across the room and towards the bed with such ease, as if I weigh nothing.

He lays my body down on the bed and reaches for the knot securing the robe.

"Tell me to stop, Juliet."

I am completely frozen. I'll admit, there wasn't a single part of me that wanted him to stop. I know that future Juliet is going to want to kick my ass for this, but right now? There is no stopping it.

I *can't* stop.

He tugs on the knot and pulls it loose, but he doesn't expose me. Not yet.

Instead, he drops to his knees, taking my calf in his hands. He slides his hands down the length of my leg until he's

holding my ankle.

His lips press into the soft skin.

Then another, and another, and another.

He kisses all the way up my leg, baring me further with every inch, and when he is so close to my slit that I can feel the exhale from his breath, he stops to lock eyes with me. His mouth is still on my skin, but he doesn't move.

He's waiting for my approval.

I nod, unable to stand the build-up any longer. I need him to touch me. I need him to soothe this ache in every way he can, in the way that only Ryan Knox can.

His fingers lightly roam my thighs. He places the most gentle kisses everywhere that he can, so gentle that it barely feels like he's touching me. Every nerve ending is screaming his name, and I don't think I've ever felt so truly savored by a man. He caresses and kisses my folds, a predator circling his prey.

My back arches against the plush bed, and I let out a moan, not caring how loud it is.

His hands grip my hips, lifting my body so he can devour me.

He nibbles at me, and I thrash to the side, but his large hands hold me steady. He isn't letting me get away.

His expert tongue circles the tiny bundle of nerves and sends shock waves through my body. He sucks and licks until I can't stand it for another second.

I press my thighs in, riding his face and I explode around his tongue. He laps up every morsel of my orgasm like his favorite ice cream dessert.

I look down just as he pulls away, and my cheeks redden when he wipes away the remnants of my wetness from his lips.

I'm in a haze of pleasure and not sure what's going to happen next, but he surprises me.

Ryan gently gathers my open robe and ties it loosely with little effort, covering me back up

He notices the confused look on my face and smiles.

“You said you didn’t want to fuck me, Juliet. I’m going to respect that. There’s plenty we can do in the meantime.” He winks. “I’m not going to fuck you until you beg me to.”

My mouth drops open, and he moves over me. His face hovers over my own, his strong arms holding him up. His lips brush against mine and I almost unravel for him all over again.

“You taste so good.”

Before I can even process his words, Ryan is up and walking toward the door.

I sit up and clutch the robe tightly around me.

“See you in the morning, Juliet.” He smirks at me, wickedly sinful. Then the door shuts, and I am alone again.

A small part of me starts to wonder if that really just happened, or if my exhaustion from today has led to some freaky fever dream starring the one man I knew better than to let touch me.

But those touches were very much real.

Ryan Knox had burst into my room and ravished me without wanting anything in return. How the hell was I going to face him in the morning? There was no way I could let on to anyone on the tour what had just happened. My career was on the line, and I’d given in at the first taste of temptation.

I stalked to the bathroom and drained the now lukewarm water.

Tomorrow was going to be interesting.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ryan

I can still taste her, and it makes my mouth water. She's fucking delectable.

Her body was so responsive to me, so needy. The way she wriggled and arched against the bed as I pleased her was a high that beat any other I'd ever experienced. Her whines and screams as I worked her over with my tongue were like a melody to a song I've always wanted to hear.

She sings with her body, and together we make some pretty fucking magical music.

I would dine on her delicious pussy every day of the week if it meant hearing her scream for me.

The short walk to my room feels longer than it truly is. That's likely thanks to the massive hard-on currently trying to unleash itself from my pants.

As much as I wanted to take her right then and there, I knew I couldn't. If my sweet Juliet wants to play games, I'll give her just that. I'll make her writhe and squirm every night of this tour if that's what it takes to hear her beg for me.

I want her on her knees, pleading for me to fuck her so hard that neither one of us will be able to move afterward.

I want her to be my good girl and admit that she wants me as badly as I want her.

As soon as I'm inside my room and the door shuts behind me, I breathe a sigh of relief. I unzip my jeans and my cock springs free from my pants. I use my other hand to brace myself against the wall and fist my cock, moving up and down the length of it slowly at first but picking up speed as my mind is flooded with thoughts of Juliet.

Precum beads at the head, and I use it to coat my shaft from base to tip.

My hips begin to move swiftly back and forth as I find just the right motion. I roll my head back as the ecstasy builds, and

I can almost hear her moans as I work myself. I feel myself get harder as my mind wanders to thoughts of the curves of her body and the way my mouth felt against them. I alternate between hard and soft pressure to my throbbing length, and I shudder as the pleasure rolls through my body in waves.

I come so fucking hard that I almost lose my balance. I turn and groan as my body relaxes into the wall, not giving a shit that my release is now coating it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Juliet

I was trying to focus on the words coming out of Olivia's mouth as we sat at the small coffee bar adjacent to the hotel lobby. Really, I was! But the growing paranoia brewing within me made it almost impossible as my mind whirled with anxiety. Of course, she was oblivious to what I'd let Ryan Knox do to my body only hours before meeting her for our morning debriefing, but that didn't do much to settle the nerves.

"Juliet, you alright? You seem off this morning."

I shove away the racing thoughts and force a tight smile.

"Sorry, just didn't get much sleep. Where were we?"

I swipe open my calendar app and go over the agenda for the day.

We have two more nights in Seattle, and then we're off to Portland for another few days. The only thing on the agenda for today is a planned photo op for TMZ at a local cafe where the guys will have an early dinner. I knew better than to try and have them out of bed any earlier than three. After that, they are free until the show.

"I won't make it tonight," Olivia said without making eye contact. She scrolled on her phone and typed out a quick message to someone. "My daughter's birthday is on Sunday and we're taking her to Disney."

I nodded and took another sip of the iced latte.

"My PA will be available if you need anything, but don't hesitate to reach out if shit hits the fan. I know how they can be. I'll meet everyone in Portland on Monday. I've arranged a car for you to save you from any more bus rides."

I nod again. "Thank you, I appreciate that."

The immense sigh of relief I want to release is staggering.

I won't have to be stuck on that bus with Ryan, and that is a major win in my book. Or, it should be. Logical Juliet should be relieved, overjoyed even, to have the distance. But horny Juliet said no that's too much space, give me more Ryan please and thank you.

I try to focus as Olivia finishes going over the plan for the next several days. We brainstorm a few ideas and settle on a few more PR moves to pull off between now and Portland. My favorite of which includes trying out one of the 'Stripped' versions of a hit song on their socials. If it performs well, my album idea could become a reality.

When we finally wrap up I make my way back to the fifth floor where my room is. I'm alone in the elevator, and when the doors open I see a familiar face.

It's the tiny blonde from the concert, Mollie.

The one that had been all but throwing herself into Ryan's arms.

Surely she hadn't come back with him.

There was no way. There was no way he brought her here and then came to my room. And what? Returned to her afterward?

The bile rising in my throat burned.

The smeared makeup and bedhead made it clear she'd spent the night here with *someone*.

"Mollie, right?" I ask, trying to keep my tone cool.

"Oh shit! Yeah, hey again." She brushes past me and enters the elevator. "I can't believe this, you know? Like, you go to concerts and dream that you'll be one of the lucky ones they pick from the crowd. But for it to happen? Pinch me!"

The noise that escapes my lips is a mixture of a laugh and a groan.

She twirls her fingers at me before pressing the button that closes the doors between us.

That dirty bastard.

I pull out my phone and search through the hotel accommodations folder. 539. That's his room.

My mind shuts off and my body takes over. It's like I am suddenly on auto-pilot. Before I can blink his door is right in front of me.

I pound on it, not caring at all how many guests I disturb.

It takes a few moments, but eventually, he opens the door.

He's shirtless, and a pair of dark gray joggers hang low on his hips. He wipes at his still sleepy green eyes. He must be just waking up.

"What happened?" His morning rasp would be sort of cute and a lot sexy if I hadn't just caught little Miss Mollie doing her walk of shame.

Who was I kidding? There was no shame in that girl's game. That was a walk of pure pride and joy.

I shove him into the room and use my body to close the door behind me, my hands finding their place on my hips.

"Damn, I figured you'd come around but I didn't think it would be this quick." His sleepy smile is infuriating.

"Oh no, Casanova. You stay back," I say, and he raises a brow.

I take a step towards him. "You know, I knew last night was a huge fucking mistake but I somehow lost every single ounce of self-control. Here I am trying to focus while Olivia wants to talk business but all I can think about is you and your stupid mouth. I'm trying to work through this in my head, and what do you know? The groupie from the concert meets me at the elevator. You know, the one who you want to eat dark chocolate strawberries with?"

Ryan leans against the wall and crosses his arms over his chest.

"How dare you? How dare you come into *my* room and do those things to me and then go fuck some nameless girl you'll never see again? I mean, I understand you can get whoever you want but I am not your plaything!"

“Are you done?” He finally says when I take a breath.

“Excuse me?”

He cocks his head to the side and gives me a knowing grin.
“I said, are you done?”

I narrow my eyes and bite my bottom lip.

“After you ran off last night, you know when you *weren't* jealous, I introduced her to Ant. I guess they hit it off. You know, I'm not the only one on this floor. They book the block of rooms so we have our privacy.”

Oh shit. I say nothing. What could I say? On top of what happened last night, my ridiculous accusations were mortifying.

He closes the space between us and hoists me into his arms. My legs wrap around his waist and my breath hitches in my throat.

“You really think I would want to touch someone else after tasting you?”

His words still me.

“I—” I try to come up with something to say, anything that will make this the tiniest bit less embarrassing.

He takes my mouth in his and kisses me. I can still taste the bourbon on his lips from the night before. My body goes limp in his arms, and he presses me into the wall. He deepens the kiss and I surrender to it completely. The power he has over me is scary.

He breaks away and sets me down, looking over at the clock on the bedside table.

“As much as I hate to say it, if you don't want to get caught in here, you better go.” He slowly slides my body down until my feet are back on solid ground.

He's right.

If one of the other guys wakes up, or if Olivia decides to go back to her room? I'd be screwed.

I wipe at my mouth and turn for the door, but he pulls me back towards him.

“Don’t you dare leave like that,” he grits out and presses a sweet kiss to my temple. “You aren’t a nameless groupie, so don’t expect me to treat you like one.”

His words replay in my mind as I walk back to my room, and the swarm of butterflies going crazy in my belly seem to revel in them.

You are in so much trouble, I tell myself. Logical Juliet is having a complete meltdown, but horny Juliet? She’s cheering.

Chapter Thirty

Ryan

I'm not sure what we're doing, the publicist and I, but I'm not complaining. This little game of cat and mouse we have going on is one of the most exciting things to happen to me in a long time.

The grin plastered on my face when she leaves my room is one that will probably be stuck there for the rest of the day.

She wants to pretend she doesn't want me, that she isn't clenching her thighs together every time we're in the same room, but I see right through that.

And that little display she just put on?

Well, that all but confirmed it. My Juliet got jealous, and *that* was hot.

My phone buzzes against the bedside table, and when I see the name on the caller ID my mood shifts instantly.

Magnolia Springs.

My steps are intentionally slow, and I tell myself that if it's still ringing by the time I get there, I have to answer it.

Of course, it is, so I slide my finger over the screen and bring the phone to my ear.

"Mr. Knox?" a familiar voice sing-songs over the speaker. Rachel.

"This is him," I respond in a clipped tone. "She okay?"

"Oh, yes. She's had a good day. She's been asking about you, asking if you think it's time she comes home—"

"It's too soon," I say quickly, cutting her off. "I'm not in a position where I can be with her right now, and there's no way in hell I'm leaving her alone. She'll stay there until, well, until I can figure out a better plan."

The woman on the other end of the line takes a breath and pauses for a few beats before responding.

“I understand, Mr. Knox. We will continue to offer her the best care, of course. May I offer you my thoughts?”

I have to force myself not to reply with a smart-ass remark. Something along the lines of, “I don’t pay you for your thoughts. I pay you to take care of Wrenlee and make sure she doesn’t fucking hurt herself.”

I swallow the words, though, and instead, I manage a considerably more decent response.

“Go for it.”

The woman clears her throat. “Wrenlee is a troubled girl, we both know that, but I think right now, what she really needs to heal is to be with people who love her. She’s so young, and I hate to watch what little bit of light remains in her eyes get snuffed out in a place like this.”

I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks in response to her words, anger pulsating through me.

“I pay good fucking money to you people. Do you understand that? I pay you to make sure that her light doesn’t go out *again*. That’s your job. If what you’re telling me is that I need to have her moved to somewhere better, say the word, and I’ll have a driver there in an hour.”

“No, sir, I only meant that--”

I cut her off again.

“You think I don’t want what’s best for Wren? Is that it? That I don’t care about her? She’s all I have left, and I’ll be damned if I let some stranger tell me what’s best. Wrenlee is exactly where she needs to be.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.”

“Good. Once this tour is finished, I’ll come to visit her, and once I’ve met with her doctor,” I accentuate that last word, “only *then* will I make the decision about what comes next.”

“Of course, Mr. Knox. I apologize for overstepping.” The woman’s voice is much quieter now.

I click the button to hang up the call and slam the phone back down on the table.

“Fuck!” I yell out before collapsing onto the bed.

Memories of that day flood my mind, and tears prick at my eyes.

“Wrenlee?” I call out, the empty condo echoing my words back to me. “Wrenlee?”

My heart pounds in my ears as I throw open each door, looking for her.

Please don't do this. Please don't fucking do this.

“Wrenlee?” This time it's more of a wail.

Her bedroom is the one on the right, I think.

I grab the handle and try to open the door, but it's locked.

“I know you're in there. Open the fucking door!”

“P-please, Ryan, just go. I'm f-fine, I promise, just go.”

Her sobs make it hard to get through the sentence, and now the urgency to get through that door is even worse.

I slam my body against the wood, the walls rattling around the frame.

“Jesus Christ, Wrenlee, open the God-damned door!”

“Ryan, I c-can't do it anymore. Please, just l-let me go.”

I throw my shoulder into the door one, two, three more times until the wood begins to crack beneath my weight.

On the fourth attempt, it finally gives in.

“Fuck, Wren, what did you do?” My voice cracks when her small frame comes into view.

Her face is puffy and stained with streaks of eye makeup and tears.

“I'm sorry,” she sobs into my chest when I pull her into my arms. “I'm s-so sorry, Ryan.”

Magnolia Springs has to be the answer. It has to be.

Chapter Thirty-One

Juliet

Despite what had happened behind closed doors twice now, Ryan surprisingly remained completely professional when we were in the presence of anyone else. This meant more to me than he could ever understand.

During the PR photo shoot, the trip back to the hotel, and even during sound check, he never once let on to what happened between us or behaved any differently towards me.

The show went off without a hitch, and the crowd went wild for the new song.

But when I'd told the guys I wasn't sticking around for the backstage festivities this time, Ryan's green eyes had darkened with a hint of wicked lust. I knew it was his way of telling me he'd be following shortly behind me.

When I shut the hotel door behind me it was as if the room was electrically charged. The tension building while I waited for him was already enough to get me wet.

Five minutes passed, and no Ryan.

I tried not to be disappointed.

Obviously, he would have to hang around long enough for it not to look suspicious. If he left immediately after me, people might talk.

Ten minutes. The ticking of the clock in the room is driving me nuts.

Twenty minutes.

Tick, tick, tick.

The throbbing ache in between my legs was excruciating, and the constant ticking woven in only worsens the anticipation.

Forty minutes.

What the hell am I doing?

I shouldn't be waiting around in this room for a man. Especially a man who was so far beyond off-limits it wasn't even funny.

I walked over to my suitcase and picked out an oversized T-shirt. I stripped down to my underwear, pulled the shirt over my head, and gathered my hair into a bun.

I should go to sleep.

Staying up to tempt fate with Ryan Knox was only going to end badly for both of us. Probably me more so than him.

I switched off all the lights and crawled into the plush bedding. There was something about hotel rooms. Coming in, turning the AC down as low as it will go, and just snuggling into the perfectly white sheets.

I force my eyes closed and refuse to allow myself to glance at the clock. He'd clearly become preoccupied, or maybe he just found a better option. Either way, I wasn't going to focus on it for another second.

I tried counting sheep, then counting the lights off in the distance outside the large window. After some time, my eyes began to feel heavy, and somehow I was able to drift off to sleep.

“Wake up.”

The heat from his breath tickled my neck.

Of course, I would dream of him.

It felt so real. I could almost feel his weight just barely hovering above me.

His nose glides over my jaw, and I let out a soft moan.

“Wake up, baby.”

Holy shit, this felt so real. Even in my dreams, that rich voice of his was hypnotizing.

It's pitch black and I can't see a thing, but I almost feel dream Ryan's finger lightly tracing my lips.

Wait—

Not almost feel it. I do feel it. This isn't a dream.

My eyes flutter open, and there he is. Wrapped in shadows and lying next to me in bed.

"How—" I start to ask, but he's too busy peppering kisses down my jawline and over my collarbones to answer.

His knee slides in between my legs and he uses it to open my thighs for him.

It's too dark to see the details of his face, but I can smell him. After a show, he always smells like the most perfect mixture of sweat, tobacco, and smoke from the pyrotechnics.

"I've been thinking about *this* for hours," he breathes out, and I shudder. His words make me clench and squirm.

"What took you so long?" My words end on a gasp as his fingers manage to work their way into my panties, and my eyes roll back into my head.

"The guys wanted to party. It would have looked weird if I had ditched. I wanted to be *here*, though."

He emphasizes the word *here* as he pushes his fingers inside me.

"The entire time," he whispers against my neck, "All I was thinking about was this sweet pussy. All hot and wet and ready for me."

"God—"

I raise my hips to give him better access just as his tongue flicks over my nipple.

My fingers tangle in his hair as I begin grinding against his hand as he works two fingers inside of me.

My body twists and writhes at the pleasure he wrings out of me until I can barely stand it. My hands reach out for the

sheets, grabbing and pulling until knots form that give me something to hold on to.

There was not one inch of my body that he wasn't worshipping.

His teeth nibble at my nipples. Not hard enough to hurt me, just enough to send shock waves of ecstasy throughout my entire being.

I struggle beneath him, unable to control the need to come.

How is it possible he can make my body respond like this so quickly?

"I-I'm so close," I moan, and he begins to circle my clit faster. "God, yes, please keep going."

"So polite," he murmurs into my breast with a chuckle.

When I can't possibly hold on for another second, I arch my back and cry out, coming for him.

"That's my girl," he says, pulling his fingers out of my wetness. He sits back on his knees and brings his fingers up to his mouth, sucking them. "God damn, I missed the taste of you"

I shiver at his words and the picture he paints in front of me. My heart rate is still through the roof, and I haven't quite been able to steady my breathing.

This was now the second time he's made me come harder than I ever had before and taken nothing in return.

"Your turn."

I didn't have to see his face to know the smile was there. I could feel it against my skin.

I roll over and crawl towards him. His impressive length is already struggling against his tight leather pants.

I slowly unzip them, and he stares at me as I pull them down.

It wasn't graceful or quick like in the movies. The leather against his sweaty body made it hard to get them off, but once

I did, I could see him in all his glory.

I waste no time lowering my head and taking his cock in my mouth. It's warm, and I take a moment to savor his taste. My tongue dances over the tip, already beaded with cum. Ryan's hand finds the back of my neck and his fingers tangle in my hair as I begin to move up and down his hard length. I pull back when he reaches the back of my throat, but only for a second before I take a breath, relaxing my muscles and opening wider to take all of him.

He moans, and the sound excites me. Ryan's hard abdomen flexes underneath me.

When I look up at him, our eyes lock, and I don't dare allow myself to close them again. His breathing gets more and more ragged as I maintain eye contact.

"That's it. That's my dirty girl."

His words only fuel my need to please him.

I want nothing more than to make this sinful God of a man feel like my mouth is the only one that could ever make him feel this good. I'm not normally a possessive person but I feel almost *feral* with it.

I feel his hips rising and know he's close. I use my hands to mimic the motion of my lips, creating more slippery friction for his pleasure.

"Fuck, Juliet, don't stop. Just like that."

I never knew how much having a vocal partner intensified things. I've always enjoyed being a giver in a relationship, but my past boyfriends were typically quiet in the bedroom.

Not Ryan.

He moans and groans and praises with every single movement I make.

Warm salty release suddenly fills my mouth and his body jolts. His hips thrust deeply and I swallow it all down without hesitation.

He pulls me up and into his arms and our lips crash together.

There is something about a man kissing you after you've pleased him that feels so dirty and exhilarating.

His tongue explores my mouth, and I swear it's like I'm flying. Ryan swallows my moan as he sucks on my lower lip.

This man and the grip he has on me is unlike anything I've ever experienced.

"You're mine now, Juliet. You understand that, right?" His words are resolute against my lips as he slows, the kiss turning from frenzied to something softer, something *claiming*.

I nod, unable to form coherent words at the moment.

I am his, and he is mine. I don't care if we have to sneak around. If it means I get to experience *this* for the next three months, I'll do it.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Juliet

I wasn't surprised when I woke up and Ryan was gone. I ignored the small twinge of disappointment I felt, though. This was just physical, after all.

I am, however, surprised to see that the room service comes accompanied by a note from him.

Eat up, Juliet. You'll need your strength for later.

It was both a warning and a promise, and my thighs instinctively press together to quell the growing arousal.

I lift the metal lid off the plate and grin at the stack of Belgium waffles covered in fresh fruit. A small glass dispenser full of warm syrup sits next to the plate. There's a cup of hot coffee and a glass of orange juice. He must not have known which one I would choose, but the gesture was sweet.

I ate quickly and slid the note from Ryan into my suitcase. I made sure to put it underneath my clothes. The chances that anyone would go through my things were slim to none, but I couldn't risk it.

I didn't see him for the rest of the day.

I was too busy with web meetings with the home office and making sure all the preparations were in place for the next city on the tour. After the show tonight, we'd all be headed for Portland.

Once again, they were slotted for three shows: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. That meant I had a few days in between to explore the city. It gave me something to look forward to that wasn't as risky as my more recent extracurricular activities.

It was hard to put the thoughts of Ryan out of my mind, though.

The way his hands expertly handled my body. The way his wicked words caressed me inside and out.

There were also the words of his bandmate that constantly circled my mind. Those words weren't as beautiful.

They were more like trash circling the damn drain.

Those words kept me clinging to my initial promise that I would never sleep with Ryan Knox. No matter how badly I wanted to, I couldn't stand to be another girl in the lineup who gets all used up and thrown to the side. Not when I had so much to lose.

Ryan never fucks around with the same girl twice.

There was nothing wrong with a bit of fun here and there, though, as long as I knew my boundaries and never let it go too far.

Ryan seems perfectly fine with those boundaries and hasn't once pressed them, but how long would that last? He wouldn't be content with foreplay and oral for the next three months.

But I would end it before things got out of hand, right?

It was a good thing plenty was going on around to keep my mind busy. If not, I might have gone crazy.

Watching the boys do stage tests was a new kind of torture.

I stood before the stage, where the band's biggest fans would be in only a few short hours. They went through the set list and ensured the lighting and pyrotechnics were timed just right, and the sound traveled to all corners of the massive stadium without getting muffled.

All that was well and fine. The torture came in when a certain lead singer refused to break eye contact with me the entire time, especially when he sang the dirtiest parts of their hit songs. When he came to a particularly fiery lyric about tasting a woman's lips like candy, he licked his own as if he could remember exactly what I tasted like. His eyes rolled back dramatically like he savored the memory.

I tried to tell myself that this was part of it- part of the performance. He would do the same thing to a fan once the show started. He'd make them feel like he burned for them as he sang.

The thought sent an unwelcome pang of envy through my body.

A small voice in the back of my mind told me that wouldn't happen, though. That voice reminded me that, for the time being at least, it seemed the only thing on his mind was me.

More than likely, that stemmed from his need to claim me, to take me in his arms and drive himself into me. Hard.

That was my only advantage here. It was the only explanation for why someone like Ryan Knox would be enamored with someone like me.

For him, this was a game.

He wanted me to break. To beg for it.

I could still hear his low voice in my head.

I'm not going to fuck you until you beg me to.

Someone from the crew walks out onto the stage and breaks the illusion. The man holds a thumb up to whoever is operating the spotlights, and they respond by flashing them twice.

That meant the lighting was a go.

It also meant my job was done, and I could excuse myself.

I twirled my fingers at the guys and made my way towards the exit, scrolling through emails to avoid the emerald eyes burning through me. Every step ached. I didn't know it was even possible to be so aroused that it made *walking* difficult. The way my panties rubbed against my core every time my thighs brushed against themselves was delicious. But very, very distracting.

I had only made it a few steps from the door when I heard his hushed voice call my name.

“Juliet, a word?”

I turn and see him leaning against a doorframe, a crooked grin on his perfect face.

I look around, making sure we’re alone before I make my way toward him.

“This better be work-related, Mr. Knox,” I say, halfway kidding, when I reach him.

“Of course it is. I wanted to run something by you if you have a minute, that is.”

I nod and follow him down a hallway and into what I assume is a dressing room.

“I wrote a few lines for a new song and wanted your professional opinion.”

My eyebrow raises. “Alright,”

Excitement builds inside me at the opportunity to get a glimpse into his mind through his words.

There is a rack of clothing against one of the walls. I begin to look at the different pieces, and a leather bomber jacket covered in patches catches my attention.

“This is cool—” I turn, holding it out to show him, but my sentence is cut short.

Ryan’s hands are on my cheeks, lifting up my face and pulling me into his kiss.

I get lost in his lips, but only for a moment. Reality quickly slaps me and brings me back to planet Earth. I jump backward, putting several steps in between us.

“What the hell, Ryan!” I squeak, my voice breaking from the surprise attack. “Someone could come in!”

His eyes are hungry and devious, and I can tell he’s already in predator mode.

I snap my fingers dramatically. “Hello, Earth to Ryan, absolutely not. You’ve lost your fucking mind!”

“It’s locked.” His voice is so deep and raspy it’s more of a growl than speech. “Now, come here.”

I take another step back, and I almost fall into the clothes rack behind me.

“Don’t make me chase you, Juliet.”

My heart slams into my chest, and my resolve weakens.

“It’s too dangerous, Ryan. Anyone could hear—”

He closes the space between us and leans in so that his voice is only a whisper. “Then stay quiet.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ryan

Juliet takes her bottom lip into her teeth and lets out a slow breath. She stills when my fingers brush the soft skin that leads from her face to her neck.

“Can you do that, Juliet? Can you stay quiet for me?”

She swallows hard before nodding, and her eyes looking up at me are enough to get me hard.

“That’s my good girl,” I say, tracing my fingers down until they rest at her bra line.

The truth is she’s right.

Anyone could knock on that door at any point in time, but something about that makes me want her even more.

The risk, the danger, it’s fucking hot.

I take her in, savoring her with my eyes.

I want to take my time exploring every square inch of her beautiful body. I want to discover every single part of my Juliet.

I kiss her, and my mind goes into a frenzy. My skin lights up with her electricity, and when her mouth opens for me I pull her into my arms.

“I can’t fucking get enough of you, Juliet.”

Her fingers grasp onto my shirt, fisting it hard as her body melts into mine.

A needy moan escapes her lips, and I capture it with my own. I take her bottom lip and suck it in, biting down on it hard enough to earn a small whimper from her.

Fuck, the sound of that whimper will be the death of me.

She’s in my veins now, coursing through my body, consuming me completely. She’s become an addiction that I don’t want to quit.

I press my hips into her, letting her feel what she does to me. Letting her know exactly how hard she makes me.

She moans again, and I press my hand to her mouth, silencing her.

“Baby, if you keep that up, our little secret won’t be a secret anymore.”

Her eyes press closed and I can feel her clenching her jaw underneath my palm.

I walk our bodies over to a small table where the set list for the night is sitting. With one swift motion, I swipe the papers away, and they scatter across the floor.

I lift her up and position her so that her ass is seated on the surface.

I slide my palm along her thigh, her skin raised with tiny goosebumps in response to my touch. The whole time her eyes are locked onto mine, lips parted, inviting me to take more of her.

“Ryan—” she pleads, and I pull her legs apart. I grab the hem of her skirt and shove it up to her waist, needing access to my new favorite place in the world.

Her panties are already soaked for me.

I swipe my thumb across the small strip of wet fabric that covers her entrance, and she leans her head back into the wall.

“Not a sound, Juliet,” I command before sliding the material to the side and sinking a single finger into her.

“Y-yes,” she whimpers.

I drive another finger inside and clasp my free hand over her mouth.

“I said not a sound.” My fingers work in and out of her, and she squirms underneath me. “Someone isn’t listening very well.”

She grabs onto the wrist of my hand, which is now ensuring that her moans don’t catch the attention of anyone walking by.

I look down at my fingers coated in her pleasure and back up to her. I can't help myself.

"Look at me," I order, and she complies instantly.

I keep eye contact as I pull out of her and bring my fingers to my lips. I slide them into my mouth and then back out, painstakingly slow, savoring every drop of her.

"Oh God," she says into my hand, or at least that's what I think she said. It's sort of hard to tell when I've got her mouth clamped shut.

"It's still not enough, baby."

I want *more*.

I want to rip free of these pants and drive into her sweet pussy until neither one of us can hold in the screams. I want to claim her, mark her so that every single person on the fucking planet knows who owns Ryan Knox.

This woman and her delicious body and her incredible mind.

I want it all.

But I can't take it all, not yet.

Not until she begs.

"I'm going to let you come now, Juliet," I say, pushing two fingers back into her. "Be my good girl and be quiet so I can move my hand."

She nods, and I pull my hand away. She gasps and takes in a deep breath.

I bring my now free hand back to one of her thighs, prying it open so I can access her better.

As my fingers dip in and out of her, my thumb begins to circle her clit.

She grinds against my hand as I work, and when she puts her own hand over her mouth, I know she's close.

"That's right, show me how good I make you feel, Juliet."

She arches her back and writhes from right to left, shifting her weight, trying to work with me to get her release.

Needing to taste her one more time, I drop to my knees and take her clit into my mouth.

Her muffled moans fight to break free, but my sweet Juliet holds strong.

I lick and suck at her swollen bud, her legs wrapping around my head as she presses further into me. I want to drown inside her.

I feel her suck in a deep breath and know she's ready to explode.

Her sweet release soaks my lips, and I devour it, making sure not one drop is left to go to waste.

I stay there for a moment, letting her get her labored breathing under control before I rise to face her.

When our eyes meet, a tiny smile plays on her lips.

"I stayed quiet."

She's impressed with herself. That's cute.

"Yes, you did."

She lowers her gaze and looks up at me, the whites of her eyes making the most perfect doe eyes.

"Say it," she demands.

I raise a brow. "Say what?"

"I did what you told me to do, Ryan. Now, tell me what that makes me."

Ah, I see. I know exactly what she wants.

"Do you want me to call you my good girl, Juliet?"

Her cheeks redden, and I hate that she's feeling even a semblance of embarrassment for expressing exactly what she wants from me.

"Because you are my good girl." I lean in and pull her close to me. "Juliet, you are my *very* good girl."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Juliet

He watches me as I straighten my clothes and scoop my hair into a ponytail.

“You sure do look pleased with yourself, Mr. Knox,” I say over my shoulder as I take in my appearance in one of the small mirrors. My cheeks are flushed, and my lips are swollen.

It wouldn't be a hard guess what happened in this room if anyone were to stumble in.

“I'm very pleased with myself. I enjoy making you come.”

The mouth on that man should be a sin, and his words have me ready to give myself over to him completely.

“I should really get out of here. We got lucky this time, but I don't want to put any more of my faith on chance today.”

Ryan leans against the wall and shrugs. “I think the stars are aligned in our favor, baby.”

I roll my eyes but can't help the smile trying to reach my lips.

“Yeah, yeah, Casanova.”

He strides over to me and presses a sweet kiss to my forehead. “Fine, get out of here. I'll find you later.”

“Maybe we should cool down a little,” I say, trying not to let my lust overpower my reason. “If we keep it up at the pace we're going people will start to catch on.”

Ryan lets out a chuckle. “If you think there is any chance I'm going to give you up, you've lost your pretty little mind.”

My cheeks flush again.

“I didn't say *stop*...” I hesitate, “I just mean maybe we need to be more careful. This was reckless.”

He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me back into him. “What you meant to say is that this was *fun*.”

Okay, yes, he's right. It was fun, but it was also extremely stupid. All it would take for everything to come crumbling down around me is for someone to walk through that door right now. Even fully clothed it would still be devastatingly obvious that Ryan Knox and I have become much more than we were ever supposed to be.

With every day we are sliding more and more into the danger zone.

"I have to go," I say quietly, and he releases me.

"You head out first, I'll hang back for a while to make sure it doesn't look suspicious."

A pang of guilt hits me out of nowhere, and I don't understand why.

He seems upset that I'm leaving him, but the lines in the sand have been clear from the beginning.

This had to be a secret, that was the only way it would work.

He's always seemed to understand that, so why does he look like he wants to tell me to stay?

And why did I feel bad about that?

Somewhere between our little talks and his face between my thighs, things were beginning to get a bit more complicated than I'd signed up for.

"I'll be at your room after the show," he says as I open the door. "I'll make sure no one is around."

I don't respond, and when I shut the door behind me, my heart sinks a little at the thought that I've hurt him.

Jesus, pull yourself together, Juliet.

This is *the* Ryan Knox we're talking about. World-renowned rock star and ultimate sex symbol.

There is nothing that I could possibly do that would have any lasting impact on a man like that.

Whatever vibe I think I'm picking up on from him is clearly in my head.

I'm not sure that regularly attending rock concerts with my choice of either floor seats or side-stage access will ever feel *normal*.

I'm also pretty sure that my awe over the boys in their natural element will never be any less than just that. No matter how many times I've seen them perform now, every single time I'm completely taken by them. It's incredible to watch them go from a group of normal guys to complete superstars on that stage.

They sure as hell know how to put on a show.

Ryan in particular is really laying it on thick tonight. His vocals are off the chart, and he takes every opportunity that presents itself to make this show one that the crowd will never forget.

My personal favorite is pulling a little boy dressed almost identically to him onto the stage to sing a song with the band. He can't be more than eight or nine years old, but he knows every single word.

When Ryan puts the mic to the boy's mouth he screams the lyrics into it, and the fans go absolutely wild.

Gareth gives the boy one of his guitar picks, and I swear even Neil cracks a smile at the interaction.

When they finish the final song, Ryan hands his guitar down from the stage and into the boy's hands. He screams and hoists it above his head while every single person in the arena cheers.

This glimpse into a softer version of the band is refreshing, and by the reaction from the crowd, it's a version of them they wouldn't mind seeing more of.

When the boys come off the stage each of them hoots and hollers, all four clearly buzzing from the adrenaline of a great show.

Gareth wraps me in a sweaty embrace and Ant sticks out his fist looking for a bump of solidarity.

“God, Gareth, you’re soaking wet!” I wriggle free from his embrace and throw my hands up in jest.

“Oh I’ll show you wet—” he begins, but is quickly cut off by a swift punch to the shoulder.

“Knock it off, asshole,” Ryan growls at his friend and bandmate. “Keep the pervy shit to yourself, would you?”

“Such a buzzkill,” Gareth remarks with a smirk.

“You guys were great,” I yell over the noise coming from the still-cheering fans. “I think this was my favorite show so far.”

“The energy here was fucking intense,” Ant agrees before shaking the sweat from his hair like a wild dog.

I take several steps back, dodging the spray.

“You four need showers, pronto,” I say between laughs.

“Hell no, we need to party!” Gareth responds with a scoff. “The ladies like us dirty. Isn’t that right, Knox?”

Ryan’s eyes are trained on me. “Yeah they do.”

I swallow the smile before it can reach my lips, and shake my head.

“Alright then, you guys go be dirty somewhere else. I need to go wash your stench off of me before I ruin my sheets with sweaty rock star germs.”

“So I take it that means you won’t be joining us?” Gareth asks before poking out his bottom lip in a dramatic faux pout.

I shake my head, “Not tonight, I have tons of work to get done before next week.”

“Don’t let her lie to you,” Ryan remarks as he lets out a laugh. “She’ll probably be sitting in her bed with a plate of

room service and watching *The Bachelor*.”

He remembered.

My mouth falls open and the guys share a laugh. I narrow my eyes at the lead singer but he shoots me a wink and I can't help but smile.

They begin to file down the stage stairs and toward their dressing rooms, and when Ryan passes, his fingers quickly graze my own.

The small gesture sends a zing through my body, and despite all my best efforts, I begin to count down the seconds until I have him all to myself again.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Juliet

The knock at my door almost stops my heart, and when I stand on my tiptoes to peer through the tiny peephole, what I see nearly brings me to my knees.

He's standing there, propped against the frame with one arm. He's leaning, head cocked to the side, with a devilish grin on that beautiful face.

I breathe before sliding the chain lock open and turning the handle so he can enter.

He's in and somehow already has his hands on me before the door shuts behind him, and a layer of sweat still coats his skin from the show. He pushes my back against the wall and takes my mouth. His soft lips move against mine, and I moan into his mouth when his tongue grazes mine. The kiss overpowers me. Overwhelms me.

And when he carries me to the bed, I open my legs for him, granting him access to do whatever he pleases with my body.

I arch against the sheets when one of his large, calloused hands finds my breast. Even through my nightgown, I can feel the roughness. Two fingers slide my panties to the side and dip inside me.

His other hand leaves my breast and finds the hem of my gown. While those fingers work, I sit up just enough so I can pull the gown over my head with his help.

His mouth descends on my nipple, lavishing it with attention. His thumb rubs and circles that perfect place, and I arch further, eyes rolling to the back of my head.

"Good girl," he breathes out, and I clench around his hand. "Just like that."

The orgasm that builds is staggering. I am seconds away from being reduced to putty in his hands. If he stops, if he

slows, I would beg. I would *beg* this man to make me feel these things over and over again.

“I want to make you unravel for me, Juliet.” His hot breath dances on my skin.

I groan; every muscle in my body pulled taut as my nerve endings fire off.

He takes it all in, and when he dips his fingers inside me again, I still.

He brings the finger to his lips, and one corner of his mouth curves up.

He slides his finger deep into his mouth, lips wrapped around it. He sucks as he pulls it back out as if he'd just dipped it in cake batter.

My mouth drops open. Nothing will ever be as fucking hot as this man sucking my come from his fingers.

“Fucking incredible,” he says before dipping the finger inside me again. “Come here.”

I hesitate, but he pulls me towards him.

He brings his finger to my lips and traces them, my wetness coating them.

Something inside me awakens.

I lick my lips, and his eyes darken.

The taste is foreign, and I'm surprised at how much I like it. It tastes like raw sexuality and passion.

I reach for his hand and take his finger into my mouth, sucking from base to tip.

It drives him mad, and his hands are instantly underneath my thighs, hoisting me up so that my entrance is readily available. His tongue drives inside me, and I release another moan. He plunders me, and my body responds with gratitude. I grab at his hair, pulling him in further.

One of his fingers enters me and works in unison with his tongue to pleasure me. He locates a spot that sends shock

waves down my aching body and continues to hit it while his lips gently suck at my clit. I shudder against him, my legs quaking and shaking from the sensation.

I look down to see his eyes trained on me, watching me revel in his touch. I watch him as he licks and sucks.

My release builds until I can't stand it for another second. The high-pitched orgasm that tears through my body is unlike anything I have ever felt.

My boneless body goes limp against the sheets, and he releases my legs.

“You are slowly becoming my favorite instrument to play with, Juliet.”

I prop myself up using my shaky arms.

“Is that right?”

His eyes rake over my body.

“Perfectly in tune with me, and you make the most delicious sounds when I touch you just right.”

Everything that came out of this man's mouth was magic—like he was writing lyrics as he spoke.

“You're starting to make me feel like a greedy lover, Ryan Knox. You give and give and don't seem to expect much in return.”

He lays at my side and pulls me in so that our noses almost touch.

“Pleasing you gives me more satisfaction than you know. Watching you writhe and come underneath me is quite the experience.”

He raises his chin and nips at my nose with his teeth, and a small giggle escapes my lips.

An idea strikes me, and though it's probably the worst timing possible, I can't help but talk it out.

“Hey, what if we try to film some unplugged and low-key footage in one of the rooms tomorrow?”

Ryan smirks. “What kind of footage did you have in mind?”

I shake my head. “Sorry, buddy. Not that kind. I mean you and the guys. I’m picturing nothing but you and the instruments and my phone. It doesn’t need to be anything fancy. I could grab a few clips and post them to socials and see how they perform.”

He nods. “And if they do well...”

“Exactly. We know your fans would be down for the stripped album if they do well. Maybe you could even play a version at the next show.”

He props up on an elbow. “I like it. Talk to Olivia in the morning and get the approval. Tell her the band is down.”

“You speak for all of them, huh?”

Ryan grins. “No, but if it’s your idea, they’ll like it. You’ve had quite the effect on the Chaotix boys.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks.

“I don’t know how. I feel like I’m in over my head in your world, and I’m just treading water, trying not to drown.”

His arms envelop me and pull me in. “No one can tell. To everyone else, you seem like a superhero. Full of these incredible ideas and a fresh look at how we do things. Your place here was earned because you know your shit. Imposter syndrome can be a real bitch, trust me. I’ve slayed that beast a time or two.”

It was hard to picture Ryan struggling with his identity. He seems so larger than life and comfortable with his success. Confident.

“Maybe one day I’ll accept the praise and not feel like I somehow stumbled into this opportunity on a fluke.”

He shifts. “It wasn’t a fluke. The stuff you said the night I met you stuck with me. It made me think. I’ve heard hundreds of pitches over the years, and when a gorgeous girl backstage gets my wheels spinning more than others who have been in the business for decades? That says something. I was surprised

when I found out that the ink wasn't even dry on your promotion when you managed to sell us on your agency. That's impressive, Juliet. Stop overthinking and embrace it.”

I replay his words in my mind as he dresses and heads for the door. Maybe if I hear them enough, I will start to believe them.

Believe that I belong in this world.

Believe that maybe, just maybe, I was made for this.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Ryan

“Tell us where you want us, boss,” I say with a wink.

I can see Juliet’s wheels turning as she maps out the room in her mind.

“Maybe the sofa? Let’s see how it looks with the two of you on the cushions, and maybe someone can sit casually on the arm? Then Ant, you drag that chair over to the left.”

We all fall into motion and do as she says.

She crawls onto the bed and sits up on her knees so that all four of us are visible in the frame.

“Okay, I love it. I guess go for it, and I’ll start filming. I can sort through the footage later and put something together.”

I look over at Gareth. “Swing Days?”

He nods and begins strumming out the melody. Neil joins in, and Ant finds his footing on the box drum.

We fall into step flawlessly, and she hits record.

Baby, I love your crossroads,

do you mind if I steal a rotation?

But I’ve tried maneuvering before,

that’s why we’re stuck at the swing station.

We’re laughing with each other as we sing out the words. Each time I glance at her, she seems thrilled with what is happening in front of her.

Now I can’t find the limbo without you,

and your words cut deeper than a dilemma.

I just wanna be part of your nexus.

Free me from all this temptation,

And meet me at the swing station.

“This is perfect,” Juliet calls out when we get to a lull in the lyrics. “What the hell is this song about, anyway?”

“No fucking clue,” Gareth answers between belly laughs. “I wrote it when I was high as a kite in Reno a few years back.”

“People think it’s deep or something, but it’s really just the weird shit that goes on in that idiot’s head when he’s zooted,” Ant adds through his laughter.

“That weird shit went top ten when we released it, asshole!” Gareth says before nailing Ant in the head with a couch cushion.

We’re all laughing so hard now that none of us can finish the song, but Juliet is still recording. There’s a big, beautiful smile on her face, and I love that she’s fallen into my world so easily.

We go through a few more songs from the setlist until she says she’s happy with what she’s gotten.

“Thanks, guys. I really think this is going to be great.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Juliet

“This is fantastic, Juliet,” Olivia says as she scrolls over the analytics for our latest social post. “I’m honestly shocked at how well this is performing. I’ll be interested to take a look at the analytics again after the Nampa show.”

The video I’d filmed on my phone with zero production was going viral.

Everything about the video was different from anything the band had done before, especially with all of the instruments unplugged and acoustic.

It was raw and honest, and the people loved it.

“She’s a genius,” Gareth says, draping an arm over my shoulder. I don’t react to the sudden contact.

Ant nods in agreement as he slides his drumsticks into his back pocket. Neil was already on the bus, and Ryan still hadn’t made it out of the hotel lobby.

“Not a genius, but thank you. It’s important to keep you guys trending.” I smile at Gareth, and he doesn’t move his arm.

“What the hell is a Nampa?” Neil calls out from inside the bus, and we all laugh.

“For the third time, Neil, it’s in Idaho,” Olivia calls back, her face giving away that, despite her tone, she thought it was the tiniest bit funny.

“Ah, right,” he calls back, and I can almost see the smirk playing on his lips.

While Olivia goes over a few house-cleaning items with the band, I listen intently, trying not to focus too much on Gareth’s touch.

It wasn’t strange that his arm was draped over me.

At least, that’s what I am telling myself.

“Knox,” Ant said as Ryan approaches, his eyes instantly finding me. “Jules’ video is fucking killing it! We’re like, *trending*.”

I laugh at Ant repeating my words, but Ryan doesn’t seem amused. He looks upset. His eyes are trained on his bandmate’s arm and where it rests on me.

“Cool.”

That was all he said. His eyes are hard and cold and his tone is emotionless. This is in complete contrast to our typical interactions where he maintains constant eye contact and teases me with his flirty words.

“It’s more than cool, man. We need all the buzz we can get, and the people are eating it up,” Gareth adds, and Ryan clenches his jaw.

I shrug out from under Gareth’s arm and take a step back. “Well, I’m glad it’s performing the way it is. I knew it would, though. You guys are too talented for it not to.”

I kept eye contact, so Ryan knows I am talking to him, but he breaks the connection and heads for the bus without another word.

“Who pissed in his Cheerios?” Neil asks as he exits the bus.

“Who knows,” Ant responds with a shrug. “Maybe that brunette with the big tits didn’t put out.”

“You’re disgusting,” Olivia chides, and I shake my head.

“Only kidding!” He holds up his hands in mock defeat.

Picturing Ryan cozying up to someone else backstage makes my cheeks heat, and my stomach turns, but I know where he ended up.

In my bed, with me.

I may not have *put out*, as Ant so grossly described it, but he seemed more than satisfied when he left.

Something was bothering him, and from how icy that interaction felt, it was something more substantial than

whether or not he fucked someone. Sure I've seen him get pissed off, but I've never seen him look *sad*.

Those eyes that normally glitter seem dull and lifeless, and the bags under his eyes make it clear that he didn't get much sleep after he left me.

I wish I could go to him. Ask him what's wrong and be there for him...

But I can't. I can't march onto that bus and console him without opening the door for an endless barrage of questions from everyone else.

That would cross those invisible but very *present* professional boundaries.

Was it something I did?

I hate being that girl and instantly wondering if his bad mood had something to do with me, but that's where my mind is going. It's hard to resist that path when I don't really have anything else to go off of.

It also makes me realize that even though the two of us have been getting pretty damn close behind closed doors, we really don't know anything about each other. Sure, I obviously know what Ryan does for work, and what he likes to drink, how he takes his burgers. But he's never opened up much.

I distantly hear my name and register that Gareth has still been talking to me.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Someone is distracted all of a sudden," he nudges me in the shoulder with a closed fist.

My eyes train back onto the open door of the bus.

"I just zoned out, sorry." I force a tight smile.

We stand outside the bus while the guys wait to board.

There is a long drive to Nampa, and now that I'm no longer making the journey on the bus, it means I'll have to wait to talk to him.

Olivia and I shared an SUV, and thankfully she spent the drive listening to an audiobook with her headphones in. That gave me the opportunity to sleep for some of the trip without feeling guilty for not talking to her. During the second half of the drive, I spent most of it catching up on emails and touching base with the home office.

When I finally got into the hotel room the first thing on the agenda is a long, hot shower to wash away the road trip grime. Next on the agenda? Getting something to eat that doesn't come from a fucking gas station.

I sat at the bar in the hotel lobby and waited for the man working behind it to acknowledge me. The show was great, and they filled every seat in the auditorium. I decided not to stick around for the post-show festivities. For the most part, it's because I'm too anxious. I haven't spoken to Ryan since the small exchange before he boarded the tour bus, and he made it abundantly clear then that he wasn't in the mood to be bothered by anyone.

Including me.

The bartender finishes up with the other patrons and walks toward me.

"Looks like you could use a drink; what can I get you?"

I smile tightly. "Just a vodka cranberry, please."

He nods and begins to make the drink.

The place is relatively empty, likely thanks to the concert across the street.

The man places the glass in front of me, and I give him my room number.

"Charge it to the room, please."

I finish two before I retreat back to my hotel room to wait.

He'll come. He always does.

I change into something comfortable and begin to flip through the channels, settling on a random crime documentary. I watch the story of a jilted lover gone psychopath playing out on the screen. The producers do an excellent job of making you think the killer was the ex, but their big reveal at the end is that it was her best friend sleeping with her husband.

“Can’t trust anyone,” I mutter as the credits roll.

I look down at the time and groan.

It’s 2:00 a.m.

My eyes are heavy, but the anticipation of whether or not he will come to me keeps me awake. I toss and turn in the plush bedding, my mind racing with what-ifs.

When I hear the key slide into the door, I roll over to the bedside table where the clock sits.

3:00 a.m.

He comes inside and leans against the door. I sit up in the bed and brace my weight against my arms.

“Hey.” My voice is groggy despite the lack of sleep. It felt silly to say, but it was all I could think of.

“Hey,” he responds in a low voice, partially obscured by the shadows of the dark room.

“Are you going to stay over there?” I ask, cocking my head slightly to the side.

He doesn’t respond but closes the space between us and sits at the foot of the bed.

“That’s better,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

He exhales loudly, and I crawl over to him, wrap my arms around his shoulders, and rest my chin on the curve of his neck.

I turn so that my lips are just barely brushing against his ear.

“What’s wrong, Ryan?”

He turns away from me and stares at the wall. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I take my bottom lip into my teeth. “Talk to me.”

I can feel him pulling away from me, but I want to fight it. I want him to open up to me, to let me in.

His head snaps back to face me.

“Juliet, this isn’t any of your fucking bus—”

The wounded look on my face must have been enough to stop that sentence in its tracks.

“You’re right,” I bite out. “I mean, hell, we’ve just been screwing around, right? It’s not like it means anything.”

I roll away from him and put as much space between us as I can.

Do not cry. Do not fucking cry, Juliet.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he says in a low voice, his eyes on his feet. “I’m just dealing with some shit.”

I cross my arms. “Okay, and I’m trying to figure out how to help.”

“It’s not something you can help with.”

I don’t know why his words are like a punch to the gut, but they are. He doesn’t owe me anything. It’s not like we’re together. I don’t know what the hell we are or how to even begin to label it, but it is very clear this doesn’t go beyond the surface level for him.

I swallow back the unwelcome emotion trying to break free, and when his face falls, I know he’s noticed it.

“Juliet, come here.”

I shake my head and wrap my arms around myself. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

I don’t want to be comforted by him. Not when he completely shot me down for attempting to do the same for him.

He gets to his feet and closes the space between us.

“Hey, I’m sorry, okay?” His hands rest on each of my cheeks and force me to look at him. “I’m an asshole.”

Yes, you are. A massive fucking asshole.

I don’t say anything. I can’t. I know as soon as I give any sort of response, the tears I’m holding in will be set free.

He presses his lips to my temple and whispers against my skin. “I’m sorry.”

He continues kissing along the side of my face and down my jawline, sending a chill down my body as I go limp against him.

“Ryan—“

I want to tell him to stop, but I know I won’t.

“Thank you for caring enough to ask me what’s wrong,” he breathes out, his lips brushing against mine.

“I just wanted to help,” I finally whisper, and his face softens. “We don’t know anything about each other.”

I reach up so that my palm rests on his cheek, “I want to know you, Ryan.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Ryan

Her words stop me in my tracks.

“I want to know you, Ryan.”

Telling her about Wren would mean letting her in on a completely new level, and that wasn't something I was sure I was ready for.

It was a part of my life that I didn't share with many people.

Juliet's beautiful blue eyes were glassy, and looking into them made my heart clench. The last thing I want to do is make her fucking sad.

I grab her hand and lead her back to the bed.

“Okay. Let's get to know each other, then.”

I may not be able to give her everything she wants from me, but I can try to give her this.

She looks at me through lowered lashes before climbing onto the bed and wrapping her arms around her knees. “Okay.”

I'm not really sure where to start.

I lean against the headboard and take a breath, “You already know about the band and how that turned into what it is today...” I trail off. “I guess to understand I need to start a little further back.”

Juliet listens intently, and as much as my brain wants me to crawl back into my comfort zone, I don't.

I want to talk about this shit with someone, and I want that person to be *her*.

“My home life wasn't great,” I admit. “We were poor and lived in a shitty two-bedroom apartment paid for with government assistance. We survived off food stamps. My mom couldn't work thanks to a back injury, and my stepdad was a real piece of shit. My dad split after my sister was born.”

One thing I hadn't put on my bingo card for today was dredging these memories out from the dark hold I kept them tucked away in.

"When I turned sixteen, I moved in with Gareth. My sister," I pause before continuing, "Wrenlee, I didn't take her with me. I mean, she was only twelve, but I'll never forgive myself for not getting her out of that hell hole."

I close my eyes, trying to blink away the guilt snaking its way into my body and sinking its fangs into me.

"My mom got hooked on pain pills after her injury, which made her even more of a non-existent parent. With me gone, Wren was all alone. She got mixed up with some shady people and made some bad decisions. When we started actually making a living with our music, I put her up in a condo, but by then, the damage was done. She was stuck in a relationship with some asshole who mooched off her and the money I gave her to live on, and by the time I figured out he was hitting her, she was already pregnant."

"Jesus," Juliet breathes out before placing her hand on my knee. "That's awful."

"I showed up unannounced, and she didn't have time to cover the bruises. I don't remember much after that. I blacked out and when I came to she was crying and he was unconscious."

She crawls across the bed and into my lap, pressing her forehead into my chest. The comfort I feel from her touch surprises me.

I think a part of me knew that things had gone deeper between us than just wanting to fuck her, and this confirmed it.

"I made damn sure that he made a swift exit from her life. Wren didn't take it well. She'd been pushed around and abused for so long that she'd started to believe that kind of life was fucking normal."

We're at the part in the story now where I normally shut down.

I can feel my chest tightening, my heart starts racing, my palms are sweating and my instinct is to end this here. I don't want to talk about that day. I don't want to admit to Juliet that the reason my sister is where she is... is because of me.

The moment I found her plays in my mind as clearly as watching a movie on a screen. This time I don't shut it off when it gets to the part I've forced myself to block out.

"Fuck, Wren, what did you do?" My voice cracks when her small frame comes into view.

Her face is puffy and stained with streaks of eye makeup and tears.

"I'm sorry," she sobs into my chest when I pull her into my arms. "I'm s-so sorry, Ryan."

I scramble for my phone and dial 911, clutching her to me as if it will somehow keep her here with me. Like if I let go, she will slip away.

"God damn it, Wren, what did you do? Fuck," Her eyes flutter, but I can tell she's trying to keep them on me. "Hold on, okay? Fucking hold on."

"I just want it to stop, Ry." Her voice is small now and I can feel her grip on me weakening.

My fingers tremble as I hold the phone to my ear.

"911, what is your emergency?" A male's calm voice comes through the speaker.

"I need an ambulance here, 826 Cobblestone, Unit D. My sister tried to kill herself." I choke out the words and try to swallow my tears, "Fucking hurry, I don't know what she took, but she's fading in and out."

"Yes, sir, I can have first responders en route. What is her name?"

I look down at her and bile rises in my throat.

"Her name is Wrenlee Knox, she's 26," I hesitate. "And pregnant. She just found out she's pregnant. I don't know how far along. I don't know anything,"

“Stay on the line with me. Help is on the way.”

Juliet’s hand against my cheek brings me back to the present.

“She tried to kill herself,” I admit, blinking back tears. The words feel strange as I say them out loud. “I wasn’t there for her and she took a bunch of pills. She swallowed a handful and tried to go to sleep. If I hadn’t got there when I did—”

Her silence is expected, but the look in her eyes makes me feel safe. She’s listening to me, and for whatever reason, she wants to be there for me.

“She needed help, but I was too worried about tours and albums and fucking parties that I didn’t even see how empty she was.” My body wants to pull away. That gnawing guilt that always eats away at me screams that I don’t deserve to be comforted. Not when my selfishness almost cost me one of the only people in the world I truly care about.

“Where is she now?” Juliet’s voice is barely a whisper.

I look away.

“It’s a place called Magnolia Springs, some wellness retreat where they focus on healing. I picked it because she has freedom but isn’t by herself. I can’t—I don’t know how to make it okay. I don’t know how to look her in the eyes and make her understand how sorry I am for putting my shit before her. She lost the baby, and with that, on top of everything else, I don’t know that I’ll ever be able to trust her being alone again.”

Juliet swallows hard and nuzzles into my neck. “Is this what was bothering you, earlier?”

I nod. “They called. She’s been asking if I think she’s ready to come home. Asking when I’m coming back and if she can stay with me. And I don’t have the balls to tell her I’m too much of a coward to face her, so I just keep telling Wren that I think she needs more time.”

“Don’t say that, Ryan. You aren’t a coward.” His eyes are brimmed with tears. “You saved her life.”

I scoff. “She didn’t want to be saved. Don’t you see that? She tried to kill herself behind a locked door. She had no intention of being rescued.”

I can see the thought whirling in her mind. “But the front door was unlocked.”

I furrow my brow. “And?”

“How did you know to go there?”

I think back to that day, and back to the message she’d sent apologizing for what she was about to do.

“She texted me.”

The beautiful woman nestled in my arms raises up to face me. “I think she did want to be saved, Ryan.” Her voice is gentle. “The front door was unlocked. I think that means a small part of her hoped you would get there in time.”

I wrap my arms around her, pulling her back into me.

She continues. “All you can do is love her, Ryan. That’s all anyone can do. Love her and be there for her. You can’t let this guilt you feel rob the both of you from ever getting the chance to move on.”

How is it that hearing this from her makes more sense than any of the countless lectures I’d received from the psychiatrists, nurses, and therapists? From the moment she got off that ambulance until I left her at Magnolia, I’ve felt nothing but guilt and shame.

I press a kiss on the top of her head. Exhaustion from the tour and from opening up these wounds and laying it all out to bear for Juliet has my eyes feeling heavy.

“Thank you,” I say into her hair. It’s all I can seem to manage. We lay back into the pillows together and settle in.

For the first time, I don’t want to leave once she falls asleep. I want to stay here, with her in my arms, and I don’t give a damn about the consequences.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Juliet

Today, everything was different.

Today, I woke up at dawn in Ryan's arms after spending the night listening to him open up in ways I could never have expected.

We both had gotten up surprisingly early considering how little sleep we'd gotten.

Today our little game had turned into something real—and infinitely more complicated.

I suppose that was a blessing, though. Even though my relationship with Ryan was evolving I couldn't let that be known to anyone else on tour. Things between us might be changing, but the reality of our circumstances was still the same. At the end of the day, Ryan Knox is still my client and this thing we have going on is still so fucking off limits it's not even funny.

He'd snuck out of the room and quietly made his way back to his own while I watched him walk away; every step he took caused a harsh need to pulse through me.

A small voice in the back of my head was already panicking about someone seeing him leave. After all, rock stars don't typically get out of bed before noon. They slept all day and partied all night—that was just the way of this world that I now found myself in. Hell, I was lucky if they rose before the dinner bell rang some days.

When I first met Ryan, I thought he was one of them.

You know, the typical rock star. Not a real care in the world, unless you count the dilemma of which starstruck groupie will be warming their bed after a show.

I'm sure some of them did fit that mold.

Ryan Knox sure as fuck did not. He only *pretended* to—and that was unexpected. But it was also making me fall hard

and fast. To see the normal, caring, very much *real* person behind the rock star persona.

Walking into the hotel conference room to meet with the band and Olivia has my stomach in knots. The next few stops on tour are in California, and also the largest shows we have planned. Acton has prepared by hiring additional security and sprinkling in a couple of extra PR opportunities for the band, both of which are the subject of today's meeting.

With all the excitement buzzing for these shows you would think this would be my time to shine but all I can think about is fucking Ryan Knox and how hard I'm falling.

I take a seat at the conference table and find myself zoning out as the meeting takes place around me. I can hear Olivia's voice as she outlines the details of the events, and I can hear the band members chime in sporadically with their commentary, but my brain can't seem to focus on any of it.

Instead, my focus seems to be on avoiding the searing gaze of a particular lead singer from across the table.

The voice in the back of my mind keeps whispering that I'm being too obvious, that if I don't get my shit together, every single person in this room will know what we've been doing behind closed doors.

"Juliet?" Olivia's voice breaks through my thoughts and I can feel five pairs of eyes staring at me as they await my response.

I let out a breath I didn't even realize I'd been holding and clear my throat. "Yes?"

"What are Acton's thoughts on security? I know we discussed ramping it up for the upcoming shows."

My mouth goes dry and every single thing I had planned out in my mind for this meeting disappears. I'm completely blank.

Suddenly my clothes feel too tight and my cheeks flush hot.

As Olivia raises a brow, obviously surprised by my lack of focus. This is so not me, so fucking out of character.

I feel like what I've been doing with Ryan is stamped across my forehead like a massive scarlet letter.

Pull yourself together, Juliet!

“Yeah, Acton recommends ramping it up by 35%. We've reached out to the vendor for both venues and have everything arranged.”

I somehow manage to make my words sound much more confident than they really are.

For the remainder of the meeting, I force myself to stay focused, nodding along with Olivia's comments and jotting down feedback from the boys.

This is not me. I am not the girl who loses sight of what is important and forgets how to take control of a damn meeting. I'm the girl who works hard and keeps her head screwed on straight at all times.

Chapter Forty

Juliet

Ryan Knox was torturing me.

“Have you ever been to California, Jules?” Gareth asked.

I lean back against the cool brick as we wait for the cars to arrive. Sound check is done and that means we have the rest of the day to do as we please.

I shook my head no in response, but my eyes were trained on Ryan. He was talking to a group of ridiculously attractive and scantily clad fans outside the venue.

“It’s always one of the best locations, in my opinion,” Gareth continues. “I’m so glad we get two Cali stops this time.”

He drones on, completely unaware that I’m barely paying attention.

One of the fangirls talking to Ryan hands her phone to one of her friends and positions herself next to Ryan for a picture. The first one is innocent enough. But then she presses her lips to his cheek for the second one, her back arching so much so that it almost looks painful. His arm snakes around her waist as he hams it up for the camera, the act made complete with a devilish smirk.

The perfect imprint of red lips left on his cheek from her kiss makes me seethe.

My vision tunnels and rage floods my veins.

Why was he letting her touch him like that? I’m not one to let my emotions get the best of me, especially in a public setting, but it was taking everything in me not to react.

“Jules?”

I force myself to look away and back to Gareth, who’s finally noticed my distraction. “Yes?”

“I was just asking if you had any plans for the rest of the afternoon?”

I could play the same game as Ryan if I wanted to. I could go with Gareth. I know what it would do to him.

But that was the problem. I don't like playing games. It's just not me. And unfortunately, the only person I wanted was Ryan fucking Knox.

"Oh, yeah. I have some phone conferences lined up with other clients from back home."

He looks disappointed but smiles. "Well, we're going to the club tonight if you finish up work in time and want to join."

All of them?

I wonder, but don't ask aloud.

"Yeah definitely, I'll let you know." I force a polite smile on my face.

"Okay, but you really should come. Touring with a rock band is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, you know? Don't work so hard you forget to live, Jules. You always go back to the hotel early. We want you to party with us every now and then."

If only Gareth knew just how much I was *experiencing* this.

"Yeah," I sigh, knowing he's right, "I'll try to come, okay? Promise."

He flashes me that million-dollar smile and gives me a quick nod before walking off.

Olivia's SUV pulls up to the curb, and I slide into the back seat.

We're having lunch to discuss my latest ideas for the band, including an expansion on the raw and stripped footage I shot in the hotel room. The video did so well and the fans are essentially begging for more.

I pitch shooting more videos of the guys with the same vibe but in various places: the tour bus, backstage, and even the hotel lounge.

There is something interesting about seeing the guys returning to their roots and having a jam session without all the bells and whistles that seem to appeal to the masses.

Olivia selected a small bistro with outside dining for the two of us, and with the slight breeze, I'm glad I snagged my cardigan before leaving the hotel.

Gareth's comments from before replay in my mind as I move pieces of lettuce around my plate.

Maybe a night out with the band isn't such a bad idea after all.

I like to consider myself a fairly confident woman, but maybe it's just the sudden public visibility of this job or just working with such hot famous people, but I was feeling self-conscious as hell in this tiny black dress.

I'd almost changed twice, but Alyssa's voice in my mind forced me to keep it on. It was one of the outfits she'd added to my luggage, and she'd been right. It fits like a glove. She made sure to tell me over and over when I tried it on over FaceTime for her.

The building glowed from the inside out, neon spewing from every corner. Large letters hang overhead that spell out the club's name, "QUBE." As I approached the door my feet vibrate from the bass within. A line wrapped around the building, and a tall man wearing a black suit guarded the entrance.

The breeze makes me wish I'd grabbed a jacket before getting into the Uber.

Imposter syndrome strikes hard as I walk up to the bouncer.

Gareth had told me to tell the club I was with the band. That saying this would ensure they let me right in.

I ignore the sneers and glares from the dozens of people stuck in line, and when the mountain of a man guarding the entrance looks me up and down he is visibly unimpressed.

“Back of the line,” he barks and I take the inside of my cheek between my teeth.

I clear my throat. “No, I will not go to the back of the fucking line.”

I’ve surprised him and myself.

“Is that right?”

I nodded, trying to find the confidence I lacked.

“I’m—uh, here with the band. I’m their PR manager, or I guess you’d call it the tour publicist.” Words are flying from my mouth as I try to justify why the hell I’m here. “Chaotix, they’re inside.”

Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t manage the sentence without a stammer.

His thick chestnut brow furrows as he reaches for the clipboard on the podium. “Name?”

“Juliet Warren.”

He flips the page on a clipboard and scans it with his index finger. He pauses halfway down the page and looks back up at me, surprise marring his gruff face.

“Right this way, Miss Warren.”

He unlatches the red velvet barrier and gestures towards the entrance, simultaneously signaling for one of the attendants to escort me the rest of the way.

As I stepped past the barrier and entered the club, it was as if I had stepped out of reality and into some alternative universe.

There are bodies everywhere, and the pulse of the house music jars my senses.

“Welcome to The Qube. Enjoy yourself,” the bouncer says before turning his back to me and returning his gaze to the

other patrons in line.

Disco balls of all shapes cover the ceiling, and the lights bounce off the mirrored bits creating a magical effect. Suspended cages with go-go dancers inside hang from the ceiling, their outfits made of reflective fabrics that bend the light from the LEDs and mirrors. Each of them sports a pair of retro, neon square-framed glasses. I guess to play off the name of the club. There is a stage towards the back that houses a massive, glowing martini glass that serves as the centerpiece for a burlesque show.

I look around, hoping to find wherever a place like this would seat their VIPs. Undoubtedly that would be where I would discover Gareth and the others. The attendant points towards a second-floor area, seemingly reading my mind.

Walking through the crowd was a task in itself. I could barely hear myself think, let alone listen to the words coming out of my mouth asking where I could find them. My skin kept brushing against strangers, stray hands touching my body as people try to pull me in for a dance. The contact is making me wish I wasn't so exposed.

“Jules!”

A voice calls out over the noise.

I try to follow it.

“Up here!”

My eyes train upward and I see Ant.

There's a platform high above everyone else, lined with bright purple neon strips. To the right is a staircase being guarded by someone I recognize.

“Hey Wayne, how are you?” I ask the bodyguard, and he gives me a bright smile.

For a man who is shaped like Mount Everest and looks like he could snap you in half with one hand, he's sort of a softie.

“Surprised to see you out, Miss Juliet. Head on up and have a good time.”

When I reach the platform, purple velvet couches line the sides and a booth sits in the middle of the secluded area. Sitting on them are all four members of the band.

“Holy shit, smoke show!” Gareth says, taking me in.

I can feel the boys’ eyes roaming over me, not even attempting to hide their obvious surprise at my attire. I look down at the black satin mini dress and strappy heels that wrap around my lower calves.

I bite the inside of my cheek and manage a tight smile.

“Thanks.”

Neil reaches for a bottle of blue liquid and takes a large swallow. He offers me the bottle once he’s done, but I politely decline.

Ant is sitting up on his knees, leaning over the balcony. His eyes seem to be scanning the crowd below.

Ryan leans back, a glass of dark liquor in his hand. He doesn’t break eye contact as he puts the drink to his lips and finishes what remains.

I sit on one of the empty sides of the U-shaped booth and cross my legs, hyper aware of how short my dress is.

A tall, slender blonde carrying a tray of bottles appears at the top of the stairs. She’s wearing what looks like a bodysuit made mostly of black mesh. There are strips of fabric in strategically placed areas to hide the goods, but very little is left to the imagination. The ensemble is completed with a pair of black, thigh-high boots and fishnets.

“How are we doing, boys?” she asks, either not seeing me or not caring.

“Tell her what you want, Juliet,” Ryan says coolly.

The woman looks at me, her mouth a thin line.

“Jack and Coke, please.” I smile at her, but she doesn’t return it.

She turns on her heel and stalks back down the stairs, lips pursed in displeasure.

“They always think we tip better if we don’t bring chicks,” Gareth says with a laugh.

It makes sense, I guess.

When the blonde returns with the drink, I take it, and she’s gone without even looking at me.

I down the drink in one go and slam it down on the table.

“Alright, I’m here. You talked me into coming. What’s next? Are we just getting drunk and people-watching?” I ask, directing the question at all of them.

Ant spins around and plants his feet back on the ground.

“Absolutely not, Lady Jules.” He reaches out for my hand. “We dance!”

I stifle an uncomfortable laugh. “If you remember, the last time I went dancing with you, it didn’t exactly go too well.”

Images from my last outing with the band in a setting like this flash through my mind.

“You don’t have to worry about something like that happening again. We’ve got your back.”

I place my hand in his and let him lead me down the stairs.

When I look over my shoulder, the other three are close behind, Ryan’s emerald eyes shimmering with a delicious glint of jealousy as I walk hand in hand with his drummer.

Chapter Forty-One

Juliet

The flashing lights and deep, thumping music is hypnotizing and my body moves of its own accord along with the beat as if I'm a puppet; the music controls my strings. My skin is covered in a thin layer of sweat from the humid, densely packed dance floor. The strobe lights freeze my movements like tiny snapshots in time, every move its own paused frame.

Ant and Neil each found their own dance partners; their bodies pressing together tightly as they weave and grind to the beat. Gareth has been MIA for some time.

Ryan leans against a wall, his emerald eyes following every move of my body. He's close enough that I can almost feel his gaze. I dance near the other guys but without a partner. Every time someone has come close and tried to join me, a sharp flash of darkness entered his gaze and they quickly went the other way. Instead of worrying about what people might say, I just pretend it's normal, protective friend behavior. The alcohol coursing through my system makes it easier to leave my worries behind.

Occasionally someone brave soul will approach him, and Ryan will do his duty. Smile, take a quick picture, sign a sweaty body part with a random sharpie, and give a hug. Always friendly and polite, never turning anyone away, but never anything more though.

Another house song finishes and I look around and see that the others are paying me no mind.

My gaze meets Ryan's, and I call him to me with my eyes.

It's risky, but I want to feel his hands on me. I can't go a second further *without* it. The sultry darkness of the dance floor and the heady music fuel my fire. Just for a moment. There are enough people here to shield us from calling too much attention to ourselves. Everyone is in their own little world.

Ryan stalks toward me slowly, like a predator sighting its prey.

He comes up behind me and wraps his muscular arms around my waist, pressing his hands on my hips and pulling me close against him. His hardness is evident and I flush with need.

“This isn’t smart,” I whisper as he leans in and I feel his stubble against my neck.

I say the words, but my grip on his arms and the way my body arches against him makes it clear that I don’t care. I’m not even sure he can hear me over the music.

Our bodies grind and move in sync. He turns me so we’re facing each other, his leg in between mine as we move together. Everything about touching him feels right. His hand cups the back of my neck, and he leans down to whisper in my ear. Our faces are so close and it takes all of my strength not to moan at the feel of our bodies pressed together this way.

“I can’t wait anymore, Juliet.”

His words send a shiver down the length of my body.

“It isn’t that simple.” I breathe out, but despite the protest in my words, the lust in my voice says otherwise. My fingers sneak under his shirt so I can feel his hot skin.

It wasn’t simple. Not anymore. Nothing about this was.

This used to be about my career. It was about being smart and not risking everything that I’ve worked my ass off for. It was about not being reduced to just another notch in Ryan Knox’s belt. But as much as I’ve tried to deny it, it was more than that now. There was a constant pit in the bottom of my stomach, an inherent fear that the moment I gave him everything, it would be over.

And I’m honestly not sure I could handle that.

We’re so far out of each other’s leagues that it’s not even funny, and it’s ridiculous to think that anything *more* could come from it. Giving in now would lead to nothing but hurt.

And it would be me who's hurting. But I just - I can't stop. Every fiber of my being wants this man. He's a drug and I'm hopelessly addicted.

Ryan growls, and his hand wraps tightly around my wrist, pulling me away from the crowded dance floor and towards a dark hallway.

There were bathrooms on one side and more doors on the other.

He turns each knob until one finally opens and he drags me inside with a feral sound.

It was a large room with mirrors lining one of the walls. The floor was carpeted, and high-top tables with barstools were scattered about. The exterior wall had small windows across the top, letting in enough moonlight that we could see each other.

I don't have any more time to notice any further detail in the room because before I can even take another breath, his hands are cupping my face, and my back is pressed against the door.

"It *is* simple, Juliet. You are mine."

His lips crash into mine and he swallows my moan. I can no longer tell where he ends and I begin as we devour each other. It's messy and wet but God, I can't get enough. I need *more*.

With one arm, he hoists me up, and my legs wrap around his waist. My dress rides up and his hard arousal presses right against my center. Only the thin lace fabric of my panties and his pants now separate us. His other arm keeps us steady against the door.

I break free to catch my breath, and his lips are on my neck. He kisses and licks his way down to my collarbone.

Kiss. Lick. Suck. Kiss. Lick. Suck.

"God, Ryan," I moan out, unable to hold it in.

"I need you," he murmurs, his voice heavy with lust and the last few shreds of my self-control shatter.

My fingers move into his hair, pulling him into me, claiming his mouth once again. Every inch of my body is burning hot.

He groans and pushes a finger into me, his weight keeping me right where he wants me.

“Juliet.” My name drips off his lips like sweet, salty nectar, and I lap it up.

My hands explore under his shirt, clawing at the stiff muscles along his back. His kiss deepens, and he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth, biting down.

The shock of pleasure mixed with pain shoots through me, and I squirm in his grasp.

It was like we wanted to rip each other apart.

Ryan lowers me to the ground and drops to his knees in front of me. My dress is still pushed up to my waist, his fingers tracing the inside of my thighs all the way down.

“I need to feel you,” he says, nuzzling my soft skin.

His hands roam my lower half, starting where my sandals tie around my calves. He lifts one of my legs up and drapes it over his shoulder, opening me up for him.

I suck in a breath as his lips suddenly press into me through my wet panties.

“Remember, my Juliet; you can tell me to stop at any moment.”

This time, I know I won't.

“Ryan...”

His thumbs hook around my panties and he slides them down slowly.

I arch my back and let my head fall back against the door as the cold air hits my wet core, my heartbeat drumming in my ears.

“That's my good girl,” he praises as he licks my slit. “So fucking wet for me.”

My thighs tighten around his face, and I claw at the wood behind me.

“Please...” I whimper, but he doesn’t stop. “Ryan, please —“

He looks up at me through long lashes, and I lose my breath.

“What do you want, Juliet?” He asks, in between sweet kisses to the bundle of nerves between my legs.

I try to find the strength to speak, but the pleasure building thanks to his assault on my body makes it almost impossible.

His thumb rubs tiny circles on my clit as he licks and sucks, drinking down every single drop of me.

“Jesus Ryan, please—I can’t.”

He stops and looks up at me again, licking his lips.

“I need you to say it.”

I should stop. Let him make me come again with his mouth like he has dozens of times before. I should take it and walk away with my dignity, but I can’t.

“Please fuck me, Ryan. Please,” I beg, and the devilish grin on his face nearly brings me to my knees.

He shoves two fingers inside me, bringing me to the edge of ecstasy. “With pleasure, but not here.”

His mouth is back on me, and I cry out as the orgasm shatters through me.

He looks positively thrilled with himself as he continues to slowly lap at me as I come back to reality.

His hand reaches out and picks up my panties. My breathing stills once again when he slides them into his back pocket with a sinful glimmer in his eyes. He pulls my dress down, covering me, but I still feel so exposed as the breeze hits my innermost thighs.

“We can leave separately, but I want you in your room waiting for me when we get back. We are nowhere near done,

Juliet.”

He presses a soft kiss to my lips before leaving me alone in the room, and it takes me several moments to steady myself.

There’s an aching and neediness that flutters around my belly as I walk toward the exit, and I don’t stop. My body is moving on autopilot, and Ryan Knox is the final destination.

Chapter Forty-Two

Juliet

The ride from the club to the hotel was excruciating, and as I made my way through the lobby and up the elevator, I found myself bouncing on my heels.

The room is quiet, too quiet. I pull my hair up and then let it down again as I pace nervously across the room. The restless energy prickles my skin and makes it impossible to stay still.

My body throbs with need.

When I hear Ryan sliding the key into the door, my body becomes one big p and the breath rushes out of my lungs.

He wastes no time when he enters the room, instantly closing the space between us. I back up until my calves hit the bed frame and he follows me, blocking me in.

His kiss is hard and demanding, and the shockwaves it sends through my body make me tremble. Ryan slants his head to the side and slides his tongue in, moving against my own. My arms wrap around his neck, and he leans down, pulling my body up, holding my weight in his strong arms. I wrap one of my legs around his hips, frantically trying to pull him closer.

The bulge in his pants presses against me, and a muffled cry escapes my lips. A moan of pleasure and need. The need to be closer, to feel his skin. To have his mouth all over me, his tongue flicking over that sensitive place he knows so well.

“Fuck,” he groans into my throat. “Ask me again. Tell me what you want.”

“I need you,” I pant. “Please.”

“You’re sure? You’ve been drinking and—”

“Ryan,” I breathe, narrowing my eyes at the God among men standing before me. “Shut the hell up and fuck me.”

A ghost of a smile flickers across his lips, but before I can process it, his mouth is on mine again.

My hands find the hem of the thin black shirt he's wearing. I get it halfway up before he impatiently pulls it the rest of the way off. My fingers explore his chest, enjoying how it expands and contracts alongside his racing heart. I savor every inch of his warm, smooth skin. His broad shoulders and biceps.

Ryan Knox is stunning.

Feverish passion takes over, and I press my mouth to his skin, licking and sucking while he touches me everywhere.

His rough hands slide underneath my dress and up the outside of my thighs to my ass. His fingers dig in, and I moan again.

I continue my assault on his upper body with my mouth and slide my hand to the hard, thick bulge between his legs.

I rise to my tiptoes and pepper kisses up his neck, breathing in his scent every chance I get.

My fingers fumble with the button and zipper on his pants.

When his length is freed, I stroke it, feeling his excitement beading on the tip.

"Oh, fuck," he grits out as I work his shaft, my fingers wrapped around it, pumping up and down. "You're doing so good, sweetheart."

The way he praises me makes me feel like a goddess. Like I am the only woman in the world capable of bringing him this pleasure.

I tease his tip with my thumb, rubbing come over the head in a circular motion.

Ryan lets out a feral sound and yanks at my dress, ripping it over my head.

There was nothing underneath it. I'm completely bared to him.

The straps were too thin for a bra, and he'd stolen my panties at the club.

His palms cover both of my breasts. He squeezes and then captures one of my nipples into his mouth.

“Your body,” he rasps. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Juliet.”

That silly, insecure voice in my head doesn’t believe his words, but it doesn’t matter. The haze of lust and need overrides any lack of self-confidence because in this moment, the only thing that *does* matter is the man in front of me.

Every one of my nerve endings fires off as he runs his hands over my body, and my back arches when one hand slips between my legs. My hips move, creating friction against his hand. His fingers slide into me easily, my wetness giving him all the help he needs.

My fingers thread into his hair, pulling hard.

“Please,” I whisper against his lips. “Please.”

Wrapping an arm around me, he slowly lays me down on the bed.

I look up at him, watching as he removes the rest of his clothing.

Once naked, he doesn’t move. He continues to stare at me.

“Ryan,” I plead.

“I want to remember this, Juliet. I want to remember exactly how you look right now. I want to remember every inch of your perfect body and every single sound you make for me.”

He climbs onto the bed and positions himself above me, sliding his hand up my inner thigh. I open my legs for him.

“Don’t make me beg,” I whimper. If he doesn’t bury himself inside me, there is a good chance I may combust.

“I think we’ve had enough begging; I’m just taking my time.” He circles my nipple with his tongue before nipping at it playfully.

When I go to plead again for him to stop teasing me, his finger dips inside me, stopping me in my tracks. Then another

finger, his thumb stroking my clit as the others plunge in and out.

I moan at the wonderful sensations ripping through me.

There is no doubt I've never felt anything as good as Ryan Knox.

His lips kiss down my body until they replace his fingers on my clit. I can barely breathe as he licks, his expert tongue bringing me to the brink of orgasm within seconds.

I claw at the sheets as his fingers and tongue work in delicious unison.

I clench around him, unable to stop the explosion of pleasure from enveloping me. Ryan's breathing is ragged as he devours my orgasm.

My ears are ringing and my vision blurs from pure ecstasy.

He rolls off the bed, and the absence of his weight on me makes me whimper.

I follow his movements with my gaze and watch as he pulls a small golden foil packet from the jeans crumpled on the floor.

He tears the packet open with his teeth as he walks toward me and rolls the condom over his hard erection.

I pull my bottom lip into my mouth and bite down, anticipation and desire overwhelming my senses.

God, he's gorgeous.

His dark hair was messy from my fingers, those green eyes... the muscles. Not to mention the thick cock standing at attention, hard for *me*.

He was between my legs again so fast I barely had time to finish the thought, the head of his cock teasing my entrance.

My breathing was hard and frantic, and his eyes were dark with hunger.

He slowly eases inside me, and I can't help the moan that escapes. Feeling myself stretch around him, taking all of him,

it's glorious.

I wrap my legs around his waist as he pushes deeper.

He pushes in and out in slow, deep strokes.

My nails rake down his back.

Once he is buried as deep inside me as possible, he pauses, looking down at me.

“God, you're so warm.”

He pulls out, and once the tip is barely inside me, he slams home.

I cry out, digging my nails into him again. But it only encourages him further.

He does it again. And again. And again.

“Is this what you want?” His voice is gruff, and I gasp.

I try to nod, but he shakes his head.

“Tell me. I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes,” I somehow manage in between thrusts.

He fucks me, and I writhe underneath him, falling to pieces repeatedly.

Never has a man been able to make me come more than once, but Ryan was a magician. He knew exactly what to do, how to play my body like his favorite instrument.

The way he tastes, smells and moans.

When he finally explodes inside of me and falls limp over my body, I realize just how much power I've given him.

I've handed him the keys to the kingdom, and all I can do now is pray he doesn't burn it all to the ground.

Chapter Forty-Three

Juliet

A part of me expected Ryan to be gone when I woke up. For him to have slid out of the bed once I'd fallen asleep and retreated back to his own room. It would have made what happened between us less confusing.

But as I pry my tired eyes open when the morning sun peaks through the sheer curtains of my hotel room, I quickly realize he's still here.

Ryan's eyes are closed, his beautiful face completely relaxed. His lips barely parted, and with each breath, a tiny sound escapes.

It isn't an obnoxious snore.

It's actually sort of cute.

His eyes flutter open and a sleepy smile plays on his lips.

"Watching me sleep, huh?"

His just woke-up rasp is heavenly.

"Maybe. Or maybe I was just checking to see if those God-awful snores were really coming from you," I lie, and he pulls me into his arms.

"Liar. I don't snore."

I giggle and pull away in mock disdain but his strong arms make it impossible to get very far. His skin is warm against my own, and it would be a lie to say it didn't feel pretty damn good to wake up next to him. Snores included. I want to stay here forever.

A faint buzzing sound coming from somewhere in the room interrupts the moment.

My phone.

I let the call go to voicemail. It can wait.

"You do snore. Loudly," I lie again.

He pulls me on top of him and his hands clasp onto my waist. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Miss Warren, but it seems like you are...” he pauses, the smirk on his lips deliciously mischievous. “Complaining.”

Just as it seems things are starting to get good, the buzzing sounds again.

I snap my head around, trying to remember where I put the damn thing.

It buzzes again.

“Someone must really need to talk to you.” His fingers press harder into my skin, pulling my attention back to him. “Too bad your morning is booked.”

The buzzing is back.

“Jesus.” I lean back and swing my leg over so I can hunt down the stupid annoyance.

Our clothes are scattered across the floor of my hotel room, and so is the comforter. The black clutch I’d taken to the club last night is on the desk. I reach it but the phone is nowhere to be found.

“Can you call it for me?” I ask him.

He laughs and I quirk up a brow. “What’s funny?”

“I don’t have your number.”

How strange is it that a man I’ve been fooling around with in secret doesn’t even have my cell phone number?

“Oh,” I say, mirroring his laughter. “We should probably fix that.”

I watch as he stands from the bed. That white sheet slowly slid off his naked body in the most devastatingly perfect way.

His tight ass walking across the room and bending down to retrieve his own phone from his pants should not be an erotic experience, but this is Ryan Knox we’re talking about. Everything the man does is climax-inducing.

He taps a finger on the screen and brings it to life before typing in his passcode.

I reach for a t-shirt from my bag and pull it over my head, but when I look back at him something is off.

His brows are furrowed, and something that looks like concern or anger mars his face.

“Everything okay?” I ask, but he says nothing. Just continues to swipe through what looks to be multiple messages and attachments.

At first, I just assumed it was band business, but the longer he goes without speaking the more nervous I get.

“Ryan?” I ask again, and this time he looks at me. He pulls his bottom lip into his mouth and runs his fingers through his hair, smoothing down the bedhead from our night together.

The buzzing from my missing phone seems much louder now thanks to the silence hanging between us. I look down and see the corner of the phone peeking out from under my dress.

Before I can reach down for it, he stops me. His hand wraps around my wrist and he pulls me in and kisses me hard.

It feels nothing like our other kisses.

This one feels panicked. Like he’s kissing me because he’s scared he may not get the chance to do it again.

My stomach is turning somersaults and I can hear my heartbeat inside my ears.

I pull away and take a step back.

“What is going on?”

His eyes are on the floor and refuse to meet my own.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Juliet.”

He reaches for me but I step back again.

“Sorry for what? What the hell is happening?”

This makes no sense, and at this point, I’m just getting angry. I reach down for my phone and when the screen lights

up I see the notifications.

15 missed calls from Olivia.

7 from Max.

“It’s my fault, I’ll tell them that. I swear. I’m so fucking sorry.”

I blink, still trying to wrap my mind around what he’s sorry for.

He holds out his phone, and I take it. It’s a grainy picture that looks like it was taken with a toaster.

“What am I looking at?” I ask, and he sighs.

“Click the link.”

I do, and when the page opens the image is much clearer.

It’s me. Well, it’s Ryan and me.

His hands are on my waist, and the other clubgoers around us are dancing without a care in the world. Under it in large, bold lettering is the headline.

Chaotix Frontman Behaving Badly with Publicist

Below is another image. This one shows Ryan’s hand gripping my thigh as I wrap it around him.

Then comes the nail in my coffin. The image of our lips crushed together in a passionate kiss.

A high-pitched ringing sounds in my ears and I can’t hear anything else. His mouth is moving but the words aren’t comprehensible. It’s like I hit the mute button on the TV. The scene continues to play out, and I’m just watching in silence.

It’s an out-of-body experience.

I know I’m here, and I know he’s there... but it doesn’t feel real. It feels like a bad dream and I need to be shaken awake before I’m stuck in it forever.

Chapter Forty-Four

Juliet

There was nothing that could have prepared me for this. I know that what I have been doing with Ryan is wrong, and I haven't cared. Instead, I chose to put myself in a bubble and believe that nothing could pop it.

Well, reality check. It's been popped. And everything I've done, all the hours I've put in? It's going to mean nothing.

Ryan's face, as I shoved him out of my room, is an image that will be hard to forget.

The tears sting my eyes as I try to compose myself enough to call Max.

"Juliet?" His voice barks into the receiver and the waterworks are instantly back. I can almost hear the anger falling away from him at the sound of my tears. "Oh my girl, how could you let this happen?"

"I don't know." It's the only answer I can manage. "Olivia —"

He stops me. "I've spoken with her. Valerie is on a plane right now. She's coming to try and... save this."

My heart drops at the mention of Valerie.

"Save it?" I ask.

"Juliet, your involvement with Mr. Knox, whatever that may be... it's plastered on the front of every headline in the country. Your name, your role, our company. The very integrity of Acton PR is coming into question. I knew sending you was a risk, but I never thought something like this could happen."

I press the back of my hand to my mouth.

"Olivia wants to speak with you before you leave. We've got to get as much distance between you and this fiasco as possible before it gets any worse."

"Before I leave?" I whisper into the phone.

Max lets out a breath.

“Yes, you’re coming home. Valerie will stand in for the remainder of the tour. We have to try and salvage what remains of this relationship.”

I nod, not caring that he can’t see the gesture. There are no words left for me to speak. I just feel numb.

“Talk to no one, under any circumstances. Do you understand? Olivia will ride with you to the airport, but other than that, nothing. You have no comment.” I can tell this conversation is painful for him.

“I understand.”

“Good. I’ll check on you later, just please leave quietly. If for nothing else, do it for me.”

“Of course, Max. I’m sorry.” It’s more of a whimper than an apology.

There’s a long silence before he finally ends the call, and when he does, I crawl into the bed and cry some more. I cry until there are no more tears inside me.

I place the last of my things into the suitcase and zip it. I set it upright and pull out the handle. With one bag on my shoulder, and one rolling behind me, I leave the hotel room.

Ryan is sitting on the floor outside my room, his back against the wall. He looks at the bags and then up at me.

“Fuck.”

I shrug, thankful that I’m out of tears.

“Just give me a little while to talk to everyone, okay? This is ridiculous. I can just say we were dancing and you needed some air or some shit. We can say nothing happened, that it was camera angles and photoshop.”

“It’s too late,” I manage. “My boss should be landing in an hour or so. She’s taking over my position on the tour. My

plane leaves shortly and I'm just praying I still have a job when it touches down."

Ryan stands and takes a step toward me but I hold out my hand.

"Just, don't. Please?"

Hurt. That's what it looks like he's feeling at my rejection.

"Juliet, I don't understand—"

I don't let him finish. I can't. This has to end and I need to leave.

"Ryan, what's the point? In dragging this out? In fact, you should be fucking celebrating. This has got to be one of the easiest outs you've ever gotten."

I swallow the bile rising in my throat. It burns, and I can feel my body trying to shove out more tears.

"What the hell do you mean by that?" he spits out. More hurt.

"Everyone told me. Ryan Knox is a world-famous ladies' man who never sleeps with the same woman more than once. The lead singer never gets attached and only wants to *get it out of his system*. I swore I wouldn't let myself become another notch in your stupid studded belt, but yet here we are."

His hand rubs over his face, "What do you— where did you even... when did I ever give you that impression?"

I laugh. I'm not sure why—it isn't funny. But I do.

"I'm different, huh? Is that what you're telling me? That these last few weeks have changed you? You don't want to be the big bad rock star who can have anything or anyone he wants anymore? You expect me to believe that?"

He says nothing.

"That's what I thought. We both know what this was. It was all about the chase. I told you no, and you couldn't stand it. Ryan always gets what he wants, even if it is just some rookie publicist who just wanted to do her job. You had to fuck the one person who was off-limits. Hell, I'm just as

guilty. You were the forbidden fruit and I fucking took a bite. I knew what would happen, and I did it anyway. I'm not asking you to fall on the sword here. I screwed up. The only difference between you and me is that no one cares if you fuck your publicist. It's just another day in your world." I step around him. "But in my world? It's a big deal. I was given the opportunity of a lifetime and I ruined it. I can't blame anyone but myself."

I walk towards the elevator, leaving him standing there.

"Fuck that," he calls after me. "Fuck everything you just said. So what, because I'm in a band I can't care about someone? Because I've slept around in the past I can't decide that I just might want something *more*?"

I keep walking. The pretty words he's saying aren't what I need to hear right now. They aren't real.

I press the button to call the elevator. His arms wrap around my waist and his lips press into my neck.

"Please stop," I whisper, unable to move.

"No," he answers.

I close my eyes and feel the wetness brimming on my lids.

"Ryan, stop. I can't do this."

He turns my body around, forcing me to face him. His thumb wipes at the tears, his hands cradling my jaw.

"I'm sorry it happened like this. But I'm not sorry that I care about you, and I'm not sorry that everyone knows it. Yes, I wish it would have gone down a little differently, but we can handle that."

I look at those beautiful eyes and shake my head.

"This doesn't end well," I gesture between us. "You live in this fairytale world where everything works out and there are no consequences. I don't live in that world, Ryan. I live in the real world. I live in a world where I can't afford rent without a roommate, I drive a gas saver, and I'm up to my ears in student loan debt. I have a boss who hates me and now I've just given her all the ammunition in the world to finally kick

me to the curb. I gave everything I had to get my degree and land the job I have, and now my name and face are on the front page of every sleazy tabloid there is. Who the hell is going to want to hire the girl who got caught whoring around with her very first client? I'll give you a hint, the answer is no one."

I reach for the button again.

"If you will just listen to me, I said I will talk to everyone. I can fix this!"

His words are just another reminder that his head is so far in the clouds that no amount of explaining can bring him back down to reality.

"There is no fixing it. I have to face it, and that includes getting in that SUV with Olivia in a few minutes and letting her tell me off. That means getting on the plane and groveling at Max's feet tomorrow. I played with fire, and I got burned."

The elevator dings and the door opens. Thankfully, no one is inside.

I step inside and he follows me, holding the door open with his boot.

"Jesus, Ryan! I have to go!" I yell out, and he clenches his jaw.

"No, you *need* to fucking talk to me."

I drop my bag and throw my hands up. "So what, Ryan? Fuck my career, right? Who cares if everyone thinks I slept my way to the top, right? I mean, who the hell cares if I can never work another day in the industry that I love because I get to be with a rock star? I'll just follow you around until you get bored and then what? Watch as you fuck a new girl in every area code? Then what?"

He's speechless.

"Because you will. Get bored. You'll get tired of having the same girl every night. You'll miss the days when you got to pull the pretty girls backstage after the show with the other guys. You'll miss the thrill of the chase. And then what

happens to me? I just go home with nothing and cry every time I hear your stupid songs come on the radio. I don't think so. I need more than that, I deserve more than that. You want to say these things and make all these grand promises today, but what happens when you regret them? What happens when you realize that you aren't ready to be a one-woman man? If you don't let me go and I stay here, I lose the chance at ever salvaging what remains of my career. That means if you wake up one day and realize this isn't what you want, I'll have nothing left. Can you live with that?"

Our eyes remain locked on one another for what feels like a lifetime. In reality, it's only a few seconds. He's the first to break contact. His eyes drop to the floor, and when he moves his boot the door begins to close.

I hold my breath and don't release it until I feel the elevator moving beneath my feet.

That's when I let the tears fall. The pain that pulsates inside me is unlike anything I've ever experienced. It feels like a hole has been punched straight through me. When he let me go he validated that everything I said was the truth, but having it confirmed hurt like hell.

Chapter Forty-Five

Juliet

Silence hangs in the air as the SUV weaves in and out of traffic. I chew on my bottom lip and stare out the window, unsure if she's waiting on me to speak first or if she doesn't want to speak at all.

Olivia clears her throat, and I let my hollow eyes meet hers.

"How long?"

Her tone is clipped.

I contemplate the best way to answer the question, but at this point starting from the beginning seems to make the most sense.

"I met him before the meeting, at a concert. My roommate dragged me there and we were invited backstage to meet the band. It wasn't my scene, but I did it for her. Ryan approached me and I ended up giving my *professional* opinion knowing damn well I was no expert in the field. I left out that I was barely considered more than an intern. I never thought I'd see him again, and I had a bit of fun with it. When you showed up at my office it seemed like a cosmic joke, but he planned it. He tracked me down and made sure my firm was one you considered."

Olivia leans back and lets out a breath.

"You must have made quite the impression."

I say nothing at first, but she gestures for me to continue.

"When the pitch went well no one was more shocked than me, well, maybe excluding Valerie. She's been praying I'd screw up since they hired me. All I wanted was to prove myself. To prove that even though meeting him was the reason I got the shot, I still managed to land the job on my own. That it was my talent that made you pick me and not because the lead singer had some weird interest in me. Slowly it became apparent that you did see my contributions as real, and that

this was the opportunity of a lifetime for someone like me. Sure, we'd had a few moments... but nothing beyond that. I told him I would never cross that line. I told him that my career was everything to me and that no man was worth risking everything I'd worked so hard for. Even if that man is Ryan Knox."

His name on my tongue feels strange now. And thinking of him sends a flood of emotions over me like a tidal wave. Olivia's attention is completely on me, and she's letting me explain with an expression that gives nothing away about how she feels.

"I stuck by it, for a while. I wish I could put the blame on him but I can't. I was drawn to him and no matter how forbidden it was, I couldn't resist. I also wish I could say it was purely physical, but it wasn't. It was wrong and I understand that. I understand the position I put you in, the position *we* put everyone in. If I could take away the problems I've caused I would, but it wouldn't be honest for me to say I would take back what happened with Ryan. The truth is I think I would do it again."

She seems to think hard about my words, carefully calculating what to say next.

"Are you in love with him?" she asks, and it isn't a lie when I shrug my shoulders.

"Can you be in love with someone you've only known for a few months? Someone you were only able to touch behind closed doors? I don't know how to answer that. What I do know is that I developed feelings for him that feel complicated and scary. I know that those feelings made me make decisions that I never thought I would. Beyond that, I just don't know. It doesn't matter, though. He's on an entirely different wavelength, and I don't see how that could ever change. And when I left today he seemed to agree with that sentiment."

When her hand rests on my knee it takes everything inside me not to cry again. It's such a small gesture, but the comfort it brings means more than she will ever know.

“Juliet, I can’t say I’m okay with how things happened. This world we live in is a messy one, and I can’t blame you for getting caught up in it. Your instinct is good, and I never would have agreed to bring you on if I didn’t have faith in you. Bottom line is, your presence as a professional is no longer what is best for the band. If I could change that, believe me, I would. The last thing I want is to bring in Valerie, but my hands are tied.”

Unable to meet her eyes I nod, “I understand.”

“I’ve known Ryan for a while now, and I know that underneath the rock star, there is a good man who cares deeply for the people in his circle. That being said, he is still a celebrity. That means a scandal like this doesn’t hurt him the same way it does you, but I think you know that. What’s best for his image is to be seen as available yet unattainable, and a headline like this does little more than fuel the fires that burn for him across the world. On the other side of the coin, it will brand you like a hot iron. You crossed a professional line and called your ethics into question. In a business like this? That can’t happen. Right now the best thing you can do for your career is put time and distance between you and what happened on this tour. You’re young, and you still have a shot at becoming great. Don’t let this define you.”

Her words play on a loop in my mind as I exit the car and make my way toward the counter inside the airport.

I feel so out of it it takes me almost a full minute to process that the woman standing behind it is waiting for me to hand her my ticket. She clears her throat and gives me a tight smile, and I return it apologetically.

Normally flying is a stressful experience. Going through security and rushing to get to the gate in time. Today, I’m just numb. I walk through the crowded terminal like my body is on autopilot.

Alyssa has called and texted constantly.

As soon as I place the cool metal device to my ear her cheerful voice chimes through.

“Lys, I’m okay. Really.”

I’ve said the words a dozen times, but she knows me better than that. She knows that my entire world is falling apart, and it’s killing her not to be by my side.

“I know you are. I have a bottle of your favorite waiting for you when you get home. I love you, Jules.”

I click the button to end the call and let out a deep breath.

Despite the current state of my career, and potential lack thereof, Alyssa is one constant I can always count on.

I settle into one of the chairs that line the window and don’t even bother pulling out my phone. Instead, I scan the large room.

There’s a man and woman that seem to be in a deep conversation about something. They study the tablet in the man’s hands and point at whatever is on the screen. The woman laughs and her companion shakes his head.

There is a young mother rocking an infant closer to the gate. She coos at the tiny bundle.

What looks to be a family is huddled around one another. Their teenage daughter has her eyes on me, one brow raised as if she recognizes my face. She pulls out her cell phone and taps on the screen, then looks back up at me. Back down at the phone, and then back to me again.

My stomach knots.

Is this what my life is going to look like until some other scandal hits the headlines?

The girl nudges her mother and says something quietly to her. The woman looks at me and nods to her daughter.

As the girl walks towards me I try to work out how this conversation is going to go in my mind.

“Uh, hey. Sorry to be weird, or whatever, but are you Juliet Warren?”

The girl fidgets awkwardly as she awaits my response.

“I’m sorry?” I ask, acting as if I didn’t hear her.

“Are you...” she hesitates, suddenly unsure that she has the right person. “Juliet? The publicist who’s dating Ryan Knox?”

It takes me longer than it should answer. Something about that word, *dating*, catches me off guard.

I try to force my best smile, but I doubt it’s very convincing.

“No, sorry. That isn’t me.”

It isn’t a lie. I don’t know how to define what I shared with Ryan, but whatever it was, it’s over now.

Chapter Forty-Six

Ryan

“What the hell were you thinking?” Olivia says as she collapses into one of the chairs in my hotel room. “You are not a stupid man, Ryan, so please explain this to me in a way that will help me understand.”

I sit on the bed and rub my hand over my face. The truth is I have no clue what to say to her. My mind is too busy replaying my last conversation with Juliet over and over in my mind on a repeating loop.

“Ryan!” she calls out to me and my eyes snap to hers.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” I answer honestly.

Olivia lets out a deep breath.

“I want you to tell me why it seemed like a good idea to make out with Juliet in a public place, Ryan. I want you to make me understand why you would pursue her. Why would you choose to mess around and play your little games with someone who had the potential to be successful with us? Did you truly not realize what the ramifications of this would be or did you just not give a shit?”

As if the massive hole in my chest wasn’t painful enough already, the insinuation that I didn’t care about what our affair meant for Juliet multiplied that pain by a million.

“Of course I fucking care,” I grit out through closed teeth.

I have no right to be pissed at Olivia. How could she possibly understand how I’m feeling or what my time with Juliet meant to me? Nobody had any clue what was going on between the publicist and me, but hearing this, the accusation that it was just some fling? It was infuriating.

It may have begun that way, but things had changed. It wasn’t just one of my “little games” at all, things with Juliet were different.

My manager drops her head down and covers her face with one of hands before muttering something under her breath. She seems to be counting in her mind, as if she's trying to get her anger in check before she rips my head off.

“Look, Ryan, we've known each other for a long time, and you're like family to me. But that also means I *know* you. It means that I've seen how you operate, how you treat women. I'm sure it seemed like harmless fun but she was good. Juliet had so much potential, and I just had to fire her because you couldn't keep it in your damn pants.” She smoothes out her skirt and leans back against the chair. “Not to mention the poor girl looked like a shell of herself when I dropped her off at the airport.

My chest heaves again.

“What did you say to her?” I ask, the accusatory tone in my voice unintentional but I can't help but feel defensive over Juliet. I don't want her getting slammed by this over and over while I sit here unable to help.

Olivia raises a brow. “Nothing she didn't already know. She handled herself with poise. That only made me angrier though. Angry because I don't want to let her go, and I sure as hell don't want Valerie taking over.”

“How was—what did she say about it? About me?”

I don't look at Olivia when I ask the question, instead leave my eyes trained at my feet.

“She explained how it happened, how you two met before the meeting. How you manipulated the situation to get their firm in front of me. Then she explained that she tried to resist it, but she failed. That she wished it was the truth to say if she could do it over again that it wouldn't happen, but it wasn't. She'd probably do it again. I, however, was very honest with her about how a scandal like this impacts someone like her as opposed to you. It isn't the same. Your career thrives off being seen as the unapologetic womanizer who landed yet another conquest. But for her? This is the shit that kills a career for someone like her. She understands that.”

I can feel my heart rate speeding up as my mind processes her words.

“I asked if she was in love with you,” Olivia admits.

Now that gets my attention and my eyes snap back to hers. She can tell what I want to know without the words leaving my lips.

“She didn’t know if she was or not, but said that it didn’t matter. I believe her exact words were something along the lines of you being on an ‘entirely different wavelength’ than her, and that it wasn’t something that would change. She also mentioned that when confronted with that, you didn’t disagree.”

You fucking coward.

I replay the elevator doors closing, her tear stained face disappearing from my view.

“She’s wrong,” I whisper, and Olivia narrows her gaze.

“Wrong about what?”

I stand and make my way to the window.

“About shit not changing. She changed everything. I was just too fucking scared to admit it. I’m fucking terrified of messing up her life, of hurting her.” My fist connects with the wall to the left of the glass. “Fuck!”

“Ryan!” Olivia gasps at the impact.

“You don’t get it, I wasn’t toying with her. I didn’t just want to fuck her. I wanted to be with her all the goddamn time. To talk to her about shit, to just lay there and have her in my arms. I liked listening to her get all excited when a new idea would pop into her mind, and seeing the stars in her eyes when she ended up being right. Juliet isn’t like anyone else I’ve ever known, and when she looked at me, she fucking *saw* me. Not Ryan Knox the rock star. She saw the real me.”

Olivia stands and closes the space between us to place her hand on my shoulder.

“Ryan, I—”

I can tell she doesn't know what to say.

“And how do I show her I care? I lose all self control and pull her into a back room at a club. I put her career on the line because I couldn't keep my fucking hands off her. Because of my selfishness, she could lose everything she's worked towards. Then I let her walk away. I didn't tell her how I felt. I let her think I didn't want something more because I was too scared to admit out loud what that meant, and now she's gone.”

Her hand squeezes my shoulder. “Ryan, call her.”

I shake my head.

“And say what? Hey, I'm sorry I ruined everything but please give me another shot? Sure, I got you fired and then made you feel like our time together was just a fling, but please, oh, please drop everything and be with me?”

I turn to face her.

“Then what? Ask her to leave her life behind to follow me around the country? All she's ever wanted was to prove she had what it takes to make it, to prove that she was the best. Any chance she has of salvaging that means going back to New York and staying as far away from me, from this situation, as possible. You expect her to leave all that behind for *me*?”

The answer was no.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Juliet

The only positive thing about returning to work today is that Valerie isn't here to make things worse. Between the looks from my coworkers that ranged from mild disappointment to full-blown disgust and the three hour long meeting with the executives this morning, I was just ready to go home.

I'm not getting fired, which is a huge win, but I don't feel any happier. I don't feel much of anything, actually. A heavy numbness has settled into me.

I am, however, essentially benched for the foreseeable future.

I can't even sit in on meetings. I'm sure Valerie will be thrilled when she returns. She'll finally be able to run the pitches without having to worry that I may butt in with my ideas.

"Have you seen it yet?" Kate asks when I prop my elbows onto the reception desk.

"Seen what?"

She extends out her hand, offering me her cell phone. There is a video on the screen, and I press the play button.

The intro to a popular talk show network plays. The camera pans to the house band as they pluck away at their instruments, then over to the audience who is cheering wildly for the special guest. I see several screaming fans wearing Chaotix band tees and know the reason she wanted me to watch it.

It's Ryan. He's seated in a leather chair next to a late-night host wearing a perfectly tailored black suit and black dress shirt. He looks mouthwatering. The host, on the other hand, looks more like a used car salesman than someone who should be interviewing someone like Ryan. His patterned suit is gaudy, and his hair looks like it has about a pound of dry shampoo in it. Powdery and stiff.

“So, Ryan, it seems this tour has been a bit more exciting than the last.”

The host’s cheesy grin is directed at Ryan, but the images of our night in the club are being shown on the screen.

“Touring is always exciting, Bill.”

Ryan remains vague, but he gives the host a wink.

“I gotta know, man, the publicist? Really?” He clasps a hand on Ryan’s shoulder. *“What, groupies and models got old?”*

Ryan’s smile falters, and he glares at the man before looking off-stage towards someone out of view. It’s clear Bill is going off script.

“Oh come on, I’m only teasing you. I saw the pictures, I wish my publicist looked like that. You know what I’m sayin’?”

The host is obviously grossly unaware that his comments are not being tolerated well by his guest. Either that or he simply doesn’t care.

Ryan’s jaw clenches, and once again he looks at whoever is to his left.

“Word on the street is that she was seen boarding a plane back to New York. Does that mean she’s back on the market for new clients?”

Kate scoffs at the comment. “What a tool.”

My heart is in my throat and my lunch threatens to make a surprise appearance.

Ryan stands and glares at the host who is nervously looking around, trying to figure out how to save the interview he’s botched.

“We’re done here,” Ryan says as he snatches the wireless microphone from his collar and tosses it into his now-empty seat.

When he is out of view Bill looks back to the camera, sweat beading on his forehead. *“Well, folks, looks like I’ve*

struck a chord with our testy rock star. Let's take a quick breather, we'll be back with the Chaotix frontman after the break."

The video fades to black and I hand the phone back to Kate.

"He never went back on. They had to pull Gareth in to finish the interview."

"Have you heard from him?" Alyssa asks, pouring some chilled Riesling into my glass.

I shake my head. "No, but I don't expect to. We didn't exactly leave off on the best of terms. And it's not like I have his number, I never needed it."

She takes a seat beside me on the couch and pulls her legs up, tucking them underneath her. "Don't you think maybe you owe each other a conversation? I mean, after watching that interview... maybe his feelings aren't as cut and dry as you think."

I can't afford to think like that, not after everything that's happened. I can't afford to spend my time playing the what-if game. I've been handed a lifeline at work, and if I don't hang on to it with everything I have? I might as well hand in my letter of resignation.

"Can we talk about something else, please?" I ask her, pressing the glass to my lips and finishing off the cool liquid. "I can't think about him anymore. It's—"

"Painful?" she interrupts. "Don't you think that means something, Jules?"

I stare at the wall, trying to swallow down the burning sensation creeping up my throat. It always does this. Right before the tears come.

"Of course, it's fucking painful, Lys. What do you expect? I met this incredibly sexy man who rocked my world in every

single way possible, and he just so happened to be the one man I couldn't touch. I tried, I really tried not to want him. He just—He's just—God I can't even explain it! It wasn't even just the physical stuff. The way he looked at me, spoke to me, the way he *protected* me.”

My lip quivers. It's the first time I'm admitting any of this out loud and it feels like a weight has been lifted off my body. Every moment replays in my mind. From the first night, we met to the day the elevator closed between us.

“Babe, you've got to talk to him. What if he is just as torn up about this as you are?” Her eyes sparkle with the tiniest hint of tears. Her heart is breaking for me, and it makes it impossible to hold mine in any longer.

“I can't hinge my life on a what-if!” I set the empty glass down on the coffee table and wipe my eyes. “What if he doesn't want me? What if all I am to him is a challenge and a good time? What do I possibly have to offer someone like him? He has it all, Lys. He could have anyone he wants. Why would he ever choose me? Not to mention, just making the decision to talk to him could cost me what's left of my career. And if it ends up being for nothing? How do I live with that?”

She ponders my words.

“And what if you're wrong? What if he feels the same way you do? What if you never find out and end up regretting it for the rest of your life? How do you live with *that*?”

Chapter Forty-Eight

Juliet

The next several weeks go by in a blur. I keep my head down at work and try to avoid Alyssa's constant questions about Ryan. Deep down I know she's right, but it's also too hard to admit out loud that I'm not okay with how things left off between us.

I'm not okay with the unknown.

The problem is I have no clue what to do about it.

I can't exactly call him. The moment we realized we hadn't exchanged numbers was also the moment we realized our secret romance wasn't so secret anymore.

I also can't reach out to Olivia and ask her for his number because that would be extremely inappropriate.

With every week that passes, it becomes harder and harder to let go.

The front door opens and closes and I hear my roommate set her things down on the counter.

"Jules?" she calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah?"

"Can you come in here?" she calls out again, and I don't try to keep the groan inside.

"Seriously, someone is here for you."

My stomach lurches and my heart does that thing where it feels like it jolts out of rhythm for a few seconds.

That's impossible. It couldn't be...

I walk out of my room, holding my breath.

It isn't Ryan standing there, though. It's just a courier. He's holding a bouquet of flowers and a large yellow envelope. I sign for them and set the vase down on the counter.

It's silent until Alyssa closes the door behind the courier, but as soon as he's gone she's in front of me. "Is it him?"

“I have no clue, you know just as much as me, Lys.”

She rolls her eyes. “Open it!”

I run my fingers over the envelope, nerves buzzing around me like an angry hive.

Inside there is a note from Olivia, and two tickets to the farewell show in Dallas.

Juliet,

I hope this finds you well. You have been missed. Things just aren't the same around here without you. I hope you'll use these. I understand if you can't, but know that I truly hope you will.

Your friend, Olivia

I stare at the note and reread it several times in my mind.

“These are pit tickets, Jules,” Alyssa says, grabbing the tickets from my hand. “I mean, do you want to go?”

I imagine what it would be like to see Ryan and the band again from that point of view, like the very first night all over again. Would he find me in the crowd? Would he want me there? Or would he be pissed I was putting us in a position to potentially gain more bad press?

No matter what the answer is, I know what I'm going to do.

All I've done since I walked away from him was wish I could talk to him one more time. This may not be a conversation, but it's at least some sort of closure.

If he doesn't look my way I have my answer.

And if he does? Well, I'm not sure what that would mean.

“Yeah, I'm going to go. But only if you'll come with me.”

Alyssa grabs my hand. “Of course, I will.”

Six Weeks Later

The hardest part about this was keeping it from Max.

I knew the second he found out I planned to go to the concert tomorrow night, he'd lose it. I can't blame him. He thinks I left everything behind when I flew home from California, but it just wasn't that easy.

The entire way to work I practiced my speech in my mind, making sure each point was well thought out and practical.

All those plans fell away as soon as I stepped into his office.

"How's my girl?" he asked, and for some reason, the endearment made it even harder to tell the truth.

"I'm alright," I lie.

He looks up from his laptop and gives me a smile. "What's on your mind?"

I take a seat in the chair directly in front of him.

"A few weeks ago I got a letter from Olivia. She invited me to the Dallas show."

His jaw ticks. "I hope I am correct in assuming that you politely declined the invitation."

Shit.

"I did not."

He lets out an exasperated breath and folds his hands over his belly. "You understand why I can't allow you to do that, right? Things are quiet now, but you can't risk it."

I look at the man who gave me a shot when not many others would have. The man who looked at me, fresh out of college, and gave me my dream job.

"Yes, Max. I understand." He's relieved, but he shouldn't be. "But you have to understand why I *have* to go."

"Juliet—" I stop him before he can say anything else.

"I think I might be in love with Ryan Knox," I blurt out and his mouth falls open. "Well, I'm pretty sure I'm in love

with him. Since the moment I left California, I've felt like I made a huge mistake. I got on that plane because it was the right thing to do, but if I have the chance to see him again? To figure out what happened between us? I have to do it."

Max leans back in his chair and looks at the ceiling. "If something happens, if we lose this account—Juliet, I won't be able to save your job this time."

I bite my lip and try to swallow the fear rising in my throat.

"I know."

He nods. "There's nothing I can say to change your mind, then?"

I shake my head. "No. There isn't."

He nods again but says nothing.

"I wanted to tell you in person, just in case. I didn't want you to find out from anyone else. Max, you have changed my life. You took me under your wing and mentored me. You are a huge part of who I am today, and I will never, ever forget that. If I could somehow find a way to do this without hurting you I would. You have to believe that. But if I don't see him, and get this closure, I'm so scared I will spend the rest of my life wishing I had been brave enough to take this chance."

Max stands and makes his way over to me. He pulls me up and wraps his arms around me in the most perfect hug.

"You have always been special to me, Juliet. I have sons, but you became the daughter I always wished I'd been blessed with. Watching you grow and come into your own here has brought me so much joy. I'd love to say that your career here should be enough to keep you content, that this is a fool's errand, but I know better than that. If you truly believe you may love him, I won't be the reason you live with regret. Just promise me you'll be smart about this. The last thing I want is to see you get hurt."

I squeeze him tighter. "Thank you for believing in me, Max. Thank you for seeing something in me and tending to it until I was able to see it myself."

Walking out of the office feels ominous. I guess because, depending on how the rest of the weekend goes, it could be the last time I do it as an employee of Acton PR.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Ryan

“Bro, get your fucking head in the game,” Gareth yells over the backing tracks. “That’s the third time you’ve missed your mark.”

“I know,” I shove the mic stand away from my hands and it clashes against the stage floor. “Fuck!”

My mind is all over the place, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t get it together.

“It’s straight, G, we can go again,” Ant calls out, slamming his sticks together to count us off.

I’ve sung this song thousands of times, so why the hell can’t I get the timing right? Probably because Juliet Warren’s tear-stained face is all I can see. That beautiful face was marred with so much pain the last time I saw her, and I didn’t do a fucking thing to fix it. I just let her walk away.

I let her tell me what she thought I wanted, even though I knew she was wrong.

I let her think I didn’t want more with her.

It was all bullshit.

Nothing has ever felt as good as being with her. Performing on stage used to be the high I chased, until her.

Sure, in the beginning, it was all a game of cat and mouse. She told me no, and no one tells me no.

But it grew into something more than that. Those stolen kisses and secret meetings became everything. I ate the forbidden fruit and God was it good. It was the best thing I’ve ever tasted, and I’d do just about anything to have it again.

These weeks without her have been hell and having to hear the snide remarks and jabs at her character have put me in a permanently bad mood.

“How about we take a break, huh?” Neil recommends, ever the voice of reason.

I shoot him a knowing look, thanking him with my eyes for stepping in.

I slide the guitar strap off my shoulder and lean it against a speaker.

Gareth makes his way toward me and bumps me with his elbow. “How do we help you, man? It’s been weeks. You’ve got to nut up or shut up at some point.”

“Nice,” Neil chides.

“I still can’t believe you were macking on Jules, dude,” Ant adds with a smirk. “Still got my feelings hurt you didn’t tell us.”

This conversation is so tired and played out and yet here we are again.

“I need some air.”

No one argues when I leave the stage, they know better. I’ve been snapping like a pissy crocodile who missed the dinner bell.

Olivia is outside nursing a large cup of iced coffee.

“Sounds rough in there, Ryan.”

Her words are all business, but her tone is light. She’s tiptoeing around me too.

“I’ll get it together before tonight,” I promise, and we both know I will.

No matter how scrambled my head is, I’d never let it affect a show. The fans don’t deserve that.

“I know you will. I have to tell you something, Ryan, and I need you to promise you won’t be upset with me.”

That can’t be good.

“Yeah?”

She takes a long sip and sighs. “I invited Juliet to come tonight. I sent tickets a few weeks ago.”

Heat creeps into my cheeks and my heart skips a beat.

“She’s coming. Max emailed not long ago.”

She’s coming.

She’s coming.

The words replay in my mind and God does it make for a beautiful song.

“I didn’t want to keep it from you, but I also didn’t want to tell you until I knew whether or not she’d come. Now, this doesn’t change anything, Ryan. We still have to be very careful how we play this. If not for your sake, for hers. Max made it clear if there is another scandal she will not make it out unscathed.”

“Okay.”

I should say more, but now all I can think about is seeing her again.

I turn and run back to the stage, a huge shit-eating grin on my face.

Gareth’s brows furrow when he sees my sudden change in demeanor, and my smile only grows.

“Boys, we have work to do.”

“Damn, Knox. I didn’t realize.” Ant pulls his hair up into a bun on top of his head using his lucky scrunchie. “Why didn’t you tell us that shit was serious? I feel like a dirtbag for ragging on you.”

I’d never admitted that my feelings for Juliet went far deeper than just sex. It was something that I’d only been slowly admitting to myself. It was like the longer I went without her, the more I realized what she meant to me.

“So it doesn’t suck, right?” I ask them, the paper full of chicken scratch and ink stains clutched in my fingers.

“It’s good, man. Really,” Gareth responds with a shrug. “And I agree. I just wish you would have told us. We could

have helped with some grand gesture shit to fix this mess.”

Neil lights a joint and takes a long drag. “This is about as grand a gesture as it gets. Just be sure before you do this that it’s what you want. I don’t want you pulling this and then tucking tail in a few months when shit gets real. She’s a nice girl, it wouldn’t be right.”

I can’t help but smile at his protectiveness. I like that they like her. These three guys will always be a huge part of my life and having them love who I love is important.

Love who I love.

“I’ve had two months to tuck tail. If I didn’t want this I wouldn’t be here fucking around with you. I don’t know how to explain it. She just... fits. I want her and I don’t care what anyone has to say about it. I just hope it’s enough.”

I look at the paper again.

It has to be enough.

“Chicks dig shit like this,” Gareth says before finding his place on the stage.

“This isn’t *some chick*. This is Juliet. It has to be perfect.”

We run through the set a few more times, putting extra focus on the new addition. It’s shaky at first, but by the third go, it sounds pretty damn good.

I’m not used to feeling nervous before a show, but this one has me breaking a sweat. I’m used to being the center of attention, but to put my feelings on display for the world to see? That’s new territory.

It’s also a massive risk.

By doing this I also put the spotlight back on her.

A part of me thinks that it may not be fair to make this decision for her, to tell everyone where I stand completely blind to how she feels in return. But the other part of me is screaming for that one to shut the fuck up.

If I don’t take this opportunity tonight, I may never get the chance again. Damn the rules, damn the consequences.

Chapter Fifty

Juliet

It feels strange being on this side of the stage now. The pit is slammed full of fans, and I've been elbowed twice. Everyone is pushing and shoving, trying to get as close as possible to the stage, but I am happy to stay back. We're in the middle and off to one side, perfectly blending in with the masses.

I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't see me at all.

My heart sinks at the thought.

"How are you feeling, Jules?" My best friend asks, leaning against me.

"Nauseous. Terrified. Like my heart will leap from my chest at any point."

That's an understatement. It feels like I'm in line at a carnival waiting to get on a ride that twists and loops its way across the sky. The anticipation of what is to come is eating me from the inside out.

Her hand finds mine and gives it a tight squeeze. "We can always leave. Coming this far was a massive step, and no one would blame you for walking away."

I shake my head and glance nervously back at the stage.

I can't walk away, not this time. If not for any other reason than knowing that he'd probably let me. He'd watch as I walked out of his life for the second time, and he wouldn't come after me.

The arena goes dark and bright bands of light begin to dance across the ceiling. A low rumble breaks out over the crowd, and the chants begin. The large screens on either side of the stage scan the group, landing on fans who sport fantastical outfits or hold massive signs.

"Marry Me, Ryan!" is my favorite, especially considering the woman holding it can't be a day younger than 65.

Gareth has a fair share dedicated to him, and I smile, knowing that seeing them will probably cause him to puff his chest out like a proud gorilla.

A guitar solo silences the roaring crowd, and everyone's breath stills with anticipation.

"How are we doin' tonight, Dallas?" a familiar voice calls out over the speakers.

Screams fill the massive space.

"I said, how we doin', Dallas? I know you can be louder than that!"

The crowd goes wild and gets even louder when the stage comes to life. The four men are standing in position, and my eyes immediately find Ryan.

His lips are so close to the microphone as he speaks.

"This is a very special show; you know that?"

His voice has dropped so that it almost sounds like he's speaking to someone standing next to him rather than a sold-out arena.

"Do you know why tonight's special, Dallas?" Gareth yells into the microphone in front of him.

You can't hear anything the crowd is saying in response, just jumbled cries of excitement thundering across the horde.

"I don't think we should tell them just yet," Ryan smiles into the camera. "I think we should make them sweat it out for a little while."

With that, Ant begins to pound on the drums, and a spotlight lands on him, illuminating his form as he bangs away. Gareth and Neil join in, and Ryan slowly stalks toward the front of the stage. He's dragging the mic stand as he walks.

His raspy voice fills the speakers as he starts singing one of their more popular songs. It seems like every single person in the place knows the lyrics, and when Ryan points the microphone toward them and stops singing, they don't miss a beat.

My heart swells at the look he gives to their adoring fans. He's entirely in awe of them as they sing the lyrics for him. He lets them continue past the expected line and turns to ensure the other guys are soaking up the moment with him.

The look shared between the four men should pull at anyone's heartstrings.

It's one of those "Hey Mom, I made it" moments.

The band makes their way through the setlist, and I try my hardest to enjoy myself. Alyssa dances and sings with every song, but the more time passes, the harder it is to stand here and pretend I'm okay.

He's in his element, and he's owning the stage.

It's probably the best performance I've seen him put on.

So while I've been going through the motions and just trying to stay afloat, he's been thriving.

That *hurts*.

I tug on Alyssa's wrist and force a smile. "I need some air."

"Okay." She moves to follow me, but I hold up my hand.

"No, you stay. I'll be right back. I just—" I try to find the words to reassure my best friend that I'm alright, but the look on my face gives everything away.

"I'm here for *you* tonight, Jules. I'll come with you."

I give her a tight smile, but don't try to argue. She laces her fingers in mine and we turn our backs to the stage.

We make it halfway through the crowd before Ryan's voice begins to speak into the microphone, Gareth playing a slow tune to dull the silence.

"I mentioned earlier that tonight's show is a special one," he croons into the mic. "You want to know why?"

Screams fill the space, but we keep walking. I can feel my chest tightening, and I need to get out of here before it constricts completely.

“You see, there’s someone here tonight that means a great deal to me.”

It feels like I’ve been hit by a semi-truck.

My hand squeezes Alyssa’s and I stop walking. I think my heart even stops beating.

“But I’m a fuck-up and I may have ruined my chances with her.”

I turn around, my mouth hanging open, shock radiating over every inch of my body.

“Is he—“ Alyssa begins but doesn’t finish the thought.

“I let her walk away from me and I didn’t fight for her. I didn’t fight for us.”

The crowd is silent, and all you can hear is Ryan’s deep breathing into the microphone as he scans each row looking for someone.

Looking for me.

“I’ve never been the best with shit like this,” he continues. “And even though I can’t always find the words to say, I can say them in my own way. With music.”

Gareth walks over to him and holds out his fist, a show of support between the brothers. Ryan fist-bumps him back, and the other members begin playing a song I don’t remember hearing before.

His voice rings out and I’m unable to move, barely able to let out the breath I’m holding as I listen to the words.

I need some time to stop,

to think all about all of this,

I hate when you are out there, I want you to be right here.

I feel a little numb, man, I thought I knew what I wanted.

I’m falling apart that you’re distant and I’m far from you.

We come from two different worlds,

I guess that’s what made me see things a bit blurred.

I told you what you wanted to hear I thought I knew what it was

but I was wrong.

The impact you had on me was strong...

You might be right—

Maybe I am not the one for you,

but you gotta be mine,

so where does that leave us?

Ohh...

“Holy shit, Jules,” Alyssa whispers into my ear.

He’s still looking out at the sea of faces, and I watch as his brow furrows when he doesn’t see me.

My feet are moving before I realize what’s happening. I’m walking toward him, toward the words that are piercing straight through me.

You can’t risk your job,

for some empty plot.

Gareth’s fingers expertly glide over the strings, music filling the space between Ryan’s words.

You couldn’t be the same after what we went through.

I don’t stop until my body hits a barrier and I can’t get any closer. I physically can’t get to him and I need to. I need him to see me, need him to know that I’m listening.

You might be right,

maybe I am not the one for you.

But you gotta be mine,

so where does that leave us?

Neil sees me before Ryan does, and the smile that takes over his face warms me up from the inside out. I watch as he tries to get the lead singer’s attention, but his eyes are closed. He’s so caught up in the words he’s singing there is no pulling

him away from them. All I can do is be here in this moment with him, even if he doesn't realize that we're experiencing this together.

Chapter Fifty-One

Ryan

I don't even realize my eyes are closed but I'm so fucking overwhelmed by everything around me. I just need to be here with these lyrics and with her.

I love her.

I fucking love Juliet Warren with everything I've got and this is my one chance to lay it all out there and hope like hell she feels the same.

I should never have let her walk away, but I was afraid. It scared the shit out of me. It scared me that another person had become so important to me and that I'd let myself be vulnerable. That's probably why I didn't go after her when she left me standing there at the hotel. She said all that shit to me by the elevator and I panicked.

So I let her leave. I shut down and I let her go.

You never realize how much someone has become a part of you until they're gone. She's ingrained within me and I didn't even know it.

Somehow in the last few months, this went from me wanting something simply because I was told I couldn't have it, to Juliet completely and entirely owning my heart. And it was time that everyone else knew that too.

It was time for the world to know who possessed me, body and soul.

As the words I wrote for her leave my lips, I fight the urge to search for her in the crowd again. I had this whole thing planned out in my mind but it wasn't exactly playing out the way I'd pictured.

I'd planned to find her in the crowd and make sure our eyes were locked, make sure that she knew I meant every single word. I'd find her, and she'd realize that it was never a game for me. It was real from the moment I saw her backstage at that first show.

It may have started with infatuation, but the more I got to know her, the more real it became.

I mean, hell, I'd tracked her down with nothing but a first name and an occupation. Anyone in this business knows how many PR firms there are, but I wouldn't stop until I found the girl with a sharp tongue and big ideas.

But these lights are so fucking harsh and I can't make out anything in the sea of faces before me. All I can do is hope that she's out there somewhere and that she can hear me and that it's enough.

Give me a solid chance, Juliet,

to be the ultimate Romeo.

Let me show you what I got,

to make you happier than ever.

I need to hear from you.

I need to be with you.

I need to touch you.

I need to be with you.

I need to hear—

I need to hear your voice.

I need to hear it.

As the song comes to a close I open my eyes and there she is, front and center. The only thing keeping her from coming any closer is a metal barricade and several large security guards.

I squint, trying to make out her expression but these damned lights make it impossible. She's a blur.

I'm moving to the edge and without a second of hesitation, I jump down from the stage, not giving a fuck about the gasps erupting from the crowd. Nothing on this entire damn planet could stop me from getting to *my* girl.

When my feet hit the ground I look up and our eyes lock, hers are brimmed with tears.

I don't stop until I reach her, and my hands clasp around each side of her face.

"I'm so sorry," I breathe out. "I'm so fucking sorry I didn't stop you."

Juliet closes her eyes and leans into my hand, and when they reopen there's a spark in them that makes my chest tighten.

She pulls away and the sudden loss of contact has me ready to clear the barrier between us and take her in my arms.

A loud crack echoes in my ears and my face jerks to one side. The crowd goes silent as soon as her hand makes contact with my face, well, except for a few shocked gasps.

I hear a laugh from Gareth behind me.

She fucking *slapped* me.

My hand goes to my cheek and my brows shoot up, but I can't hide my grin when I realize she's trying her hardest not to smile.

That's my girl.

"I guess I deserved that," I say in a low voice, still rubbing the place she'd just hit.

Juliet nods and I can tell she's biting the inside of her lip to keep the laughter in. "Yes, you did."

I open my mouth to speak again, fully prepared to grovel as long as it takes to make her understand that I meant every single word, but she silences me with her lips.

Her stomach is leaned over the barrier and her arms wrap around my neck. My hands return to her face and I pull her into me.

Her lips are warm and soft, and she parts them slightly letting me deepen the kiss. I can fucking feel the thud of our combined heartbeats as we drown in each other.

Cheers erupt from the crowd and pull both of us out of the moment.

I reach down and grab Juliet around her waist and hoist her over the metal that separates us, and when she's in my arms, I nuzzle into her neck.

"I'm *never* letting you go again."

Epilogue

Juliet

Three months later

I lean back, letting my body relax into the velvet sofa. My afternoon had been packed with meetings, and this was the first time I'd really had a moment to breathe.

This was my favorite way to end a long day, though.

"There's my girl," Ryan says when he walks through the front door of his condo. He's on the phone, but immediately all his attention is on me.

"Hey, I gotta go. Talk later."

He hangs up and slides the phone into his back pocket, closing the space between us and joining me on the sofa. He pulls my legs into his lap and begins rubbing my feet.

"Long day?"

I nod. "My new role comes with plenty to keep me busy."

After our little display of affection at the concert I was fairly confident any hopes of keeping my position at Acton PR were as good as gone, but thanks to Olivia and her ultimatum, my job security was pretty damn solid.

As the newly official publicist to the largest client they had, no amount of bitching from Valerie could convince the partners to get rid of me. Losing me meant losing Chaotix, and that would be a very poor business decision.

Max didn't even try to hide his amusement when Valerie stormed out of the building when my promotion was announced.

There were two things I'd learned from all this.

The first was I could care less if anyone thought that I'd gotten to where I am now because of my relationship with Ryan. The people who mattered knew that wasn't true, and I was now in such high demand that the few who had something negative to say were drops in the bucket.

I've worked my ass off to get to where I am.

The second thing? I am madly in love with my client.

Talk about a plot twist I never saw coming.

Ryan's hands begin to travel up my legs and underneath my skirt.

"Why don't you let me help you relax a little bit, baby?"

I lower my eyes at him and bite my lower lip. "I think I'd like that."

He pulls me towards him by my legs and turns my body so that I'm straddling him, hands roaming my thighs. His fingers wrap around the waistband of my panties and he slowly pulls them down my legs. He drops them to the floor and raises up on his knees, unfastening his belt and jeans while maintaining eye contact.

"My perfect Juliet," he growls in a low voice as he pulls out his hard cock and fists it, preparing himself to ravage me. He strokes his length a few times, using the pre-cum that beads at the tip to coat it so that it slides into me with ease.

It's excruciating, watching him touch himself when my need to have him inside me is so overwhelming.

"Please," I beg, reaching for him, pleading for him to fuck me so hard I see stars.

He positions himself at my entrance, and with a deep thrust, I stretch for him, taking every single inch and reveling at the pleasure it sends through my body.

"Take all of it, baby. I know you can," he groans before pushing into me again.

I suck in a breath and wrap my legs around him, needing there to be nothing that separates our bodies.

Ryan moves in and out of me, picking up speed, and I arch against the soft sofa underneath me. His hands land on both of my hips, and he uses the control to slam my body down onto his cock.

"God, yes!" I cry out in pure ecstasy.

There have never been two people whose bodies were made for each other like mine and his. You can't convince me otherwise.

I watch as he completely loses himself, sinking into me and giving every ounce of himself to me with no hesitation. Knowing that I am the one who makes him feel these things is a high I can't even begin to explain.

The sounds of his pleasure begin to muffle in my ears as my orgasm builds, and I roll my head back, knowing my release is coming any second.

"Just like that," he grits out in between thrusts, "You feel so good."

I come apart at the seams, and as soon as he feels my walls clench around him, he explodes with me.

My body goes boneless against the sofa and he climbs over me, pressing dozens of kisses to my skin.

"Aren't you glad you didn't let me get away, rocker boy?" I say, playfully as his lips graze my collarbone.

He lets out a small laugh before hovering over me so that our noses almost brush.

"I love you, Juliet Warren."

The End

What Comes Next

"Everything will be perfect, Ryan," Juliet calls out from the kitchen.

The condo had been buzzing for the last two days as everyone pitched in to prepare the place for its new occupant. Her bedroom now had freshly painted walls, and the movers were in the process of putting together a brand-new set of furniture.

Ryan was pulling out all the stops.

"Where do you want this one?" One of the men asked when he entered the room carrying a box labeled: *'personal.'*

The contents of Wrenlee Knox's apartment had been locked away in a storage facility since she went away, and now her brother was busy deciding what would be here when she returned.

"There," Ryan said, pointing to the granite countertop.

"Are you going to open it?" Juliet asks, concern etched on her face as she watches over her boyfriend.

Of course he is.

Ryan was putting away anything that might trigger his sister. Anything that may remind her of the life she had before that day her found her.

He grabbed a knife from the counter and slid it underneath the tape, and when he peered inside he quickly closed it again.

"This one stays on the truck."

Ant walks over and grabs the box from his bandmate and takes it back outside, not bothering to wait for one of the movers to return.

"You okay, man?" I ask, walking over to where my best friend is now leaned against the surface.

"I just need everything to be perfect when she gets here. I want every reminder of that piece of shit and what he put her through gone," he responds, eyes glazed over with sadness. "I just need this work."

I nod and throw an arm over his shoulder, "We're here every step of the way, Knox. You know that."

He nods, and I take a step back.

I don't remember much about Ryan's sister. She was younger than us and we never really went to their house. Ryan never wanted anyone to see what his home life was like. We normally hung out at my place, and when he moved in with me, I saw her even less.

Most of what I know about Wrenlee Knox came from her brother.

I knew she'd been through hell, and I knew she'd been away. I knew that Ryan had made the decision to bring her home to stay here with him, and that whenever she was brought up, he looked like someone had just shot an arrow straight through his chest.

I don't know if it's the guilt or what, but things with his sister seemed extremely complicated.

"Gareth!" Neil's deep voice called from outside, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Get your ass out here and help, asshole."

I roll my eyes and shoot Juliet a knowing glance. She giggles and points toward the door.

"Go on, go help. She'll be here in a few hours."

I make sure my footsteps are heavy as I dramatically stomp out of the room. "I know, I know."

We didn't have much left to sift through thanks to the whole crew showing up at the ass-crack of dawn, but I was sweaty and tired and ready to crack open a cold one.

"Hey, man," Ryan calls out as he points to another box. "Cut that one open for me."

I pull out the folded up knife from my back pocket and slice through the packing tape.

Several framed photos are stacked inside, and the one on top makes me inhale a sharp breath. I hold it up and examine the woman standing next to my best friend. His arm is draped over her shoulder, and she's looking up at him with so much love and admiration in her green eyes.

Her dark hair is halfway down her back, and it takes several seconds for me to process that it's Wren.

She looks nothing like the little girl I remember waving out the window to her big brother when I would pick him up. There's no more missing teeth and pigtails. No more stuffed animals and stained lips from whatever fruity concoction her parents gave her to drink.

No, that girl was gone, and in her place was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

“Gareth?” Ryan calls out again. “What’s in there?”

I set the frame back down and pull myself together. “Sorry—pictures. Just pictures.”

My best friend nods. “Those can go in her room.”

I lean down and pick up the box before turning on my heel and heading back inside.

Don't even fucking think about it. Absolutely not.

I scold myself for my thoughts about Ryan's sister, and when I set the box down on her bed, I let out a massive breath.

Just because she's really fucking gorgeous doesn't mean I can't control myself.

I back out of the room and lean against the wall.

Pull your head out of your ass. If there was ever any one woman who was off-limits, it's this one. She's my best friend's little sister... and I could never cross that line.

Right?

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To my ARC readers, thank you for your patience. I know this one has been long awaited, and as the newly crowned Queen of Edging, know I wanted it to be perfect for you.

Books By This Author

[Torn to Pieces](#)

We all crave what we can't have.

Josephine left everything she had ever known when her mother announced she was getting married and was thrust head-first into a new life that came equipped with an instant family. A chance encounter at a backwoods bar leaves her yearning for more, but when she discovers the obscenely hot stranger is her soon to be stepbrother? There was no way she could have prepared for that bombshell, or the intense rollercoaster of lust and love that would soon follow.

This incredibly sexy, mysterious bad boy set her body on fire. With every encounter he lets her see behind those walls he'd built up a little bit more, which only makes her need for him intensify. As the wedding grows closer the reality of what is happening becomes too much to ignore. This new perfect family is all her mother has ever dreamed of, and this forbidden relationship would crush those dreams.

There only seems to be two choices. Does she break her mother's heart? Or does she break her own?