

A  
**PLAYERS**  
ROCKSTAR  
ROMANCE

He was lost  
when I found him.

*Lovely*

**MADNESS**

**JAINE DIAMOND**

# LOVELY MADNESS

A Players Rockstar Romance (Players #4)

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JAINE DIAMOND



*Lovely Madness*  
Jaine Diamond

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*For YOU, lovely reader—for coming along on this romantic rock 'n' roll  
journey with me.  
THANK YOU.*



## Author's Note

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This book, *Lovely Madness (Players #4)*, is the fourth novel in the Players series—a rockstar romance series about the members of the rock band “the Players,” and the women and men who love them.

This is a spin-off series from the Dirty rockstar romance series (and the twelfth book in this world). Some characters and storylines in this book had their genesis in the Dirty series and the previous Players books, and if you want every detail of the crazy-romantic rock 'n' roll adventure so far, you'll want to read the Dirty series first.

I write each book as a standalone, so that it can, well, stand on its own... But I do consider the books in the Dirty series and the Players series “interconnected standalones,” meaning you could pick and choose which ones you read, in any order, but you will definitely get the most out of the series, the individual books and the relationships within if you read the books consecutively.

### **Reading order**

#### **Dirty series:**

*[Dirty Like Me \(Dirty #1\)](#)*

*[Dirty Like Us \(Dirty #0.5\) - Free](#)*

*Dirty Like Brody (Dirty #2)*  
*A Dirty Wedding Night (Dirty #2.5)*  
*Dirty Like Seth (Dirty #3)*  
*Dirty Like Dylan (Dirty #4)*  
*Dirty Like Jude (Dirty #5)*  
*Dirty Like Zane (Dirty #6)*

**Players series:**

*Hot Mess (Players #1)*  
*Filthy Beautiful (Players #2)*  
*Sweet Temptation (Players #3)*  
*Lovely Madness (Players #4)*

With love from beautiful Vancouver (the home of Dirty and the Players!),

Jaine

Lovely Madness

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# Prologue

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**Cary**

## Indestructible

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“Dude, I’m so fucking wrecked.”

My bassist and best friend, Gabe, pretty much fell over the second we walked into my hotel room. We’d just come back from lunch and he was so tired he was practically slurring. He sprawled into an armchair with a sigh and looked like he fell asleep right on the spot.

I laughed.

After the show last night, my band decided we needed to celebrate my birthday by staying up all night. Nothing unusual, but we’d really tied one on, birthday style.

And then another one.

And another.

I’d insisted on buying Gabe a drink for every one he bought for me, though now I wondered if maybe I should’ve cut him off before the sun came up or something. I got to pass out for a while this morning, but it wasn’t so easy for Gabe.

He’d been having trouble sleeping again.

Sometimes I kinda forgot that my best friend was mortal. Since I was the one who always needed holding up, I forgot that even he could fall down.

“Good thing we don’t have a gig tonight,” I mused, sipping my black coffee.

He said nothing.

I studied him, sprawled there with his legs spread in his faded jeans with the pocket chain, wearing the same brown leather bracelet he’d had forever and his beloved blue T-shirt that announced WOMEN RULE in big letters, and for some reason, only one shoe. The other one had only made it halfway across the room with him. His curly brown hair was all askew. Like me, Gabe was twenty-eight, but he looked about fifteen when he was asleep, other than the stubble on his jaw.

I plucked the takeout coffee cup from his hand and set it on the table

before he spilled his double Americano all over himself.

“Are you asleep?” I said sorta quietly, in case he was.

“I wish,” he moaned, not opening his eyes. “Do I have time for a power nap before this interview?”

I checked the time on my phone. “Nope.”

He made a long, incoherent, grumbly noise but didn’t get up.

Shit.

We were months deep into this tour and it was taking a toll on every member of the band. We’d never lived this fast or this large, and the four of us were all holding on tight—to each other—so we wouldn’t blow apart at the seams. It was the only way we knew how to survive it: stick together. We were in uncharted territory now, and as it turned out, the waters were wild and rough.

Especially for someone like me.

There was literally no way I’d be surviving daily life right now, much less the endless performances and the general overwhelmingness of life as a rock star, without him. Gabe Romanko had been my best friend since we were just kids. He’d been my partner in music since the day I could (barely) strum a guitar. He was my other—and arguably better—half in pretty much every way other than the romantic and the sexual. If it weren’t for Gabe, I’d still be playing guitar for myself in a basement somewhere, instead of on a major record label, headlining a world tour with our band, Alive.

Come to think of it... I probably wouldn’t even be playing guitar at all, since Gabe was the one who’d gotten us into music in the first place.

And all of the above meant that I should really step up here.

“Why don’t you just let me do the interview?” I forced the words out, even though my heart was already thumping harder than normal just thinking about it. I knew he’d do it for me, without question. He had done it for me, too many times to count.

His eyes cracked open.

“Then you can sleep.” I started thumbing through messages on my phone. “And we’ll meet up for dinner.”

“It’s your birthday, man. I can’t do that to you.”

“My birthday was over at midnight.”

“You hate interviews.”

“So? What else am I gonna do today?” I had the whole day off for my birthday, since we’d had a gig yesterday, on my actual birthday. But with

Gabe scheduled for an interview, our drummer, Xander, doing a drum demo at a local music store, and our lead singer, Dean, half-pickled and useless, as usual, I had zero plans.

“You can’t go alone, Cary,” he reminded me.

As if I could ever forget.

“I’ll drag Dean with me, so they get two rock stars for the price of one.”

He eyed me skeptically with half-open eyes. Granted, Dean was no replacement for Gabe, but he was better than no one.

“He’s got nothing better to do,” I said. “He’s passed out under a pile of chicks in Xander’s room right now.”

“How do you know that?”

“Xan texted. Says he slept in Dean’s room this morning because Dean turned his bed into, and I quote him here, ‘pussy stew.’”

Gabe groaned. “You show up with that hungover crab factory, they’re not gonna be happy. The disc jockeys at that station sound like super-nerds, and major fans of yours truly. They wanted to interview me about my podcast and the basses I build.”

“Whatever. It’s local radio. I can nerd out with them about the wonder that is Gabe Romanko all day long. I know you better than you know yourself, brother.” I tussled his hair, not gently.

Then I headed for the bathroom while he muttered something like, “You’re gonna regret this.”

I searched through the crap that was spilled across the bathroom counter in my haste to get ready for the show last night, grabbing two bottles of pills from the many on offer—the yellow ones and the blue ones. We had this “band doctor” who prescribed us pretty much anything, which probably wasn’t brilliant, but it was handy.

I threw back a couple of the yellow pills, the ones with the name on the label I couldn’t even pronounce, and washed them down with my coffee. I wasn’t supposed to take them regularly, just to control my adrenaline—and my pounding heart, my shaky voice and limbs—when I had to do something like an interview. I rarely, almost never, did interviews. But for Gabe...

I took a deep breath and told myself I could do this, even though I knew I’d hate every second of it. I was already feeling shaky just thinking about it. I threw back some more coffee and did some controlled breathing, looking myself square in the eyes in the mirror.

*Nothing bad will happen.*

*It's only in your head.*

As I reemerged from the bathroom, Gabe said, “Do I need to remind you that Dickhead Dean gives shit interviews?”

“I’ll do the interview. Dean can troll Tinder for all I care. But I’m dragging him there with me to punish him for being a twat.”

“Don’t insult twats like that, man.” Gabe grinned, his eyes half-slits. “And why are you mad at him now?”

“I’m not mad. But he ditched my birthday party before midnight to host an orgy, and he didn’t even do it in his own bed. Just saying.”

“And that’s why we call him Dickhead Dean.”

“Yup. Look alive.” I tossed the bottle of blue pills at him.

He caught it.

“Take that and get some sleep. Stay here in my room so no one knows where you are. Then they can’t bother you for a while. Turn off your phone. I’ll wake you up in time for dinner.”

Gabe squinted at the label on the bottle. “I don’t like sleeping pills. They make me sleepy.”

I just kinda laughed. “You’re a mess.”

He looked over at me soberly; I knew that look well. “You really okay to do this?”

“I’m good.” I took another sip of coffee. “Beta blockers.”

“Thought you weren’t supposed to drink coffee with those.”

I abandoned my takeout cup on the way to the door. “Yes, dear.”

“Or booze,” he said.

I turned back to him and gave him my most angelic face. “I’m at least eighty-percent sober right now, brother.”

He smirked. “Quit complaining. I’ll get you drunk again tonight.” He was clutching the pill bottle to his chest now, like it was a kitten or something.

I pointed at it and gave him a stern look. “Don’t take too many of those.”

“I won’t. Happy birthday!” he called after me as I opened the door.

“It was yesterday,” I reminded him, pausing in the doorway. “You can stop saying that.”

“Yeah, but I was drunk yesterday and I don’t remember half of it. I’m buying you dinner tonight and we’re celebrating again.”

“Good. Because you owe me one for doing this interview with Dean.”

He grinned.

Then I walked out. But I would always remember his last words to me as



I shut that door.

“I love you, brother,” he said.

# Chapter One

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**Cary**

# The Day I Tried to Live

---

*Five years later...*

*June*

I stepped out of the shower to find my phone vibrating on the bathroom counter. I glanced at the screen.

*Courteney.*

My little sister was calling. Again.

I tried to ignore it as I turned up Soundgarden and towel dried my hair. I hadn't shaved in a week, so I took my time as I lathered up and started shaving.

The members of the Players had this "vortex playlist" thing they did, where each of them made a playlist of twenty songs, by other artists, that expressed their own musical "blood, guts and soul." Summer Sorensen, their keys/synth player, came up with the idea when they formed the band, sort of a musical *getting to know you*.

After they'd contracted me to produce their debut album, she sent me their vortex playlists and I listened through each one.

Then I took it a step further. I asked each member of the Players to tell me their three all-time favorite bands. Like the bands they would've literally joined themselves if they could've. And I listened through each of those bands' complete studio discographies.

Today, I was on the top three from Matt Brohmer, the Players' bassist. For the last few hours I'd had Soundgarden pouring through the speakers in the walls all over my house, so I could hear the music in whatever room I was in. I was now on *Superunknown*, their most popular album and arguably their best, though I was partial to *Badmotorfinger* myself, for personal reasons.

If you asked me, music was always personal.

I'd finish Soundgarden tomorrow morning, then get listening to the top

three bands chosen by Ashley Player, the Players' lead singer and guitarist, starting with the Red Hot Chili Peppers. It would probably take me the rest of the day and part of the night just to get through the Chili Peppers' discography alone, but that was fine with me.

Without music, my house was too quiet anyway.

I had to keep myself occupied with something to fill the void. It felt strange to have this much free time on my hands. It was only two days. A matter of hours. But to me, it felt like a long damn time. I was used to being busy, consumed with my work, with music. Every moment of every day.

The last album I'd produced, the Static Ice Diva's latest, had taken nearly eight months of my life. Way longer than it should've. I was glad it was finished, but I also hated finishing an album—unless I was plunging myself fucking immediately into something else.

My work on the album had officially wrapped up yesterday, including final talks with the record company, publicists, issuing a statement that could be used in place of an actual interview with me. I never did interviews anymore. I hadn't done one in five years. I really didn't have anything to say.

Everything I had to say was already in the music.

If you knew how to listen, you'd figure it out.

When I finished shaving, I walked into my bedroom. Felt strange; I hadn't slept up here in years. Everything was neat and clean and cold. I slept in my music studio downstairs, and most of the time I showered there, too. I did pretty much everything down there. I only bothered coming up here now because I needed some nice clothes from the walk-in.

I chose a simple, black dress shirt and gray dress pants. I never wore shit like this; I was a jeans and T-shirt guy. The crisp fabric and collar, the buttons, the creases in the pants all made me feel less like myself, which was maybe the point. Helped me to detach. Depersonalize the whole event as much as I could. I didn't have to dress up to visit the mansion, but I always did. Just seemed wrong not to.

Obviously, Nicolette would.

And since I expected her to play by my rules, it was the least I could do.

The thing was, not many people understood my rules. Fair enough. But I wasn't about to spend my life having to explain them to everyone. It was so much easier to just shut a door and tell people to stay the fuck out.

Choose who I let into my world.

*Out. In.*

Most people were out.

This was my life. My rules.

When I walked back into the bathroom, my phone was vibrating again. I ran my hands through my hair in front of the mirror. It was half-damp, and I didn't bother styling it.

I glanced at the screen.

*Courteney.*

Shit. I'd been hoping to avoid her this weekend, but this had to be the seventh time she'd called. Either there was an actual emergency, or I should've maybe just stopped being an asshole and actually picked up the phone to talk to my sister.

I picked up the phone. "Hey, cupcake." That's what I called her; cupcake, or CC for short, which was also her initials and mine. Cupcake was usually reserved for private conversations, though. When she was like thirteen she'd started complaining about it, but she didn't seem to mind anymore.

"Hey! I've been trying to reach you. You're not working today, are you?"

"Not really. Just wrapping up. What's up?"

"I just wanted to talk to you. You know, about finding you an assistant? Remember, we talked about that...?"

Oh. "Right."

The assistant.

Definitely hadn't been on my mind. But now I remembered.

Several months ago—actually, half a year ago or so—my little sister had asked me if she could help hire me an assistant. After she'd tried so hard to fill that position herself last summer, I may have felt a little guilty. I knew she was just trying to help me. So, I'd agreed to discuss it with her when I was finished the album.

Well, it was finished.

I had about thirty-eight more hours, officially, obligation free, before I got started on my next project. And she knew it. Her boyfriend was a member of the Players, and she knew exactly when they were going into the studio.

"Is this a good time?" she asked me, carefully.

"Sure. I've just got a minute."

"Okay. I'll make it fast. I'm sending someone over to meet with you on Monday," she said, quickly, like she was afraid I'd cut her off. "Just for a quick chat. She's an executive assistant. I've just asked her to meet with you so she can figure out what kind of assistant would be ideal for you, because

let's face it, I have no idea what I'm doing. Then she's going to help me hire someone perfect."

"Okay." I wedged the phone between my ear and my shoulder so I could roll up my sleeves; I had no idea what the weather was like, but it was probably warm.

"Her name is Taylor," she went on. "She's a friend of Ashley Player's wife... Actually, her best friend."

Great. Now I had to be nice to this girl.

"Okay," I repeated, though I really didn't want an assistant. It wasn't the worst idea I'd ever heard, but I had zero desire to deal with another person's bullshit in my space.

I could barely deal with my own bullshit.

"I'll let you know what time to expect her."

"Sure. Sometime in the morning would be good." *So I can get this over with.*

"Okay, for sure. I'll tell her."

I forced out a "Thanks," because I knew Courteney was doing this out of the goodness of her heart. My little sister always had a good heart. And she really didn't have to be spending her time on this. On me.

"So..." she said. "Now that the album is done... you must be happy?"

"Yeah."

Actually, I wasn't happy at all. The album had turned out phenomenal, because I would never release anything that was less than phenomenal. But by the end of the project I could barely stand the guys in the band. Plus, now that it was done and I was officially between projects, even if it was only for two days, it put me in a shitty position. No work to bury myself in meant a lot of hours on the clock to think about other shit.

Like the fact that it was Saturday night and there was a listening party for the first couple of singles off the Static Ice Diva's album, pre-release. The party was down in L.A. and I'd been invited, of course, but I wasn't going.

I wondered if Courteney knew that.

Countless people had messaged me about the party over the last few days, casually probing to find out if I was coming without actually asking me if I was coming. I probably should've just turned off my phone, but somehow, I'd always had a hard time doing that. Even if I rarely answered it.

"Well, would you want to celebrate with me and Xander tonight?" Courteney asked. "We could come over. Have a drink out by the pool? It's a

beautiful night.”

“Yeah, it is.” To tell the truth, I hadn’t even looked out a window all day. “I think I’m just gonna turn in early. You know, catch up on some sleep.”

“Oh. Sure. Maybe another time.”

The disappointment in her voice would’ve probably killed me a little if I wasn’t so used to it that I’d become almost numb to it.

“Look, I’ve gotta go. Have a few things to wrap up here for the album release, then I’m going to bed.” Yeah; lying to my sister when she was always trying so damn hard to be nice to me, no matter how I disappointed her, probably made me a special kind of asshole.

“Okay,” she said. “Hey, Cary? I’m proud of you. Another big album done. You should be proud.”

And there it was. My sister’s kindness and love for me was about equal in measure to the guilt I felt every time I talked to her and she expressed that love for me.

I really shouldn’t have answered the phone.

“Thanks, CC,” I said.

“I guess... I’ll text to let you know what time to expect Taylor on Monday. Have a nice weekend, Cary.”

“You, too.”

I hung up, and realized I didn’t even bother asking what her and my best friend were up to this weekend. I never asked. Xander had hooked up with my sister last fall. And I’d accepted it, more or less. They’d been together almost a year now, so what was I gonna do? She was nineteen. It really wasn’t my call.

I’d tried to make it my call. Didn’t work.

Then I basically didn’t talk to either of them for a few months.

I’d let it go, though. There was really nothing I could do about it. But it didn’t mean I wanted to see them, or even picture them, together.

Besides that... hearing about the few people you still loved in this world doing all the normal shit that you used to do when you just couldn’t do it anymore was pretty unbearable. That was one of the things people never seemed to understand.

Just because I chose to be alone didn’t mean I wasn’t lonely.

*Fuck.* I needed to focus on something to stave off the anxiety. I could feel it creeping in around the corners, threatening to black everything else the fuck out. My heart was thudding and my palms were damp. Talking to my

sister always spiked my anxiety.

I glanced at my phone as it vibrated in my hand.

*Front gate.*

I drew a few deep breaths, all the way down into my belly, to try to relax. I checked the time, but Liam was, as usual, perfectly punctual.

I picked up. “Yeah.”

“Good evening, Mr. Clarke. It’s Liam.”

I buzzed him in and headed down to the kitchen. I didn’t see Freddy around, but I topped up the food in his cat bowl. He’d be in and out all night through his kitty doors, and I wasn’t sure how long I’d be.

Then I grabbed my wallet from the studio, set the alarm on the house and stepped out the front door.

I winced a little as the light hurt my head. It wasn’t bright, but it was brighter than in the house, and I’d spent most of the day in the studio with the lights low.

I slipped on my shades even though no one could see me on my front steps. The yard was completely surrounded by thick trees. It was almost eight o’clock and the sun was starting to descend. Courteney was right. It was a beautiful evening, warm and calm.

But I hesitated. I took a moment to check in with myself, to make sure I was okay. To breathe.

Four counts in. Hold for four counts. Four counts out.

There was always time to cancel. I’d cancel on anything, if it meant avoiding a meltdown in public. But I forced myself, one foot in front of the other, down the front steps.

It was approximately sixty steps in total from my front door to the bedroom door at Bliss. That was all. Just sixty steps.

I’d encounter three people on this outing. Three people who knew exactly what was expected of them.

If I thought of it that way, it made it much easier to step out the door.

Three people. Sixty steps.

When I walked around the corner of the garage to the driveway, I found Liam standing next to his silver Cadillac in a neat suit and tie, awaiting me the same way he always did. Patiently.

He knew it wasn’t easy for me to get myself out the door.

And sometimes I changed my mind at the last second. I’d actually gotten out of the car and gone back into the house on several occasions, for no



discernible reason. At least, no reason that he could see.

“Mr. Clarke,” he greeted me. If he was surprised that I hadn’t turned back yet, he didn’t show it. He just opened the rear door for me, like he picked me up like this every day.

In reality, there were months at a time when I didn’t call him for anything.

“Hey, Liam.”

I slid in and he shut the door. No need to ask me where I was going. He already knew.

It was the only place I ever went.

I spent the drive over to West Vancouver focusing on my breathing, trying not to think about anything else. Meditative stuff one of my therapists had taught me long ago. There was no need to think about anything else, really.

The car wasn’t going to crash.

We weren’t going to drive off the bridge.

Nothing bad was going to happen.

*Just breathe.*

But the music from the Static Ice Divas’ album kept playing in the back of my mind, the way it had for so long now, on repeat. And even now I couldn’t help wondering if the songs were really done.

In a way, they were never really done.

But that was the perfectionist in me talking.

When I was on tour, it was different than playing in the studio, recording an album. Playing music live, with a group of musicians I had chemistry with... I’d always liked to take the music to new places, as if the recorded songs were merely a starting point. Try new things. Let it breathe. It was *live* music, and that was what *Alive* was all about. Giving people something they didn’t expect and letting them become part of the live experience. In a way, the music wasn’t what it was until it was performed for that particular audience, and no two shows were ever exactly the same.

Me, Gabe, Xander, Dean... we all liked to perform that way, together.

But that was in the past. When I was actually in a band.

I wasn’t in this band.

This album was out of my hands now, and in a way there was an incredible relief in that; the Static Ice Divas would tour with it now, without me. And divas they truly were. Whatever they did with those songs on tour—

however they rearranged them or if they butchered them or played them note for note—it no longer had anything to do with me. People would say it did. They'd ask me for interviews. They'd credit me when the songs climbed the charts. They'd nominate me for awards, possibly.

But none of that had anything to do with me now.

The music I'd produced was already recorded. It was an expression of a moment in time—or in this case, eight months—and now it was done. At least, it was for me.

That album was the past, and I was looking forward.

The day after tomorrow, I'd start working on the Players' debut album. They'd put together a killer lineup, including my best friend and former bandmate, Xander. The band and their manager, Brody Mason, had chipped away at me for a good six months trying to convince me to produce the album. In the end, when I was able to come up for air and give it fair consideration—when the Ice Divas' album was finally nearing completion—the decision wasn't all that hard.

I had other offers. Plenty of bands, old and new, wanting to work with me, despite my reputation for being... well, difficult to work with. But when it came down to making a choice, it was between the Players and a few other artists I'd worked with before, ones I was, frankly, feeling pretty lukewarm about.

Maybe I just needed something fresh and new.

And there were a lot of reasons to work with the Players.

I'd spent as much time as I could over the last few months listening to the band members' recorded work; everything that Ashley Player, Summer Sorensen, Matt Brohmer and Xander Rush had ever recorded in their musical careers, before they came together as a band. And although the four of them had never collaborated on a project before, they all had something in common: that special something I looked for in a musician. It was a mix of raw talent, hunger, and uniqueness.

Maybe it was the personal “blood, guts and soul” that each of them brought to the music they made.

Whatever it was, even I couldn't quite put my finger on it. It had to be this way; it had to surprise me. Intrigue me. It had to be something I couldn't have come up with myself.

Otherwise, what was the point?

But it was also something I knew I could take hold of as their producer,

shape, direct and elevate to a higher level.

They all had serious writing chops, too, which was a must for me.

With Brody Mason at the helm as their manager, and Trey Jones, who'd just signed them to his label, Brick House Records, they also had the right team behind them.

On Monday, the Players would walk into a studio together for the first time. And while I'd be co-writing and producing the album, I'd also be playing on the album. Various instruments as needed, including guitar. The Players had been searching for a second guitarist ever since the four of them hooked up, and Ashley had told me that he wanted a second lead. But so far, they hadn't found anyone to fit the bill. This was a bonus for me. I didn't always play on the albums I produced, so that was something I was also looking forward to.

It'd been a while since I'd contributed like that, and I knew it would take a lot out of me.

Maybe that's what I was looking forward to the most. Burying myself so deep in a project that everything else ceased to exist for me. I wouldn't say it was my happy place, but it was the place I wanted to be more than anywhere else, which was saying something. I really didn't want much these days.

But I was optimistic—hungry, even—to see what we could all stir up together.

I actually hadn't felt this excited about a new project in a long time, and it was kind of putting me on edge. On edge was a dangerous place for me. A terrifying place. I needed to keep calm and in control.

I didn't do well with out of control.

So, I took control.

As part of our deal, I'd given the Players a space at my recording studio over in Mount Pleasant, Little Black Hole. My staff would take care of them there while they wrote and recorded the album. I'd be working from my home studio, and my staff would facilitate that, too. Virtually.

The members of the Players already knew my... situation. And Xander knew me well. Which meant there would be no need to have to try to explain it to them.

They wouldn't be pressuring me to come down to the studio in person or any of that shit.

I'd work remotely, technology would connect us, and we could focus on what was important—like the music, rather than the “logistical issues and

undue stress” caused by my “eccentricities.”

The Static Ice Divas had been pretty vocal about those. Half the reason the album took so goddamn long. I’d never worked with a group of musicians who whined more about me not joining them in the studio, in person. But I wasn’t exactly the only producer who worked this way. And the Divas lived in fucking Ohio, anyway. They didn’t even want to fly up here to Vancouver to record at Little Black Hole. What was I gonna do, fly to Akron so I could hold their hands, show them how to play their fucking instruments?

That was a bunch of bullshit, and a bunch of “logistical issues and undue stress” that *I* didn’t need.

I didn’t do “in person.”

At least, I usually didn’t.

If people could play by my rules, though... they had a hell of a lot better chance of getting in a room with me.

*Out. In.*

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We pulled up to the mansion in West Vancouver just before eight-thirty. Right on time.

The house stood at the end of a private, gated driveway on an estate lot, on a street in the British Properties where the price tag on each home was a minimum fifteen million. Vancouver was not a cheap place to live. It wasn’t even an affordable place to live, by most accounts. But there was wealthy... and then there was wealthy.

Every driveway along this road was gated and led to an ostentatious mansion. Made the coming and going of expensive cars virtually unnoticeable, so this particular ostentatious mansion didn’t exactly stand out. Not until you were actually inside the house.

Or more specifically, in one of the private rooms.

Many of the homes up here were so large that, gated or not, they were visible from the street. All the better to flaunt one’s wealth, I supposed. But the Bliss mansion, as it was known in certain circles, was less an actual home than a private club.

The house was rendered completely private by a well-placed wall of groomed trees. The lot featured manicured lawns and gardens, a walking

path, a pond and a large pool in back. The driveway ended in a loop in front of the house, with a fountain in the middle.

A couple of luxury cars were parked at the side of the loop, but as usual, no one was in the front yard.

Liam drove us around the loop and pulled off onto the small lane that ran alongside the house. We rolled right up to a door, one of the service entrances, where Liam stopped us and came around to open my door for me.

One of the staff was already waiting for me when Liam walked me up to the door. A man around my age, meticulously groomed, tall and built. He wore a plain, black dress shirt and pants, gleaming shoes. He also wore an earpiece; he'd been talking into it when we pulled up. I'd met him before, many times. He'd probably told me his name. I didn't remember it.

"Good evening, Mr. Clarke." He greeted me, holding out a small, wooden box. I placed my phone into it and he shut the lid. Then he opened the door for me. Liam waited outside while the man in black escorted me into the house, into a hallway that led from the kitchen at the back to a service stairway.

As soon as I was safely inside, Liam would go park the car and wait for me. He never asked questions and I had no idea if he knew what went on inside this house. I never wondered about things like that. Liam was in his late forties, almost old enough to be my dad, and he had a wife and kids at home. I didn't want to have to feel anything about making him come to a place like this.

Once the door was closed, I took off my sunglasses and followed the man in black up the stairs.

The house was beautiful by any standard. A custom built French chateau that looked old but was new, it featured panoramic views over the city, the waters of the Strait of Georgia and the islands beyond. Or so I'd been told on my first visit. I never looked out the windows.

Most of the main areas of the house were bright and airy, lots of open corridors, vaulted ceilings, iron railings and polished stonework.

But the back hallway was dark. Dark cherry paneled wood, black carpet. Amber and gold wall sconces lit the way. The hall at the top of the stairs was wider but just as dark, with the same jagged sconces in a line along the wall. Large, old-looking paintings hung between the sconces. Erotic scenes, each with a similar theme: a centaur clutching a swooning, naked woman; a satyr with a huge erection and a nymph by a stream, her breasts bared to him; an

anthropomorphic wolf on two legs and a woman in chains, fucking. Scenes from some twisted mythology.

It was impossible to tell who were the gods in those paintings—the women or the beasts.

Maybe that was the appeal.

The rooms were widely spaced out, with broad, ornate doors. All closed. I could hear nothing in the silence but the slight swish of clothing and the brush of our shoes on the deep carpet as we walked. Along the way, I saw no one but the man in front of me. I never did.

Privacy and discretion were taken seriously at Bliss. If they weren't, I wouldn't be here.

Three people. Sixty steps.

The man in black opened a door for me, and I walked into the room to find Nicolette waiting. She stood up, and the man behind me closed the door softly, leaving us alone.

“Mr. Clarke.” Nicolette's mouth quirked in the slightest smile. I was pretty sure she was still waiting for the day when I'd tell her to call me Cary. I never did.

I wondered if she was happy to see me.

I felt nothing. Nothing but a dull sense of relief, maybe, that I'd made it here, and that the next couple of hours of my life were now spent.

*Only thirty-five more to go.*

She wore a short, cream-colored dress, tight to her curves, with a bit of cleavage. Sexy, but not over the top. Same way she always dressed when she met with me. But something was wrong.

Different.

Her shoulder length hair was a pale, ashy blonde. It was usually jet-black.

I didn't like it.

It looked fine, but I didn't like the change when I had no control over it.

The club was supposed to know this.

I'd never asked for a woman with jet-black hair, or with any specific physical attributes. It was the *type* of woman I wanted, *needed*, that I'd specified and Bliss had provided. I really didn't give a fuck if she was blonde or brunette or if her hair was green, as long as she looked good. And the new blonde hair looked good.

But I did not like the change without being asked.

“Is everything okay?” she said, her smile vanishing.

“You changed your hair.”

“Oh.” She smoothed her hand over it. “Yes. A while ago. I guess it’s been a while since we’ve...” She faded off. “I didn’t know you didn’t know.” She flashed me a slight, uneasy smile.

I looked away. At least the room was the same as usual.

There were different types of rooms at Bliss; different colors, different moods, different themes. To set the stage, so to speak, if you wanted that.

I wasn’t here to perform.

All I needed was for things to be the same. As I expected them to be.

The first time I came here and they asked me what kind of room I wanted, I told them to put me in a standard room. Just a bedroom. Something comfortable. That was it.

They’d put me in a room just like this one that night, and every other night I’d come here. Dark, velvety furniture. Black satin and burgundy on the bed. No windows. Whatever windows this room had, they were completely covered by wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling drapes in dark jewel tones.

I went to sit down in the black leather chair that faced the one wall that was covered in mirror. Nicolette had laid out a small towel with her tools on the table next to the chair. It was the only proper chair in the room. Unbuckled leather straps dangled from the armrests and the legs like an invitation.

I ignored them as I started tapping my fingers on the armrest in a restless, repetitive rhythm. A rhythm that was so deep in my blood I’d never been able to purge it. It was a song, and it fucking haunted me.

At least, it used to haunt me. It used to jolt me out of the depths of a dream in the middle of the night, soaked in cold sweat.

Now, if I focused on it, it helped to steady me, level me out. It pulled me back from the black that started seeping in around the edges as my equilibrium started to tilt, whenever my heart beat too fast and my fingers started to shake.

Nicolette came over and stood behind me. She didn’t look at my fingers. Her eyes met mine in the mirror.

“I was thinking about coloring my hair black again,” she offered. Maybe trying to understand what was going on in my head. I wasn’t sure why she bothered. “Sometimes I like to change it.”

“It doesn’t matter. It just surprised me.”

She touched the nape of my neck, running her fingertips gently through

the waves of my hair, sending a little shiver down my spine. “How would you like it today?”

I looked at my reflection, considering that. At the tired-looking eyes that stared back at me. At the face I hardly recognized anymore, though I really didn't look all that different from the man I used to be.

*Before. After.*

Maybe I just didn't look often enough to remain that well-acquainted with myself.

My blondish-brown hair, darker underneath, used to be all sun-streaked waves. Surfer-boy blonde. It didn't see enough sun to be golden anymore. It was getting long again, the waves spilling over my forehead. Last summer, I tied it back in a knot so I didn't have to deal with it, but it wasn't long enough for that right now. In a few weeks it would start to bug me; it was either long or short in summer. Like everything else in my life, I couldn't handle in-between.

“Just cut it off,” I said.

“Sure.” I watched Nicolette, if that was even her name, run her fingertips gently through the hair on top of my head. “I can leave some on top, so you can wear it forward, like an angsty bad boy.” She smiled a little. “Or smooth it back when you're feeling slick.”

I didn't smile back. It was probably nice that she felt comfortable enough to tease me, though. At least I didn't scare her. Nicolette was maybe one of the few people who didn't actually think I was crazy. Or if she did... she didn't show it.

“Whatever you think will look good,” I said. Really, not many people would ever see it anyway. Pretty sure Liam and my sister wouldn't care what I did with my hair. These days, I really had no one to impress. I could've just shaved it off at home with my eyes closed, and who would care?

But vanity was a weird thing. Made you want to still be that person who used to be wanted, that person people thought you were, even though you weren't that person anymore. Even when you knew you never really were. Even when you just wanted to be alone.

Maybe coming here was part of that. Part of trying to be normal, when I never really had been.

Nicolette draped a towel around my shoulders. She sprayed my hair down with a water bottle, then set about cutting my hair, and she didn't take too long. She didn't fuss to make it perfect. She didn't put in a bunch of hair



products and make a show of it.

She knew I didn't really care, so she didn't waste my time with any of that.

The haircut was just a perk of seeing her. She'd mentioned it once, that she used to be a hairdresser, and she'd offered to cut my hair. I wasn't sure if that was a fetish for some people. Or if it was a fetish for her. But she always did a good job.

By the time she finished, I'd tapped my way through the song so many times that my fingertips were numb.

"What do you think?" She peeled the towel away and moved so she wasn't blocking my view of the mirror. She picked up a hand mirror from the table and held it behind my head so I could see the back.

"Good. Maybe I'll let it grow out now. By next summer, it'll be long enough I can just tie it back again."

She set the mirror carefully on the table. "So, then... you won't be back until then?"

"I'll be back."

I stood up and turned to face her, and when my gaze locked with hers, I could see it in her eyes.

Excitement.

I still felt numb. But there were certain... patterns of behavior... that would get me there. And Nicolette knew them all.

She smoothed her hands gently down the front of her dress, her eyes shining with anticipation. "Do you want me to change?"

"No. What you're wearing is fine."

"Can I get you anything first?"

She meant wine. Bourbon. Pills.

She always offered.

But I never needed any of that shit anymore.

She probably also meant toys. Restraints. Ridiculous, custom made furniture designed for fucking in every imaginable position.

But I didn't need any of that shit, either.

I just needed things to be the same.

"No," I said. "Just get down on your knees."

And as usual, she did.

## Chapter Two

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**Taylor**

## Sparks

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**O**n Monday morning, right on time, I walked up to the address Courteney Clarke had given me and stopped in front of the big, iron gate. Her brother lived in Shaughnessy, where the lush, trim hedges and massive trees gave way to even more massive homes, most of them tucked up gated driveways. Cary Clarke's house was one of the ones you couldn't even see from the road.

I plucked my earbuds out, silencing Metallica. It was quiet, a lawn mower buzzing away in the distance. The street meandered through the residential neighborhood so it wasn't really a direct route to anywhere, which meant zero traffic.

Perfect location for a former-rock-star-turned-recluse to hide out.

There was a security panel with a speaker on the stone pillar at one end of the gate. I pressed the buzzer, but no one answered.

Courteney had warned me that would happen.

I tried it again anyway. I looked around for a security camera while I waited, but I didn't see any.

I wondered if I was being watched.

I wondered, fleetingly, what Cary Clarke would think of me.

I hadn't removed my facial piercing for this "job" and I didn't cover up my tattoos. Or my hair. Six months ago, I'd hit a personal low when I was fired by my horrendous boss and cheated on by my horrendous boyfriend, a mere four days before Christmas, because happy holidays to me—and I'd vowed right then and there to make some changes. Reinvent myself.

And I had. More or less.

I had indeed pierced something—my eyebrow. I'd gotten a new tattoo—*Gimme Shelter*, up my inner arm. And I'd died my hair—bright pink. It was now more of a soft, cotton candy pink, and I loved it.

But I still hadn't quite started over.

I'd be turning thirty at the end of this year, and I was definitely having

some kind of mini life crisis.

In my almost three decades on the planet, I'd suffered a crazy family, some crazy-ass boyfriends and some seriously psycho bosses. At this point, I was pretty fucking done with crazy people.

And yet, here I stood.

According to the world at large Cary Clarke was, in a word, crazy.

And I was about to trespass on his property.

Brilliant.

After several minutes of stalling, asking myself if I was really going to do this, I used the remote opener Courteney had given me to open the gate.

It clicked and breezed slowly open.

I glanced behind me, but there was no one on the street. No one could possibly see me from the other yards or from a window anywhere through all the trees. I still felt like a creeper as I stepped through the gate. I closed it behind me like a considerate intruder, waiting until it locked into place. Then I looked up toward the house. I could only see the closed three-car garage from where I was standing.

I walked up the driveway, slowly. There were palm trees in the yard. Two of them, one standing to either side of the driveway.

When I moved to Vancouver at age thirteen from the virtual desert outside Osoyoos, I'd decided that one day, when I had my own place, I'd have a palm tree in my front yard. There weren't all that many palm trees in Vancouver; I always figured people who planted them here were optimistic types.

Over the years, I'd grown less optimistic about such things as owning real estate in Vancouver. Especially real estate of this kind.

Cary Clarke's house was pretty much a mansion. Gorgeous, modern, built out of taupe stone in a way that looked timeless. The surrounding yard was green and lush, in full-bloom. There were ivy vines climbing up the walls. And big windows along the front of the house that I couldn't see into; curtains lined the inside.

I heard the tinkle of a little bell and something furry darted out of the bushes. A silvery-white cat trotted over to me, the bell on his collar tinkling. The cat sniffed the hand I offered, then rubbed against my ankle.

"Well, hello. Aren't you friendly?"

I bent down to rub the cat's chin and furry little cheeks and it purred loudly. I loved animals, cats included. I'd volunteered at an animal shelter a

couple of days a week for many years, just to get my fix. I would've gotten my own pet—or a few—if only I was home more. I was relieved, though, that when I'd asked Courteney if her brother had any killer guard dogs I should know about, she'd assured me that he had only a cat.

Turned out, it was fluffy and adorable, with big green eyes that gazed at me with curiosity and what I could only describe as affection.

“Whoa, won you over fast.”

The cat rubbed against my leg again, putting its whole, furry body into it, purring. I took a peek at the little tag on its collar. *Freddy*.

“Well, Freddy, lead the way.”

I continued up the driveway and the cat didn't lead the way, but he did follow me. I climbed the steps to the front door and rang the bell. I waited a few minutes, but no one answered.

Then I tried again.

While I waited, I watched Freddy the cat. He was rubbing himself on the corner of the house, the wall of the garage, and kept peeking back at me. Then he wandered away around the front of the garage.

I looked up at the house. There was no sound from inside. But I knew the homeowner was inside, because Courteney assured me he would be.

Apparently, he never went anywhere else.

So I headed around the front of the garage, the way the cat had gone. I didn't see him, but there was only one place he could've disappeared so fast. I went that way and peeked around the side of the house. There was Freddy, wandering up the path. There was a gate to the backyard standing open and the cat walked through it.

I followed.

We emerged into the beautiful oasis of the backyard. There was a high fence and trees around the perimeter, more trees and greenery along the back of the house, gardens off to the far side. And right in front of me, taking up most of the yard, a stone-paved patio flowed into a gorgeous swimming pool that was large enough to swim laps in.

Beyond the pool, in the back corner of the yard, there was a guesthouse. It looked similar to the main house, just small, with French doors that would open right onto the path around the pool.

I followed Freddy; the path in front of us curved through the trees toward the house, where a set of French doors stood closed. There was no curtain on the inside, but it was dark in there, the sun was bright out here, and I couldn't

see in. And I wasn't about to glue my nose to the glass like some creepy Peeping Jane.

Further along the house, I could see another set of doors, but the path that way was blocked off by a garden bench. Freddy slipped right past the bench, headed for those doors. I watched him... and noticed the little panel on the bottom of one of the doors.

A kitty door.

"Oh, shit. Wait, wait!" I called after him, and Freddy stopped with a jolt. I scrambled around the bench as he rubbed lovingly against a tree. "Don't go in yet. I need you, little guy." I reached out, and he came over to rub his cheek on my fingers. Thank God he was so friendly. "Just... a sec..." I dug in my purse for my pen and pad of paper, and quickly jotted out a note. "Wait... just... one more sec..." I tore the paper off and folded it, squatting down in front of the cat.

I showed him the paper. He sniffed it.

"You're gonna take this inside for me, okay?"

I reached to tuck it under his collar, and his whole back twitched; he shook his head and tried to eject the note. I tucked it in tighter and he just blinked at me.

"Wow. You're a patient one. Okay, go on in your kitty door."

He just stared at me.

"Kitty door. Inside." I pointed at the door, then actually poked it, swinging it open an inch.

The cat, being a cat, took his time. He took the long route all the way back around the bench, rubbing against a tree on his way, then finally squeezed through the door.

Well. That was either brilliant or stupid.

For all I knew, he'd go have a cat nap now and that note would be tucked under his collar for days.

I went back out to the pool area and sat down on one of the lounge chairs. Everything looked beautiful, but very untouched. The pool was immaculately clean, but I wondered if anyone even used it.

The words *recluse*, *workaholic* and *shut-in* had all been tossed around in my vicinity—as descriptors of Courteney Clarke's brother—late at night when people were drunk and they got loose lipped about such things. And yes, words like *crazy* were tossed around, too.

If anyone ever tried to tell you that men didn't gossip as much as women

did, they were fucking full of it, because I'd never heard anyone gossip like a bunch of male rock stars pounding whiskey shots at three a.m..

My best friend, Danica, had married a rock star—Ashley Player—six months ago. And Ash's bandmate, Xander, was Cary Clarke's best friend and former bandmate. I supposed if anyone had the goods on Cary, it was Xander. I never heard Xander use any of those labels to describe Cary; he never said much about Cary at all. But he certainly didn't deny it when everyone else said those things.

And all Courteney had said about him was *He's very private and He doesn't go out much.*

I'd still taken this meeting with him, at her request, because frankly, I liked her. She was friends with Danica, and she and I had become friendly, socially. And yes, maybe there was just a dash of morbid curiosity involved.

Plus, I needed the work. Courteney had offered me a week-long contract—to meet with her brother, then meet with her to help her vet, interview and hire an assistant for him—a contract that would nicely bridge the gap between the temp contract I'd just ended and whatever gig I took next.

As I waited by her brother's pool, I wondered what he was really like. And yes, I wondered if he was really crazy.

I knew what he looked like, more or less. I'd seen him in music videos years ago, when his band was big. I remembered, more or less, the image of this beautiful guy playing guitar, with wavy, sun-streaked hair. And I may have Googled him over the weekend, after his sister asked me, over beers, to meet with him.

I saw pictures.

But those pictures were all old. More than five years old. So I really wasn't sure what I was expecting now.

For some reason, I kept imagining some washed-up loser who'd embalmed himself in alcohol, cologne and ego. I pictured him with his hair slicked back in a bad ponytail, maybe going slightly bald, wearing a Hugh Hefner style satin robe, probably open. Maybe with no shirt and a slight beer belly, some tacky jewelry, the stink of last night's whiskey binge emanating from his pores?

The type of rich person whose life had diverged so far from other human beings' reality that when he spoke to you he looked somewhere above your head and definitely didn't listen to what you had to say. I'd known rich people like that. I'd worked for them.

I still wasn't sure I really knew how to talk to them.

I mean, anything I had to say... would it make a difference?

Would he just shut the door in my face?

Would he even open the door?

I wondered what he'd think, when he opened his door and found this random pink-haired stranger lounging by his pool.

I also wondered if I cared.

In my mind, we were all equal beings, just trying to get by on this strange little planet. Some people just didn't see it that way, but that was on them. I'd never seen CEOs, executives, rich trophy wives, or any of the other people I'd worked for as "above" me. I paid them the respect they were due when they were paying my salary, but I'd worked for enough wealthy and so-called powerful people to know that they weren't any better than me just because they had status and power.

I felt the same way about all the rock stars I'd met since my best friend hooked up with one.

All of the above meant that I'd brought "myself" to this meeting. I didn't do one extra thing to look like anything I wasn't. I didn't drape myself in designer clothes or accessories that I could barely afford so I could "look the part." I wore a typical Taylor outfit: a black dress. This one was a soft, summery maxi dress, sleeveless, accessorized with a long necklace with a silver skull-and-crossbones on it.

And now, it had cat fur all over it.

Oh well.

I was maybe a little nervous, because I liked Courteney, and that meant I wanted this to go well. I wanted her brother not to hate me and say bad things about me to Courteney. But I hated that.

I hated needing anything from someone who had the power to shit on me just because he could. I'd sworn to myself—while tearing wax strips off a woman's butt a few days ago—that I'd never, ever compromise my dignity for a paycheck again. There was nothing wrong with tearing wax strips off someone's butt for money, of course—if you were a professional aesthetician.

I, however, was not one.

And I was not some inexperienced wannabe assistant who'd grovel outside a rock star's mansion all day long, just waiting on him to deign to grace me with his presence only to treat me like garbage. No matter who he



was related to.

I glanced over at the house, at those closed French doors that would open onto the path.

Nothing.

No sign of Cary Clarke.

I glanced at the time on my phone and wondered how much of my day I would sacrifice to this. For Courteney. And of course, for the money she was paying me.

I gazed at the beautiful, neglected pool, just a few feet away.

Then I slipped off my sandals and walked over to the edge. I dipped my left foot right in the warmish water, up to the ankle. I wiggled my toes around, then pulled my foot back out.

Man, if I lived here, I'd be in that pool every day of summer.

I started to turn back to the house when the French doors cracked open.

And he appeared.

*Finally.*

I walked right over to meet him and stopped in the middle of the path.

He didn't step outside, though. He just stood there on the threshold, looking at me strangely. Not angrily or rudely or anything. Just... strangely. Like he had no idea what to make of me, standing here in his backyard. If I'd ever felt like a stalker in my life—I really hadn't, other than this—yeah, this moment was it.

“Hi,” I said. “My name is Taylor. Courteney sent me.”

Absolutely brilliant, considering that was pretty much the same thing I wrote on the note, and evidently, he read it.

He just stared at me. And he definitely looked nothing like what I'd pictured.

He did not look like a loser.

He looked like a guy who, if I saw him in line at the grocery store or something, I'd stare at him while pretending to read a trashy magazine, scan for a wedding ring, and try to figure out how I could “accidentally” pack his bread into my bag and then slip him my phone number while we were laughing about it.

He wasn't laughing now. Or even smiling.

He looked me over, slowly, and I did the same to him. Quickly.

He had to be closer to my age than his teenage sister's, and he definitely wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I realized I hadn't even wondered, until this

moment, if anyone might be in the house with him. Or how old he was. Or if he might actually be perfectly healthy and sane.

He didn't look insane, but really, what did an insane person look like?

He looked fit. Definitely no beer belly.

No sleazy robe, either.

He wore a gray T-shirt that was kind of wrinkled, with worn gray jeans. A simple, brown leather bracelet. His hair was light brown, kind of blonde, but not as sun-streaked as I remembered it. It was cut short around the back and a little longer over his forehead, very modern rock star, and kind of messy, like he didn't bother doing anything with it when he got out of bed this morning.

Definitely hadn't done anything extra to prepare for this meeting. Less than I had, even.

He had a strong jawline, kind of a small nose, and very nice lips. And slightly dark circles under his gorgeous eyes. They were a light hazel color, like his sister's. They met mine again and held there.

When he said absolutely nothing, I asked, "Are you Cary?"

He was, I was pretty sure. Unless he had a twin or something. He looked pretty much like all his photos.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm Cary."

"Courteney asked me to come talk to you today. Is this a good time?"

He just stood there, and he didn't answer me.

And I wondered... *Was* there something wrong with this guy? Like did he have some kind of brain damage from too many rock star drug binges?

Was he really a shut-in? Was this as close as he would get to stepping outside his door?

Did he really not use his gorgeous pool?

And if he was a shut-in... when was the last time he'd seen a woman who wasn't his sister? Not that it was any of my business, but the way he was looking at me made me wonder.

It wasn't a blank stare. He was definitely thinking... something. And for a long, uncomfortable moment, I was one-hundred-percent sure that he was about to either A) tell me to leave, or B) shut the door in my face without even answering me.

Then he blinked, and his expression changed. That unnerving intensity in his eyes broke. His focus softened and he glanced down at my feet.

"Yeah," he said, finally. "Come in."

“Thank you.”

He turned and walked back into the house, leaving me standing there. I stepped inside and let my eyes adjust. We were in a living room and there were no lights turned on. It was kind of dim, the curtains on the windows on either side of the French doors filtering the daylight.

I closed the door behind myself and followed him. He crossed the room and sat down in an armchair kind of like it was his throne, but he didn't look relaxed. He pointed at the couch next to him.

I sat down in the middle of the couch and laid my purse on the coffee table in front of me. He looked at it. He looked at my feet. He looked at my tattoos. The *Gimme Shelter* tattoo up my inner right arm, the flower tattoo on my left wrist.

I glanced around the room. It was large and seemed professionally decorated. Danica, who was an interior decorator, would definitely approve. Everything was in tones of cream, some charcoal-gray, and looked expensive. The cozy sitting area was dominated by the huge couch I was sitting on. There was a giant flatscreen TV across from it; had to be an eighty-inch screen, at least.

But it all felt very untouched, like no one actually used this room.

I looked at Courteney's brother. He was just sitting there, staring at me.

“You have a beautiful house,” I said.

And in response, he said, “Is your foot wet?”

I looked down at my foot. It did look wet. “I dipped it in the pool,” I admitted. “I left my shoes out there, too.” I wiggled my bare toes on the carpet as he scrutinized them.

Then he met my eyes again. He said nothing.

*Shit.* What if he was a germaphobe or something? I glanced down. His feet were bare, too, but he lived here.

“Should I go get them?” I asked.

“No.”

I tried to smile a little. And I decided that he looked different from his photos. In pretty much all the photos I'd seen of him online, he was smiling. Even the ones where he wasn't smiling, his eyes were smiling.

He wasn't smiling now, with any part of him.

“So, your sister asked me if I would meet with you, to chat a little bit about how an assistant might be of use to you. She explained this to you, I guess?”

“She did.”

“Great. Well, I’ve been an executive assistant for ten years.” God, had it been that long? “I’ve worked in many different environments, different industries, for all types of employers, so hopefully I can help with this. I haven’t worked in the music industry, but—”

“Does that say ‘Gimme Shelter’?”

He’d interrupted me so suddenly, it took me a moment to process. I lifted my right arm a little, showing my tattoo. The one he was now staring at. “Yes. It does.”

He met my eyes again. I waited, but he didn’t say anything else.

I put my arm down.

“So... I thought maybe you could tell me a bit about your workday,” I said. “Since I’m not totally familiar with what you do.”

He said nothing.

“Uh, from what I understand, you have a home studio here that you work out of?”

“Yes.”

“And you produce albums for other artists from here?”

“Yes.”

“So, is most of your day spent working on the actual music? Or is there much paperwork involved? Do you have virtual meetings, conference calls, that kind of thing?”

“Yes.”

Holy God. They were men of few words... and then there was this man.

“How much of your time would you say is spent doing redundant administrative tasks, like answering phone calls and emails and filling out paperwork?”

“I don’t answer phone calls. I rarely answer emails. Paperwork... usually goes to my accountant or the lawyers or whoever.”

“Would you like someone to answer the phone for you? Answer your emails?”

“The people on the other end of the phone calls and emails might appreciate it.”

Hmm. Clever.

He still didn’t smile, though.

“Would it be helpful to you to have someone handle your personal errands?” I asked him. “Groceries, dry cleaning, post office...?”

“My housekeeper gets the groceries. I don’t need dry cleaning. And the staff over at my recording studio handle any shipping and mail.”

“Right.” I knew he owned a recording studio over in Mount Pleasant. Danica told me, even before Courteney mentioned it; she was doing some interior decorating there this week, getting things comfy for the Players as they settled in. “Little Black Hole,” I said, remembering the name of the studio.

He said nothing. I supposed there wasn’t really a question in that, though. And he hardly seemed like the type to carry a conversation, so apparently this was all on me.

Courteney hadn’t mentioned that he had a housekeeper, but it was reassuring to hear it, somehow. Presumably that meant he saw another human being on some sort of regular basis, even if he never left the house.

“How about scheduling?” I asked him. “Time management? Would it help you to have someone keeping you organized, on task, on deadline, anything like that?”

“I’ve never had that before. And things manage to get done.”

“When you think about having an assistant work with you, what do you picture?”

“I have no idea.”

I considered that. I was pretty used to employers who knew exactly what they wanted out of an assistant. Usually, someone they could give orders to all day, who’d do whatever they needed at any moment of the day—or night. But this man didn’t seem to have any preconceived ideas, or even any desire, particularly, to have an assistant at his beck and call.

At least, he wasn’t expressing any desire as we sat here talking.

“Can you hear the buzzer on your front gate,” I asked him, curious, “when you’re working in the studio?”

“The buzzer goes to my phone.”

Right. The phone he never answered.

“How about the doorbell?”

“The studio is soundproofed.”

Interesting. I wondered if he had any plan of meeting with me at all. Or if he’d forgotten about our meeting.

If I didn’t sneak that note in to him with his cat... would he have completely blown this meeting off?

I studied him as he studied me. He was so... still. Totally silent. I could

see his chest move a little, like he was taking slow, deep breaths. But he didn't even blink for a long moment.

Was he a ghost or something? Because that would explain a lot.

"So... right now you're working on the Players' album, right?"

"Yes."

"Are you working on anything else?"

"No."

"Do you ever work on more than one project at a time?"

"Sometimes they overlap a bit, but I try to avoid that."

"Why?"

He didn't answer that. Just stared at me.

I almost moved on to something else, but then he said, "Because I dive pretty deep when I'm on a project. That level of focus... it's hard to break."

"So, it's pretty intense for you when you're working on an album?"

"Yes."

"Does it get any easier, now that you've done it for so long?"

"It's never easy."

"Do you work long hours in a typical day?"

"Yes."

"Are you looking forward to this project?"

He took a moment to answer that one. "I haven't worked with Xander in a while, so that should be interesting."

"Do you enjoy what you do?"

"Most of the time."

"How long will the album take?"

"Maybe six months. That's the timeline outlined in the contract, but that can always change. Could take a week. Could take the rest of my life."

Huh. Interesting. "So what happens when it's done? You move on to the next one right away?"

"Yes."

"Do you do interviews or anything to promote the album?"

"I usually issue a statement."

"Do you work with a publicist on that?"

"Yeah. The band manager will hook me up with that."

"Brody Mason?"

"That's him."

"I know Brody, a little," I told him. "I know everyone in the band, too. I

should probably mention that my best friend is Ashley Player's wife."

"That's what Courteney said."

Right. I wondered what else his sister might have told him about me, if anything.

"So... then the band goes on tour? And as the album producer, do you have anything else to do with the promotion of the album or the tour?"

"There's usually some kind of launch party for the album, maybe a listening party. There might even be a few in different cities. It varies. A producer would probably be a part of that. And then yeah, they'll be touring. But none of that's got anything to do with me."

"You don't go to those parties, or to the shows?"

"No."

"Never?"

He tapped the fingers of his left hand a few times on the arm of his chair. I glanced at his hand. But then he gripped the chair and his fingers stopped moving. "There was a party for the album I just finished producing. An early listening party. I thought about going."

"But you didn't go?"

"It was down in L.A., and I'm here."

"Will the Players have a party here when their album comes out? The record company is here too, right?"

He didn't answer that right away. Maybe because he knew that I could ask Ash these things and get answers, so he couldn't bullshit me.

I wondered if he was considering bullshitting me.

"That's definitely Brody's style," he said.

"Will you go to that party?"

His fingers started tapping on the arm of his chair again. And this time, they didn't stop.

"I don't know."

I glanced at his fingers. They weren't just tapping. There was a rhythm to it. A repetitive rhythm.

He seemed uncomfortable sitting here, in his living room. He'd seemed uncomfortable the entire time we spoke. Or maybe he was uncomfortable *with me* in his home. His social cues, though perhaps a little rusty, were incredibly clear. I could *feel* that he wanted this to be over with.

"Would you like to have an assistant?" I asked him.

"I've never had one for long, or one that worked out."

“Having a good one could provide you with a lot of support. Take care of the things you don’t want to do, to free you up to focus on the things you most want to spend your time on. Like music.”

“Then I guess that could be good.”

“If you don’t mind me saying, you don’t seem all that interested in the idea.”

“Then why are you in my living room right now.”

He said that like a statement, rather than a question. Like my presence here was evidence that he was at least marginally interested.

Maybe it was. He definitely didn’t have to let me in here, or even come to the door.

Either way, he wanted this conversation to be over with, I was pretty sure.

It was pretty clear that he needed assistance of some kind. But I really wasn’t sure what that should entail.

If he really spent all his time alone in this giant house, when he should’ve been going to album release parties... more than anything, he probably needed a therapist.

Did he have a therapist?

I tried to find out without directly asking.

“Do you have anyone else you work with regularly?” I asked him. “A co-worker? A mentor?”

“I like to be alone.”

Right. And that was my clear-as-hell cue to get the fuck out.

I wasn’t quite sure why I didn’t just get up and leave.

He hadn’t exactly been rude or mean to me or anything, but so what?

He wasn’t exactly ugly either, but again, so what? I’d been fooled by a handsome face before, and it was not a trend I wanted to carry forward with me into my thirties.

Anyway, handsome on the outside had zero to do with what lay inside. I was grown-up enough to know that by now.

Just because he was nice to look at and his sister seemed to give a damn about him, it didn’t mean I should waste my time on someone who hadn’t even earned it yet. That much, I knew for sure.

“Well, thank you for entertaining this,” I said, trying to politely wrap things up. Maybe after I got out of here and we were no longer staring at each other, I’d be able to make sense of this and give Courteney my report. Right now, I really wasn’t sure what the fuck I was gonna tell her. “It seems to



mean a lot to your sister.” *Even if it means nothing to you.*

I saw the slow rise and fall of his chest as he took a deep breath. His fingers tapped their restless, repetitive rhythm on the arm of his chair.

“My sister thinks I need... people. She doesn’t understand why I work alone.” His eyes held mine. “I prefer to be alone.”

“Do you?”

He studied me for a moment, and his gaze flickered down my arm. He looked at my *Gimme Shelter* tattoo again.

Then his eyes met mine. “Do you like people?” he asked me. And I realized it was the only thing he’d asked me.

“Sometimes,” I said, honestly. “Sometimes not. But I still like to be around them more than I like to be alone.”

## Chapter Three

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**Cary**

## Paint It Black

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I stared at Taylor, whose last name I didn't even know. This pink-haired girl I'd just met, who sent a note into my house via my cat and took her shoes off in my yard to dip her foot in my pool.

This girl who looked and smelled like cotton candy. This girl who was now curling her bare toes into my carpet, her toenails and fingernails painted in glittery nail polish, every one of them a different color. This girl who wore a necklace with a skull-and-crossbones pendant on it and a bandage on her arm with Mickey and Minnie Mouse kissing on it. This girl who only sometimes liked people.

She had round eyes that alternated between way too wide open and narrowing into curves that crinkled with soft smile lines at the corners, even when she wasn't smiling.

She looked way too comfortable sitting in my living room.

I was not.

*I like to be alone.*

How many times did I need to repeat it?

"I can't handle a lot of people in my life," I tried again, since she seemed to be waiting for me to say something. Was that clear enough for her?

Never seemed to be clear enough for my sister.

"Okay," she said, seeming to think it over, like it was complicated, when it was not. "How about one?"

*As long as it's not you.*

I took a deep, slow breath.

I needed her out of my house. Five minutes ago.

But she was still sitting there, still waiting for me to say more as I tapped out a song—the song—with my fingers without even thinking about it. Sometimes I just drummed out the beat. Sometimes my fingers ghosted actual chords. It just happened that way. The music came when I was agitated. When I wanted to escape. When I needed to focus so the world

didn't turn black.

I needed to know why she had that tattoo on her arm.

I needed to be working in my studio right now, alone. But here I was.

With this woman, staring at me.

I'd gone through the motions of this meeting for my sister. I'd given it more time than it was worth, probably. I didn't even want to let this stranger into my house, but I did. And I'd taken my time deciding.

*Out. In.*

If it wasn't for the tattoo, I might've shut the door in her face. The anxiety had started creeping in the moment I saw her in my backyard. The moment I saw her face. The moment her eyes met mine and she saw *me*.

And she was still waiting.

"If it was the right person," I said, as neutrally as I could without being a total dick about it. "Maybe."

"Well, then... maybe we can find you the right one."

*Not you.*

When I said nothing, she went on. "I can get to work on it with Courteney and let you know what we find."

"Sure. Look, I have work to do."

"Of course." Her round eyes widened. They were a deep, layered turquoise like miles-deep equatorial waters. The graveyards of ancient secrets, where the wreckage of men lay, drowned.

Bermuda Triangle eyes.

She got to her feet, smoothing her hair to the side of her face. She wore a bunch of rings on her fingers, and long, turquoise feather earrings that matched her eyes. She slipped her pink suede purse with the long fringe onto her shoulder. It looked like it was older than she was. Which made me wonder her age. And why nothing she wore matched any other thing she wore, so that it was harder to make sense of her.

And why she was so comfortable here, in my living room, when no one else was.

*Time to go.*

She half-smiled and turned to head to the door.

I followed her at a distance, so I didn't smell that cotton candy smell coming off her. The slight waves of her shoulder-length hair looked soft, like wisps of cloud, not bleach-dry. Like she spent more money on her hair color than her entire outfit. There was a tag sticking out of her bra, and it bugged

me. I wanted to tuck it back in for her. I could see the pale tan lines crisscrossing her skin under the low back of her dress, where she'd worn something strappy and skimpy in the sun, and I wanted to know what it was.

I wanted to see her in it.

She wasn't thin, but she wasn't heavy. She was curvy. She probably turned the heads of guys who thought they preferred skinnier girls, who thought she wasn't their type, who thought they hated skull jewelry and tattoos.

And it had probably always been that way.

At school, she was the unpopular girl. The one all the popular boys secretly beat off to.

And backstage she'd be the one pissing off the tall, leggy models when the rock stars and the roadies all rubbernecked at her. Because she didn't even notice. She was just there to get her T-shirt signed.

"Thank you for meeting with me," she said as she opened the door and stepped outside. When she realized I'd stopped, she stopped and turned to look up at me. She probably wasn't even five-and-a-half feet, the difference between us exaggerated because I was standing on the raised threshold.

Her shipwreck eyes met mine. She had arched, light-brown eyebrows, maybe the color of her natural hair. But her eyebrow piercing was distracting. Her tattoos were distracting. (*Gimme Shelter*. Why?) Her puffy lips were distracting. The jiggle of cleavage at the slight dip in the front of her dress was distracting. I didn't want to look into her eyes but I didn't want to look anywhere else.

*Go. Stay.*

When I said nothing, which was my way of saying we were done here, she seemed to hesitate to leave. "You're not a ghost, are you?" She gave me a tiny smile.

*I wish. Wouldn't that be easier.*

Shit, was I really this much of a freak?

As she stared at me, it occurred to me that in the past five years, I'd had very few women look at me, and me at them.

My sister. My mom, when I could stand to be around her. Rose, the old lady who cleaned my house.

Nicolette.

A few of my sister's friends who came around when she was here.

That was pretty much it.

Five. Years.

I forced myself to extend my hand. My wrist felt soft, like it might bend if she gripped me too hard. She looked at it, like she could tell.

My heart was beating way too fast.

When she slipped her hand into mine, I gave her a slight squeeze to prove to myself that I could touch someone beautiful who I wasn't paying to allow it, and not freak out.

"Real," I said.

Her eyes locked on mine again as I held her soft hand, and the hairs up the back of my neck stood up. The prickle travelled right around my scalp as her pupils dilated, like whirlpools opening up to suck me in. I pulled my hand back.

Hers dangled in the air between us for a moment too long.

"I'll talk to your sister," she said, her voice softer and huskier than before as she lowered her hand. "I can't promise anything, since I've never really done this before. But I'll do what I can to find you a great assistant."

"Promises don't mean anything."

She adjusted the purse on her shoulder and the tattoo on her inner arm flashed. That black ink in bold, gothic letters, etched into the petal-soft skin.

*Gimme Shelter*

When she looked away, briefly, my eyes traced the round curves of her face.

*Ask her.*

Her eyes skipped back to mine again and I took a slight step back, slipping my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

"I should probably be honest with you," she said, "and admit that I may fail. But I will try."

"It doesn't matter."

She cocked her head a little, like she was trying to make sense of that comment. "Did you ever set out to do something feeling like you'll probably fail?"

"Yeah. That's pretty much where panic attacks come from."

The slight smile on her face snuffed out, like a dark tide had washed in.

I had that effect on people.

"You have panic attacks?"

"I used to."

I could see her thinking. Considering if she should ask me about that.

Why did I say it? What did it mean?

Who offers up that kind of information so abruptly?

*This guy.*

“What does it feel like?” she asked softly.

“Like you’re out of control. When it’s really bad, it feels like you’re dying.”

We just stood there, at the threshold, staring at each other. Me inside my living room and her right outside. I didn’t step outside with her.

I wanted to. I wouldn’t.

*Out. In.*

I was at war with myself. I felt like I was at war with her, when I wasn’t. I was still at war with the world, a world that no longer wanted to be at war with me.

But I couldn’t stop fighting.

*Go. Stay.*

She didn’t say anything else. But she didn’t turn to leave.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That sounds like an awful thing to go through.”

*Ask her.*

“Why do you have that tattoo on your arm?”

She looked down at it, lifting her arm a bit to expose it again. “Uh, yeah, that wasn’t so smart, in retrospect.” She looked up at me. “Do you have any tattoos?”

“No.”

“Well, here’s a pro tip. If anyone ever tells you it’s okay to get a tattoo on that part of your arm, they’re lying through their ass. It hurts like a bitch.”

“I meant, why ‘Gimme Shelter’?”

“Oh.” She dropped her arm. “Well... I got kinda screwed over a few times recently. I won’t bore you with it.”

*Please, bore me with it.*

*Please leave.*

“Uh, I guess it’s kinda my plea to the universe right now,” she went on. “For mercy, kindness. You know, shelter. And besides, it’s my favorite Rolling Stones song.”

“I thought everyone’s favorite Rolling Stones song was ‘Paint It Black.’”

“Not mine.”

My fingers twitched in my pocket, trying to tap out that restless rhythm. I dug my fingers into my thigh to stop it.

When I said nothing, she said, “So, thank you for your time... Should I call you Mr. Clarke?”

“Cary.”

“Okay. Cary. Have a nice day.”

She dipped her head as she turned to step away, but then she glanced at me one last time like she couldn’t help it.

I watched her walk away, her dress and the purse with the long pink fringe swishing against her legs. Curves. She was all curves.

I watched as she bent to get her shoes by the pool. Gold leather sandals that didn’t really go with anything else she was wearing. She sat on the edge of one of my lounge chairs to put them on. I was still standing in the open door, staring. She didn’t seem to realize it. Which was why I kept doing it.

Freddy wandered out of the trees and over to her, harassing her for attention while she did up her shoes. She spent a good two minutes rubbing his chin with her fingertips as he twitched his tail in pleasure. Then he flopped down on his side on the patio at her feet. She ruffled the thick hair on his stomach for a moment, until he got frisky and started attacking her hand, gently, and she got up.

She waved goodbye to him with her fingers, and he rolled up to sit on his butt and watch her go. He sat there for a long moment after she disappeared from view. I knew she was out of his earshot when he relaxed his ears.

Then he turned his head, and the moment he saw me he popped to his feet and lifted his back, his tail, and drifted toward me.

“Lemme guess,” I said. “You want food.”

He quickened his pace, his eyes opening like saucers at his favorite word. *Food*. As he trotted into the house, I shut the door and headed into the kitchen. He followed at my feet. He even squeezed out a little mewl of anticipation. There was food in his bowl already, but I hadn’t given him his favorite treats in a few days.

“You shouldn’t be so nice to pretty girls who show up at the door,” I told him, even as I poured treats into his dish and he lapped around my legs. “They’ll break your heart.” He dove into his food. “She’s not coming back,” I informed him, but he was too busy doing his favorite thing in the world to care, purring while he stuffed his face.

I headed into the studio, and into the control room. I sat down in my rolling chair and slowly spun toward the window. The one that would look out into the front yard if I ever opened the blinds.



I tapped one of the laptops on the table in front of me. It woke from sleep mode and I clicked the icon that opened the feed to the security cam on the front gate. It showed the gate, closed. And no sign of Taylor.

She was already gone.

I wondered how she'd gotten in.

She'd asked me if I heard the buzzer. I should've had my ringer turned on this morning, watched for her to arrive at the gate—if I was considerate enough to think ahead like that and respect the effort my sister had gone through to set up this meeting. But I'd totally forgotten about the meeting, pretty much seconds after Courteney texted me yesterday to let me know what time Taylor would be here. I was in the middle of listening to music.

And this morning when she arrived, I had music on in my headphones.

Did Courteney drop her off and buzz her in? Or did my sister actually lend her the remote for the gate? She'd given one to my former assistant, what was his name? Hard to remember when he only lasted a week.

No way Taylor actually scaled my fence to get in here. Did she? Somehow, I wouldn't put it past her. She seemed... resourceful like that. The don't-waste-my-time type.

The I-don't-care-enough-about-the-rules-to-let-them-stop-me type.

Not my type, that was for sure.

*Go. Stay.*

I couldn't decide which I wanted her to do. That was my first problem, as soon as I found the note she stuck under my cat's collar. He'd trotted in here and rubbed against my leg, and when I didn't take enough notice for his liking, he'd jumped up on the control panel in front of me to get in my face. He knew he wasn't supposed to do that, but I kinda let him get away with it. His giant paws with the tufts of fur sticking out between his toes stepped gingerly over the buttons and he humped his back, looking for attention. I'd plucked him off to put him on the floor and there it was. A piece of folded paper, deliberately tucked under his collar.

I unfolded it.

*I'm here, in your backyard - Taylor.*

And then, underneath that, like an afterthought: *Courteney sent me.*

And that was when I remembered the meeting my sister set up.

Ashley Player's wife's best friend.

The executive assistant.

The note paper was purple and shaped like a star. For some reason, I

smelled it. It just smelled like paper and my cat.

I'd half-considered just tearing it up and ignoring it.

But I went to the living room and took a look out, and there she was. Standing at the edge of the pool, a woman in a long black dress with pink hair.

I opened the door, because I wanted to see her better.

She turned, and I saw the pretty, round face. The round mouth and the puffy, dewy lips. She'd come right over and stood in front of me, looking up into my eyes. It was bright and sunny out, but we were in the shade, and the corners of her eyes turned up in happy little crinkles when she wasn't smiling at all.

She introduced herself and said something about Courteney and I just stared at her. Her voice was soft but husky, not businesslike. Cool and maybe slightly aloof, but not cold. The breeze fluttered her long dress distractingly around her legs.

*Is this a good time?* she'd asked me.

*Go. Stay.*

Then I saw the tattoo. I saw what it said.

I made the decision to let her in. I told myself it was for Courteney. I'd get it over with. I'd make it fast.

As we sat down, I noticed there was a bunch of cat hair on her dress, which meant Freddy had rubbed his approval all over her, and his scent. Marking her like he already wanted her to belong to us.

She looked me in the eye as she spoke to me, but she didn't smile too much. And she looked so at ease on my couch, as if she'd sat there a thousand times with her turquoise eyes like the ancient abysses of every truth, just there for the taking.

I wondered if she'd fuck me if I asked her to.

I wondered if she'd get down on her knees.

But then I stopped thinking about that, because you didn't fuck girls like her and expect it to mean nothing. Girls like her were too easy to get hung up on, and I didn't get hung up on people anymore. I just wanted to bury myself in producing this album, then the next album, and the next. My work would hold me together.

That girl with the ocean-bottom eyes would only tear everything I'd so carefully built apart.

In my world, you were in or you were out. And these days, it was a very

small world.

Black. White.

I stayed behind my line. In the dark. Alone. Where I belonged.

I couldn't risk getting attached to someone like her. Needing someone like her. I'd gotten over needing people long ago. Eventually. Sometime long after the one person I'd always needed most died.

I wasn't going to need this girl, or any assistant she sent my way, or even my sister.

But I wondered when Taylor would be talking to Courteney. I wanted to know what she'd say about me. What she thought about me.

I didn't like it.

I picked up my phone. Among the notifications, there was a text from my sister—from this morning—that I hadn't seen.

**Courteney:** Just a reminder, Taylor is coming today at ten.

I swiped it away and opened Instagram. I pulled up my sister's profile and clicked on *Following*. I searched "Taylor." And there she was. I recognized the hair and the lips in the tiny photo, even though the name on the profile was a generic *TaylorInAMood*.

I clicked on it and read her profile.

*Taylor Lawson (Lawczynski)*

*Executive assistant. Earthling. Animal lover. No flex. Love not war.*

I scrolled through the posts. Looked like she posted pretty regularly, maybe a few times a week. There were some photos of her with friends. And some of her with guys. Most of them pretty, clean-cut boys who looked like they spent more time styling their hair than she did.

Boys who didn't look like they belonged with her.

The popular boys who wouldn't admit they wanted her in school, but now hit on her at the bar and sent her selfies with their dicks out and ate up her attention, if they could get it.

Boys who probably treated her like shit because they secretly thought she was beneath them and hated themselves for wanting her approval.

She was smiling too brightly in most of those images. Mostly, I scrolled right past them.

Then I stopped on one of her and Ashley Player. It was from a few months ago. It was just the two of them, and the caption said: *Happy*

*Birthday you fuck.*

They were both looking at the camera, their heads touching, her arm slung around his neck. They were in a dark bar or something, the camera lighting them up with a stark flash. Taylor looked happy and possibly drunk. Actually, they both did. Her eyes were narrowed in those pretty, curved slits, and she had that bright smile on her face. He had an unlit joint dangling from his mouth, and no one could miss who he was. The post had way more likes and comments on it than her other ones.

But the photo didn't scream, *Look who I know*. More like, *I love this guy and you should too*.

I stared at it. How easily they were hanging out like friends, possibly in public. And how easily, how publicly she called him *you fuck*, when she was so polite with me, even in private, no matter how fucking weird I probably seemed to her.

Polite, because I wasn't her friend. I was a stranger.

I kept scrolling. Travel images. Pictures of dogs. A couple of beaches.

A few selfies, but not many. And no other pictures of her with famous people.

The vast majority of her posts, though, were just words. Short sayings. Stark black words on white, like that tattoo on her skin. And as I scrolled through, I noticed they were all song titles. She always referenced the artist in the caption. *Horns up if you're here for Metallica*, that kind of thing.

*Be Yourself*

*Dog Days Are Over*

*Never Going Back Again*

*Lost Cause*

*Don't Tread On Me*

There seemed to be one every week, at least. Her mood for the week?

And they seemed to get progressively darker the further I scrolled back.

When I reached the first post of this year, on New Year's Day... there it was.

*Gimme Shelter*

Her mood for the year?

I started to scroll back to the top, letting the images blur by, an eddy of color—pinks, purples, blues—with the black around the edges being my life. My existence, here in this room.

I stopped partway and shut the app. Other than the song titles she'd

posted, her whole account was a blur of color. Joyful and bright. Pretty and confusing, like her.

Because there was no way Taylor Lawson/Lawczynski's life could be as perfect as it looked on social media.

Beneath the surface, there was always darkness.

# Chapter Four

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**Taylor**

## Heaven Coming Down

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**N**o. Way.

There was no way I was taking on this assistant job myself.

*Not happening.*

I realized on my way to meet up with Courteney that I'd been thinking about it. In the back of my mind, the entire time I'd talked to her brother this morning, and ever since then, I'd been weighing the possibility of whether or not *I* could take the job as his assistant.

The answer, of course, was a resounding no.

No, no, no.

This one was a major fixer-upper, and I was totally done with fixer-uppers.

“Lookin’ good, baby.”

I shot the sun-leathered construction worker a look. He was standing at the edge of the sidewalk, leaning on a shovel, and unfortunately I had to walk right past him.

“I am not your baby,” I informed him.

He looked stricken at the unexpected backtalk and averted his eyes. His friend snickered.

I walked on by, sighing.

*Men.*

Couldn't live with them... couldn't really stand to be without one for too long. It was nature's cruelest joke, really. The last time I'd gotten any action at all had been a drunken shit show under some mistletoe with a rock star, and way too much spiced eggnog in my system. And that was six long months ago. Those construction workers could probably smell it on me.

*Lust.*

I hadn't even noticed them standing there until one of them decided to hit on me. I'd had Allan Rayman playing in my earbuds while my mind drifted in a hot daydream about no one in particular. Just some faceless Adonis

who'd lost his shirt... and okay, who kinda-sorta looked like Cary Clarke... and was definitely about to lose his pants. Yup. This was the stuff I entertained myself with whenever I was doing such mind-numbing things as riding the bus.

Music and sex fantasies.

I'd hopped onto the bus at the bottom of Main Street, near my place, and hopped off here in Mount Pleasant to walk up to my favorite café. Nudge Coffee Bar was on a residential street lined with big, leafy trees, the café located in the front rooms of one of the beautiful heritage homes. I walked up the wide front steps to the porch—convinced that I would never work with Cary Clarke, that I wasn't sure I could actually find anyone to work with him... and fortifying myself to be completely, even painfully, dead honest with his sister about it.

And I already felt bad about it.

I wasn't sure if I felt worse about the fact that I was planning to be completely honest with her about things she might not want to hear... or the fact that I was never going to see her brother again.

It was really fucking bothering me that it bothered me.

I'd met the guy once. I had no reason to ever see him again.

Why did I feel this strange sense of disappointment that that was the case?

When I walked into the café, Courteney wasn't there yet. It was just after lunch and there was a lineup at the counter, so I got in line.

Nudge was owned by Katie Mayes' sister, Becca, and her husband, Jack; Katie was basically a local celebrity because she was married to a rock star, but she also happened to be a dear friend to my best friend, Danica. In the last few years, Nudge had become something of a hangout for local hipsters who wanted to pretend they had access to rock stars because they sipped lattes here. But I had actual access to rock stars, so that wasn't why I came. I'd chosen the location for this meeting with Courteney Clarke because I felt comfortable here. Ever since Danica first brought me here months ago, I'd loved it. Awesome menu, local art on the walls, and Becca had great taste in music. If nothing else good came out of this meeting, at least I could get a fantastic coffee.

A Dirty song was playing; a ballad called "Somewhere," off their last album. A few of Katie's paintings hung on the walls, portraits of Becca's kids. There were a couple of signed photos of Dirty on display, too. Becca



and Jack made no secret of the fact that Katie used to work here or that she was now married to Dirty's lead guitarist, Jesse Mayes. They were obviously proud as hell of Katie and Jesse.

I'd heard that Becca and her family used to live in the backside of the house, but that after Katie's relationship with Jesse went public, they'd moved to another house. For privacy.

That must've been strange. Your whole life having to change because your sister married a famous guy, and now people were knocking on your windows wanting to talk to you—and maybe see if he was over for Sunday dinner.

Very strange.

"Hey, Taylor." I heard a familiar voice and turned to find Becca, down at the end of the bar, where she was pouring coffees into takeout cups. I waved and she beckoned me over. "Katie's here with the baby. Wanna say hi?"

"Yes, please."

"Go on back."

She nodded for me to come around the bar, so I did. But when she pointed me into the back, I paused and asked her, "Hey, Becca. What's your favorite Rolling Stones song?"

"Hmm. I'd have to say 'Paint It Black.' Why?"

*Huh.* "No reason."

I headed into the small, industrial kitchen. And there was her sister, Katie Mayes, hanging out in a back corner with her baby, out of the way of the bustling staff. Some biker guy was leaning on the counter a few feet away, looking at his phone; he wore a plain, black T-shirt and jeans, which didn't say much, but the ink all over his arms and the jagged look he gave me when I approached Katie sure did.

"Hey, Taylor!" She greeted me, and when she reached to give me a hug, her security dude seemed to relax.

"Hey." I gave her a squeeze. I'd met Katie Mayes plenty of times now, but I'd only seen her baby boy, Madsen, a couple of times when he was much smaller. "How's the little ladykiller? Holy crap, he grew."

Katie beamed. "Yeah. He just turned six months." He was trying to stand on his chubby legs on a chair, with his mommy's help. He had thick whorls of dark hair like his daddy did, and he wore little baby jeggings over his diaper butt with a button-up shirt that had rhinestone buttons on it. He looked like a tiny little rock star.

He reached out and tried to grasp the skull-and-crossbones on my necklace, and when he looked up at me and smiled, holy Christ. He had Katie's big, blue-green eyes and Jesse's smile. "Whoa. You realize the girls of future generations are fucked if this is what you're sending their way."

Katie laughed. "I know. He's so much fun." She peppered kisses on his face and he squirmed and grunted, laser focused on my necklace. "Is Danica here?"

"No, just me. I'm meeting Courteney Clarke for a coffee."

"Ah. Nice."

"Hey," I asked her, as Madsen played with my necklace, "what's your favorite Rolling Stones song?"

"Oh, I love the Stones. How did you know?"

"I didn't."

"Well, 'Start Me Up' is up there... and 'Beast of Burden'... and 'Wild Horses'... Damn, there are so many good ones. But I'd say 'Paint It Black' is my all-time fave. Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering." I glanced at the security guy, who'd gone back to his phone and was pretending not to listen. "Is that a new one?"

"Oh, there's an endless supply of them. We're going shopping with Auntie Becca today, so we get an escort."

"Cool." I wondered if it was cool. If she was used to it by now or not.

Madsen tried to stuff my necklace into his mouth and Katie lifted him away; he lost his grasp on it as she swung him up in the air. His face crumpled and he emitted a little squeal that he probably hoped was wrathful.

"Ooooh, little temper on that one, huh?" Courteney remarked as she swept in.

"Oh, he'll definitely let you know when you've pissed him off." Katie swung her son onto her hip. He immediately reached for my necklace again and grasped it as she leaned in to give Courteney a hug.

"Is the temper from his daddy?" I teased. "Or from you?" I really didn't know Katie or her husband well enough to know the answer to that.

"Hmm." Katie considered that. "Actually, I think he got it from Aunt Becca."

"What!" Becca had just walked in, followed by Katie's best friend, Devi. "I heard that!" Becca set a couple of takeout cups on the counter by Katie's purse and frowned at her sister.

"Oh, but it's true," Devi said. She greeted me, Courteney and Katie with

hugs, then plucked Madsen from Katie's arms.

"Okay, it's *probably* true," Becca conceded. She turned to me and Courteney. "You ladies want some coffees before we head out? You can skip the lineup."

"You know, it really pays to know the VIPs," I said, and Katie smiled.

Courteney and I put in our drink orders, gave Madsen a goodbye kiss, and the two of us headed out into the café. The tables were all taken, so we sat at the bar along the front window on a couple of high stools.

"That is one lucky kid," Courteney remarked as we got settled. "Pretty sure he's got permanent dibs on whatever he wants in life."

"Maybe. I hope they don't make it too easy for him, though. A little struggle is good. Builds character."

"Right." She looked at me with a question in her eyes. She was probably wondering what I was about to say about her brother and his... struggles.

"Hey, your kids will have it good, too," I added casually. "They'll have their own rock star daddy."

"Oh, God. I hope rock star daddy doesn't want the kids anytime soon. I'm a little young for that yet."

"Well, when you're ready. There's time, right?"

One of the staff appeared and set Courteney's coffee in front of her. "This is from Becca, hon. I'll be back with yours," she told me, and headed off.

"I guess we have it pretty good too, huh?" Courteney smiled a little.

"Yeah. VIP-by-association isn't too shabby."

"True." Courteney blew on her hot coffee and looked me over. "You look awesome, by the way. Why are you so damn stylish?"

"Um... is this stylish?" I glanced down at my black dress. "Pretty sure I bought this at least seven years ago."

She laughed like I'd said something funny.

Courteney looked like a breath of fresh summer air in her casual, sleeveless, pink sweatshirt dress and white sneakers. Nineteen and gorgeous, with oodles of long blonde hair, the girl did not have to try very hard to score that perfect ten.

No wonder she'd scored Xander Rush, the Players' smoking hot drummer.

I'd considered trying to score with Xander myself when I first met him, but now I was really glad that I hadn't. I'd never mention that to her now. Seemed irrelevant since nothing between Xander and I had ever happened,

and he and Courteney were such a great match.

Just the thought of how hot they must've been together in bed was kind of sickening.

But that was just my single self being a little envious.

"Okay. I'm dying here," she said. "Please tell me how it went with my brother."

"It went fine," I assured her.

"Really?" She seemed so stricken, I almost laughed. "Tell me everything."

"Okay." I took a breath. "But I've gotta tell you, upfront, I'm not sure your brother actually needs an assistant, Courteney. What he probably needs is a life coach or something. And maybe... a therapist?"

Courteney's mouth floated open.

"At least, that's my humble opinion," I added quickly. "He didn't actually seem like he *wants* to hire an assistant, though I think he would let you hire one. Maybe because deep down he knows it would be good for him, or maybe because he loves you. But..." I trailed off, because Courteney was officially gaping at me.

I knew what I'd just said had to be hurtful. But I respected her—and her friendship with my best friend—enough to give it to her straight. She asked me for my assessment. Well, that was my assessment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't mean to be harsh—"

"He talked to you?"

"Yes."

She just stared at me like she was completely shocked by that.

"Wait," I said. "Why?"

"I'm just... surprised that he talked to you. In a good way."

"Oh. Yeah, we talked for about twenty minutes or so."

She stared at me like I'd sprouted wings and turned her coffee into wine or something.

"You asked me to go talk to him. Right?"

"Yes. But, honestly... I thought we might have to try this a few times before he even let you in the door. Did he actually answer the door?" She looked so damn confused, I actually felt mildly annoyed.

Did she seriously send me over there expecting me to strike out? And she didn't tell me that?

"No, he didn't. I gave his cat a note to take inside."

She blinked at me. “Freddy?”

“Yeah. I found the kitty door and sent him inside with a note.”

Okay. She was definitely looking at me like I was superhuman or something.

“Go on...” she said.

“So, he came to the door and I told him who I was, that you sent me, and he invited me in. We sat in his living room and talked. I got the feeling he was willing to entertain the conversation because he promised you he would. It didn’t seem like he was thrilled to have a visitor or anything. But he was polite. He answered my questions...” I stopped talking because the barista was back; she put my chai latte in front of me. “Thank you.”

She nodded and vanished, and I found Courteney still staring at me.

“What did he say?” she asked me.

“Not much.”

“How did he look?”

“He looked... good.”

I took a careful sip of my drink, testing the temperature, while Courteney stared at me. Pretty sure I was blowing her damn mind.

Did he really not talk to her at all?

“He seems really devoted to his work,” I offered. “It sounds like he’s looking forward to working on the Players’ album. And there’s the release party at the end, that sounded like a big thing.”

Courteney’s eyes widened. “He mentioned the release party?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say about it?”

“He just mentioned it. I guess there was some kind of party for the album he just finished working on? It was down in L.A., so maybe he couldn’t go anyway, but he seemed kind of bummed that he didn’t go.”

“He said that to you?”

“No. It was just a feeling.”

“And he said he wants to go to the release party for the Players’ album?”

“No. I could just tell.”

I watched as Courteney’s hazel eyes kind of misted over.

Holy shit. Was she about to cry on me?

“Look, Courteney. Uh... some kind of end goal like this party might be a good idea. Nothing like motivation, right?” It had occurred to me, while talking to Cary, that the album release, in general, might be just the end goal

that could make this situation work. A temporary contract with an end date to keep things on track might make it feel less daunting—for both Cary and whoever we brought in to work with him. Like a trial run. “You could hire someone for a certain length of time, maybe just to work with him while he finishes this album, and help him with whatever media surrounds it, the launch party, whatever. I don’t even know what all is involved with that...”

“It’s a great idea,” she said softly.

“And if that’s the goal,” I forged on, determined to be honest with her, “then he’ll probably need someone who’s experienced with all of the above. He’ll also probably need a friend or a date or someone who can go with him to the party, because I can’t imagine someone who hasn’t left the house in five years is just going to strut into a party by himself, you know what I mean?” I figured I’d just slip that in because who the fuck were we kidding? She knew that I knew that that was what everyone said about him. If it wasn’t true, here was her chance to refute it.

She didn’t.

She just said, “Uh-huh. Could you do that?”

Oh, boy.

“I’m just an executive assistant, Courteney,” I said gently. “Your brother needs help. I mean, *practice*.” Shit. *Tread carefully here, Taylor*. “You know, with social interaction? Honestly, he probably needs a relationship coach or something. And counseling. And psychological support. And none of this is my expertise.” Did I just call her brother a complete weirdo? Because that was kind of how it sounded.

But what else was I supposed to say?

“Did he say that to you? That he wants to go with someone to this party?” She seemed really stuck on that part.

“No. I’m just saying... your brother probably needs a lot of support. None of which he seems to have right now? I don’t know why that is, but he said he prefers being alone.”

“He said that?”

“Yes,” I said gently. “He said that. He said he can’t handle a lot of people in his life. And while I can sympathize with that, I don’t know how you get from where he is to where you’d probably like him to be. Or even where, maybe, he wants to be, if he really wants to do things like go to album release parties.”

“He doesn’t tell me this stuff,” she said. “He doesn’t even tell Xander this

stuff.”

“Well, he didn’t really tell me much, in the end.”

I wondered, briefly, if I should tell her about the panic attack thing. But it didn’t seem like something I should just blurt out. If she already knew, then it wasn’t news anyway. And if she didn’t know... then who was I to go telling her, if he hadn’t?

She shook her head slowly, her eyes still looking pretty misty. “No. He doesn’t tell us anything.”

I took a sip of my chai, while Courteney just sat there looking mildly shellshocked.

“Look, I’m not sure what else I can tell you, Courteney,” I said. “I can help you find an assistant for your brother, if you still want me to. But I don’t think it’s going to change his life. It might help him keep organized, take some tasks off his plate and maybe open lines of communication with him a bit more.” I knew she wanted that. She’d told me so. “But beyond that... I really can’t say. I’m no expert in psychology.”

“You’re wrong about that,” she said softly. “What we need is a people expert. You know, someone who’s great at working with people. And if you aren’t that... I don’t know who is.”

Oh, God. If she only knew how wrong she was. “I’m not a people expert, Courteney.”

“My brother hasn’t talked to anyone like that in a long time. He doesn’t talk to our parents, he doesn’t talk to his best friends... and he definitely doesn’t talk to strangers.” She just kept shaking her head. “I’m actually completely shocked that he talked to you at all.”

“Really?”

She blew out a breath. “I thought maybe because you’re pretty he might actually hear you out for a minute or two. You’ve got this thing about you, you know? This sexy thing. All the guys just *notice* you. I see it at the bar.”

“Uh...”

“I know that’s gross. And I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that upfront. I just wanted to get Cary’s attention. The fact that he invited you into his house and talked to you for twenty minutes and told you these things, though? That’s unprecedented. You have to let me hire you, Taylor. *Please*.”

Uh-oh.

“Hire me... to do what, exactly?”

“To be my brother’s assistant.”

I took a deep breath and tried to say it as gently as I could. “Look, I’m sorry, Courteney. I really appreciate that you thought of me. But... I can’t work for your brother. It’s just too close to home. I like you, and I know you and Danica are close. And if it doesn’t work out, I’d feel terrible.” *When.* When it didn’t work out. It was a matter of when, not if.

At least, that’s what my experience told me.

My experience told me that no matter how nice Courteney was, her brother, if I worked for him, would go crazy on me.

Too many of them went crazy on me.

And already, this job had all the signs of being a very bad fit for my own psychological well-being.

“Of course,” she said quickly. “I understand. And that’s why I asked you to help me hire the right person to work with him. I thought it would be too weird to ask *you* to work for him. I mean, *I* would feel awful if it didn’t work out. To be totally straight with you, my brother hasn’t really been great with assistants in the past. I worked for him briefly last year,” she explained. “‘Producer’s Assistant.’ It didn’t work out so well.”

“Oh.”

“I had no idea what I was doing. I don’t even know what a producer’s assistant is. I tried to figure it out. I asked people I know in the music industry. I got a list of personal assistant duties, things that I thought I could help him with. I really tried. But my brother just wasn’t interested. I think he was uncomfortable having his little sister as his assistant. He never said so. He would never say so. Because... he’s very good to me.” Her voice softened with those words. And I could see it there, in her eyes...

*Love.*

I saw a deep, deep love there.

“Whatever you might have heard about my brother...” she went on, “he is not crazy. I know that’s what people say about him.”

“Okay.”

“I just have a good feeling about this, Taylor. Let me and Xander pay you for a six month contract. We can negotiate longer than that if it’s needed. But the band is supposed to hand the album over to the record company in six months. That means the release party will probably come shortly after. We’ll pay you a fair, full-time rate. And you can work with my brother part-time, or whenever he needs you. He won’t want you there all the time anyway. Just help him get everything he needs in line so that he can finish the album on



time, as stress free as possible, and try to go to that party. That can be our goal. It's a great goal."

She gazed at me, pleading with her hazel eyes. They weren't the same shape as her brother's; they were rounder, but the color was pretty much the same. That warm, liquid honey color. She was so hopeful, she was practically trembling with it. I could feel her hope and her desperation, and I felt for her.

She obviously loved her brother. A lot.

I took another sip of my chai, stalling. A song by Ash's old band, the Penny Pushers, was playing in the café now. Vancouver had such a cool music scene over the years, and sitting here right now, it struck me how very possibly stupid it was that I—a total music lover—never thought about trying to work inside it. And here I was getting offered an in, and I was asking for an out.

"Okay, I'll think about it," I said. "Can I have a day or two to think it over?"

"Of course. Take whatever time you need. There's no rush." Courteney sighed. "It's not like my brother's begging me to hire him an assistant, like right this second."

I smiled a little. "You're a really good sister, Courteney, you know that?"

She groaned. "Honestly, I wish I knew how to help him better. I wish he'd talk to me." Her voice broke a little. "But, if he's willing to talk to you... I'll take it."

"Okay. Let me think about it." I started to get up, and Courteney hopped to her feet. She gave me a big hug.

"Thank you. No pressure, okay? Whatever you decide. But I'd be so grateful if you'd give it a try."

Right. No pressure at all.

I gave her a squeeze, then let her go. I looked her in the eye. "I'll let you know, I promise. I should grab a takeout cup for the rest of this and get going."

"Me, too. I'll grab some for us. And if there's anything you need, just let me know." She turned and probably would've skipped all the way to the counter, she seemed so happy. But I stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Hey, Courteney? Do you have a favorite Rolling Stones song?"

"The Stones?" She frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know... I don't really listen to them."

"Oh. Okay."

She started toward the counter, but then stopped again. “Wait. What’s that old song they do? ‘Fade To Black’ or whatever?”

“You mean ‘Paint It Black’?”

“Yeah. That’s it. I pick that one.”

“Cool.”

*Damn.*



When I walked into my apartment that evening, I yanked out my earbuds, dumped my purse, kicked off my sandals and immediately helped myself to a beer. I had a bunch of fruity ales from the brew pub up the street stocked in my fridge. I chose a raspberry bitter, grabbed my phone and plunked my ass down on my favorite window sill.

Like everything else in this place, the windows were old. They were wood frame and while they were always getting stuck, the sills were nice and deep. I had a corner apartment, which was pretty much the only perk of this place since Danica moved out of the apartment next door. I got a street view from the bedroom window and a sort of industrial waterfront-ish view from here in the kitchen. I could even see the mountains a little.

I’d met up with Danica for dinner tonight, and I told her about Courteney’s offer. She already knew Courteney had asked me to meet with her brother. But when I told her that Courteney basically begged me to consider taking the assistant job myself, Danica definitely wasn’t as uncomfortable with the idea as I was.

Bottom line, she knew I could use the contract. She liked and trusted Courteney. And as kindhearted as my best friend was, she just couldn’t imagine that Courteney’s brother could be much of an issue when Courteney herself was so wonderful.

My best friend was born wearing an invisible pair of rose colored glasses through which she viewed the world. It was one of the things I admired and loved about Danica the most. Her optimism. Her warmth. Her willingness to live and let live, forgive and forget, and all that good stuff.

I’d learned a lot from Danica Vola over the years about being a good human.

Her sunny point of view had helped me through a lot of dark shit in my

life. But I wasn't so sure that it was helping me with this.

Anyway, it wasn't that Cary Clarke was an issue. It was that he had issues.

I felt totally split down the middle, between what Courteney and Danica wanted me to do—take the job—and my misgivings about my prospective employer's mental health.

And of course, just to complicate matters, there was the whole *he's very, very attractive* thing. Which I hadn't brought up with either Courteney or Danica.

I checked my email, just to see if my dream job had happened to float into my inbox in the last few hours on the wings of a fairytale, but alas, no such luck. I wasn't even sure what my dream job was. But it definitely wasn't there in the slew of daily alerts for crappy, underpaying job postings that were utterly deletable.

There was a nice, personal email from one of the recruiters at the temp agency, though. One of my crazy bosses of yesteryear needed a new assistant and—wasn't this just flattering as all hell—he'd thought of me. *He reached out personally to ask if you're available*, the email said.

I didn't reply. It was too late in the evening for that. I'd reply tomorrow and politely but firmly let them know that there was no way in hell I'd ever be available for that man again.

*Fuck that noise.*

Also, the waxed butt lady had texted me. Again.

*Damn.* Did I forget to reply to her?

My latest crazy boss had been eccentric-crazy, not mean-crazy, so at least that was an improvement. The woman had four purse dogs, but that wasn't the crazy part. The dogs had their own walk-in closet in the penthouse apartment where she was staying downtown; a walk-in closet that was the size of my entire studio apartment, and that's where the weirdness really began for me. It was part of my job to dress the dogs every day, in their doggy-chic designer outfits, which undoubtedly cost way the fuck more than mine did.

Of course, I also had other duties. I never dreamed I'd scoop so much tiny dog poop in my life. But we couldn't exactly have them pooping in the designer purses, now could we?

Good thing I loved dogs.

For the last two months, while my temporary employer was here in

Vancouver with her husband on business, he worked, she enjoyed a life of leisure, and I was basically a glorified dog-sitter. I was pretty sure half the reason she hired me was the animal shelter volunteer work she saw on my resume. And it wouldn't have been all bad, if I wasn't also required to do every other odd and totally-beyond-the-bounds-of-my-job-description task that came up in this woman's life—like rip wax strips off her buttocks because the aesthetician of her choice was unavailable and she had a hot date with her husband.

It was their anniversary, and apparently her gift to him was “derrière stuff.”

Never. Again.

I really needed to start sucking at my job or something. Become incompetent. Get myself fired a little more often so maybe I was *forced* to rethink my entire career choice. Because the waxed butt lady had been messaging me all day. Apparently, I'd done too good a job on the waxing. Her anniversary date had gone “very well.”

The result? She said she wanted me to work for her some more. She was flying back home to Austin and wanted me to come along. If I really wanted to, I could scoop doggy poop and wax her butt in Texas for a while.

I almost shuddered just thinking about it.

I closed the conversation without replying and found another new text—from my ex, Dominic.

It had been half a year since I caught him with another woman—in my bed, because the man was a giver like that. Every once in a while, he still messaged me or called, usually when he was drunk. Like he was just putting out a feeler, checking to see if I'd forgotten what he'd done yet.

I hadn't forgotten. I'd forgiven, because again, my best friend had taught me a thing or two about being a good human. And what was the point in being angry forever? That would only hurt *me* anyway.

But I was never going to forget that shit.

Sure, there was a time when I would've replied to his text. Marched straight into battle. Told him in scathing, colorful detail where he could shove it, how fast and how hard.

I used to be tough, angry, and snarky as hell.

I used to be a broken girl from a fucked-up home, with a real knack for biting back when I was bitten.

But that was Taylor 1.0.

The new, improved Taylor, the more mature Taylor, the Taylor who was turning thirty at the end of this year, didn't go there anymore. Nope.

This Taylor simply deleted the message, because it was unwanted. And moved on. Instead of arguing with my ex over something that would never change no matter how much I fought with it or told it that it was an asshole, I went online.

And I searched "Cary Clarke."

The first page of Google hits was a revealing smattering of what the world—or at least Google—seemed to think you urgently needed to know about the man. One glance at that page told you that Cary Rylan Clarke, aged thirty-two, was, in the eyes of the world, 1) a famous musician, 2) a famous hermit, and 3) a famous hottie.

The hottie thing I looked past, because that part was self-evident. I didn't need a bunch of social polling sites to tell me how high he'd scored on the bangable celebrity meter.

Besides, I'd already looked at plenty of pictures of him online.

But I hadn't read about him.

On the musician thing and the hermit thing, I scanned the articles on offer, skipping to page two of the search results, then page three. Other than the first few legit articles from music magazines talking about his musical body of work, there really didn't seem to be much written about him in recent years that was of any substance.

There were those words again though, repeated often.

*Recluse. Workaholic. Shut-in.*

But it was all just gossip. No one who actually knew him was quoted saying things like that in the articles I scanned. The musicians who spoke about him in interviews said other things.

*Outstanding musician. Incredible artist. Genius.*

There was an article that caught my eye, something in *Rolling Stone* about the end of his band, Alive. I clicked on it, and I scanned what it said about Alive's bassist, Gabe Romanko, dying, and the band going on hiatus mid-tour; speculation about whether or not they would complete the tour. The article was written several months after Gabe died, but it didn't go into detail about his death.

No doubt there were many, many articles about that, closer to the time it happened.

I wasn't sure I wanted to read them.

I'd definitely heard about it. It was big news in Vancouver when it happened. I'd read a bit about it back then; at least the headlines. But that was five years ago. Danica had also told me the sad story, months ago, after she heard it personally from Courteney. At least, the parts that Courteney had told her over drinks. I didn't really know any details about how it happened. A hotel fire or something? That's all Danica had said.

It was publicly accessible information now, of course, but the idea of reading about the death of Cary's bandmate, and other people's two cents about how it had affected Cary, felt too much like spying on Cary.

Plus... what if the articles got it all wrong?

I really didn't want to form an opinion about the circumstances surrounding the man's grief based on what other people had to say in some online post that might be complete fiction. Danica had already schooled me on this. On how much shit people said online about her rock star husband that wasn't even true.

Instead, I checked out the career stats on Cary's Wikipedia page. I figured those would at least be verified by the community of his supporters, and based on things like album sales, not gossip and hearsay.

Apparently, he'd played lead guitar in a few local Vancouver bands, one of which had released an album with a major label out of Seattle before he and Gabe split with the other band members, then formed *Alive* with Xander Rush and lead singer Dean Slater. Since *Alive* broke up five years ago, Cary had produced nine albums, most of them in the last three years. He had six platinum albums in the US. One for *Stand and Fall*, *Alive*'s only album. Five as a producer for other bands.

Any way you looked at it, the man was just as successful now, as a music producer, as he was as a rock star. Maybe more. And he was still as famous.

He was just way less accessible.

Kind of made it seem unreal that I'd actually walked onto his property today and gotten his cat to get him to open his door for me.

But I did.

*Real.*

That was what he said when I asked him, jokingly, if he was a ghost, and he offered me his hand. He gave my hand a squeeze. He felt warm and strong, and I felt the life in him, like a rush through my body.

He was real.

He was flesh and bone, a soul and a heart, locked away from the world,

living out some self-imposed prison sentence.

Why?

Had he committed some crime in his own mind?

Had the world committed too many crimes against him?

What was he afraid of?

Or had he really gone crazy? Unable to function except behind his own walls?

Was he simply agoraphobic?

Eccentric?

Was he mentally ill, or a mad genius?

Both?

Now that I'd met him, I realized I wanted to know the answers to these questions even more than I wanted this paycheck.

Which wasn't really a great place for me to be.

I opened my messaging app again. The text from waxed butt lady stared me in the face. Since she'd deigned to message me personally, several times now, I figured I should reply—so she'd stop messaging me. I composed a quick text and hit send.

**Me:** Sorry, I'm unavailable right now. I've taken another longterm position.

Then I wrote a message to Courteney.

**Me:** I'll take the job. If it's ok with your brother. I can talk to him about it tomorrow.

Then I turned on some music and set the phone aside.

Decision made.

I figured I'd give this a chance, like Courteney asked me to, and at least see what Cary thought of the idea.

So maybe I was a little intrigued by the idea of working with a great musician.

I was curious about him.

And yes, there was just something about the way his little sister so clearly adored him that was tugging at my heart strings.

“Damn, girl,” I muttered to myself as I sipped my raspberry beer. “You’re getting soft.”



## Chapter Five

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**Taylor**

## I'm with You

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The next morning, when I woke up to “Master of Puppets,” I hit snooze three times. I wasn’t really a morning person—on days when I didn’t have to be—and given my current employment situation, I didn’t exactly have a schedule yet.

I wasn’t even totally sure if I had a job yet.

When my Metallica alarm finally punched through the sleep fog, I took my time getting up, showering and eating breakfast. I figured there was no hurry since rock stars, even former rock stars, probably weren’t early risers.

Then I got ready to go meet Cary Clarke. Again.

Dirty’s bassist, Elle Delacroix, had this lipstick line that I loved called *Kiss and Tell*. She’d released a whole new pallet of amazing colors in the spring and I decided to wear *Rock Star Crush*—only because the soft, shimmery pink shade went nicely with my hair, of course. It also made my lips look the exact color and sheen they probably looked after I’d made out with a man, something I only noticed after I put it on.

But I didn’t take it off.

It would be hot today, the sun was already blazing, and pretty much everything I owned was black, so I slicked my hair back in a ponytail to compensate. This was about as bright and summery as I got: pink hair, pink lipstick, short black dress.

I grabbed my purse, put in my earbuds, and I was out the door.

When I walked up to Cary Clarke’s house almost an hour later with Puddle of Mudd’s “She Hates Me” rocking in my ears, once again, he didn’t answer the gate. Or the front door.

Good thing Courteney had let me keep the remote.

She’d also offered to set this up, let Cary know I was coming back, but I’d said “No thanks” to that. That approach hadn’t been working so well—his sister trying to arrange things for him. I got the distinct feeling that people had tiptoed around Cary Clarke for a long, long time, his sister included. So I

decided to take a different approach.

I'd be direct.

And this time, I came prepared. I brought kitty treats.

I plucked out my earbuds and walked around the yard, rattling the treats in the little packet and calling Freddy's name until I heard his tinkling bell. Cary's cat trotted right up to me and rubbed against my ankles.

I led him around to the back of the house and gave him his reward. Then I tucked my pre-written note under his collar and nudged him in through the kitty door. "There you go. You know what to do. Go find Cary."

I hung out, wondering if I should go sit down by the pool. But this time, it didn't take as long. Apparently Freddy had figured out the drill. A few minutes after I sent him inside, the French doors on the back of the living room opened.

Cary stood there, looking at me.

Freddy trotted outside and took off into the bushes. "He's very handy," I remarked, watching him go. "Friendly with strangers, though." I met Cary's eyes.

"I guess you're not a stranger." The look on his face was wary as he waited for me to explain my presence.

I offered him my hand. "How are you?"

He stared at my hand, and for several awkward heartbeats I thought he wasn't going to take it. I almost dropped it.

But then he slid his hand into mine, giving it a squeeze. His warm skin against mine set off a wave of... something... in my body. That same buzz when he touched me, like yesterday. The little lines at the corners of his eyes appeared as he squinted a little in the bright daylight, and a strange flare went off in my stomach. Like a hot torch lighting up in the dark. Nerves or something.

I drew my hand back.

I noticed he didn't answer my question.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I said. "You know, without calling first. But I figured you wouldn't answer anyway."

He said nothing, just studied me as he slipped his hands into his pockets. He was wearing a gray T-shirt, like yesterday. With gray jeans again, but these ones were skinnier cut and rolled up at the bottom. Decently fashionable, even if he ordered them online or something?

How was it that he never left the house... yet he looked so damn normal?

Or as normal as a totally gorgeous man could look, anyway.

“So, I spoke with Courteney. About everything we talked about yesterday.”

“And how did that go?”

“Well,” I told him bluntly, “she wants me to work as your assistant for six months.”

“Six months,” he repeated dryly. “Is that all?”

“Yes. Or thereabouts. She also wants you to go to the Players’ album release party. Which she estimates is happening in about six months. So, you see where she came up with that number.”

“I see.” His face didn’t change, but I was pretty sure I picked up on a slight undercurrent of irritation.

“And she wants me to help you get ready for it.”

He didn’t say anything. He didn’t ask me to come inside, but he also didn’t ask me to leave or shut the door in my face. So I pressed on.

“Also, she said she wants to pay me herself. Her and Xander.”

“I thought you were just supposed to help her hire someone.”

“Yeah. Well, she hired me.”

I watched for his reaction to this, but he didn’t seem to have any. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t move. But I could feel his discomfort. Just like yesterday... it wore heavily on him, in the weight of his silence.

Was he thinking over what I’d said? Or thinking about how to most swiftly and permanently get rid of me?

“Unless you have a problem with that,” I offered. “I won’t be offended if that’s the case. Your sister wants to find the ideal person for this position. She seems to think the ideal person is me. I really can’t argue with that. So, I’m willing to give it a go. If you are. If not, no hard feelings. It’s business, right? It’s not personal.”

“You’d be my personal assistant,” he said. “Sounds personal.”

Something furry pressed against my leg, and I glanced down. Freddy was back, and he threw himself at my feet. Right on top of my feet, actually. He stretched out and twisted onto his back, his eyes half-closed... and his legs flopped open, revealing his furry privates.

Yup, there it was, covered in silky fur.

I looked up at Cary, who was frowning at his cat. I had to swallow the laugh that bubbled up my throat. I had a lewd sense of humor and tended to laugh at awkward shit. And a cat penis suddenly appearing at an already

awkward job negotiation totally warranted a chuckle.

I cleared my throat to cover it. “Uh, you can give me whatever title you like,” I told him. “If it makes you feel better.” I wiggled my toes, trying to dislodge Freddy, but he was relaxed deadweight.

Cary’s eyes lifted to mine. Yeah, he was definitely irritated. Uncomfortable. And annoyed with his cat for dicking around in the middle of this seriousness. “What title do you want?” he said irritably, like I’d demanded he address me as Your Royal Assistantness.

“Well, I usually go by executive assistant. I’ve worked for a lot of executives. But producer’s assistant or whatever works, too. As long as it’s not errand bitch or slave girl, we’re good.”

He responded to that about as warmly as he did Freddy’s dick; he didn’t even pretend to find it mildly funny or charming or even offensive. He just stared at me.

“I’m not an executive,” he deadpanned.

“Right. You’re a musician and a music producer who owns a recording studio, and you’re pretty much a self-made multimillionaire, as far as I can tell, so I’m going to assume it’s probably not that different from what I’m used to.”

I supposed I’d just revealed that I’d done my research on him. Or maybe he assumed Courteney had told me those things.

“Self-made...” he said. “I’m pretty sure the record companies I’ve worked with over the years would have a difference of opinion on that.”

“Maybe they give themselves too much credit.”

“They run the business.”

“But they’re not the talent. You’re the talent and the business.”

He studied me, and I wondered if I was convincing him of anything or if he was merely collecting reasons not to hire me so he could list them for Courteney later. It felt like he was interviewing me, right here on his threshold. While his cat napped on my feet. It was getting awkward. He was way taller than me up there. And my toes were getting hot.

“Any chance I could partake of the air conditioning while you finish grilling me?” I asked him. “My toes are sweating.”

He glanced down at his cat again. “Freddy,” he said sharply. “Fuck off.”

Freddy’s ear twitched, but he didn’t move. He didn’t even open his eyes. If anything, he went more limp.

Ours eyes met again, and I shrugged. “He likes me.”

“He likes everyone. Don’t let it go to your head.”

*Nice. “I’ll try.”*

“Come in.” He pushed the door open and I felt the cool draft of the AC.

“Thank you.”

I gently extracted my feet from beneath his cat and followed him into the house. Once again, he led me over to the couch. He pointed at it.

“Sit.”

I sat. What was it about this man giving me orders that made me want to do exactly as he said, like immediately?

*Not good.*

He sat down in the armchair next to the couch, like last time. And the way his eyes remained glued to my face with the same disapproving look he’d given his spread-eagle cat, I really had no idea what he was about to say to me.

Then he said: “Okay.”

“Okay...” I repeated. “Like, I’m hired?”

“Yes. But not by my sister. I make the rules in my own house, and I’ll be your boss, so. I’m hiring you. And I’m paying you.”

Well. He definitely had a way with words. When he actually chose to speak. Everything he said was true enough, but it was the way he said it that gave me pause.

*I make the rules.*

*I’ll be your boss.*

“Okay...” I said.

“Okay.”

I waited for him to say something else, but he didn’t. He seemed to be waiting for me to say something. But now that he’d agreed to hire me, I was a little stumped. I’d been prepared for opposition. I thought he’d be more hesitant about the whole thing, or downright disagreeable. I was expecting more of a discussion, a negotiation. I was half-expecting to walk out of here with no job at all.

“So, you’re okay with this?” I asked him. “Really?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, as I understand it... you don’t normally have an assistant.”

“No, I don’t. But I haven’t always done everything right. So maybe that’s one of the things I’ve been getting wrong.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. Maybe he really was open to a

change? Or maybe he was doing this for his sister. Courteney clearly cared a lot about him, and maybe the feeling was mutual.

But then there was that other thing. That thing in his eyes.

The way he looked at me.

I noticed it the first time we met, sure. But sometimes when you met someone for the first time, it was hard not to look at them that way. He was sizing me up, obviously. Wrapping his head around this pushy stranger who'd just appeared in his home for the first time. I mean, I figured that to him I probably seemed pushy. Putting a note on his cat and all, and peppering him with questions in his living room.

But this was no longer the first time we'd sat here like this. And he was still looking at me that way. Like I was exotic and strange. And *interesting*. And he was trying to make sense of me.

Was I looking at him that way, too?

The doorbell rang through the house. It wasn't loud, but you could definitely hear it in this room. He made no move to get up, though. He just kept staring at me.

"Would you like me to get that for you?" I offered.

"It's just Rose. My housekeeper. She has a key."

"Oh. Okay."

It was odd how relieved I felt to hear that. That there would soon be another person in the house, so the two of us wouldn't be totally alone. Another person to interrupt this strange tension.

On the other hand... I was kind of wondering how hot this Rose woman was.

I was starting to wonder if Cary Clarke had a thing for hiring women he was attracted to. Because he was definitely looking at me like that.

You know, like he liked my face.

He wasn't checking me out, exactly. I hadn't even seen him look directly at my chest or anything. It didn't feel creepy.

It just felt like he liked my face.

I swallowed and cleared my throat a little in the awkward silence. We seemed to be waiting wordlessly for Rose to appear.

Finally, she poked her head into the room. "Oh! Good morning, Cary." She looked utterly stunned to find him in here. Rose, to my relief, appeared to be in her sixties and highly unlikely to have been hired for the eye candy she provided. She also appeared to be the sweetest lady in the world. She smiled

at me as I got to my feet.

“Hey, Rose,” Cary said. He was still looking at me, and he didn’t get up. “This is Taylor. She’s my new assistant. You’ll be seeing her around.”

Rose was still smiling at me, eyes and all. “Nice to meet you, Taylor.”

“You, too.”

“Rose is here on Tuesdays,” Cary informed me.

“How nice,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to say. I wondered what this woman knew about him. What kinds of things she saw, working in his house.

“I’ll put the groceries away,” she told him. “And then I’ll clean the studio now?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

I noticed he wasn’t as bossy with her as he was with me.

She smiled at me again, nodded, and ducked back out.

I sat down again. “She seems very nice,” I said. And then, because maybe I was fishing for something, I added, “You hire good people.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’ll try not to let that go to my head.”

He didn’t smile. “The quality of the people in my life is really important to me, Taylor.”

“Of course.”

“I’m not used to having an assistant and I don’t know exactly how this will roll. So, I’ll want you here full-time.”

Huh. Definitely not what his sister said he’d want.

How had she put it?

*You can work with him part-time, or whenever he needs you.*

*He won’t want you there all the time anyway.*

“When would you like me to start? I can start today, if you need me.”

“I don’t need anything,” he said, his eyes never leaving mine. “Except a few days to get a contract together. And a Non-Disclosure Agreement that you’ll have to sign. If that’s a problem, you need to tell me now.”

“I hear you,” I said, digging my card out of my purse and handing it to him. “I’m totally fine with the NDA. I’ve had to sign them before. You can just have everything emailed to me when it’s ready. And full-time works for me.”

“Good.” He held the card between two fingers for a moment, studying it, before placing it on the coffee table. He leaned on his knees, locking eyes



with me. “I’m used to working alone. I collaborate with other people, but I do it remotely. I’m not used to delegating. But if you’re willing to figure this out with me, then I guess we can give it a go, like you said.”

“Great.”

I almost looked away, just to find relief from the intensity of his eyes, but I didn’t. Why did he still seem irritated?

“If you want to come by next Monday, you can start then.”

“Okay.”

He got to his feet. “I’ll walk you out.”

And just like that, the weirdest job interview I’d ever had was over.

“Sure. Thanks.” I got up, quickly, because he was already heading for the French doors. He opened the door and walked right out into the backyard.

So, apparently he did go outside.

I hurried to keep up. He wasn’t rushing, but the man’s legs were definitely longer than mine. I followed him around the house, to the driveway, in silence. When we got there, he stopped, so I did too.

“What time should I be here on Monday?” I asked him.

“Sometime before ten is good. I usually dive pretty deep into my work in the afternoon.”

“How about nine o’clock?”

“Sure.” He looked at the empty driveway. “No car?”

“I don’t have one.”

“I’ll get you one,” he said, and pulled out his phone.

“It’s okay. I usually take transit.”

He looked at me, and I could tell something was wrong. He looked irritated again.

“It’s not a problem, I promise,” I added quickly. “I’m reliable, punctual, and I can get around just fine. I live right downtown—”

“I’m getting you a car. I insist. It’s on me.” He was thumbing around, on a taxi app probably, and I didn’t want to make a big deal about it when I’d barely even started working for him yet, so I didn’t.

“Thank you,” I said.

When he was done booking the car, he tucked his phone away and walked me halfway up the driveway. Then he stopped by the palm trees, and sat down on one of the big rocks that lined the edge of the driveway. To wait with me, I presumed.

So I sat down on a rock kind of next to him.

He didn't say a word, so I didn't either.

After a minute, I pulled out my earbuds and held them in my hand so I was ready to pop them in when the taxi got here. He still didn't say anything. I wondered if I should make conversation or not.

*About what?*

After the longest silence I'd ever experienced with another human being sitting so close to me, he said, "You really took the bus to get here?"

"Yes."

Had the man been living in his gated mansion with the three-car garage for so long he'd forgotten that regular people did regular things like ride the bus?

"You listen to music on the bus?"

"Yeah. There's not much else to do. Sometimes I read."

"What do you listen to?"

"All kinds of things."

"What do you listen to the most?"

I looked into his eyes. I wondered if this was still part of the job interview process. Like if I got this wrong, would he be changing his mind about hiring me?

"Well, I guess I'm supposed to say something cool like Billie Eilish or Twenty One Pilots or Halsey. And those would all be true. But honestly, I have a Metallica fetish. And my secret weakness is love songs by female vocalists who I can sing along to in the shower."

"Like who?"

"Like... do you really want to know? I can't sing, so it's not like I can pull it off."

He considered that. "What are we talking about? Céline Dion and Whitney Houston?"

"More like Ann Wilson and Avril Lavigne."

"Avril Lavigne, huh?" He took that in. Or maybe he was trying to picture me singing "Sk8er Boi" into a shampoo bottle.

"Hey, when I was ten she was huge."

"You like Heart?"

"I like Ann Wilson. And, if you really need to know, Dolly Parton."

His eyes crinkled a bit. It wasn't exactly a smile, though. "So, let's see. She likes Metallica and Dolly Parton."

"Yup."

“You know, I used to try to figure people out by the kind of music they listen to. I’m not sure it works. Especially when you come at me with Metallica and Dolly Parton.”

“What can I say. I once gave myself minor whiplash from banging my head so hard to ‘Whiplash.’ And ‘Jolene’ makes me cry every time I hear it.”

A car eased to a stop outside the gate, and he got to his feet. “Your ride.”

I got up. It wasn’t a taxi. It was a silver luxury sedan. The driver, a strapping, salt-and-pepper-haired man in dark dress clothes, got out and came around to open the rear door.

He called me a car service?

And where did it materialize from, his secret Batcave?

“Uh, that was fast.” I looked at Cary; he was pulling out his phone again and said nothing. “So, see you Monday. Maybe you can tell me about your favorite music.” It seemed like a good topic for him. While we’d talked about music, it was the first time he’d seemed to relax a little.

“Maybe,” he said. Then he used his phone to open the gate.

“Wow. There’s an app for that?”

He smiled.

And I felt another rush of... something. It was the first time he’d smiled at me.

He didn’t glow like some people did when they smiled. He didn’t sparkle like Rose did. He didn’t even look happy, like he did in all those old photos I saw of him online.

It was a small smile, and it was hard-won. And I liked that it was for me. I was pretty sure it was for me, and not for his fancy car-summoning and gate-opening techniques.

“See you Monday, Taylor.”

“Bye.”

I headed out to the car. And after I slid in and the driver shut my door for me, I looked to see if my new boss was watching.

He was. He stood under a palm tree with his hands in his pockets as the gate closed, and watched us drive away.

---

The driver’s name was Liam. He had two kids, a third one on the way, and he

was about as nice as Rose was.

I asked him if he drove for Cary often. Maybe I was snooping just a little. I didn't even put my earbuds in.

"Not often," he said.

"You came so fast."

"I live close by."

"That's handy."

He didn't offer anything else, so I decided not to press.

After Liam dropped me off at my building and walked me to the front door—and stood there until the door closed behind me to make sure I was safely inside—I took the elevator up to my apartment on the fifth floor. I put on some music—my vortex playlist; I was still working on it—and made myself lunch. I was just sitting down to eat when my phone rang.

*Private number.*

Hmm. My new employer?

Or spam?

I took the risk and answered, quietly chewing a bite of sandwich. "Yes?"

"Is this Taylor?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"This is Cary Clarke."

Funny, how he used his last name. As if I knew a hundred guys named Cary. But that strange, uncomfortable, torch-sparking-in-the-dark thing happened in my stomach and I sat up. I tried to keep chewing, my bite of sandwich feeling dry in my mouth.

Why was he calling me?

"I spoke with Liam," he said abruptly. "The man who drove you home."

"Okay...?"

"Now that I know where you live, I don't think it'll be possible for you to \_\_\_"

*Work for me.* That was actually what I thought he was gonna say.

"—live there anymore."

I stopped chewing. "Excuse me?" Seriously, did I hear that right?

I washed my mouthful down with Coke.

"It's very far from my place," he pointed out. "I looked it up. You'll have to take two separate buses, each way, to get here every day."

"Yeah. I'm aware of that."

"And walk through a neighborhood I'd rather my assistant didn't have to

walk through on my account.”

“I walk through this neighborhood all the time.” *And it’s really none of your business where I live.*

Was he seriously calling me about this?

“I’d like to make you an offer,” he said.

“Uh...” I put down the sandwich I was still holding. If he was about to offer me daily car service via Liam, I wasn’t even sure what to say to that.

“What kind of offer?”

“I have a poolhouse. It’s private and comfortable. And it’s much closer to my studio.”

What the *what?*

“I’d like you to move in.”

“Oh. Wow. Uh—”

“It would be free to you, of course,” he went on. “I assume you’ll want to keep your apartment, but you can stay in the poolhouse for free as long as you’re working for me. I really don’t like the idea of you taking public transit and walking home to your apartment, in that neighborhood—”

“Okay, look. You wouldn’t be the first person to diss my neighborhood. But I’m telling you, I’ve lived here for a long time—”

“I don’t mean to insult where you live,” he cut me off. “I work long hours and I work late at night. I’m not comfortable with letting you head out into the night after work if I keep you late. And having a car service shuttle you back-and-forth on a daily basis is a waste of time. Wouldn’t you rather spend that time chilling by the pool, listening to Avril Lavigne?”

I rolled my eyes. And turned down Avril, who was singing her ass off in the background.

“This way, you’ll be close whenever I want you here,” he added, when I didn’t answer him. “You can still have your own space. And you won’t have to be hauling yourself across the city all the time.”

“Right...”

“Think about it,” he said. Or rather, ordered. “I’ll text you my number.”

Then he hung up on me.

Wow.

People skills: desperately needed.

I put down the phone and went back to my sandwich. And with every bite, I felt a little bit more uneasy.

*I’d like to make you an offer.*

*I'd like you to move in.*

*This way, you'll be close whenever I want you here.*

## Chapter Six

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**Taylor**

## The Middle

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**A**fter lunch, I did some deep housecleaning that I'd been meaning to do, but hadn't had enough of a break between gigs to do in a while. And maybe I was preparing to not be here much over the next six months? Just in case?

Then I went for a run with *Our Last Night* blasting in my ears.

Then I took a quick post-jog shower, had dinner, and tossed my feet up. I put on a movie while I painted my toenails. *Old School*, one of my favorite comedies of all time—and really, best use of a Metallica song in a movie, ever.

By the time the movie was over, the sun was down.

I cracked open an apricot ale. I missed the days when my best friend lived right on the other side of my wall and we could hang out all the time. We'd walk to the brew pub or the little dive diner up the street, or we'd sit up on the roof. I could go talk to her anytime, about anything.

I'd already called Danica twice, but she didn't answer. I would've liked to talk to her first, to get her take on the poolhouse thing, but it was getting late. So I called Cary Clarke's sister.

"Hey, Taylor!" Courteney answered, with the enthusiasm of someone who'd been waiting, impatiently, for my call. All day. "How did it go?"

"Okay. Actually, it went better than I expected."

I must've sounded really unconvinced of that, or somehow strange, because she said, "Oh, no. What happened?"

"Nothing bad. He hired me, actually."

"Oh. That's great. Wait, what do you mean?" She laughed a little. "I thought I hired you."

"Yeah... Cary said he's hiring me himself and he's going to pay me, too. He said I can start on Monday."

"Oh. Well, that's great."

"Yeah. I thought so. But then he also asked me to move into his



poolhouse while I'm working for him."

She went silent for a moment. "He asked you to move into the poolhouse?" She sounded a lot more excited about it than I expected her to.

"Yeah. Is that weird?"

"It's amazing!"

"Is it?"

"Seriously, Taylor, my brother is very private. If he wants you on his property, that means he feels comfortable with you. *Wow*," she mused, "I think he's really embracing this assistant thing."

"Seems that way."

"He must be really impressed with you. This is exciting! You know, I knew this was gonna work out. I had a good feeling about this."

I couldn't exactly say the same.

I had a feeling about this, sure. Actually, I had several feelings about this. *Good* wasn't necessarily one of them.

"You don't think it's weird? For me to live on his property with him? He said there might be long hours and he didn't want me to have to take the bus home at night and stuff. It's a really generous offer, but..." I drifted off. I didn't want to suggest that the offer was out of line or anything. I wasn't sure that it was.

I knew live-in personal assistants who moved into their employers' homes, traveled with them, the works. I'd never done it, but it wasn't unheard of.

Moving in with a brand new boss, though? One who reputedly never left his house, clearly had issues of some kind with the world at large, and—let's just admit it—made flares ignite in my stomach? It felt... risky.

"I don't think it's weird at all," Courteney said. "He's let people live there before. I lived there for a while when I was working for him last summer. So did the previous assistant."

"Oh."

"The only reason I didn't offer the poolhouse to you upfront was because I didn't want to overstep with my brother, you know? I was trying to tread softly this time. But if he offered it, it sounds like he's really warming to the whole idea."

"Yeah. I guess."

"I mean, think about it if you need to. But the poolhouse is *nice*, Taylor. And Cary's closed up in the studio so much anyway. I used to work on my

laptop out by the pool. You're lucky it's summer. Perfect timing."

"Hmm. You make a solid point."

She laughed softly. "Do what you've gotta do, but I'm telling you. The poolhouse is the way to go."

"Okay. I'll think about it," I told her. "And, hey... thanks again, Courteney."

"Thank *you*. I really, truly appreciate what you're doing for me. And for him."

My phone blipped from an incoming call, and I peeked at the screen. "I'll let you know what I decide, okay? Danica is calling through."

"For sure. Have a good night!"

"Good night." *Damn*. She sounded so excited. I wondered if she'd be just as excited if I gave her absolutely any intel about her brother at all, short of "he's not happy." I blew out a breath and picked up Danica's call. "Hey. How's it going?"

"Great! Sorry I missed your calls. We were doing sex stuff."

Of course. Danica and her man were always doing sex stuff. They'd been married for six months and their honeymoon phase was still going strong. It was inspiring, really.

"My eyes are rolling right now."

She laughed. "What can I do for you this fair evening?" she practically sang.

"Spoken like a woman who just got laid."

"Guilty."

"I just called to tell you, I think I landed myself a job today."

"The Cary Clarke thing?"

"That's the one."

"That's awesome, Taylor! Congrats. It sounds like a good gig."

"Yeah. I hope so. But he just invited me to move into his poolhouse."

Silence. Then: "He did?"

"Yeah. It's this beautiful guesthouse in his backyard. There's a bunch of trees and gardens... it's gorgeous."

"Okay..."

"I just talked to Courteney and she said it's standard. His other assistant lived there, and she lived there when she was working for him. But I don't know. It feels a little weird."

"Why?"

“Well, it kind of raises the stakes, right? Now if I ever quit, I’ll have to quit *and* move out.”

“True. But if it works out... you get to live in a beautiful place and be close to his studio, instead of taking the bus all the time, right?”

“Right.” I sighed, deciding to confess. “I’m gonna tell you something you can’t tell your husband, okay? This is girl talk.”

“Of course. Girl talk is for girls, Tay. I tell Ash everything, but you know I won’t tell him your girl talk.”

“I know. I just had to make sure, because this feels really close to home. I don’t want the rock stars gossiping about me. I know how they get when the beers start flowing.”

“Okay. Vaulted. Lay it on me.”

“Cary’s hot.”

Silence.

“Hello?” I prompted.

“I’m here. I’m just digesting. How hot?”

“You need to Google him,” I told her, because apparently she hadn’t yet. Danica didn’t follow bands and musicians like I did; even I knew who Ashley was before she did.

“Okay. I’ll do that later. But for now... Are you telling me you have a crush on your new boss?”

“I don’t know him well enough to crush on him.”

“You don’t have to know someone to crush on them. You crushed on the members of Nickelback all through high school.”

“*Only* Ryan and Daniel,” I insisted, not for the first time. “And they are still cute. Everyone’s allowed a guilty celebrity crush, or two, so back off about Nickelback. Everyone loves ‘How You Remind Me’ even if they won’t admit it.”

“Oh, she’s touchy. You *are* crushing on your new boss.”

I groaned. “I can’t explain it, Danica. There’s something between us. Chemistry or something. It’s all static electricity and body rushes when he talks to me.”

“Body rushes?”

“You know, that full body rush thing you get when a man you want, really badly, brushes his lips against yours?”

“Taylor. Did he brush his lips against yours? In a job interview?”

“No. He didn’t touch me. He just shook my hand. But I got the full body

rush. A few times.”

“Oh. Wow...”

“The man is a top shelf bang, I’m telling you. Hit up Google on that shit.”

“That’s amazing.”

“How is it amazing? He just hired me to work for him.”

“So? You dated one of your bosses before. Maybe just go with it and see what happens?”

“Says the girl who wouldn’t even touch the man she’s now married to, *for weeks on end* when she first met him, because she was redecorating his apartment.”

“Hey!” She laughed. “Low blow.”

“I’m just saying.”

“I know, but you’re not me. You’re not... sensible like me.”

I laughed, and she laughed, too.

“You are such a bitch sometimes,” I informed her. “Are you saying I’m a slut?”

“I’m saying you know what you want, and usually you have no trouble going after it. If you want this job and the poolhouse that comes with it, take them. If you end up wanting your boss... take him, too. If you want to.”

“Aw, man.” I groaned again. “What are you doing to me? I’m counting on you to be sensible here.”

“Why?”

“Because there are too many warning signs. The man is obviously some part crazy. His adoring sister hired me to be his assistant because even she can’t work with him, and I had to put a note on his cat to correspond with him because he won’t answer his phone. He does this rapid-fire *tappity-tap-tap* thing with his fingers while we’re talking. And I basically had to trespass on his property to meet with him because apparently he never leaves his house, and no one gets to see him. Like, ever.”

“Except you.”

“Except me. What the hell is that about, anyway? You have to admit it all reeks of crazy.”

“I don’t know about crazy. Eccentric, maybe. But I’ve gotta tell you, after meeting a hell of a lot of musicians in the last year... they’re all pretty eccentric, Tay.”

“Yeah, but there’s eccentric and then there’s just crazy. And rarely interacting with other humans is not exactly indicative of non-crazy. I feel

like I know crazy when I see it. You've met my family, right?"

"Okay, stop saying crazy. Your family isn't crazy. They're just..."

"Mentally unsound?"

"I was going to say... complicated," said my ultra kind best friend.

"Yeah. Well, I've had more than enough 'complicated' people in my life, don't you think?"

"It's just a contract, though. It's not forever. If it doesn't work out, you move out. And maybe you can still help Courteney find someone else to fill the position as originally planned. Then you can walk away knowing you tried, and it just wasn't meant to be. But there's no need to feel bad, because you helped. I know you want to help, or you wouldn't be considering this at all. You've never been *that* motivated by a paycheck and poolside benefits."

"When you say it like that... it sounds so sensible."

Danica laughed. "Follow your heart, Taylor. What is it you really want to do here?"

Damn. I already knew the answer to that.

But when I didn't answer her right away, she said, "Look. You're a spontaneous person, Taylor, and I love that about you. You lured me to a mountaintop so Ashley could propose and marry me on the spot, because you get spontaneity. I'm the one who's always trying to slow things down and take everything too seriously. So I feel like whatever it is you want to do here, you already know it."

She was right. I was definitely the spontaneous type. I usually made decisions quick and on the fly, and I stood strong behind the decisions I made.

So why was this decision giving me so much pause?

"I want to help," I admitted. "I like Courteney. She's sweetly naive in a way I wish I was when I was her age. And her brother is... intriguing. The job could be really cool. I love music. And really, who doesn't want to hang out by a pool all summer?"

"Then I guess you have your answer." I heard some muffled noise and a male voice in the background. "Ash just walked in, and by the way, you'll be getting a resounding 'hells yes' from him."

"Put him on."

She handed the phone to her husband. "'Sup, Taylor?" Ash said.

"Hey. Your wife tells me you've met Cary Clarke?" She had told me, though I hadn't asked him for any intel yet.

“Yup. We used to cross paths and rub shoulders and all that shit, back in the day.”

“And what day would that be?”

“Back when we were teenagers. And up until about five years ago, when he went hermit.”

Right. Ash was never one to mince words. Which was why I wanted his take on this.

“So is he really crazy or what?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Yet you signed him as your producer on this album, which I know is incredibly important to you.”

“Almost as important as my wife and my next breath.”

“So, you’re not worried about working with a crazy person?”

“Hey, I’ve worked with crazy people all my career. Pretty sure I’m not totally sane myself.”

“Accurate,” I poked. “What was he like before the hermit thing?”

“Cool. He was always kinda in the background at parties, though. Shy or something. He was a fucking great guy, though. I’m sure anyone would tell you that. He’s a brilliant musician, too. Can’t really speak to what he’s become, personally, since I haven’t seen him in years, but Xander’s still tight with him. I’m sure if he’d grown horns or something, Xan would’ve warned us.”

“Right. Well, I’ve seen him. And no horns, I assure you.”

Ash went silent for a moment. “You’ve met him already? In person?”

“Yeah. A couple of times.”

“Well, Christ. Aren’t you a VIP. I haven’t even seen him in the flesh yet. How does he look?”

“Like a rock star.”

He snickered. “Cary always was pretty as fuck.”

Yeah, you could say that. Ash was bi, and I was pretty sure his version of “pretty as fuck” meant he thought Cary was legit hot.

He wasn’t wrong.

“So... he’s hired me as his assistant. And asked me to move into his poolhouse while I work for him.”

“No shit? Xander lived there last summer.”

“Your wife seems to think I’ll be comfortable there.”

“Uh, pimped-out poolhouse versus that dive apartment? No brainer.”

“Hey, now. The love of your life used to live in a dive apartment right next door to this one.”

“Yeah, and I moved her out of it as soon as I could. Let us know if you need help with the move. We’ll be there with beers and bells on.”

I sighed. “Thanks, Ash. Tell Danica I said good night, okay?”

“Will do.”

I hung up. Obviously, he thought I should move into the poolhouse, even if he also thought Cary was a little crazy. He seemed pretty blown away that I’d actually met the man; that I’d met with his record producer recently, and even he hadn’t done that.

I supposed I felt flattered that I’d been invited inside Cary Clarke’s private world, when so few people were. But flattery didn’t pay the bills, and it certainly wouldn’t keep me from getting hurt here.

I stood in the middle of my old studio apartment and looked around. *Dive apartment*, indeed. I’d never planned to live here forever. When I moved in, I didn’t even plan to live here as long as I had so far. But it was home now. The only one I had.

It wasn’t like I’d be moving out, though. I’d keep the apartment. I just wouldn’t be here as much.

Because I’d be at Cary’s place.

Everyone seemed to think this was a grand idea, including my best friend. But I just wanted to make sure I made this decision for the right reasons, with my eyes wide open. If it didn’t work out, I couldn’t let myself walk away from this job any worse off than I was before the offer came along. I could not let my life tumble onto some downward trajectory. I’d been struggling this year just to level out. It was time to move onward and upward.

This whole offer felt like a dream job, yes.

I just had to be careful it didn’t turn into a nightmare.

I called Cary, prepared to leave a message if he didn’t answer. But he did.

“Hey, Taylor,” he said, and it wasn’t lost on me that he’d already programmed my number into his phone.

“Hi, Cary. I’m calling to let you know that I’ve considered your offer, and I think I can move into the poolhouse.”

My uncertainty must’ve screamed through, because he said, “You don’t sound sure.”

“I’m sure. The offer was just very... unexpected.”

“I get that. I want you to be comfortable. If there’s anything you need,

you can just let me know.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“I want to make this work.”

*Me too.*

And maybe I wanted it just a little too much. That was the part that was really freaking me out.

“I’ll move in,” I said, “as long as the employment contract all looks good.”

“Of course. I’ll have it sent over to you. You can go ahead and make the arrangements, and let me know if you need help.”

“Arrangements?”

“To move in. And I’ll pay for the movers. Whatever you need.”

“Oh. Uh... I won’t need movers. I have a few friends who can help me. I don’t need to bring much stuff.”

“Sure. You can move in this weekend. Whichever day works better for you. Then you’ll be ready to start on Monday.”

Huh. Despite the slightly irritable/bossy/awkward streak, my new boss seemed pretty nice.

He also seemed to have all the right answers. But how could that be true? If he really had all the answers, how could he possibly be living the way he was?

“How about Saturday morning?” I said. “I can check with my friends, but I think that should work.”

“Sure. I’ll give you your own keys, and the code for the poolhouse and the alarms and all that.”

“Okay. Can I pick you up a coffee?”

“Sure.”

“What do you take in it?”

“Just black is good for me.”

“Then I guess I’ll see you Saturday around ten, to exchange coffee for keys. Sounds like a pretty sweet deal. For me.”

I heard his breath; it was maybe a soft chuckle, and a thrill ran through me.

*Not good.*

“I’ll see you then. Good night, Taylor.”

“Good night.”

After I hung up, I sat there for a long moment just thinking about the



sound of his voice. The words he chose. The things he said to me, and the things he didn't say.

The things other people had said about him.

And that thrill down my spine when I heard him breathe. It wasn't even an actual laugh.

*God help me.*

What was I walking into here?

I tried to organize everything I knew about him so far into some kind of understanding. But I still wasn't even sure why he'd hired me. I wondered why he'd let me into his world, when everyone told me that he didn't do that. That he had friends and coworkers and family who couldn't even get in to see him.

And it had been like that for five years.

Why me?

*Because he wants to fuck you* seemed far too basic for someone who already seemed so complex.

Could it really be that simple?

Could it really be that his sister and I had convinced him that he needed an assistant, and that I was the woman for the job?

Or was it some combination of both?

I put some music on, then went over to the window. I sat down on the deep sill and looked outside. I could hear the sounds of the city, the traffic noise and distant sirens, the less distant sirens. The voices of people stumbling by on the street below.

I took a deep breath and tried to sit with my decision.

I knew I'd made the right decision because it was what I wanted to do. But I felt uneasy about it. I didn't yet know what Cary Clarke's issues were, but I knew he had them. And I heard the warning bells chiming away in the dark.

If I was being honest with myself, though, I felt drawn to him.

I picked up the phone and wrote a text to my best friend.

**Me:** Can you drag your husband's butt out of bed around nine or so this Saturday?

She texted me back pretty quick.

**Danica:** A.M. ??

**Me:** Yup. Looks like I'm moving into Cary Clarke's poolhouse. I need muscles and beers please.

**Danica:** This is exciting!

**Me:** That's what Courteney said.

**Danica:** I think you're making the right choice. And if it doesn't work out... just walk away. Court will understand.

**Me:** I hope so.

**Danica:** And by the way. I googled. Top shelf bang certified.

**Me:** Told you so.

**Me:** And thank you.

*Just walk away.*

I could do that, right?

God knew I'd done it enough times in my life already. I'd walked away from bad bosses, bad boyfriends, bad relationships of all kinds.

And so had he, apparently.

He'd walked away from almost every relationship he had, and I wasn't sure why.

Were they bad for him?

Did he walk away too late, like I always seemed to? Or did he walk away preemptively, *before* he got hurt?

I wondered at what point I'd have to walk away from this one. Because I knew I would. Either at the end of our six month contract, or sometime before that, I'd have to walk away from Cary Clarke.

And I promised myself that this time, no matter when it was, I'd know when it was time to go.

I'd get out, before he hurt me.

# Chapter Seven

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**Cary**

## Heavydirtysoul

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**A**round ten o'clock Saturday morning, a black GMC Sierra driven by Ashley Player pulled up to my front gate. I saw him on the security feed on my laptop. He didn't hit the buzzer, but the gate opened for his truck; it was followed by Xander's Corvette.

Taylor's friends—including my best friend, apparently—had come to help her move in. I wondered if they'd volunteered so they could casually check up on me.

Once they'd pulled up the driveway, I couldn't see the vehicles anymore. There was no camera inside the yard or on the front door, and I stayed right where I was. In the studio, working.

Xander knew I was hardly the welcome wagon type, and I figured they'd let me know when they needed something. He'd already made it pretty clear to me how he felt about Taylor working for me and moving into my poolhouse; I didn't really need him saying anything ridiculous to me in front of her. If my sister was with them, same problem.

Xander and Courteney were both far too excited about this whole thing for my comfort.

My sister had already called me, twice, to tell me how happy she was that this situation was working out so well (a bit premature), and asking me to please let her know if I needed anything (I wouldn't). If things didn't work out well, she probably wanted to make sure she could whisk Taylor the fuck out of here as quickly as possible, so as not to upset me.

My little sister was big on not upsetting me. Though I supposed having a mental breakdown on her was probably a good reason for that.

She'd learned long ago to tread lightly.

Xander usually tiptoed around me, too, in his stupid-expensive designer sneaks, looking like he felt guilty for being happy. But he'd been fairly direct—for him—about this, when he'd hit me up with a string of texts the same night I hired Taylor. Which, apparently, he found out from my sister. I

definitely didn't feel the need to inform him and request his two cents on the matter.

I checked my phone now, but none of them had messaged me since they pulled into the driveway. I wondered what they were up to out there, but not enough to actually go look.

I scrolled back through my messages to that one-sided conversation the other night.

**Xander:** Heard you hired Taylor.

**Xander:** She's hot.

**Xander:** Obviously you know that. Not judging. Just saying she gets a lot of attention at the bar but I've never seen her one and done with anyone. I thought about fucking her myself but don't worry I didn't. This was before Courteney. But full disclosure. I didn't know she was your type or I would've brought her by to meet you long ago. Kinda feel bad I missed that.

About an hour later, when I hadn't replied, he seemed to feel the need to go on.

**Xander:** Also she's nice. And smart.

**Xander:** Guess that's why you like her.

**Xander:** Also her last boyfriend was a fucking douchewad of the highest order.

**Xander:** Ash is glad you're moving her into the poolhouse. He says her place is a slum.

**Xander:** Also she's single. In case that wasn't clear.

I didn't respond.

Seriously, Xander was never this chatty about women.

Ever since he hooked up with my little sister behind my back, he'd been kissing my ass to try to smooth things over, so it was hard to tell if his apparent excitement about this was genuine or what. Nowhere in there was an actual question to me, though, so I figured he didn't bother asking because he assumed he already knew the answer.

The last text was the most bizarre.

**Xander:** I'm happy for you.

You would've thought I'd proposed to her or something.

But I supposed the fact that I was interacting with a woman who I wasn't related to and who wasn't my sixty-something housekeeper was fucking exciting, if you were him. The fact that Taylor was hot sweetened the deal. Maybe he could mentally strike off *Is he secretly gay?* and *Did his dick fall off?* from his long-ass list of concerns about me. Because I knew these were serious questions in Xander's mind. Every time he talked to me, he subtly probed for answers.

*So, talked to anyone interesting lately?* (Translation: Have you talked to anyone *female* lately?)

*Hey, I ran into [insert name of hot chick], remember her?* (Translation: You do remember that chicks are hot, right?)

It occurred to me that it was difficult for Xander Rush to fathom a lifestyle that didn't involve a woman within reach at all times, ready and willing to get naked on demand. But Xander had never really understood me at all. And honestly, I'd never really understood him, either.

You didn't need to understand someone to care about them, though, and I knew Xander loved me like a brother. He used to say that all the time; that Gabe and I were his brothers. He still called me his brother.

I knew I was his best friend since Gabe died. He was mine, too.

So when I thought about it, really, I appreciated his weird speech about Taylor. It was his way of saying *Good for you, bro*. Obviously he approved of the fact that I'd hired her, and if I was also planning to fuck her, I had his blessing. I knew him well enough to extract that much from his text rambling. It was his way of looking out for me and being supportive.

He'd always done that, no matter how hard I'd made it for him.

I tried, for about the hundredth time, to actually focus on the music I was

supposed to be listening to. I was down to the last band on Summer Sorensen's top three, Twenty One Pilots, and I had two albums left to go. I was on the opening track from *Blurryface*, but I was far too distracted by the fact that there were people in my yard to really listen.

Taylor. Taylor was in my yard.

I checked my phone, but still no text from anyone outside.

I considered just going out there—you know, into my own yard—to say hi to my best friend and the woman I'd just hired and basically pressured to move onto my property. But I didn't. I told myself I just had to get through this album. Finish up with the Twenty One Pilots discography today, while I finished getting some shit organized for Monday. The studio control room was kind of cluttered and disorganized right now. I was usually pretty neat and organized in general, but the idea of having Taylor walk in here made me see it with fresh eyes.

I had to at least clear some work space for her and unpack the office chair I'd had delivered for her to use. Maybe clear out a drawer or something? Try to look like I at least remembered what it was like to have another human being inside my bubble.

And thinking about it just made me anxious to get it done.

Yeah, maybe I should get on that shit.

I put the music through the house-wide system and went looking for a knife in the kitchen to open the ridiculously stapled and tape-sealed box the chair came in.

But then someone rang the doorbell.

I figured it was Xander, coming to try to drag my ass out of the house. But when I went out to the foyer and looked through the front window, it was Taylor, and she was alone.

I opened the door.

She was wearing a little black cotton dress and a pair of pastel-pink Vintage Nikes that had been doodled on with black marker, her hair in two little pink braids. I didn't realize an almost thirty-year-old woman could look so hot in braids until this moment.

Yeah, I knew how old she was now. I'd discerned that from the birthday party photos she'd posted last November.

And yeah, I'd been snooping through her social media again.

"It's just me," she said quickly, as I stared at her. "Everyone's in the backyard."



“Hey.”

“Good morning.” She glanced down—at the utility knife I was holding in my hand. It was pointed at her. The blade was out and I’d forgotten I was holding it.

I dropped it to my side. “Uh—”

“Wow. That is one way to welcome a woman to your house.”

“Sorry, I was opening a box.” The knife clicked as I retracted the blade, and I tucked it in my back pocket. My face must’ve actually been turning red, judging by the heat level under my skin.

*Holy Christ*, was I rusty with women. I couldn’t think of one word to say to her.

*Good morning. Just say good morning, idiot.*

“Uh, good morning.”

She smiled tentatively and handed me a takeout coffee. And a packet of paperwork. “Black coffee. Employment contract and NDA, signed. Tax documents. Direct deposit info for my bank account... My rider’s in there, too.”

When I just looked at her, the smile fell.

“I’m kidding,” she said.

“Thank you.” I glanced at the paperwork but didn’t really see it. “If it were in there, what would be in it?”

“A rider? For me?” She kinda laughed. “Uh, I’m pretty low maintenance. Salt and vinegar chips? Coke? Jolly Ranchers?”

“Coke... like, the drink?”

“Yeah. Coca-Cola. I wasn’t planning to Hoover blow on my coffee break or anything.”

“Good to know.”

“I do eat chip sandwiches and Coke every day for lunch, though. Just mentally preparing you. Every adult human I’ve ever met makes fun of me for it. But if I never changed the menu for anyone else, afraid I can’t do it for you, boss.”

“I see. You’re telling me you put chips on bread and eat it?”

“No.” For the first time since I met her, she actually looked at me like I was crazy. “You just make a regular sandwich with whatever on it and then add chips to it. Makes it salty and crunchy.”

“Alright, then.”

“You don’t have to partake. I’m just saying.”

“I’ll get Rose on your lunch supplies. You can let me know what brand of chips you prefer.”

“Oh. I didn’t mean—” Her eyes went wide. “I was just joking. I don’t have an actual rider. You know that, right?”

“It’s fine. Lunchtime is during the workday and you’re at the office, so to speak. You can just give me a list of what you want from the grocery store and we’ll stock up the kitchen.”

“Okay,” she said, seeming unsure. “That’s really nice. Thank you.”

“Come in.” I opened the door wider and she followed me into the foyer. “Wait here.” I went into the studio, dumped the paperwork and the knife, and grabbed the envelope I had for her. When I re-emerged, she was looking up the curved staircase in the foyer, at the framed photos on the wall over the stairs. My family. My former band.

She turned to me when she heard me coming.

I handed her the envelope. “House keys. Alarm code for the house. And the entry code for the poolhouse. I just had it changed, so you don’t have to worry about any of my friends stumbling in there or anything.”

“Yeah, Courteney was pretty miffed that she couldn’t open it just now.”

“Maybe memorize those, and then burn that?” I suggested as she peeked in the envelope.

“It won’t just auto-destruct?”

“I’m not a secret spy or anything, so no.”

“Just checking.” She looked me over, quickly. “You have this subtle, if-James-Bond-were-a-surfer vibe going on, in case you didn’t know.”

“I think he did surf. In *Die Another Day*.”

“Okay, I’ll try not to hold it against you that you know that.”

“Not a Bond fan?”

“Not really.” Her eyes widened and she immediately tried to backpedal. “I mean, when I compared you to him, though, it wasn’t an insult...”

“I didn’t take it as one.”

“*Shit*.” She rubbed her neck. Was she nervous?

I was so used to being distracted by my own discomfort when talking to people, I could hardly read the signs.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I think I just flirted with you, without meaning to, then insulted you, without meaning to. Can we chalk this up to moving day nerves and move on?”

“Done,” I said. I didn’t want her to be nervous. I was nervous enough for

both of us. “Your own remote for the gate is in there, too. The other one is signed out to Courteney so you can just give it back to her. I have a security company that monitors everything. You’re attached to the new remote.”

“Sounds official.”

“I emailed you a list of other contacts you’ll maybe need, like the groundskeepers and whatever.”

“Thank you.” She hesitated. “Do you want to come out and say hi?” she asked, with the kind of unassuming innocence of someone who really didn’t know me. “Xander’s here and so is your sister. And Ashley and Danica.”

“I’ll pop out a bit later. I have some things to do first.”

“Okay. We’ll be a little while. I didn’t bring a ton of stuff, but the guys are already two beers in and playing Frisbee. I’m herding rock star cats out there.”

“I have total faith you can handle it.” I opened the front door for her. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Sure. See you later.”

I could hear voices out in the yard, in the distance, as she jogged down the steps. Laughter. Music was playing, but I couldn’t tell what it was. I thought I heard Xander’s voice, getting louder, like maybe he was coming around to the front of the house as I shut the door.

I headed into the studio and locked myself in.

I pulled up the security feed of the front gate on a laptop and left it open next to me, so I’d see when anyone left. Or if anyone else arrived. Then I got to work on unpacking and assembling Taylor’s new chair. And tried not to think about her out in the yard, hanging out with her friends, drinking beer in the sunshine.

You know, being normal.

Normal was hard for me. Because I so totally wasn’t.

Sure, I used to be the kind of person who’d enjoy a few beers by the pool with friends. I used to be easygoing—more or less. Even as my anxiety worsened, the bouts becoming more intense, I found joy and pleasure in everyday life.

I had a pretty great life.

The anxiety came on infrequently, and always triggered by specific things. It was predictable. Manageable.

But all that changed when Gabe died.

Overnight, *living* became unmanageable. I spun out of control, and the

only way for me to get some semblance of my life back was to take control.  
Of everything.

I became closed off, guarded, particular about everything in my life down to the smallest detail. I wasn't even sure what it was about Taylor Lawson that made me want to let her in.

I'd been thinking about it all week and I still hadn't figured it out.

I liked looking at her. I liked talking to her. But it was more than that.

I got a strong sense that she'd be willing to follow my rules.

Let me have control where I needed it, which was pretty much everywhere, in every little thing. And I didn't think she'd treat me like a freak because of it. Or tiptoe around me. Or butt heads with me over every trivial thing. She had strong instincts for navigating around other people, and I could feel that when she walked into my house and looked me in the eye, gently grilling me without being rude.

She was respectful without kissing ass.

She had a subtle, dry sass about her that was endearing without being prickly or obnoxious.

It made me want to be around her.

I hadn't felt that way about literally anyone in a really long time.

My phone vibrated with a text message, just as I was sitting down in her new chair to test it, make sure I'd put it together right. The leather was soft and it sank smoothly under my weight as I adjusted the height; it was the same as my chair.

I spun and rolled toward my desk to pick up my phone.

**Xander:** We're almost done moving Taylor's shit in. Come have a beer. It's Saturday.

**Me:** In a bit.

Maybe half a minute later, someone put on Our Last Night's cover of "The Middle." Taylor, possibly, since I now knew they were one of her favorite bands—I may have texted her several days ago to demand she send me a list, as if it was a condition of her employment, when it wasn't; I'd asked for her top ten, not just three, because I was obsessive like that.

It was definitely Xander who pushed the music through to my in-house

sound system, though. *Loud.*

I'd never been able to figure out how he always bumped my connection when he paired his phone to my speakers. But I didn't take the bait. I just let it play, closing myself into the studio control room and shutting off the speakers in there, and slipping on my headphones.

Then I got another text.

**Taylor:** This is kind of turning into a pool party. Xander said it was ok. If you want me to tell them to go, just let me know.

I smiled to myself a little.

**Me:** There's booze in the poolhouse kitchen if you want anything. I'll come out later.

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Sometime mid-afternoon, I saw Ash's truck leave on the security feed.

A short while later, I decided to head outside. Best to get it over with now, before anyone else showed up. I found Taylor, Xander and my sister drinking by the pool. They all turned to look when I stepped outside.

"Hey!" Xander swaggered over and greeted me with a hug. "When did you cut your hair?"

"Like a week ago."

"Yourself?"

"Uh, this girl does house calls."

If they found anything odd about that, I didn't see it. Probably because I'd stopped looking for signs of those things years ago. My primary tactic for dealing with the people in my life, even the closest ones, was pretty much get in and get out as fast as possible.

"You look handsome!" my sister said. She looked drunk. She gave me a big, bright smile and hopped up to give me a kiss on the cheek.

Then she settled against Xander, who draped his tattooed arm around her shoulders. She was wearing a bikini, and I tried not to give him a dirty look, or any look. I supposed they were used to their togetherness by now. They sure seemed comfortable with it, even in front of me. They'd been together

for almost a year, but for me, felt like it happened just last week. Maybe because I so rarely saw them.

That wasn't their fault.

"Can I get you a drink?" Xander grinned at me. "It's yours."

I glanced at the booze they'd found in the poolhouse and piled onto the bar cart on the patio. But I wasn't planning on sticking around long enough for a drink, so I just muttered something about needing to get back to work.

"You don't want to swim? We're just going back in," my sister said.

"No, thanks."

"But, look!" Courteney said. "We found my unicorn." She pointed at the pool, where the inflatable unicorn floaty I'd bought for her years ago was floating. They must've dug it out of some closet in the poolhouse.

"Go on in," I said. "You still fit in that thing?"

"Of course," she said, handing Xander her cooler. He followed her to the pool, where she flopped onto the floaty. He handed her cooler back to her. She screamed when he grabbed the unicorn by the horn and jerked the floaty like he was going to flip her.

He didn't.

She splashed him and called him a very nasty word, smiling the whole time. He laughed, flashing his teeth and taking a swig of his beer.

My sister was in love with my best friend. I still couldn't quite digest that.

I'd just never known either of them to be in love before, maybe. And really, I couldn't remember what it was like to be in love. Witnessing it in action felt foreign to me, like most human experiences based on emotion and connection with other humans.

"No rest for the wicked, huh?" Taylor said.

I looked over at her.

"You don't take Saturdays off?" she asked me.

"Not usually."

She was wearing a sort of see-through pink cover-up thing over a black bikini. I tried not to look too closely, pretending to watch Xander and my sister goofing around. But I couldn't help noticing her toes, wiggling a little to the music. Some old school No Doubt was playing now, which could've been Xander's pick or Courteney's. Or Taylor's, for all I knew. Maybe she sang Gwen in the shower, too.

She sipped her beer and grinned as she watched them. She looked comfortable here, and I liked it. Already, I liked having her here. Definitely

improved the scenery.

I'd told myself many times this last week, since I made the decision to hire her, that I was doing this for my sister, and maybe for myself, in the healthiest way. That maybe I was finally listening to what Court and Xander had been trying to tell me for years. That maybe this would help me grow or something.

But the truth was I was taken with Taylor. I found her fascinating.

And I wanted to control our relationship as much as I could.

I knew that was sick.

I didn't care.

I'd been sick for so long, maybe I was just used to it. And good mental health was overrated anyway. I probably wouldn't be half as good as I was as a musician if I was wholly sane.

And anyway, none of this would hurt her. It wasn't about her. It was just the way I needed it to be.

"Hey, I've gotta go," I told Xander, when he strolled back over.

"Sure, brother." He didn't bother arguing or trying to convince me to stay. He knew that would just get awkward for all involved.

Plus, he probably didn't want to draw attention to my freakishness in front of my new assistant.

Courteney gave me a wave from her floaty. "Thanks for coming out to say hi! Don't work too hard, okay?"

"Never."

She grinned, and Xander slapped me lightly on the shoulder. Then I turned to say goodbye to Taylor.

"Catch you later," I said, kinda awkwardly. Xander was watching, and it made me self-conscious. I probably had about zero game left with women at this point, and Xander had always been a professional player.

"I'll walk you in," Taylor said quickly, and followed me as I bolted for the house.

"Have a good weekend," I told her at the door. "I'll see you Monday."

"Yeah—about that," she said, grabbing the door before I could close it behind myself. She glanced back at Xander and Courteney, who were goofing around in the pool. Then she slipped into the living room with me. I had to step back so we wouldn't touch. "I just got an email from my bank," she said. "An automatic alert."

I said nothing.

“It said that there was a large deposit made into my checking account. I checked, and... it was as if, instead of a paycheck, six months’ worth of paychecks got deposited at once.”

“Right,” I said.

She searched my face like she was waiting for some explanation. “Was that a mistake?”

“It wasn’t a mistake. I had your pay deposited into your account. All of it. Just thought it was a good idea to pay you everything upfront. And I put in a little extra so the taxes don’t kill you.”

She stared at me, not looking happy at all. “Why?”

I went blank. I couldn’t even compute the question.

What was happening?

Why wasn’t she happy?

“So you never have to worry that you’re not getting paid if things don’t work out,” I said carefully. “Or if you don’t like being here.”

She just stared at me.

“You’re free to quit at any time, to move out, no questions asked.”

Well, that was bullshit. If she took off at some point, I’d definitely be asking her why. I’d probably want to know, in a masochistic sense, which freakish thing—or things—I did that drove her away.

“Are you okay with that?” I asked her.

Why didn’t she look okay with that?

“Well, next time, I’d feel more comfortable if you talked to me about this kind of thing before you do it.”

I studied her face, trying to read the vibe coming off her. All I knew was it wasn’t good. Tingles prickled up the back of my neck.

Was I blushing again?

“You’re upset,” I said.

“No. It’s okay.”

Bullshit.

My mind started racing as the anxiety crept up. My heart rate spiked and my fingers felt weirdly numb as blackness edged in around me.

*Don’t. Lose. Your. Shit.*

“Do you want to give the money back?”

“No,” she repeated. “It’s fine.”

“I wanted you to feel secure that you can quit if you need to. It’s in your contract. You can leave at any time, no notice needed.”



“I know. I read the contract.”

Shit. Did I just insult her? By implying she didn’t understand the contract?

*Fuck.* How did I fuck this up?

“Okay, then.” I started to back away, because I wasn’t sure it was a good idea to be standing so close to her when she wasn’t even fully dressed. And when I’d clearly overstepped some line in employer-employee relations that was not okay to cross. I could *feel* her unease. It was raising the hairs all over my body.

“Is this, like, *Shut up* money?” she blurted.

I stopped dead. “What?”

“You know, like if something happens that I don’t like, just shut up about it because you already paid me?”

“No.”

Fuck, no.

I could see how it felt that way to her, though. *Jesus*, I was shit with people.

*Major fucking backfire, asshole.*

“It’s not like that.” I dragged my hands through my hair, my face getting fucking hot. What the fuck was that about? I couldn’t remember blushing while speaking to a girl since maybe I was fourteen or something. “It’s more like *I like you and respect you* money. And if I do anything stupid, I don’t want you to feel like you’re stuck here, or you have to stay because you didn’t get paid yet.”

“Oh.”

“I wanted you to feel secure,” I repeated.

“Oh.”

I pressed my hand to my thigh, as my fingers started tapping. “I’m not really good with people, Taylor. As you can fucking see.”

“Right.”

“I just...” I shoved my hands into my pockets to keep my fingers still, cramming them into fists.

*You are not gonna melt down right here.*

“I can see me fucking this up,” I forced out, “and I really don’t want you to have to suffer for it.”

Taylor’s expression softened a little. “Okay. I think I get it.”

I took a deep, slow breath. “Did I just offend you?”

“No. I’ll get used to it.”

“Used to what?”

“Your... ways.” She glanced at my hands in my pockets. “You’re different than other people. I realize that. And it’s not a bad thing.”

Yeah, right. *It’s charming as hell.*

“I really didn’t mean for it to come across that way. I wasn’t trying to buy you. I know you’re not for sale...” I stopped talking because I didn’t trust myself not to say something that would just make it worse.

“Okay. I get that.”

“I was pretty sure I was gonna fuck this up at some point, somehow. But I can’t believe I fucked up already.”

She considered that, then said, softly, “I think your heart was in the right place, Cary.”

I barely heard her.

The anxiety was rising up like a black tide. My limbs felt shaky, and I didn’t want her to see it.

Not this soon.

I started backing away. “Look, if you’re not here on Monday morning, I’ll understand. I know I’m a lot to deal with.”

*Which is why nobody bothers trying to deal with you anymore.*

“I’ll see you on Monday,” she said firmly.

“Okay.” I was practically out of the room.

“And, Cary?”

“Yeah.” I stopped just inside the archway to the foyer.

“You can let me know if you need me today. I’m just hanging out. Later, I’ll just be unpacking and getting settled in. If you need me today or tomorrow, I’m ready to work. You know, for all that money you already paid me.”

“Sure. Just enjoy your weekend. Have fun.”

I turned and fled into the studio, locking the soundproofed door behind me. I sat down in the control room and took a slow, belly-deep breath, the way one of my therapists had taught me.

In four. Hold four. Out four.

Why the fuck did I think I could do this? Masquerade as a fucking normal person?

Like she wasn’t gonna notice.

*You’re different than other people.*

Yeah. No shit.

I could put on a mask for a few minutes at a time, but when she spent the day with me, day after day, she was gonna see who I really was.

The thing I just couldn't figure out was why I wanted that so badly.

## Chapter Eight

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**Taylor**

## Be Yourself

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**M**onday morning, I got ready for work in the poolhouse with an anticipatory buzz in my chest. Same way I might feel starting any new job, but this one felt like there was way more at stake.

I'd already been paid. A hell of a lot. And now maybe I was feeling this strange sense of performance pressure, like it was now on me to prove to my new boss that I was worth all the money and the perks he'd generously donated to my bank account and my general living conditions.

The poolhouse itself was amazing. There was a combined living room / kitchen area, the bedroom and bathroom, and it was beautifully furnished. The plush towels and bedding were way nicer than what I had at home.

It still struck me that the pay-in-advance thing was a little weird, but when I'd confronted him about it, he'd seemed so genuinely horrified that it might've offended me. And then he just let me go about my weekend, never asking a thing of me.

I didn't want to take advantage, but he'd told me to treat the yard like it was my own, and just to let him know if I was having anyone over. He'd been so entirely generous and reasonable, I couldn't find any fault with anything he'd done so far. Even the money thing.

Like I told him, I was pretty sure his heart was in the right place.

When I had Danica over for a drink by the pool again yesterday—just Danica—I told Cary first. By text. I hadn't seen him since we spoke about my pay. He didn't come out while Danica was here and say hi, but he seemed fine with it. All he said in response to my text was: *Have fun*.

As I packed my laptop into my bag, ready to head over to the house and find out how this job was going to roll, I managed to convince myself that everything would be fine. That I didn't need to be nervous. There was no reason to think this arrangement was weird or too intimate. Cary's sister had lived here. So did the assistant before. I'd taken the liberty of getting his contact from Courteney and calling him a few days ago; he said the job was

fine, but Cary didn't seem to warm to him and fired him within the week. He also said Cary gave him a generous two weeks' notice pay even though, according to their contract, he didn't have to.

I didn't ask him if Cary direct-deposited any of his pay into his account upfront.

While he'd stayed in the poolhouse that week—it was a perk of the job Courteney had offered when hiring him—he said he never got inside the studio. He barely got inside the house.

I wondered how far I was gonna get, or if I'd be working out by the pool on my laptop, alone all day. It hadn't occurred to me until yesterday, when I sat by the pool alone and heard not a peep out of Cary all day, that this job might actually get lonely, all perks aside.

On my way out of the poolhouse, I texted Cary that I was coming over, and I showed up for work at nine a.m. as agreed, at the French doors to the living room. He'd outlined nine-to-five work hours in my contract, with the possibility of working overtime, basically whenever he wanted me to. I wondered if he actually would.

He met me at the door, opening it for me.

"Good morning," I said as I stepped into the room. "Nice day."

He looked outside like he hadn't noticed. "Yeah. Looks nice." He shut the door behind me, and there was an awkward pause as I waited for him to say something else.

He wore gray jeans again and a gray T-shirt, which seemed to be his uniform. This time the shirt looked like it had once been black but had faded all the way to gray. And he wore the same worn-looking brown leather bracelet. He wore no other jewelry. He'd maybe finger-combed his hair, if that. He looked like he hadn't properly shaved in days.

And he still could've strolled onto the set of a *GQ* photo shoot and no one would've kicked him out.

Was it fair for someone to be so naturally delicious?

"I brought my laptop and stuff. Not sure where you want me to set up..."

"Right. I'll show you." He started across the living room, but paused. "Did you sleep well? How is the poolhouse?"

"It's adorable. And super comfortable. Can I just say I love your house? It's really nice here."

"Oh. Yeah." He looked around like he was actually seeing the house for the first time in a long time. "Thanks."

“How long have you lived here?”

“I bought it about six years ago. Just before my band went on tour.”

“Alive, right? Your last band.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t meet my eyes, still looking around the room like it belonged to someone else. “Pretty much spent every penny I’d made in my career to date on it. Luckily there was more money to come. I bought it cash, though, so no mortgage. And I guess it was a good purchase. It’s pretty much doubled in value since then.”

“Too bad. I guess it’s a little out of my budget, then. I’m thinking about saving up to buy myself a doghouse and live out by the train tracks on the industrial waterfront.”

He met my eyes, but he didn’t smile. He knew I was joking, right? “Well, if things work out here, you can stay in the poolhouse as long as you want.”

I didn’t touch that. His poolhouse was, sadly, nicer than any place I’d ever lived. I didn’t want to get too attached.

“I’m not trying to show off,” he said, suddenly looking uncomfortable. Like the other day, when I pressed him about the load of cash he’d dumped in my bank account. “I want you to feel at home.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like the tour?”

“Please.”

“*Shit*,” he said, and I realized it had probably been a long time since he gave a tour of his home to anyone.

I smiled. For someone so bossy/irritable/awkward and easily horrified by a social blunder, he was pretty fucking cute. I probably shouldn’t be smiling about that, though.

“Here goes.” He led me out into the grand foyer, turning to face the big staircase that swept up to the second floor. There was an open landing up there with a super-high ceiling and a skylight, and a couple of hallways leading off. Partway up the stairs, the wall was decorated with a framed platinum album and a bunch of photos. “Upstairs,” he said simply, pointing.

I smiled again. “Right.”

“The garage is through there.” He pointed at a door to the side of the entrance behind us. “You just saw the living room. The studio is this way.” He pointed me to the side of the foyer opposite the garage, beyond the living room entrance, where a set of double doors were tucked back in an alcove. They stood open to a dim hallway.

And just like that, he led me right into the studio.

*Huh.* That was easy. I wasn't even sure if I'd be allowed in here, much less immediately, on my very first day.

"Those are completely soundproofed," he said, pointing back over his shoulder at the doors, "so if they're closed and you knock, no one will hear you on the other side. The whole studio is soundproofed, for the most part. I had a lot of work done here when I moved in. This wall," he tapped the wall on our right, "wasn't here when I bought the place. This used to open right into the kitchen and dining room, on the other side." We passed a closed door on the left, then reached an open door on the right. "This was a small den/office situation. Now it's the studio control room and my office."

I followed him inside. There was a large control panel with about a zillion knobs and buttons on the left, like I'd seen in music studios in movies and stuff. Above it, a large window looked out into the rest of the studio. There was also another window on the exterior wall in front of us, but the shades were closed. Beneath it was a desk with stuff all over it—several laptops and paperwork—and on the right, a wall unit with shelves stuffed with books, and another built-in table/desk situation.

There were two desk chairs, one at each desk.

Cary pointed at the empty desk. "I cleared that off for you and emptied out a drawer. You can put your stuff there, and if you need more room just let me know."

"This is perfect. Thanks." I set my bag down on the table. *Holy shit.* I was working in his office with him?

"You can work there, or wherever you want," he added, like he was reading my surprise. "There's some tables out in the great room, too." He led me back out. The end of the hallway, outside the control room, opened into a giant room. "This was the great room of the house, like a big family room. I sacrificed it to the gods of music."

I smiled, a little awed. "I see that. It's awesome."

There was a step down into the sunken room, and a soaring, high ceiling. The walls were draped in heavy, dark curtains. Ornamental rugs were layered over the carpet. And luxurious, comfy furniture was arranged kind of haphazardly, including two couches and various plush chairs, some lamps scattered around. There were a few tables. There was also a glossy black piano in one corner, and several guitars displayed on stands.

Everything was neat and clean, but it was pretty dark. Just one of the



lamps was turned on, some dull light flowing in from the rooms off to the far side.

“This room is pretty soundproofed, but it’s not perfect,” he said. “The back wall has some soundproofing under the curtains, but the doors and windows there, onto the backyard, just have heavy sound-dampening curtains over them. Freddy has a kitty door there, under the curtains. That’s how he gets in and out of here when the doors are closed.”

“I know. I kinda sent him in through there to find you.”

“Right,” he said, eyeing me like he was impressed with that. He hadn’t seemed impressed when it happened. He pointed at the glassed-in booths at the left side of the room, next to the piano. “Sound booths, for recording guitar and vocals.”

“This is really cool,” I said, taking it all in.

“It’s pretty much a self-contained suite in here,” he said, and I could tell he was proud of the space, maybe encouraged by my interest. “That over there was a little TV room and a reading nook or whatever,” he explained, pointing at the wall on the far right, where two doorless archways led to small adjoining rooms. “The one on the right is now a little gym. And the other one has a bed in it. I have a bedroom upstairs but I usually just crash in here. I might, uh, have to change that now that I’m not the only one working in here.”

“Sure. Whatever works best for you,” I said lightly. Though I wasn’t sure how good an idea it would be if I walked in to find him in bed.

He’d look way too sexy all sleepy with bed hair.

I tried to smile pleasantly and stop picturing him with bed hair, but the damage was kinda done.

I glanced at the bed, what I could see of it, and wondered if he slept naked in there.

*Nope. Not good at all.*

He turned and I followed, trying to focus on what he was saying. “That was a small sunroom at the front of the house.” He pointed at an open doorway just past the control room. “I turned it into a mini kitchen. There’s a washroom back down the hall, too, where we first came in. Other side of the control room.”

“Wow. You’re really prepared for an apocalypse in here.”

“It’s not bomb or zombie proof, unfortunately.”

“Maybe in the next reno.”

He smiled a little. And holy Christ, the man was breathtaking when he smiled. "I'll show you the rest."

I followed him back down the hall and into the house. I thought he was about to take me upstairs, but instead we headed through the arched entry into the massive kitchen. There was a small nook by the window with a low table and chairs, and a formal dining room through another archway that looked like it was never used.

"I usually keep the studio kitchen pretty stocked, so I don't have to bother coming out here unless I'm really cooking. But that kitchen is small and pretty basic. Rose stocks all the groceries in here and in the pantry. You can help yourself to anything you want. You can use the kitchen in the poolhouse too, but feel free to use this one anytime. Same with the living room if you want to watch TV. There's no TV in the poolhouse."

"Thank you. That's really generous."

He shrugged that off. "Least I can do. I moved you in here. You should be comfortable and have everything you need."

I wasn't sure what else to say, except, "Thank you," again.

Then Freddy caught my eye. I'd noticed him quietly following us around, rubbing himself on furniture. Sometimes ignoring us to lick himself and other times gazing at Cary with his big, round, dayglow eyes beaming pure adoration.

"He adores you," I observed.

Cary looked down like he had no idea Freddy was with us, finding him seated at his feet, gazing up at him. The cat immediately popped to his feet, swishing his tail seductively in the air. "Ah, he just wants treats." He rubbed his foot on the cat. "Shit, now we've gotta give him some, or he'll be obnoxiously affectionate all day."

"What?" I laughed.

"He'll park his furry ass on top of whatever you're working on and stare you down at an uncomfortably close range until you acknowledge him, and then the cuddling and begging starts." He picked up a half-eaten pack of kitty treats from the counter and dumped it into Freddy's bowl. "Here you go, buddy. Let's not embarrass yourself in front of Taylor on her first day, huh?"

Freddy mewled a very small, dainty meow for such a big cat, rubbing himself gratuitously on Cary's legs before diving in. He purred like a small lawn mower while he ate.

"You'd think I never feed him," Cary said.

“I mean, obviously he’s starving.”

“I actually had to put him on a diet a while ago. Courtney took him to the vet and they said he was overweight.”

“Aw. Poor, starving, fat kitty,” I said, petting his head. “I’ll play with him. Make sure he gets exercise. How does that sound, Freddy? We’ll do some kitty yoga.”

When I looked up at Cary, he was just looking at me. “He’ll like having you around,” he said.

“I love cats. I wish I had one.”

“Well, now you do.”

I smiled. “Actually... I volunteer at an animal shelter a couple times a week,” I said, as it occurred to me that he’d never actually asked to see my resume. “I hope that won’t be a problem.”

“Nope. You can just let me know when you need to go down there.”

“Sure. I usually go one night a week and then once on the weekend.”

“Sounds good.”

He reached down and patted his cat on the butt. Freddy purred louder.

When he wasn’t looking, I eyed Cary carefully. I wondered if maybe he was getting better? If whatever he’d struggled with in the past wasn’t such an issue anymore?

Maybe he wasn’t as bad off as everyone seemed to think?

It was hard to imagine that the man in front of me was actually a recluse.

I’d looked up agoraphobia after he hired me, because I wasn’t sure I really knew what it was, other than some vague notion I’d maybe gleaned in the movies. From what I’d read, agoraphobia often developed in relation to panic attacks, because once a person had suffered a panic attack, they became so fearful of having another one and being out of control that they avoided situations where it might happen. And sometimes that went so far as meaning they stopped leaving the house.

But he said he didn’t have panic attacks anymore, right? So maybe he was getting past the whole thing.

“So, if this is going to work out,” I told him, “just so you know, I need coffee. I don’t see a coffee maker here. Please tell me there’s a café nearby? Walking distance?”

“There is. Maybe more like driving distance, depending how much time you have.” He opened a cupboard above the fridge and dug around, pulling something out. “You can have these.” He handed me a keychain with a

couple of keys and a key fob on it. “You can take the car anytime and get coffee or whatever you need.”

I stared at the black key fob in my hand. I knew what that fancy L logo meant. He’d just handed me the keys to a Lexus.

“Oh. Wow. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I also have a coffee maker in the studio, though. I already put on a pot today, if you want one. It’s just a Tim Horton’s dark roast.”

“Yes, please.” I followed him back into the studio. “I’m not a coffee snob. Tim’s is fine. But maybe I’ll hit the café one morning this week. Might be a good idea to get to know the neighborhood.” I followed him into the studio kitchen, where it smelled faintly of coffee and fresh air. Previously a sunroom, he’d said. It was the only room in the studio that had a window that was actually open, sunshine streaming in.

He poured me a steaming mug. “Help yourself to cream and sugar and whatever. It’s all there.” He motioned at the counter and the fridge next to it.

“Thank you.” I fixed my coffee while he poured his own. I noticed his was in a reusable black mug that said *Good Morning, Handsome* in gold script. “Did you buy yourself that mug?” I said dryly, wondering if he’d appreciate my sass.

“It was a gift,” he said equally dryly. “From my little sister.”

“She thinks highly of you.”

“One may wonder why.”

“Does she come over a lot?”

“Not really. Maybe a couple times a month. She’ll call first.”

I wondered if he always answered that call.

He’d responded to my text this morning, but he had already paid me a whack of cash, so it was in his interest to open the door and let me in here to earn that giant paycheck.

“Come to think of it,” he said, “Xander doesn’t always call first. Neither does my friend Dean, so if you find some shaggy haired guy in tight jeans with a big mouth loping around, that’s my former lead singer. Just point him in the direction of the food and he’ll leave you alone.”

“Right. Dean Slater? I kinda familiarized myself with your former band members’ names and listened to your album and such.” I glanced at him while I stirred my coffee. “I thought it would be appropriate, so I don’t make an ass of myself not knowing something I should know.”

“That’s cool,” he said neutrally. His eyes narrowed a little as he scanned

my face, and maybe my hair? “Actually, I take it back. If you see Dean around, let me know. I’ll throw him a beer and try to steer him off your scent.”

“Dean likes girls with pink hair?” I ventured lightly.

“He likes girls, period. Beautiful ones especially.”

I let that compliment go by like he hadn’t even said it. *Just fixing my coffee here.*

“He usually drops in when he’s in town,” he went on. “Him and Xander like to show up unannounced so I don’t have a chance to tell them not to.”

“That’s what friends are for. I do it to Danica all the time.” I grinned. “Anyone else?”

“That’s about it. No one else really comes over without calling first. They can’t get to the house anyway. Xander has a remote for the gate and Dean scales the fence. I actually offered him a remote, but he prefers to skulk in like a cat burglar. The security company swings by once a week to do a random check. They’ve caught him a couple times over the years. I think he likes the challenge and the element of danger.”

“So, if I happen upon him getting caught by the security guys...?”

He smirked faintly. “Just pretend we don’t know him.”

“Right. And how do I get into the house if I can’t reach you? Like if I text or call and you don’t answer?”

“You can use the house keys I gave you, anytime. And I’ll leave the studio open.”

“Okay.”

“Why don’t we get you set up?”

“Sure.”

I followed him back into the control room. “Do you like it dark?”

He looked at me like he wasn’t sure what I was asking.

“The shades,” I said, pointing at the window. “Do you mind if I open them?”

“Oh. Sure.” He moved to open them for me, and light flooded the room. Dust motes glittered in the sunbeams that shone down through the trees and into the room. “Uh, it may have been a while since I opened those.”

“Well, thank you for opening them for me.” I got busy pulling out my laptop. I noticed the pens he’d set carefully on my desk in a little holder for me, and the lined pad of paper. “If we need any office supplies, should I just get some or check with you first?”

“Anything like that, Merritt orders for me.” He settled into his rolling chair on his side of the small room. “She’s the studio manager at Little Black Hole. She’s there part-time and handles any supplies or equipment I need. The studio assistants will do runs back and forth from LBH to here.”

“Okay. That’s awesome. I can get in touch with them and coordinate that for you so you don’t have to deal with it anymore.” I pointed at the pile of stuff on his desk. “And by the way, what is all that?”

“Paperwork.”

“I thought that went to your accountants and lawyers and whatnot.”

“It does. But eventually I have to look at it.”

“Okay, how about I go through it for you so you don’t have to stare at that disorganized mountain, and I’ll just flag the important stuff for you? I have those handy little colored arrow stickers that’ll point you to where you need to sign.”

“Sure.”

I gathered up the whole pile and dropped it onto my desk with a *whump* of paper. “Look at all the time I’m saving you already. So you can put up your feet and you and Jack Daniels can make magic.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

“Isn’t that what musicians do in the studio?”

“I don’t drink JD.”

“Okay, so feet up and making magic, then.” I plopped down in my rolling chair. “What do you drink? You know, so I can stock it for you.”

He considered that, clearly surprised by the offer. “Not much,” he said. But then he added, “Maybe vodka.”

“Straight?”

“With a pickle chaser. And bread. It’s kind of a tradition I got from Gabe.”

That was the first time he’d mentioned Gabe to me. He didn’t use his last name or explain who he was. Maybe he knew he didn’t have to.

I’d told him I’d schooled myself on his former band. But more than that; he probably knew I’d heard. You couldn’t really hear anything about Cary Clarke and not hear about Gabe Romanko.

But I really wasn’t sure how carefully I should tread around the topic.

“That’s quite a tradition,” I said. “He came up with that?”

“He got it from his uncle.”

“Alrighty. Vodka... and... pickles,” I said exaggeratedly as I wrote it

down on my lined pad. “Dill, obviously?”

“Obviously. But I’m not doing it alone, so. Hope you like vodka.”

“Sure. And pickles. And bread. But I’m not drinking it straight.”

“You’ll learn. Keep it in the freezer, it goes down smooth.”

“Noted. Do you mind if I ask if you’re an alcoholic?” I looked him straight in the eye. “Betty Ford stints in your past? AA meetings? Totally not judging. Just figured I should know these things.”

“Alcoholism was never my problem.”

“Great. Me either.” *Good to know. Moving on.* “Do you smoke?”

“Cigarettes? No. Why?”

“I quit when I was nineteen, and I don’t intend to backslide. So I have this thing about not providing nicotine products for my employers, and trying not to be around it.”

“Sounds like a good policy.”

“I also don’t provide illicit drugs or prostitutes for my employers, just so you know. And I’m totally not sorry about it. But I’m not adverse to providing you with weed or anything else legal that floats your boat, within reason. Including indulging sugar cravings, caffeine or whatever other hankerings you have. Your good mood is my good workday.”

“That’s very proactive of you.”

“You learn as you go.”

His eyes gleamed a little, maybe with amusement. Maybe it was just the sun shining through the window that made them look like melting honey. “I think I’m good, but I’ll let you know.”

“Great.” I looked away. *Stop staring at his eyes.* “Now, can I be nosy and ask you what you’re working on right now?”

“Sure.” He tapped one of the three open laptops on his desk idly, waking it from sleep. I couldn’t see much on the screen but a bunch of files. “I’m pretty much just getting set up for the Players’ album. I’ve been getting organized this last week. I’ll start writing a bit this week with the band in mind. Just letting things flow. Getting kinda warmed up. While they get comfortable in the studio and hopefully start writing, too.”

“Hopefully?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it takes them a few days, at least, to get used to everything in there, get used to each other, socialize, procrastinate, whatever. Before they get down to work.”

“Ah. I see. Well, if you ever need me to run a recon mission and check up

on them, or snoop on Ash via his wife to make sure he's working when he's supposed to be, I'm willing. Cracking the whip on rock stars sounds like an incredible perk of this job to me."

He smiled a little. Yup, definitely amused. "I'll keep that in mind."

"So how did you end up on this project? Xander?"

That was maybe a sneaky question, since I'd heard that Summer wanted to work with Cary, badly, and had convinced the rest of the band to get onboard with the idea. I knew Xander had posed the idea to Cary. But I wanted to get his take on it.

"Xander asked me if I'd consider producing the album. Summer really wanted me to work with them, I guess." He paused. "Do you know Summer?"

"Yeah. I've met everyone in the band."

"Right. So, I guess it was her idea and she convinced Xander to ask me. Brody approached me about it, formally, but Xander wanted to make sure I was really into it. And that our personal shit wouldn't get in the way."

"In what way?"

"Well, he knows I can be pretty intense on a project. Plus, things haven't been all that... smooth... between us this last year."

I considered that. "I guess the fact that he hooked up with your eighteen-year-old sister might make things a bit... rocky?"

"It might."

"I'm not surprised. I'd probably be pissed if Xander hooked up with my teenage sister. I mean, if I had one."

"Yeah. Well, she's nineteen now and they've lasted almost a year. Seem to be in love, from what they tell me. I guess I'm stuck with it."

"For what it's worth, he treats her like gold whenever I see them together."

He considered that. Maybe it was occurring to him for the first time that I actually saw Xander with his sister out in the world. "How often is that?"

"Few times a month, at least. They hang with Ash and Danica a lot, and me and Danica are pretty much a package deal, so... I've gotten to know Courteney and Xander. They seem really good together."

"If that changes... think you might let me know?"

"Sure. But I don't think you need to worry. He's very considerate, gentlemanly, when he's with her. Tender, even. Different than he is when she's not there. She brings out his soft, gentle side."



“Didn’t really know he had one.”

“Come on. Sure you did.”

“Not really.”

“Huh. Well, it’s there. And your sister is basking in it.”

“I guess that’s good to hear.”

“I’ll keep an eye on them for you, though. I’ll let you know if there’s ever a time when he needs a stern talking to. I’ll even lure him in here for you and lock the soundproof door so you can give him shit.”

“I knew there was a reason I hired you.”

I smiled and sipped my coffee. “So... Brody came knocking and worked out a deal between you and the Players?”

“More or less. Trey Jones, over at Brick House Records, was involved, too. That’s the record company.”

“Right.”

“There were a lot of moving parts. Negotiations. Lawyers to consult and paperwork to look over, all that bullshit. Would be nice if me and Xander could just shake hands and be on our way, but it doesn’t really work that way anymore. Everything has to be approved from up on high. Trey owns Brick House, but he’s got all these executive minions who want to put in their two cents. And I have a lawyer who acts kind of like a manager for me, negotiates my deals for me. Am I boring you yet?”

“Nope.” He really wasn’t. I was actually excited by how interesting this all was. How did I even get in here? I was still kind of in awe about it. “This is all really interesting. Seriously. If I ever annoy you with too many questions, please just tell me to get lost because you have work to do. I have a feeling I’m gonna have a *lot* of questions. I mean, if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure. Ask whatever you want,” he said, but I could sense some hesitation there. Maybe he was worried I’d go too far, get too personal with the inquiry.

“Thanks. I’ve never had a job in the music biz,” I said, trying to reassure him that I was interested in his work, not the gossip surrounding his past. “But right about now, I’m thinking maybe I should’ve.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you’re here now.”

“Right. Maybe I’ll touch base with that studio manager of yours over at Little Black Hole. Get myself set up here. Take a peek at your workflow if

you have time to kind of explain the basics to me. If you think that's appropriate."

"Sure. We can do that this afternoon."

"Anything specific you need to get done today? You want me to check in later, make sure you complete your task or anything like that?"

"Pressure," he mused. "I like it. Actually, I should finish listening to Summer's vortex playlist today. I keep putting it off because something else comes up. It's this thing the Players do—"

"Oh, I know all about the vortex playlist thing. I have my own."

He blinked at me. "Really?"

"I mean... I've been working on it for a while. Okay, almost a year," I confessed. "I think it's almost done, though."

His mouth twitched a little in amusement. "Well, I can send the band's playlists to you, if you want to hear them."

"I'd love that. I've heard Ash's. Danica made one, too. But I haven't heard the others."

"I'll send them your way." He turned his attention to his laptop.

"Can I hear yours?" I asked him.

He stopped what he was doing, and I wondered if I'd overstepped a line there.

*Oops?*

His eyes locked with mine. "I didn't make one."

"You should," I said. Because obviously, he should.

"I'm not in the band."

"Neither am I."

He studied me for a lingering moment. Then he said, "I want to hear yours," in that bossy way of his.

"Is that a requirement of my employment?"

"It is now," he said, deadpan, going back to his laptop.

I turned to mine. Without looking at him, I said, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

He said nothing.

When I couldn't stand it anymore, I glanced over. He was looking at me.

"Deal," he said.

"And you better not take a year to put it together."

"Of course not," he said mildly. "Only a weirdo would do that."

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The rest of the workday was pretty damn ordinary. I reached out to Cary's studio manager, Merritt, over at Little Black Hole and she hooked me up with an official LBH email address. Then I spent most of the day getting organized, figuring out Cary's systems, or in some case, lack of systems, for everything.

For someone who said he'd spent the last week getting organized, I could barely make heads or tails of his workflow.

His house looked neatfreakish, but his office area was another story. His email and his desktop were a mess. His phone, from what he told me, seemed to be a dark hole where correspondence went to die. And I had no idea how he navigated the filing system on his laptops and in his cloud, because it was a fucking labyrinth of files and folders with no naming convention and very little discernible rhyme or reason.

Maybe I could improve that for him.

At lunch I headed out to the poolhouse to make the same lunch I ate pretty much every day of my life, just like I told him: sandwich with chips and Coke. It was my indulgence. I took it outside and ate by the pool, while Cary ate whatever he ate in his studio kitchen, standing, while talking on the phone to someone about a microphone that wasn't working or something. I found him like that when I came back into the studio after my break.

I worked the whole day in the control room/office, and most of the day, Cary sat a few feet away from me. He had his headphones on a lot, and he didn't really share with me whatever he was doing, moment-to-moment. Not that I expected him to.

I didn't pry. I had enough to try to bite off and chew just getting the lay of the land. And whenever I asked questions, he answered them patiently.

When it was nearing five o'clock, I looked up from my laptop. He hadn't asked me to stay late today, so my workday was almost done.

I decided to broach the subject, quickly and directly, before taking off.

"Hey Cary, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He glanced over, pushing off his headphones, but like his head was still deep in whatever he was doing on his laptop.

I took a breath and plunged.

"What is it like being agoraphobic?"

He seemed to bring me into focus, forgetting whatever he'd been doing

on his computer. But he didn't answer me.

"I looked it up a bit," I added quickly, "because I'd really like to understand. I don't mean to pry."

He sat back in his chair a bit. "Who said I was agoraphobic?"

*Well.* That was one way to shut the conversation down.

He probably knew I wasn't about to answer that. I either told him *This, that, and the other of your friends said it*, or *I read it online*, or *Nobody, I just assumed*. None of which was a great answer to that question. Not to mention that his question to answer my question neither confirmed nor denied that he *was* agoraphobic, so I had no idea where to take this now.

He pushed back in his rolling chair, facing me a bit. "You probably heard that I have stage fright," he said simply, saving me from answering at all. "That's the reason I work in the studio, as a music producer, instead of being in a band anymore."

"Right."

Made sense.

And it sounded a hell of a lot like some prepared line he'd delivered many times in the past as part of an official press release or something.

Maybe people believed it.

And maybe I wanted to believe it was just that simple. But if the only issue he had was stage fright, he could still go down to Little Black Hole and work there, right?

Not to mention that he could still hang out in his backyard, by his beautiful pool, for some length of time on a gorgeous Saturday, with his best friend and his sister. I'd seen him come out into the yard twice now, so clearly he could leave the house. But he'd barely stayed for five minutes when he came out to say hi to Xander and Courteney.

Which made me super fucking curious what his limits were.

Definitely didn't feel like I had the right to ask just yet, though.

Maybe he could sense the barrage of questions I was holding back, because he went on. "I prefer a controlled environment," he said carefully. "I'm pretty obsessive about my work, and I like things a certain way. And I'm an introvert. I function at my best when I'm alone for long periods of time, or one-on-one with people. I've, uh, been known to go a little overboard on the perfection thing when it comes to music and producing. It's probably related to the creative-genius spectrum or something, if I'm allowed to say that. I'm not calling myself a genius. But I've been told it's something like

that. Plus... my anxiety.”

“You have anxiety?” I asked gently.

“I have a predisposition for it, which probably comes from my mom.”

“Okay.” I took that in, listening and trying to absorb everything he said rather than pry. Whatever he was offering to tell me, for now, was fair enough.

But I felt the need to ask this one thing, because without knowing, it kinda made my job here awkward. And I really didn’t want to make dangerous assumptions.

“Do you ever leave your property, Cary? I’m sorry to ask you that, and you can tell me if I’m overstepping and I’ll back off. But I’ve heard that you don’t, and I’d like to know. So I can make sure I do the best job I can here. And I would never tell anyone anything about you that you don’t want me to,” I added. “Even without an NDA. Professional stuff, personal stuff, it’s protected here.”

He looked away. He ran a hand through his hair and cleared his throat quietly. He stretched out his fingers like his hand was stiff.

“I don’t leave my house much,” he admitted. Obviously, he was uncomfortable talking about it. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I haven’t left the property much in the last five years. And I can go for long stretches, weeks at a time, when I’m deep in an album, not even leaving the studio. I’m just used to it, I guess. I don’t really think about it anymore.”

“And what about before that? Before five years ago?”

The fingers of his left hand started tapping out a rhythm on the arm of his chair.

“If you don’t want to talk about this—”

“I’ve always had issues with being famous,” he said. “I’ve always had some level of fear about being onstage. When I toured with Alive, I literally had to be pushed or pulled onstage almost every show.”

“That must’ve been hard.”

His eyes met mine. “I didn’t know I had anxiety, or performance anxiety in particular, for many years. Not until a therapist told me what it was.” He said this kind of lightly, matter-of-factly. Like he knew what his issue was and he had a handle on it.

He made it all sound very normal. Very okay.

But it didn’t *feel* okay.

“I have the anxiety under control now.”

“Okay.”

I got the feeling there was a lot more to it than that. That he was only telling me what he wanted me to know.

But the mention of a therapist gave me hope. It meant that he was getting help. That he had support, when I’d feared that he didn’t.

He went back to his laptop. “It’s five. You can take off. I’ll see you back here tomorrow at nine.”

“Okay. Thanks. Wow, I can’t believe it’s already five o’clock.” I started to pack up my laptop. “It’s fun working with you.”

He raised both eyebrows, like I must’ve been high or something to utter that statement. But he didn’t say anything.

“What about you?” I asked him. “How late will you work? Will you break for dinner?”

“Later. I’ll probably do some writing tonight. And maybe I’ll make my vortex playlist later. I’ll eat when I’m hungry.”

Really? He was gonna make a vortex playlist, that fast, just because I asked him to?

“Well, if you need anything, I’m like a stone’s throw away,” I said. “Literally. Don’t hesitate to ask.”

He glanced up. “Thanks for the offer. But I’m not gonna overwork you and scare you away. You’re too valuable. You already whisked that mountain of paperwork out of my face. I should give you a raise.”

I smiled. “You can just pop it into my bank account.” As I walked out of the room, I realized maybe he wasn’t kidding. I stuck my head back in. “I’m joking. Do *not* give me more money. You’ve paid me enough.”

“Good night, Taylor. Go use my pool. I pay the pool boy too much already.”

“There’s a pool boy?” I asked, with exaggerated interest. “Is he cute?”

“No idea,” he said, deadpan. He didn’t even look up from his laptop. “But if he is, let me know so I can fire him.”

“Will do,” I said, and headed out.

# Chapter Nine

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**Taylor**

## Running Up That Hill

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**T**hat evening, after I had dinner in the poolhouse, I went for a jog around the gorgeous neighborhood. Felt like I had to, to work off the strange sweats my boss was giving me.

That pool boy thing was a whole lot of flirting.

Threatening to fire the pool boy if he was cute? Didn't that suggest that my employer was interested in me himself, and wanted to clear the field of competition?

He might as well have just asked me on a date.

Although he didn't.

And anyway, what the hell kind of date could you go on with a man who rarely even left the house?

*Keep your mind out of the gutter, Taylor.*

*No use tumbling in there too damn fast.*

That was what I kept telling myself. But the problem was, my mind was very comfortable in the gutter.

By the time I got back to the house, the sun was almost down. It was getting dark as I made my way up the driveway. I could see a faint bit of light bleeding from the far front window, through the bushes and trees. The one on the control room. I wondered how late Cary would be working.

I wondered all kinds of things.

Some appropriate, some highly not.

I wondered if we would be friends. If he would ever hang out with me in the evening. If he would ever come outside for more than five minutes, maybe actually use his pool while I was around.

I wondered if he liked to jog, or if I could get him to venture out into the neighborhood a little. Like maybe after dark or something?

I wondered if he missed having women around and what he'd be like to kiss.

I wondered when was the last time he had sex.



I also wondered if he was straight. Though I was pretty sure I already knew the answer to that. The pool boy comment, for one. And the way I felt around him, for another.

It was chemical. I could feel the pheromones in the air threatening to choke us both out.

Though maybe those were mostly mine.

From the backyard, I couldn't see any lights on; the studio was entirely sealed off from the backyard with all those layers of curtains. Upstairs was dark, too. I wondered where, exactly, his bedroom was, and if he was going to sleep up there tonight.

I wondered if he slept enough. His eyes said he didn't.

I wondered if he'd be working all night.

As I made my way into the poolhouse and stripped down for my post-jog shower, I made a strange decision, very consciously.

*I am not falling for him.*

*Nope. Totally not doing that.*

I was very assertive with myself on that point.

Yes, I was curious about him. Drawn to him. Attracted to him. But I was *not* going to let myself get all wrapped up in another man who was practically bleeding with issues.

Though it occurred to me, as the water streamed over me, that if I wasn't already afraid that I could, very easily, fall for him, I wouldn't have needed to try to make myself such a promise in the first place.

*Promises don't mean anything.*

That was what Cary said to me, the first day I met him.

I shivered as the water cooled me off and sank into my bones. I made it quick, shutting the water off and jumping out so I could towel off before I got too much of a chill. The cool shower was invigorating after a good jog and a good sweat. I pulled on a pair of soft, cotton sleep shorts that didn't strictly look like pajamas, with a bra and a black tank top. The bra was out of courtesy, in case I ran into Cary.

*I want you to feel at home* probably didn't mean *Bras are optional when you're off the clock.*

Then I grabbed my faded old Metallica hoodie. It had a picture of a fist holding a dagger, sticking up out of a toilet, and said METAL UP YOUR ASS. Because I was classy like that.

I headed out into the yard. It was already cooling off, now that the sun

was down. The lanterns all around the pool and gardens were glowing, golden in the night. I saw Freddy dart into the bushes, his bell tinkling, maybe on a nocturnal hunt. Though I imagined he scared off everything down to the last cricket with that bell on.

The sweet fragrance of fresh grass and blossoms beat the car-exhaust-and-sidewalk-piss smell in the air outside my apartment, any fucking day. Part of me couldn't believe that I now basically lived here. Cary hadn't exactly encouraged me to go home on evenings and weekends. It was made pretty clear I was welcome here, twenty-four-seven.

But there really wasn't much to do in the poolhouse.

It was too early to sleep, and I liked to laugh before I went to bed. Fortunately, there was that giant TV in Cary's living room. The room he gave me a key for and told me to help myself to. And I actually felt pretty comfortable in his house.

That surprised me, in a way. But today, while I spent the day with him, any lingering reservations I might've had about working here seemed to dissolve. The job already seemed pretty awesome, and frankly, so did my boss.

But obviously, what I'd seen so far wasn't the whole picture. I knew that.

I let myself in through the French doors and turned on a lamp. I went out to the foyer and looked at the doors to the studio.

They were open.

I went over and peeked up the long hallway inside the studio. The door to the control room was ajar, dim light spilling out. I couldn't hear any sound. I wondered if Cary had headphones on.

I went back into the living room and sat down on the couch, and after some random button pushing figured out how to work the TV. He had Netflix, and I decided to watch some politically incorrect comedy—my favorite. I searched comedy specials, found Bill Burr and put on *I'm Sorry You Feel That Way*. And I turned it up pretty loud.

I curled up in the corner of the big couch, cuddling underneath my hoodie, laying it over me like a blanket.

Maybe ten minutes in, I heard Cary. I looked up to find him standing in the arched entranceway.

"I'm sorry," I said, not sorry at all. "Is it too loud?"

He studied me for a moment and maybe, just maybe, the barest hint of a smile touched his lips. He leaned a shoulder on the wall. "What are you

watching?”

“My favorite comedian.”

He looked at the screen. “Who is it?”

I paused it with the remote so I could gape at him appropriately. “You don’t know who Bill Burr is?”

“I don’t really watch stand-up comedy.”

“*What?*”

“I mean... I saw Eddie Murphy *Raw* when I was a kid.”

“You need to sit your ass down on the couch, boss. Right now. Laughter is medicine for the soul.”

I didn’t wait to see what he thought of that. I just resumed watching.

After a moment, Cary came over and sat down on the enormous couch with me. He was at one end, and I was at the other. We couldn’t have touched if we wanted to.

But we watched comedy together. And after a while he did laugh, a little, kind of under his breath.

I probably watched him as much as I watched the show. I’d seen this one before anyway.

And Cary Clarke laughing was something to see.



It was late, like after two in the morning, and I couldn’t sleep.

I lay flat on my back on the bed in the poolhouse, staring at the ceiling, unable to turn off my brain. I knew it was the nerves and adrenaline of being in this new place, starting this new job. I had nothing to be nervous about. I knew that. I’d aced my first day and Cary and I got along.

I just had all this restless energy left over, that my jog didn’t seem to dissipate.

One of the things I loved about my apartment building, and was kinda missing right now, was the rooftop. It was accessible from the sixth floor, right above mine, and I sometimes went up there at night just to listen to the sounds of the city and look at the stars.

But there were stars here, too.

I got up, pulling my sleep shorts and tank top back on. I didn’t bother with the bra this time. It was the middle of the night. I looked around for my

Metallica hoodie, and when I couldn't find it, I realized maybe I'd left it in Cary's living room.

After Bill Burr, he'd gone back to work in the studio. I'd watched a bit of another comedy special, almost dozed off, then dragged myself off to bed. I'd slept for a bit, then woke up and couldn't fall back asleep.

I dug another hoodie out of the closet, pulled it on and went out into the backyard in bare feet. I put up my hood and dug my hands into my pockets. It was cool but not cold. The golden lanterns around the pool and gardens had gone out and the yard was dark.

It was a clear night and when I looked up, I saw stars smattered across the sky. They were dim, and maybe it was my imagination but it seemed like I could see more stars here than from my apartment downtown. Maybe just because it seemed so much darker in this quiet residential neighborhood, even though I was in the middle of the city.

I laid myself out on a lounge chair by the pool, and looked up at the stars. Way better view than the poolhouse ceiling. I tried to clear my mind and count the stars. After a while, I realized I kept losing track and had to start over, which meant I was probably close to falling asleep.

I almost got up to drag myself back to bed, but I didn't.

Then I heard a noise. I jerked, wondering if I'd fallen asleep. I sat up and looked around in the dark.

Cary was standing at the French doors in the living room, inside, and I heard the click as he locked them for the night. He looked out, seemed to look across at the poolhouse, which was dark. He didn't see me out here in the darkness. He turned away from the windows.

I got up to show myself, to go ask him if he wanted to join me, maybe. But then I hesitated. What time was it?

*Come look at the stars with me.*

It seemed silly. Intrusive. It was the dead of night and he'd already spent most of his day and his evening with me. Surely he was sick of me by now, and wanted some sleep.

I watched him walk back through the living room. It was dark, except for the light in the studio that was bleeding in, dimly, through the foyer beyond. And for some reason, I drifted toward the doors.

He stopped as he passed between the couch and the coffee table, and I stopped, several feet away from the doors.

He reached to pick something up off the table. Something small. He

turned it over in his hand and seemed to study it carefully. I couldn't really see his expression or his eyes, just his face in dim silhouette.

He put whatever it was back down on the table, gently.

I wasn't sure why I was standing there, watching him. But I didn't move. I barely breathed, like he might hear me or something.

He turned and looked at the end of the couch, right where I'd sat while we watched comedy on his big screen a few hours ago. He reached to pick something up off the couch.

My Metallica hoodie.

A warm prickle went through me when I realized what it was—like he was touching *me*.

He held it in his hands, like he was feeling the soft fabric, gently. Then he lifted it slowly. He held it to his face, maybe inhaling the scent. Then he lowered it and just held it, standing there a long moment.

I didn't budge. I didn't breathe. I could practically smell the hoodie myself. Feel it in his hands, like it was in mine.

And then I remembered, the lipstick that had fallen out of the pocket. It rolled on the floor and I put it on the coffee table. Was that what he'd found on the table?

He sat down all at once, on the coffee table, like his body was suddenly too heavy.

He hung his head for a moment, and ran a hand through his hair.

That was when I knew I should back away, stop staring, stop *spying*.

But I just stood, mesmerized.

He rubbed my hoodie gently in his hands.

I swallowed, and my throat pulled, dry. My heart was beating too hard as strange things happened in my body. The nervous feeling of watching him when he didn't know I was watching. The anticipation of what he was going to do next.

The question: Why was he holding onto my hoodie?

I watched him slide over from the coffee table to the couch. He sat right at the end of the couch where I'd sat while we watched TV. But he didn't turn the TV on. He leaned forward on his knees, his head hanging. He just sat there, leaning on his knees.

Then he laced his hands around the back of his neck like he was exhausted. Or, like he was wrestling with some monumental decision that was going to change his life forever.

My heart thumped, my whole body vibrating with the frantic beat.

Then I saw his shoulders shift, his arm moving as he reached down between his legs. The obvious movement as he started unzipping his jeans.

I sucked back a breath. I knew what he was doing.

*I wanted him to do it.*

He shifted his hips, then leaned back, reclining against the couch. I followed the silhouette of his arm, down, to his hand. He'd taken out his cock.

My whole body flushed with heat.

He was hard. I could see the shape of him. Darkness against the deeper dark, flashes of detail as the dim light spilled across him, as his hand slid up, then down.

His cock flexed, standing up straighter.

I saw the thick shaft, the slight curve, the juicy head, and my mouth watered. The flesh between my legs gave a hungry pang.

I glanced at the silhouette of his face. His mouth drifted open.

I wished I could hear him.

I couldn't believe this was happening. Right before my eyes.

I was watching, and I had no intention of leaving, even as the guilt rippled through me. My heartbeat was too strong, and it pounded my feet to the ground.

*Stay.*

*Watch this.*

Cary ran his free hand up his stomach, pushing up his T-shirt to bare his ribs, the hard expanse of his chest. Then he drifted his hand over his chest. He dragged his fingers over his nipple, then down his stomach. Then he grasped something and dragged it over his bare chest.

*My hoodie.*

He draped it over his chest and left it there.

Then he lifted one hand to press it to his eyes, like he was blocking out everything except what was in his head. His other hand stroked, up and down his thick cock, squeezing. I could feel the tension in my own body, the dry thickness in my throat when I swallowed. The fierce pounding of my pulse in my head, and between my legs.

I couldn't hear him. He couldn't hear me, my raspy breathing in the dark.

But I could see his pleasure.

It was the only time he removed his hand from his eyes: to watch himself

come.

I watched, too, as his whole body went rigid. His mouth opened again in a soundless breath as he ejaculated, the thick spurts spilling over his fist... I couldn't quite see them, but I could imagine, as I watched the slow, jerking movements of his body. The way his head fell back against the couch and his hand gradually slowed, then stopped moving.

His chest silently heaving as he clutched my hoodie to it.

# Chapter Ten

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**Taylor**



## Rock N' Roll Is a Vicious Game

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I woke up with the feeling of Cary next to me in bed.

He wasn't there, of course. It was another dream.

I kept seeing him laid back with his fist around his cock, his mouth open in pleasure. I could feel his heat. I could hear him moan.

I could see the thick spurts of his come pouring over his knuckles.

I could practically taste it.

I groaned, rubbing my face and rolling over.

Obviously, when I got back to the poolhouse last night after watching him masturbate, I'd made myself come. Immediately. I wasn't sure I'd ever come that fast in my life. The overwhelming visual display of what I'd just seen had me torqued up so high I was shaking by the time I collapsed on the bed, and pretty much as soon as my fingers got working down there, it was all over.

Afterwards, I realized the blinds on the bedroom were partway open. But it was dark. I didn't turn on any lights when I stumbled in. And Cary definitely wasn't out there in the dark, watching me. I checked.

The only voyeur around here was me.

I sighed and pushed myself up out of bed. I'd had a shitty sleep, because I kept waking up aroused. Dreaming about it again and again.

As I forced myself to shower and eat some cereal, I kept seeing it.

Oh, *God*. That visual.

I would never be able to unsee it and I didn't particularly want to.

However, I felt guilty for watching something that was meant to be private.

At least, it probably was. He didn't shut the curtains over the French doors. But he also didn't turn on any lights in the living room. It was the middle of the night, he looked outside first and saw the complete darkness of the yard and the poolhouse, and obviously he thought he was alone.

And it didn't exactly seem like he'd planned to do it. More like he was on

his way to bed for the night, but got distracted by my lipstick and then my hoodie... and couldn't *not* do it.

Because he wanted me?

Either that, or he just reaaally liked the smell of my hoodie.

*Shit.* How was I gonna look him in the eye?

It wasn't what I'd seen that was the problem. It was the fact that I'd spied on him to see it.

Should I tell him?

How?

*Hey, you know last night, in the middle of the night, when you looked out the window and thought you were alone because the whole world was dark and asleep? Well, I was right outside in the dark, and I watched you smell my hoodie and touch yourself, and I watched you come, and it was the most exciting moment of my life thus far. I hope you don't mind.*

*Yeah... I'll just pack my things and go.*

Yeesh.

Would he be embarrassed? Upset? Would he fire me?

He had every right to.

If I was a guy, standing outside my female boss's house in the middle of the night, and I watched her masturbate like a Peeping Tom from the bushes, pretty sure that would be grounds for dismissal and very possibly a sexual harassment lawsuit.

Hardly made it okay just because he was a man and I was a woman.

I was his employee. I was on his property. And he did not know I was there.

Unless... he ended up liking the idea that I was there?

Fuck me, but I was so aroused at the thought. I had to get myself together. I was just hoping he wasn't in the studio already when I walked in. I wasn't quite ready to face him yet.

I made my way into the house—where my Metallica hoodie was mysteriously *gone* from the living room—and into the control room. And there he was, sitting at his desk.

My Metallica hoodie was draped on my chair. I stopped short, my gaze fixated on it.

I must've come perilously close to dropping my shit all over the place, because Cary jumped to his feet and took my laptop bag from me. I looked up at him with wide eyes.

“My hoodie,” I croaked.

He glanced at it, then his eyes met mine again. That warm, soft honey staring back at me was gonna do me in.

*I saw what you did.*

“You left it here last night.”

I swallowed. I hadn’t left it *here*, exactly. But I had left it in the house.

And the last time I saw it, it was draped over his glorious, naked chest, while he...

I went to sit down and as I got my laptop set up, carefully not looking at him, I couldn’t stop wondering if my hoodie smelled like him now.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked me, sitting back down. I could feel him eying me and I couldn’t even look at him.

“Not really. I’m kind of a night owl sometimes. Have a hard time sleeping when I can’t stop thinking.”

“Me, too.”

The doorbell rang; the studio door was open and I heard it in the house, and I almost gasped with relief. “I’ll get it.” I jumped out of my chair, glad for the interruption.

It was Rose, and I spent the next half-hour helping her unload groceries and put them away.

Then I decided to be a total chickenshit. I headed out to the poolhouse to grab my purse and the car keys Cary gave me, and sent him a text.

**Me:** Running out for coffee. Will take the car. Be back soon.

I headed around the house, letting myself into the garage through the side door so I wouldn’t accidentally run into him in the foyer or anything. Obviously, I’d have to actually work with him at some point today. I just wasn’t ready to face him with my *No, I totally didn’t watch you jack off last night* poker face on.

Maybe caffeine would help.

There were three cars parked in the garage when I walked in. One was an old collector car, in mint condition, all peacock blue and chrome. There was also a dark gray SUV and a charcoal sedan. I pressed the unlock button on my key fob, and the sedan unlocked.

I went over and slid into the buttery leather seat. As I got acquainted with the controls, I wondered why Cary had given me this car instead of the older

model SUV. I pulled out to the driveway, where I let the car run for a moment in case it hadn't been driven in a long time. Then I opened the sunroof and got on my way.

Gliding along the leafy, beautiful streets of Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale on this gorgeous summer morning, I decided to go long. I wasn't in any real hurry, and I was sure Cary wouldn't mind. He said I could use the car anytime to get whatever I needed. So I looped around and headed over to Mount Pleasant to get us coffee at Nudge instead. I wondered if he'd ever had their coffee.

I figured I might as well. It was probably good for the car to put a few miles on, let it warm up and let the oil run through.

Damn, I could really get used to this.

I'd had some decent jobs with perks, but this one was something else.

*Generous pay.*

*Sweet poolside accommodations.*

*Luxury car.*

Plus, my boss was becoming juuust this side of too much to handle. I'd never crushed on a boss so hard and so damn fast.

*Nice to me.*

*Super dreamy on the eyes.*

*Provides the hottest solo sex show I've ever seen...*

And now I felt guilty.

I should've really stopped drooling over him and his amazing car and gotten back to work. But I kinda couldn't believe this was suddenly my life.

Then it hit me—this wasn't my life. This was *his* life.

And he wasn't really living it.

When was the last time he'd driven this car? Or any of his cars?

When was the last time he'd cruised around his beautiful city and gone to the café?

It was fucking sad, that he didn't get to feel this. This freedom. The sun on his face. The breeze in his hair.

And the true enjoyment of reaping the rewards of all that hard work he did.

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I managed to fly through the rest of the day on the wings of my ongoing caffeine buzz—after the café drinks ran dry, I made us two pots of coffee—and diving deep into my work.

My most pressing mission was to get on top of Cary’s email correspondence, since ninety-nine percent of the “correspondence” seemed to go one-way—into his inbox, where it died of neglect. My first task was sorting through the unopened emails, which would probably take days. I’d decided to sort them in three rounds. One: delete everything unopened that was over two months old. This actually took a hell of a long time, since he had tens of thousands of unopened emails. Two: delete all spam and anything else that was impersonal. Three: go through everything that was left and sort it into two groups, one being “ask Cary about this” and the other being “reply on Cary’s behalf.”

Meanwhile, I was constantly distracted by the man sitting on the other side of the very small room.

Wondering what he was working on. Wondering what he was up to when he was in the other room. Wondering if he was looking at me.

Wondering how many other times since he met me that he might’ve brought himself to orgasm while thinking about me.

You know, just the important stuff.

I knew he was wondering about me, too, because on a pretty regular basis he’d fire random questions at me out of nowhere. This went on pretty much all day.

The first time, it happened when I passed him his coffee from Nudge.

“Why do you have two last names?”

“Oh. Uh... Lawczynski was my last name when I was born. But then my dad and his brother, who moved here from Poland as teenagers, with my grandparents, decided to North-Americanize it or something. I’m not even sure why. I asked him, but he was vague about it. My dad is kinda crazy. You ask him a question and he rambles off to something totally unrelated.” Wait. *Am I doing that right now?* “Anyway, they changed it to Lawson, so that’s what I’ve always gone by. But lately I’ve been rocking the original family name. You know, maturing makes one think about their roots and stuff. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering,” he said.

Later, it happened when I walked back into the control room after refilling my mug. “Is your hair always pink?”

“No. It’s dirty blonde. The pink thing is more recent. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

Later, while we were both working on our laptops, he asked me, “Is April Wine really one of your favorite bands?” That one was so out of nowhere I actually jumped a little.

“Yes. That’s why I put them on my top ten list. But I only listen to them when I’m feeling melancholy or nostalgic for my childhood. My mom was a major fan.”

After that, I started singing “Rock N’ Roll Is a Vicious Game.” Which I figured took some balls, since I couldn’t really hit a note to save my life, and he was the legendary music producer.

He smiled at me.

My pussy clenched involuntarily and I stopped singing, pretending to need to cough.

Five o’clock started creeping up far too fast, and I started to regret that the day was almost over. All day, Cary had drifted between working at his desk with his headphones on and working out in the great room, acting totally normal. Or at least as normal as Cary seemed to get.

And I’d had fun working with him, again.

Maybe it was just me who felt the palpable tension between us every time he came into the room, and felt mildly embarrassed about what happened last night.

Why would he be embarrassed? He had no idea he’d had an audience when he did that incredibly private, sexy thing.

“So... would you have time this week to go through your emails with me?” I asked him as I was finishing up. We were both sitting at our desks, and he slipped his headphones off, the same way he did, patiently, every time I interrupted him. “I sorted out anything that seems worthy of your attention. I can just run through them with you quick and see how you’d like me to respond to them for you? Might take an hour or so.”

“Sure. We can do that. I’ll let you know when I have time.”

“Okay. You know, you have some requests for interviews sitting in your inbox,” I told him, stalling as the last few minutes of my workday dissolved. Those emails had been the most interesting ones; they’d been forwarded to him from some of the record companies he’d worked with, from his lawyer’s office, from Merritt over at Little Black Hole. It didn’t seem like he had an actual point of contact for that type of thing, until now. “Do you ever respond

to those?”

“Nope.”

“I could do it for you.”

“Maybe.”

“If I did... what would you want me to say?”

He blinked at me, like it had never occurred to him to think of a response to interview requests.

“It’s good karma, responding to people,” I said. “Don’t you think?”

“Not worth wasting too much of your time on, though.”

“It won’t take much time.”

He sat back in his chair. “Okay. If it’s a request from a fan site or something you can just ignore it. I don’t think most of them expect a response anyway. If it’s from anywhere legit, any kind of major publication or TV, radio, whatever, you can write up a form response that says thanks but I’m not doing interviews right now. You can use that going forward. But if you respond once and they come back asking again, just ignore them.”

“You never do interviews? Even over the phone or email or anything?”

“No.”

“Would you want to, if we vet the questions and I help type up your answers or anything?”

“No.”

“Can I ask why?”

He stared at me.

“Just wondering...” I said, using his excuse to me when he’d asked me questions today.

It worked.

“I don’t do interviews,” he explained, “because when I do interviews they always ask me about Gabe. Some of them *only* ask me about Gabe.”

“Right.” Good to know. If he didn’t want questions about Gabe, then I’d try not to ask any. “Well, I guess I’ll clear out of here. Unless you need anything else today.”

“No.” He went back to his laptop. “Thanks for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” As I was packing up my laptop, I added casually, “Did you know that a lot of famous musicians have stage fright?”

He looked up at me.

“It’s a type of performance anxiety, like you said,” I went on. “Which is a type of social anxiety disorder. It’s a very real thing.”

“I’m aware.”

“Yet they manage to overcome it and get themselves onstage. Hence the famous part.”

He just looked at me.

I held his gaze. I’d read up on it yesterday, while I ate my dinner. I was interested. And I wondered how much he knew about it. How much work he’d done to try to overcome it.

I wondered if he wanted to go back out onstage.

And what it might take to get him there.

“Maybe you could get back out onstage,” I said, when he said nothing.

“I’m not in a band anymore. I’m a music producer.” He said it with such conviction, I almost bought it.

But if all he really wanted was to hide out in his cave, alone, where no one would ever admire him again, why did he let me in here?

He had to have noticed the way I looked at him by now. The obvious chemistry between us.

He didn’t have to hire *me*. If all he really wanted was an assistant to help him with his work, he could’ve hired some dude who was just as proficient at this job but would bring zero complications to his life.

He also didn’t have to have me living in his backyard and working right here in his tiny office with him.

So, frankly, I wasn’t buying the whole hermit thing.

His haircut was far too sexy, his body too toned, and he smelled way too fucking good to have one-hundred-percent thrown in the towel on his dick and decided he was living alone for the rest of his life, never to be seen, desired or touched again.

Of course, if he had no desire to be in a band again and get back out onstage, there was no reason for me to ever mention it again.

I mentioned it again. “But I mean, if you ever thought about it... You’re not the only one who has a hard time getting onstage and performing. Like there are some super, super famous musicians who struggle with stage fright.”

“Thanks for the info.”

“You’re welcome.”

I stuffed my laptop in its bag and zipped it up. Cary had gotten up and went over to the printer. Some paperwork I’d printed out for him hours ago suddenly seemed incredibly interesting to him.



“Quick question,” I said. “What do you think when you think of Eddie Van Halen?”

He looked up at me. “What?”

“Just answer the question. Please.”

He blinked at me. “Okay. Probably ‘Runnin’ with the Devil’ because it was the first Van Halen song I learned to play on guitar.”

“Anything else?”

“I mean, he’s pretty much a virtuoso in the guitar world.”

“Anything else?”

“That Frankenstrat guitar he created. And maybe that power drill effect he did in the nineties. There are a lot of things that come to mind.”

“Uh-huh. Did you know he has performance anxiety?”

In characteristic Cary fashion, he stared at me too long for comfort and didn’t actually answer me. “And your point would be?”

“My point would be that you’re not the only musician who’s struggled with stage fright. And it doesn’t have to define who you are.”

“Right.” He looked down at the papers in his hand.

“Did you know Cher has stage fight?”

He gave me a look.

“And Barbara Streisand.”

“Thanks for letting me know.” He walked back over to his desk like he was dismissing me.

*Consider me undismised.*

“And Adele,” I pressed.

He put the papers down, but he didn’t sit down. “When I plan to launch my career as a female pop star, I’ll take that into consideration.” His back was to me. He was trying to ignore me and what I was saying.

But I could be pretty hard to ignore. It was a talent I was obnoxiously proud of.

“Oh, it’s not just the ladies,” I said. “And it’s not genre specific. Rock stars get it, too. You know, like Eddie Van Halen.”

He turned to me, like he was wondering why I was still standing here and still talking.

“What about Slash?” I said.

“What about Slash.”

“That top hat he’s famous for wearing onstage? He wears it because he’s nervous performing for crowds and it helps him feel more comfortable.”

“You’re suggesting I start wearing a top hat?” he said dryly.

“If it helps you get onstage and live your life,” I said lightly, “fuck yes. Also, Ozzy Osbourne gets stage fright.”

“Is that all?”

“Nope. I can get you a list. I mean, if you think you’re more special than Ozzy or something—”

“Taylor,” he said. He moved toward me so suddenly, I froze. He gripped my upper arms.

He looked deep into my eyes.

Then he *kissed* me.

His lips crushed to mine, effectively silencing me. His tongue slicked over my lip, tasting me, and he shuddered. And I was so there for it, so fucking fast, I whimpered a little as my mouth opened for him.

Then he ripped his lips from mine and I drew a stuttery breath.

“Can you please shut up?” he gasped.

“Yes.”

Then he kissed me again. His mouth and mine twisted together, unfamiliar, and I squirmed, embarrassed how badly I wanted to wrap my legs around him and drill him with my tongue.

*Down, girl.*

He tore himself away again, and his eyes searched my face. They looked wild and possessed with something I couldn’t identify. Something like lust, surging on the adrenaline rush of a man who hadn’t kissed anyone in a really long time?

“Tell me to stop right now if you don’t want me to do that again,” he said, “and we can pretend it never happened.”

“Uh...” My mouth dangled open and I took a shuddering breath. “No... No, we can’t.”

“What?”

“I mean... Please do that again.”

The words were barely out of my mouth when he smashed his mouth to mine again. This time, his tongue swirled into my mouth. A shudder ran all down my body. It felt like he licked my pussy from the inside-out. I sagged in his hold, my legs almost giving out. He was still gripping my upper arms, his fingers digging in. I grasped his shoulders and held on as he drove me right back against the wall with his whole body. He pressed into me, and his warmth felt so good.

I hiked one leg up around his hip, wanting to climb him.

He caught my thigh with one hand and shoved his crotch up into mine. My dress rode up and I felt the hard jab of his cock against my pussy through the thin fabric of my panties. I moaned loudly, rubbing against him.

He kissed me with a deep swipe of his tongue and then sucked on my bottom lip, groaning in the back of his throat. Then he kissed my jaw, my throat.

“I’m not very good at this,” he groaned, as he sucked on my throat and my eyes rolled back in my head and I almost passed out.

“Uh... you’re very good at this,” I panted.

“I’m out of practice.”

“I can’t tell.”

“Taylor... I want you so bad, it’s making me crazy.”

*Oh, thank God.* “Me, too.”

He came up for air, his eyes locking on mine. He looked fucking drunk and dazed and so horny it made me sopping wet. My panties slid against me as I ground myself against him and I wondered if I was making a giant wet spot on his jeans. His hair was sticking up a bit and he looked undone and unhinged and I wanted to tear off his clothes. But something held me back.

What if I scared him off with my exuberance?

“Are you gonna hate me if I want to fuck you?” he said, pretty much voicing my own thoughts, his eyes dragging down over my lips.

“No.”

His eyes met mine. *Lust.* “Are you gonna quit?”

“No.”

We smashed together again, our mouths sucking, seeking some kind of impossible depth in each other as our hands dug under one another’s clothes. He had his hand between my legs, inside my panties, and his finger up inside me in one quick push, and I screamed into his mouth. We kept kissing, groaning, melting down. I’d never been so sweaty or shaky making out with a guy, and I was sure I was gushing all over his hand.

He fucked me with his finger as he devoured my mouth and I just tried to remain standing, clinging to him, as the sensations overwhelmed my body. He kissed his way over to my ear and whispered in a ragged voice, “I want to bring you to orgasm.”

*Oh hell yes.*

I groaned in response, unabashedly fucking his finger. Apparently, he was

pretty damn direct about sex. I liked it. He'd been pretty quiet about everything else. But this was good. Very, very good.

"Okay. Yes," I gasped out. I reached for his cock, but he grabbed my hand, stopping me.

"No." I looked up into his eyes, trying to focus. He looked really focused for someone who also looked so fucking horny. "With my mouth."

"Oh..."

Yeah. Totally there for that.

He kissed me again, his tongue swiping against mine, making my toes curl. My knees were shaking.

Then he pulled away, and knelt down in front of me. He draped my leg over his shoulder and pressed me against the wall as he tugged my panties aside, and his mouth met my pussy. And however out of practice he claimed to be, he sure remembered what to do with his tongue.

My hips undulated against his face as I went mindless with pleasure.

"Don't move," he ordered. I met his eyes as his tongue slicked over my clit, a thrill running through me at the command.

*Holy fuck, I liked my new boss.*

His finger was still inside me, fucking me. His mouth did the rest. He didn't take his time and he didn't ease into it. He went at me like his very existence hung in the balance of my next orgasm. Like he'd never wanted anything like he wanted to make me come on his face, right the fuck now.

His tongue slid over and around my clit, gently flicking. His finger twisted inside me, rubbing against my inner walls. My whole body shook with the force of the pleasure. Then he started sucking on me and I came with such force that I screamed. It ripped me inside-out, so intense I almost couldn't stand it. I was pretty sure I lost feeling in my hands and feet. The room went black. But maybe that was just because I shut my eyes.

The whole room fucking swooned, and I clutched at his head so I wouldn't fall over as I shuddered and quivered.

I hadn't had a man make me come in over six months, and I wasn't sure I'd ever had a man make me come like *that*. None of my sexual partners had ever explored my g-spot; I wasn't even sure I had a g-spot. But I was pretty sure he'd just conquered it and planted a flag.

*CARY WUZ HERE.*

Any future lover I ever had would come across it and know I'd been pre-owned, completely g-spot whipped by this man, his tongue and his middle

finger.

He hadn't even touched me with his dick yet, and he owned my pussy completely.

"Uh, that was..." I pushed him gently away as the intensity threatened to end me, and he unlatched his mouth from my clit. His finger slid reluctantly away. "Um... thank you." It was literally the stupidest thing I'd probably ever said to a man after an orgasm, but it was the only thing that came out of my mouth.

We stared at each other, breathing raggedly. His lips were wet with my juices and I'd literally never seen anything hotter than his gorgeous mouth smeared with my come.

Then my phone started ringing on my desk. And because my brain had ceased to function sometime around the moment his finger slid into me, I stumbled right over to it.

"It's Danica," I told him. I met his eyes, and neither of us said anything else, but something wordless passed between us as I wiggled my dress down over my hips, trying to cover my pussy.

We both knew everything had changed.

I wasn't sure if either of us knew how to deal with it.

I fumbled with my phone. "I should... get this... *Hello*," I answered, breathless. I was still looking at him, and he was still looking at me. He was still on his knees on the floor.

I pointed at the door as my best friend chattered in my ear. Cary didn't react. He just sat there, staring at me with that lustful look. Somehow, I managed to grab my laptop and my hoodie, and stumbled out of the room.

Danica was saying something about meeting up for drinks. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just let her ramble.

"Uh-huh," I said, maybe, and something like, "right." Basically I just agreed with her as I stumbled through the house and into the backyard. When I'd pushed into the poolhouse, I finally remembered to breathe.

Danica laughed a little. "Hey, why are you all out of breath?"

"Um, I'm just coming back from a jog." I walked into the bedroom and dumped my stuff on the bed, then collapsed onto it.

She was talking again. Something about drinks. Tonight.

Why couldn't I hear her?

My pulse was slamming through my body and all I could feel was Cary's tongue on my clit. His finger working inside me, pressing into me, setting off

fireworks. I was all wet. My panties were soaked.

I needed a shower.

And yes, a drink.

But I told her, “Uh, I can’t tonight. I didn’t sleep well last night. I need some sleep, I think.”

“Oh. Sure. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I rolled onto my back, staring at the ceiling. “Just sleeping in a new place, you know. Hard to fall asleep.”

“Are you comfortable there? How is Cary? Is everything going well? I was hoping to grill you over drinks tonight.”

“Yeah, everything’s good.”

“That’s good.” She sounded unconvinced. Concerned. “You’re liking the job?”

“Yeah. Definitely liking the job...”

I wasn’t exactly ready to tell her what just happened. I couldn’t yet fathom it myself. And my intimate parts were still humming from Cary’s touch.

I needed to get off the phone. I wasn’t sure why I’d answered it in the first place. “I’m gonna eat dinner here. Let’s do drinks on the weekend or something.”

“For sure. I’ll call you.”

“Great. Let’s talk later.”

I hung up, barely remembering what I’d said to her. My head was reeling. I felt dizzy.

And fucking *wonderful*.

And mildly terrified.

Because that was so fucking hot, I could get very, very addicted to it.

I wondered how I was ever supposed to look my boss in the eye again without jumping on him. Was I now allowed to jump on him? What were the rules here?

And how the hell were we getting any work done in that studio now that we’d crossed the mouth-to-pussy line?

And why did I run out on him like that?

I left him on the floor on his knees. And something told me Cary Clarke didn’t often get on his knees for people.

I grabbed my hoodie and lifted it to my face, smelling it. It smelled like Cary.

I draped it across my face, breathing him in, as I lay there with my head spinning.

# Chapter Eleven

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**Cary**



## Capsized

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**T**hat night, I found Taylor watching TV in my living room again.  
I stood watching her for a minute from the shadows.

The lights were off. The volume was low. Onscreen was the menu, where she appeared to be flipping through shows. Her hair was up in a messy, sexy knot with some pink strands around her face. She looked like she'd washed off her makeup. She wore her giant Metallica hoodie, her bare legs tucked up on the couch next to her. And cozy socks.

She looked like a dream come to life. A dream I once thought would never come true again.

*Let go of your ghosts.*

I practically heard Gabe's voice in my head. I could still hear his voice, sometimes, and the things he used to say to me whenever I was afraid to move forward. When panic reared its head. When my fears paralyzed me. He said all that shit was my ghosts, and I just needed to set them free.

*Ghosts don't haunt us, man. We hold onto them. We drag them around like shadows.*

*You've got to let that shit go.*

I'd learned, over the years, how right he was.

Right there, between Taylor and me, I could feel the old ghosts stirring in the dark. The shadow of my best friend. The shadows of the people who'd abandoned me while I was grieving his death.

I was terrified of getting close to anyone again.

I was terrified of this girl. Because I wanted to get close to her.

"Bill Burr again?"

She looked up and found me in the doorway, watching her. "I was just flipping around. I haven't picked anything yet."

"How long have you been doing that?"

The corner of her mouth twitched because she knew she'd been busted. She wasn't watching TV at all. She was either pretending to in hopes I'd

come around, or she was trying to but was too distracted.

“A while,” she admitted.

“Something on your mind?”

“You could say that.

“Me, too.”

I went over and sat down next to her on the couch. On the edge of it. I took the remote and turned off the TV, and we sat like that, in silence, in the near-dark. Me, leaning on my knees and not facing her, looking at the coffee table, afraid to relax and find out I wasn't welcome. In my own living room. Her, curled up in a ball at the end of the couch.

I could see her foot next to my thigh. There was a hole in her sock and I kept staring at the little pink toe that was exposed.

“There's a hole in your sock.”

She wiggled her toes. “Oh. I didn't notice.”

I looked at her face. “I don't understand you.”

“Okay...” She cocked her head a little, reading my expression. “Is that a problem?”

“It's unbelievably frustrating.”

“Why?”

“Because I'd like to understand you,” I confessed, “so I can put you in a box and set you aside.”

She sat up a little, hugging her knees to her chest. “Why would you want to do that?”

“So I don't need to get involved.”

She blinked at me. “Do you need to get involved?”

My voice scratched when I said, “Yes.” There was no way she could know how painful it was for me to admit that to her. It made me feel crazy vulnerable.

“Why?” she said.

“Because... I'm drawn to you.”

“But you don't understand me.”

“Maybe that's why I'm drawn to you.”

“Maybe you just like me,” she said softly.

“Why did you put your foot in my pool the first day I met you?”

“Because the water looked nice.”

“Why is there a hole in your sock?”

“What is this obsession with my feet?” she asked, a smile playing at her

mouth.

I just stared at her. The truth was, I had a growing obsession with her *everything*.

“Why does it bother you that I have a hole in my sock?” she asked me gently.

“Because it makes no sense. You’re so organized and efficient. And yet you have chipped nail polish in every color of the rainbow on your fingers and toes. You use perfect punctuation in every text message you send, yet you crack your chewing gum and write on your sneakers with marker like a delinquent.”

She grinned. “Thank you.”

“You wear Mickey Mouse bandages and implement filing systems and get whiplash to Metallica and cry at Dolly Parton and none of you makes sense.”

“I’m sorry you can’t fit me into a box,” she said, not sorry at all. “I prefer to be oblique.”

“You’ve got a clever answer for everything and you’ve got holes in your socks.”

“It’s just one hole,” she said, wiggling her toes again and checking to make sure there weren’t more of them. “I try to focus on the important things in life. I feel like a hole in my sock or a chipped nail just isn’t worth losing sleep over. I’ll get to it tomorrow. Or the next day.”

“And yet you insisted on alphabetizing the books in my office today for shits and giggles.”

“You paid me. So I alphabetize your stuff. Who cares about my socks?”

“*I do*. I’m fucking infatuated with that goddamn hole and everything else about you.”

She smiled again, a little more hesitant. “So... this *is* a foot fetish thing?” she teased.

“I think it’s more of a *you* fetish thing.” I reached toward her, slipping my hands between her knees. She let me. I nudged them open, sliding my hands over her hips and gripping her, then tugging her toward me. She slid against me, her legs splaying, one going over my lap and the other behind me.

Her face was close to mine, and her lips parted. I pressed in, not quite kissing her. I touched my forehead to hers and just drank her in. Her sweet smell. Her warmth.

Her presence.

“I have a confession to make.” She breathed it against my lips, and anxiety spiked through me. It was instant, the fear that she was going to say something irreparably terrible, something we couldn’t come back from. “I saw what you did in here last night,” she whispered.

I pulled back a little and stared at her. I took a deep, slow breath. “What did you see?” I asked, my voice tight, my mind racing.

“I saw you. With my hoodie.”

I closed my eyes. *Fucking great.*

*Fly your freak flag a little higher, why don’t you.*

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “I didn’t mean to spy on you. Open your eyes.” Her hands touched my face and I opened my eyes. I tried to focus on her eyes as I breathed, deep and slow. “I was out in the yard, looking at the stars because I couldn’t sleep, and I saw you come to lock the door. I started to come over here, to talk to you. But then I saw you pick up my hoodie and, I don’t know. I just couldn’t stop watching.”

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

She searched my eyes. “Why? I’m not.”

“Taylor.” I shook my head a little, slowly, and her hands fell away. “I’m out of control.”

“Well, if you’re out of control, I’m truly fucked-up. I spied on you while you were masturbating and it turned me on so much I had to make myself come afterward.”

I swallowed. “You did?”

“Yes. I want you, Cary.”

“I need to lie down.”

She laughed a little as I buried my face in her hair. I pulled her against me and we lay down together, arranging ourselves side-by-side on the couch, wrapped around each other.

“I feel drunk,” I muttered into her hair. The room was gently spinning. It wasn’t a bad feeling. Just... overwhelming.

“I think that’s pheromone intoxication.”

“The room is spinning. I need to breathe.”

“Then breathe.” Her fingers played with the hair at the nape of my neck and a shiver ran down my spine. My cock throbbed. I wasn’t even sure when I’d gotten so damn hard, but I was hard as rock.

Her toe. Her naked little toe peeking through that hole made me hard.

Her fucking *toe*.

“Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh.” *Just breathe.* Why was this so hard?

Was was *I* so hard?

I’d gotten spontaneously hard so many times today and yesterday, while we worked together, I’d lost count.

It was like I hadn’t been touched in years.

I’d had sex with a woman just over a week ago. At the club. But this was different.

Why?

I breathed in her scent. Her soft body was pressed to mine. My hand drifted carefully over her curves and up to her breast. I squeezed the soft handful, drifted my thumb over her perky nipple, and she sighed.

I’d forgotten. I’d forgotten what it was to want someone for other reasons than simply needing physical release or a distraction or to assert some imaginary control.

I had no control. My cock was so hard, it throbbed with every ferocious beat of my heart. My balls were tight and thudding.

It was never like this with Nicolette. With any of them. At the club... I couldn’t even start to get hard until they got on their knees. Looking at them didn’t do it. Touching them didn’t do it. The anticipation of what was about to happen didn’t do it, either.

With Taylor... I’d been hard today just looking at her lips while she talked to someone on the phone. She’d been sipping a Coke, and when she licked her wet, juicy lip and then laughed and threw me a glance, like she was checking to see if she was bothering me while I worked, I couldn’t have spelled my own name to save my life. My nipples were hard, and like right now, my body was alive with electricity. Every hair stood on end.

“Say my name,” I muttered.

“Cary,” she said softly.

God damn, it made my dick throb when she said my name. It was the sound of her soft, husky voice. Her dry sass and her soft chuckle. The way she looked me in the eye and asked me questions like she wasn’t afraid of the answers.

I didn’t know how potent it would be to have a woman like her in my space. It had been so long...

So long since I’d let myself feel anything for anyone.

Anything.

She drifted her fingers through my hair, making me shiver again. Then she drifted her lips over my jaw and peered up into my eyes.

“Is this an anxiety thing?”

“It might be.”

“Breathe,” she said gently.

I breathed, slow and deep, trying to control the pace of my heart.

“Why are you in here,” I asked her, “not watching TV?”

“Because this is as far as I got.”

“Where were you going?”

“To look for you.”

“Why?”

She didn’t answer, just twisted her plump bottom lip in her teeth a little. “I’m sorry I ran out today, after you went down on me. I really didn’t need to answer that phone call. I was spooked or something.”

“I’m sorry if I scared you.”

“I think I’m scared of how much I like you.”

*That makes two of us.*

“Why were you looking for me?” I asked her again.

“Because, I wanted to...” She faded off, her gaze dropping to my lips.

“Wanted to what?”

“I was hoping you’d guess so I don’t have to say it.”

“Say it.”

“I want to... suck your cock,” she said softy, and kinda rolled her eyes like she was embarrassed. “But for some reason, I’m afraid to tell you that.” She squeezed her eyes shut, cringing. “I guess I just did.”

“Open your eyes.”

She opened one eye. “Why am I afraid you might say no?”

“Maybe because you can sense that I’m fucking terrified.”

She opened the other eye. “Of what?”

“Of blowing my load the split second you touch me, and having you decide that doing your nails would be a great way to spend the rest of your night.”

She burst out laughing.

“Laughing is helping, though,” I said dryly.

“I’m sorry. Why are men so touchy about the quick release thing?”

“Uh...”

“I mean, if it happened *every* time, I’d be concerned. And yeah, probably

turned off. But if it happens a few times, especially early in a relationship when you're nervous and excited and new to each other, or just sometimes, when it's too hot to handle... I don't know. If you're so worked up that you come that fast, I'm gonna take it as a compliment until you tell me otherwise."

"It's a compliment," I told her.

"See?"

"But maybe if you give me a minute I won't humiliate myself."

She rolled her eyes, but smiled. "I mean, fine. If there's something you'd rather be doing right now than getting a blowjob..."

I groaned. "Let's just talk for a minute."

"Because that'll kill your hard-on?" She laughed again.

"No. Unfortunately for me, everything you do makes me hard."

"Everything?"

"So far."

"Just talking?"

"Yup."

"Eating my chip sandwiches? Cracking my gum?"

"Definitely."

"Singing April Wine?"

"I almost came in my pants."

She grinned. "Now you're making fun of me."

"Just trying to distract us both."

Her smile faded. She was still playing with my hair, and I really could've laid here like this with her all night.

"Well, while we're just talking..." she said. "I have another confession."

"Okay." I held my breath without even meaning to, tensing up again. I didn't trust myself or my reactions to anything.

I didn't want anything to ruin this.

"I once made out with Matt Brohmer."

I waited, but that was all she said, so I exhaled. "That's all?"

She laughed nervously. "*That's all?* You're not bothered by it?"

"Uh... I mean, obviously he's a fucking dick and you're not allowed to do it again."

She laughed again. "Okay, that's a little better. Should I not have told you, though?"

I dug deep for the courage to tell her, "You can tell me anything you want

to.”

“I just didn’t want to cause any drama or leave you in the dark. I thought I should tell you in case you’d feel weird about it because you’re now working with him. I mean, he’s a member of the band you’re producing. I didn’t want it to be a source of conflict.”

“It won’t be,” I assured her. Because even if I decided I hated the guy because of it, I wasn’t gonna put that on her. “As long as it’s not an ongoing thing.”

“No. It was one of those *crazy* things. It shouldn’t have even happened. Wouldn’t have happened, probably. But... there was a lot of spiced rum and mulled wine involved.”

“Sounds festive.”

“It happened at a Christmas party last year.”

“I see.”

“I was kinda drowning myself in rebound. I’d caught my boyfriend with another woman in my bed that day.”

“Oh. *Fuck.*”

“Yeah. So, I got really drunk at a party at Brody’s place and then some of us went back to Ash and Danica’s after. And Matt and I made out. We were both hammered. From what I remember, I made the first move, which is not like me. I mean, I’m a girl who knows what she wants and usually has no trouble going for it. But sexually... I like a man to make the first move. I don’t know what I was thinking. We just kissed and stuff. And then I kinda threw up and realized how drunk I was and went home. And then Danica basically asked me politely never to do that again.”

“Throw up in her house?”

“Make out with Matt.”

“Why?”

“Um, because there’s kind of a... history of sorts... between Matt and Ash. Which is zero-percent my business and it’s not yours either, so I really hope you can keep your mouth shut.”

“Yeah. I’m kind of a vault over here.”

She grinned. “I like that about you.”

“So... nothing else between you and Matt?”

“Nope. And for the record, I wasn’t overstepping. At least, I thought I wasn’t. Danica told me I could go for him. She actually handed me the mistletoe that I used to make my move. But that was when she was drunk. I



guess when she sobered up later, she changed her mind. I dunno. She's kinda protective of her husband and the whole bisexuality thing. As in, he is." She looked at me like she was wondering if I knew that about Ashley.

"Right."

"Anyway, it's complicated. I think she got nervous about any kind of friction coming up down the road between me and Ash, over Matt, or whatever. You know, like if I kept mistletoeing him. I think she was worried how Ash would feel about it. I'm not even sure I should be telling you all this..."

"It's okay if you don't," I said. "Other people's relationships are pretty much at the bottom of the list of things I'm interested in trying to figure out. And besides, I don't really want gossip on the band. I don't need it in my head when I'm working. What they do outside the studio really doesn't matter to me." I decided, quickly, to amend that. "That is, as long as none of them are doing *you*."

"Okay." She smiled a little. "Honestly, I don't know Matt very well. We've only talked a few times, casually, at parties and stuff. I don't think he's interested in me. I don't think there was any real chemistry between us. Just a lot of alcohol."

"You don't have to explain," I said, though I was secretly relieved to hear it.

"I just want to make it clear, I'm not interested in him or anyone else. I haven't been with anyone else since my last breakup, and I haven't even kissed anyone since that drunken shit show with Matt."

"Is it wrong that that turns me on?"

"What turns you on?"

"That you're all mine."

"I am. If you want me to be."

"I do."

"Does that mean you're all mine, too?"

"Yeah." I considered that. And how fucking weird my life must seem to someone like her—a normal woman who went to Christmas parties and made out with guys under the mistletoe if she felt like it. "I know it's fucking strange that I don't go out much. And I know you have a life. I know there will be times when you're out without me. I just want to know that you're coming home to me and I can trust you."

"You can trust me, Cary."

“Good.” My pulse was still thudding dully in my cock. I was still hard, but I was breathing better. “Take out my cock.”

Her mouth drifted open, and the arousal on her flushed face, in her glittering eyes, was clear.

“Please,” I added. I could tell she kinda liked it when I was bossy. But there was no reason to be impolite.

Her hands drifted down my body to my jeans. I shifted my hips a little, giving her access, and she brushed her fingers over the thick ridge pressed to the denim. My dick flexed, wanting freedom, wanting *her*, and she made a little hungry noise in the back of her throat.

“I seriously am not gonna last long,” I told her, maybe trying to speed her up, my voice thick with lust, as she popped the button. Then she slid the zipper slowly down. My cock pressed against the soft fabric of my underwear, making an obscene tent situation, as she peeled the jeans open. Her patience and the look of horny awe on her face was gonna kill me.

“Oh, wow,” she breathed, as she peeled my underwear down, mercifully freeing my cock. I had no idea what that wow was about, but I’d take it. She grasped my shaft in her hand, squeezing a little as she stroked, up and down, kinda relieving the pressure and kinda just making it worse. She touched the head with her other hand, just her fingertips, and smeared the thick bead of precome around, making it all slick.

My hips punched up off the couch, involuntarily, wanting more.

I was breathing raggedly, but any anxiety faded away, drowned out in the pleasure and the anticipation. She slid off the edge of the couch, getting down on her knees on the floor. She lowered her head and flicked her tongue over my cockhead, laving the slit and then sucking the whole thing into her soft mouth.

I groaned and tried to keep still. I wanted to cram the whole length of my cock into her wet warmth, but I didn’t. I just watched her as she worked her way slowly down, wetting me with swipes of her tongue before she took me a little deeper, then easing back to the head, over and over again.

I tried to relax and enjoy it as long as I could stand to, but I knew it would be over too fast if we kept this up. So I told her, “Take off your clothes.”

She met my eyes.

“I want to look at you.”

She took her time, sucking me into her mouth again for a slow, hot minute, teasing me, before letting me go. Then she got to her feet. She

slipped off her hoodie. Then her tank top. Then her bra, her breasts bouncing free. Her nipples were hard, a dark, swollen pink. She stripped off her shorts and pushed her panties down over her hips, slowly, watching me as I watched her.

I wanted to see her naked.

I wanted to see what it would do to me.

She dropped the panties and stepped out of them. I let my eyes drift over her naked curves, and my cock got impossibly harder.

She climbed over me, kneeling above me on the couch. I drifted my hands up her thighs. They were spread, her knees planted on either side of my hips, her pussy bared to me. I drifted my thumb over her clit and watched her shudder. She stayed like that, one hand on the back of the couch for support, as I drifted my fingers over the soft flesh between her legs and she trembled.

Her eyes met mine, hooded with desire.

I really didn't think I could feel like this again.

But the way Taylor looked at me, the way she responded to me... the intensity of what I was already feeling for her was blowing me away.

"Lie down," I said. My voice was tight and gravelly with lust.

She lay back on the couch as I got up and crawled over her. I smoothed her hair back from her face and kissed her. Our lips met, and I thrust my tongue into her. She met every movement, her hands sliding up the back of my neck and her fingers digging into my hair. My cock pressed into her soft thigh.

I broke away. "I think I'm obsessed with you," I panted. It felt only fair to warn her.

"What does that mean?"

"It means you should probably get out of here."

Her eyes held mine, unflinching. "What if I stay?"

I blinked at her. Obviously, she wasn't running like I'd pretty much assumed she'd be doing by now.

I couldn't fathom why.

"I don't have a condom," I told her.

"Uh..."

"The only woman I've been with in the last year got tested regularly and so did I. We always used protection."

"Me, too. I always do."

"Are you on the pill?"

“Yes.”

I shifted my hips to press my cock against her pussy, rubbing the shaft against her clit until she moaned. I was afraid she might ask questions. About this woman. About how I got tested when I didn't leave my house.

So I kept grinding against her clit in hopes of distracting her. Cheap move, but I didn't stop.

Then she lifted her hips, angling herself to take me.

“Okay,” she breathed. “Yes.”

I looked at her eyes, and I didn't stop looking as I pushed into her. Then her eyes closed.

I groaned as her heat squeezed me. So smooth and wet... I drew my hips back and did it again. Her eyes opened as I fucked her. She moaned each time I buried my cock in her heat.

I reached down and rolled my fingertips around her clit, gently, hoping to get her at least close to where I was before I lost it.

“I'm afraid this is gonna be the shittiest fuck you ever had...” I choked out.

“Um... this is already the best fuck I ever had, so...”

I couldn't imagine how that was possible. But I was hardly capable of much conversation right now. “Is harder okay?” I managed.

“Yes.”

Good. Because I was already sweating trying to hold back. I rammed into her harder and she moaned appreciatively. I wasn't sure I'd ever been so careful with a woman before. I knew she wanted me, but I was still fucking terrified of scaring her away.

I was pretty accustomed to having my way during sex. Being the boss, so to speak. And the women I was with enjoying it.

But.

I hadn't actually *liked* a woman like this in so long, I could barely remember the etiquette.

“How rough do you want me?”

Her eyes met mine again. “Uh... kinda rough?”

I experimented, fucking her hard, but slow, one deep stroke at a time while I basically fought to hold back my orgasm. At the same time, I held her down with my weight. I pressed her thigh up, spreading her open as wide as I could, making her moan. I played with her, biting a nipple, lightly, then a little harder, while my fingers worked her clit in quick, urgent strokes.

She moaned and kneaded my ass with her hands, and kissed my throat. I could feel her pussy tightening around me as she worked her hips against me.

“I have to come,” I grit out, when she scraped her nails across my back and my balls tightened.

“Come inside me,” she said, and that was all I could take. I leaned up on an elbow and pressed my other hand to her throat, holding her there, as my hips picked up the pace. My head was already spinning, turning over all the ways I was gonna beg for her forgiveness and make this up to her—on my knees, with my mouth on her pussy, any fucking way she wanted it.

But then her hips snapped up against me and she let out a garbled scream under my hand.

My fingers tightened around her throat as she jerked beneath me, coming so hard her face flushed. She slammed her head back on the couch a few times as the spasms racked her whole body. I was so in awe of it, the next thing I knew, I was slamming my hips up into her as my balls seized and I exploded deep inside her.

I groaned as the molten pleasure surged from my body into hers.

When I finally finished, my whole body collapsed on top of her. My hand was still on her throat, and I stroked her gently. I kissed her throat, wondering if I’d hurt her.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I whispered against her throat. Her breasts were soft against my chest as she breathed beneath me. I kissed her jaw, her lips, and met her eyes. I didn’t even want to get up. My cock was softening but still deep inside her and I didn’t want to go anywhere. “I don’t want to let you go,” I whispered.

She kissed my lips and said, “Then don’t.”

## Chapter Twelve

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**Taylor**

## Love the Way You Are

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The next morning, I didn't sit next to Cary while we worked. Now that we'd had sex, I wondered if my presence would distract him and if I should make myself scarce, but he made the decision for me. When I greeted him over morning coffee, he told me he was going to work in the great room so he could "concentrate," then kissed me on the forehead, which was the sweetest thing ever, and disappeared.

I'd had another restless, almost sleepless night, intermittently wandering out into the backyard, staring at the stars, and sleeping alone in the poolhouse. And wondering if I should just go crawl into bed with him in the studio.

After we'd had sex, we lay on the couch a long while, entangled, before finally dragging ourselves up. We'd kissed and made out for what had to be an hour, trying to say goodnight, then went off to our own beds.

I would've rather slept next to him, but he didn't invite me to. And I was wary of pushing things too far and having it blow up in my face. I'd already told him I wanted to suck him off and told him to come inside me. And after that explosive orgasm I'd had when he fucked me—and held me down by the throat—it was probably pretty clear, even to someone who was a little rusty in the relationship department, that I liked him.

I mean, I even told him I liked him.

And speaking of relationships... what was that thing about having sex with some woman in the last year? And getting tested?

Did he have a girlfriend his sister didn't know about? Someone who visited him here? I was dying to know more, but he hadn't offered anything more on the subject.

So I didn't ask.

I figured I'd respect his space and follow his cues on that, for now.

He spent the whole morning wandering around in the great room with an acoustic guitar strapped on, playing idly. Maybe he was writing a song. I

could hear the quiet strumming and picking drift into the control room, like he was lost in his head more than really paying attention to what he was playing.

Around eleven, I finally closed my laptop and headed out there to talk to him.

Danica had texted me early this morning to say she was finishing up her work at Little Black Hole today, and asking if I could meet her for lunch. As I walked into the great room and found Cary sitting on a couch, curled around his guitar, I smiled. I figured it wouldn't hurt to spend a few hours working not in his immediate vicinity. So I could make sure that I was really doing a job, and not just gazing lustfully at my employer all damn day while *his* hard earned dollars accumulated interest in my bank account.

"Hey, Cary?" I said softly.

He looked up, and when he saw me the distant fog in his eyes cleared and he did that thing he'd started doing when he looked at me—smiling without really smiling. "Hey."

"Danica is down at LBH today. She's been getting the place comfy for the band. I don't know if I mentioned it, but she's an interior decorator."

He set his guitar aside on the couch, giving me his full attention. "I heard."

"She asked me to meet her for lunch today. I thought I'd swing by the studio, meet the staff in person. See the space the band's working in. And then go for lunch with Danica. If that's okay with you, of course."

"Sure. That's a good idea." He got up and came over to me, pausing in front of me for a moment to run his fingers over the curve of my hip. "I have some paperwork you can take with you." He went into the control room and I quietly melted in the wake of his touch. Then I gathered myself and followed, leaning on the doorframe to watch him. He poked through some papers on his desk, which were now organized in an ascending tray rack that I'd had delivered for him. "Here. These are for Merritt."

I took the papers. "Consider them delivered."

"Is it inappropriate if I kiss you goodbye?"

"Nope."

I really didn't care if it was inappropriate. I didn't care if it was inappropriate that he bend me over his desk and fuck me while I called him Big Boss Daddy.

I'd do it right now, if he wanted me to.



He leaned in, his mouth hovering close to mine. “Have a good time at lunch.” Then he kissed me softly.

“Thank you,” I said, kinda breathless. “I can bring something back for you if you like?”

“Sure. Just get me some of whatever you’re getting.”

“Do you have any allergies or anything I should know about?”

“Nope. I hate sushi, though.”

“How can you hate sushi? You live in Vancouver. I’m pretty sure that’s illegal.”

“What can I say? I’ve never liked it.”

“Okay, then. No sushi for you.”

I was just about to walk out when Cary reached for me, stopping me. He put his hand on my face and I drifted back toward him. He looked deep in my eyes... and then he kissed me again. Softly.

My bones did that melty thing again. His lips were so fucking soft.

Christ, I was in trouble.

As he drew back, he just looked at me.

*Why are you always alone?*

I couldn’t even fathom the answer to that question. How someone like him could end up alone made zero rational sense.

Although he wasn’t totally alone, right? I was here.

“See you later, Taylor.”

“See you.”

I turned and left before I could keep staring at him. I floated all the way out to the garage and into the car. Then I told myself to focus, because I’d feel really bad if I crashed his car because I was daydreaming about his dreamy soft lips and his hazel eyes and all that stuff we did yesterday.

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When I arrived at Little Black Hole, I drove around to the back lane and parked in the small lot—in Cary’s spot, the one with the little sign that said *Reserved 24 Hrs*. He’d called while I was driving to tell me I could park there.

Even though he owned the studio, it seemed kind of strange that there was still a designated spot for him. Knowing Cary, though, it was probably

one of those things he'd just forgotten about or overlooked. And possibly the staff didn't want to say anything about it because they liked him?

Or maybe they feared him?

I wondered, as I got out of the car and wrestled the giant gift basket I'd picked up on the way over out of the backseat, what Cary's relationship with his staff was really like. And what they thought of him.

I really hoped I wasn't about to discover that they thought he was a giant weirdo and trash talked him behind his back. Because if so, I was definitely gonna have to tell him that shit. Gently. I couldn't abide by that bullshit, even if it might initially hurt him.

Cary deserved better than the crap I'd seen about him online, and he definitely didn't need his staff spreading it.

His parking spot was right by the back door, which had a small plaque on it that simply said *Little Black Hole*, but when I tried it, it was locked. So I went in the front door, where I found an entranceway that was closed off to the stairwell. There was an intercom system on the wall, so I found the button for LBH and buzzed.

"Hello," a woman answered.

"Hi, this is Cary's assistant, Tay—" The buzzer sound cut me off as I was promptly buzzed in. I opened the heavy door and wrestled the gift basket through, then slogged up the stairs. I really might've considered getting a smaller gift basket, in retrospect, but this was the best one. I reached yet another door at the top of the stairs, and thankfully someone opened it from the inside for me.

"Hey. Taylor, right?" the woman said, trying to get out of the way of the basket. I could barely see her as I carried it through the door.

"Yes. Thank you. This is heavy..."

"Over there." She pointed me at a desk that I could kind of see.

I lowered the basket slowly. "Am I about to crush anything?"

"Nope. You're good."

I set the gift basket down on the corner of the desk with relief and smiled at her. "Merritt?"

"That's me." Cary's studio manager had long, dark hair with blunt bangs and wore a System of a Down T-shirt with a tattoo peeking out, and you know when you just liked someone instantly? This girl. I'd spoken to her on the phone half a dozen times already.

"So nice to meet you," I said.

We shook hands and she said, "I'm so glad you're here."

"What?" I laughed a little.

"I mean, you've been doing a great job with Cary already. I can tell." She breezed behind her desk and picked up her phone, hit a button, and said to whoever was on the other end, "Taylor's here. Make sure everyone's wearing pants. And then come help with a package, please." She hung up and smiled at me as if to say, *Some people's children.*

"Do they usually record music with their pants off?" I inquired.

"It's very pants-optional back there. I'm just saying I've already caught both Ashley and Xander with their pants down, and not in a good way. Xander has a habit of leaving the bathroom door open, like he forgets women exist in the workplace or something. And Ashley just seems to prefer life without pants."

Yeah, I was aware of that particular character trait in my best friend's husband. "At least he has a nice butt," I offered.

She rolled her eyes, like *Not interested*. "Can I just say I love having someone at Cary's side who actually responds to my emails in a timely fashion? And who knows how to use a copier?"

"Cary doesn't know how to make copies?"

"I just mean whenever he needs to scan me a signed document or something, it always comes through crooked or with something cut off and I have to fix it. It's not his fault. He has more important things to worry about. Which is why he needs an assistant."

"I agree. And thank you."

Her eyebrow spiked up. "Are you planning on sticking around? Excuse my bluntness."

"I am. Hopefully."

"Well, I hope you do."

"Thank you. And before I forget, I have these papers for you, from Cary."

She took the paperwork I handed her, transported safely in a folder I'd tucked under my arm, and sifted through. "Thanks. See what I mean?"

"I just wanted to introduce myself and meet everyone, and maybe pop in to say hi to the band? Assuming they have their pants on. I think my girlfriend Danica is here."

"She might be. I haven't seen her, but they use the back door a lot."

"Have they eaten lunch yet?"

"I have no idea."

“Oh, okay. I just thought maybe you ordered in for them or something.”

“Oh, hell no,” Merritt said. “I’m here part time, I have two other jobs and my own kid. Frankly, it’s not my job to babysit rock stars, and that includes feeding and diapering them.”

I laughed at her frankness.

“Sorry.” She looked at me like she wondered if I was gonna badmouth her to Cary. “That was maybe a little crass.”

“I adore frank and crass.”

“As far as I know,” she said, “they’ve basically been redecorating the studio, smoking weed and drinking. Who ever said rock ‘n’ roll is dead?”

“Not me.”

We both looked over as some guy wearing a baseball cap poked his head through a door. The reception area was basically a gray little room with Merritt’s desk and not much else. Not nearly as glam as I’d expected.

Merritt pointed him at the gift basket, and the dude loped into the room. “This is Isaac,” she informed me, “one of the long-suffering studio assistants here at Little Black Hole. Isaac, this is Cary’s assistant, Taylor.”

“Hey, nice to meet you,” Isaac said, shaking my hand.

“Likewise.”

“Come, I’ll show you the way,” Merritt said. “Isaac will bring the goodies.”

I followed Merritt into the hall, holding the door open for Isaac and the basket, and we headed deeper into the studio. As we passed beneath the simple, black *Little Black Hole* logo painted on the hall wall, I asked her, “So, what does Little Black Hole mean, anyway?”

“I really don’t know. It has something to do with Gabe Romanko.” Merritt glanced at me. “Cary’s old bandmate.”

“Right.”

“Other than that, I’m not sure,” she said. “Issac?”

“No idea,” Isaac said.

Merritt pointed at a door as we passed. “There’s another musician working in Studio B, the smaller one, through there. A country artist.”

“Huh. I didn’t know we had country artists in Vancouver.”

“We have a few. But she’s from Alabama.”

“Cool.” I was trying to act cool, but this was getting exciting. I’d never felt this way walking into the offices I’d worked in, in oil and gas, tech, even once when I worked in a video gaming studio. That place was way fancier

than this, and fun. There was a snack lady who came around with a cart loaded with candy and treats every day, and beer on tap in the office kitchen, but this was way more interesting. I swore I could feel the lingering energy of the bands who'd made music here.

And back here, the walls weren't so bare. They were lined with framed, autographed photos of musicians who'd presumably recorded here. I tried not to gawk at them as we passed.

"Various other artists will be using that studio while the Players are camped out in the illustrious Studio A," Merritt explained. She pushed through a door into another hallway with several doors off of it and a big, open room on our right. The Players were there, sprawled across the furniture, with the remnants of takeout pizza laid out on a big table. Music equipment was strewn everywhere.

And I could immediately see my best friend's touch. There were cushy pillows all over the place, some giant pouf ottomans on the floor, a hammock in one corner. Danica had been sending me pics of the stuff she'd been picking out for this room. When her husband's band asked her to come decorate the studio, she'd been so excited. I was pretty sure this was her favorite project she'd ever worked on.

I was pretty sure it was Summer, actually—the only female member of the band—who'd begged her to come down and class the place up.

"Taylor!" Danica jumped to her feet from the cuddle puddle on the floor where she'd been lounging with Ash, and came to greet me. I gave her a hug as Isaac set the giant basket on the table next to the pizza boxes.

"It looks incredible in here," I told her.

"Thanks." She looked around thoughtfully. "It was kind of a barren box before. Like the inside of an old garage. I warmed it up a little."

"A lot," Merritt said.

As I looked around, the band members waved at me languidly from where they were lounging. And Merritt had called it. The guys were indeed smoking up. Ash, sprawled in a pile of cushions on the floor, puffed and passed to Matt, who was talking on his phone to someone.

"You guys look like royalty," I said. "You don't even have to smoke your weed outside?"

"They're supposed to," Merritt said, giving Matt a look.

Matt flashed us a charming, don't-be-mad-at-me-I'm-just-a-handsome-rock-star smile, tucked the joint into his mouth, and vanished out the back

door with the *Exit* sign over it.

“Come on,” Merritt said to me. “I’ll introduce you around.”

She took me up the hall, introducing me briefly to the two other staff members she could find. When we came back into the big room, she introduced me to the engineer who was working on the Players’ album. He’d materialized from somewhere, possibly drawn by the gift basket Isaac was now poring over; he was dangling in the hammock, and like the band, looked like he was in a pizza-induced coma.

I brushed the pizza boxes aside and started unwrapping the giant gift basket; it was filled with gourmet snacks. Danica helped me start laying everything out across the table.

“Hungry?” I asked Isaac, who was still hovering, practically salivating as he perused the offerings.

“I missed the pizza.”

“Well, there’s lots here. What does a studio assistant do, anyway?” I asked him, handing him a muffin he was eyeing. “Besides chivalrously carry oversized gift baskets for the ladies, of course.”

“Well,” he said, “my job is—”

“He follows us around, making notes on his tablet,” Ash said lazily from his food coma on the floor. “Which guitar I’m playing, what coffee I’m drinking—”

“If you took a shit this morning...” Xander put in.

“Hey.” I smacked Xander’s hand away as he tried to grab a muffin. He was splayed out on the couch next to the table where I was laying out the food. “Don’t give him a hard time. It’s his job. And I’m sure he works harder than you do.” I wasn’t sure of that, but hey, it was fun giving Xander a hard time.

“Give the woman space,” Danica said, laughing. “You’re like wolves. You just had lunch anyway. I saw every single one of you inhale an entire pizza.”

“I did not,” Summer said from her perch at a high table where she was working on a laptop, half-listening to us.

“Except Summer,” Danica clarified.

“I inhaled an entire pizza *plus* a slice of Summer’s,” Xander groaned.

“I really hope you all plan to accomplish something in here besides gaining weight,” Danica ventured. She raised an eyebrow at me. “So Cary doesn’t end up regretting all this studio time he’s giving you.”

“Giving?” Xander said. “We earned this shit.”

I smacked his hand away as he reached for a muffin again. “Well, I’m sure *he’s* earned it,” I said, nodding at Isaac. “FYI, I brought these for the staff. You rock stars can get your own. But maybe after they’re done, you can have what’s left.”

Xander gave me an eye-roll and Ash, who’d finally dragged himself up off the floor, plucked the muffin out of Isaac’s hand. Isaac helped himself to another one.

“What’s that?” Ash said, as I pulled a small bag out of my purse.

“Well, I figured you guys probably weren’t supposed to smoke in here. So I got you some edibles.” I laid out the half-dozen packages of edibles I’d picked up for them at the weed dispensary.

“Whaaaat.” Ash picked one up. “Why is your best friend so cool?” he asked his wife.

“I dunno.” Danica shrugged. “Just is.”

“Those are chocolates, which you might want to stash in the fridge,” I said. “And there are gummies, too.”

Ash wrapped his hand around the back of my head and kissed me firmly on the forehead. “You’re a sweetheart, Taylor. Don’t let any asshole tell you different.”

Danica grinned at me.

Isaac leaned in to peruse the gummies. “So, you keep track of everything they do in here?” I asked him, wondering if maybe I should’ve thought the edibles thing through a little better.

“Yup. Cary needs to know all that shit,” he said through a mouthful. “You do not wanna be there if he asks you which guitar you played last Tuesday and you don’t remember.”

“Why? What does he do?” Summer asked, intrigued. “Does he flip out?”

“Cary doesn’t flip out,” Merritt put in, studying a packet of edibles.

“Yeah, he just gets really quiet on you,” Isaac said, “and you feel like the worst human who ever walked the planet.”

“Powerful,” Summer remarked, just as her man, Ronan, the Players’ head of security, walked in through the back door. “And how do you like working with him, Taylor?”

“Working with who?” Ronan said, as he leaned on the table where Summer was working.

“Cary,” Summer said, and after she gave Ronan a kiss, they both looked

at me.

Xander looked at me, clearly awaiting the answer to that.

“Uh... He’s been very nice to me.”

Now everyone looked at me. *Everyone.*

Was that weird? Did I say it weird?

Did I say it like what I really meant was *We had hot sex on his couch last night... after he ate me out in his studio?*

“What?” I said, when they all kept staring at me. “How do you all like working with him?”

“We like working with him just fine,” Summer said diplomatically.

I glanced at Isaac. “He’s a great employer,” he said through a mouthful of muffin.

I glanced at Merritt. “The best,” she said, smirking.

“Uh-huh...” I said skeptically.

Ash gave me his charming rock star smile. “Tell him we’re on our best behavior in here, ’kay?” Then he patted me on the head, which he’d definitely never done before.

“Uh, okay.”

“Come on.” Danica hooked her arm through mine. “Now that you’ve seen where these superstars do nothing all day... let’s go for lunch and let them get to work.”

“What, we seriously can’t come?” her husband called after us as she led me toward the door.

“Nope!” she called back over her shoulder. “Make yourself useful and write a hit song or something.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll try.”

Xander snickered.

“Goodbye, ladies!” Summer called.

“Bye, Summer! Nice to meet you, everyone!” I called back. “Enjoy the treats!”

“Oh, we will,” Summer said.

Then my lunch date tugged me out the door... and I wondered what Cary would think of the fact that I’d just gifted the band—and his staff—enough edibles to get them seriously fucking high, for like a month straight.

*Crap.*



# Chapter Thirteen

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**Taylor**

## Load Me Up

---

**T**hat evening, I was alone in the poolhouse while Cary worked late. I put on his vortex playlist while I did my pre-jog stretches; he'd sent it to me just after dinner, minutes after I finally sent him mine.

*See, I texted him back, it's not so easy, is it?*

Of course, it had only taken him two days to do his.

When I heard the first song, "Load Me Up" by Matthew Good Band, I may have squealed a bit and texted him again.

**Me:** I LOVE MATTHEW GOOD!!!

**Cary:** One of Gabe's favorites.

I enjoyed the first few songs on the playlist so much, I kept it playing in my earbuds when I headed out for my jog.

I only got as far as the backyard, though, then hesitated. I looked up at the house. And decided to do some more stretches while I considered my options.

At lunch, I'd talked things through with Danica. And she seemed zero-percent surprised that I'd had sex with Cary already. Her only concern seemed to be that I didn't end up "going over to the dark place."

When I asked her what dark place she meant, she said, "The one you always tumble into for a few days after you see your crazy parents, or when you know some jerk is about to break your heart."

"I thought you said my family isn't crazy."

"I say a lot of things because I love you."

"Hmm. And who said I'm getting my heart broken?" I asked her. "I didn't say I'm in love. I said I like him. Baby steps."

"Right," she said, sounding overly perky and agreeable, because she

loved me.

When we parted ways after lunch, she gave me a hug and said, “Don’t let him hurt you, okay? You went through enough over the winter with Dominic.”

“Let’s not speak his name.”

“Done.”

“And who knows? Maybe this one will turn out to be my knight in shining armor?”

She gave me a sweet but very uncertain look, patted me on the shoulder, and said, “Let’s talk soon.”

I was kind of annoyed that she seemed to just assume I was getting hurt here. I was pretty sure she figured Cary was some sort of hot rock star rebound thing. *He doesn’t seem like your type* was the way she’d put it.

*What, successful, attractive and wealthy?* I said.

*No, sweetie. I meant overly complicated.*

She wasn’t wrong about that. I’d really been working on purging the overcomplicated types from my life in recent times.

I liked him. The sex yesterday was incredible. But I had this *tread carefully* feeling prickling through me on a pretty regular basis, warning me not to get carried away.

When I got home with his takeout after lunch and told him I’d met his staff, saw the band, and brought them a spontaneous gift basket, he seemed pleased. When I told him that I’d also picked up a shit ton of edibles for them, he seemed less pleased. He didn’t say anything about it, but I could tell that it irritated him a little.

Because I’d made the decision without him?

Because now maybe the band would be getting high for days on end and be less productive?

I wasn’t sure. So I just said I was sorry if that was a bad idea, and he said it was okay.

That was it. No further discussion.

I’d spent the rest of the day working in the great room on my laptop while Cary worked in the control room. I’d told him about how nice Little Black Hole was, about the space where the Players were working, gently encouraging him to go down there sometime and check it out. I even offered to go with him.

But after that, he didn’t seem to want to talk much.

I knew he was working and I should leave him alone. But I wondered if he would ever really talk to me about the things that bothered him.

He'd endured my questions about agoraphobia and stage fright, but I was already picking up on the pattern—that he pretty much changed the subject whenever something came up that he didn't want to talk about.

I wondered if I should stop asking, or keep asking.

Try to drag him out into the world, or just leave him alone.

*Fuck it.*

I headed into the house, walked into the studio and stood in the control room doorway until he noticed me. It didn't take long. He turned his head and his eyes dragged down my outfit; tank top and sports bra, fitted leggings.

"I'm going for a jog," I told him. "You should come."

He blinked at me.

"I just go around the neighborhood. The sun is going down, so it's getting pretty dark out there. I stay on the residential streets, nice and quiet. I rarely even see another person."

"Uh..."

"Come on, it'll be good for you." I stepped into the room and took his arm. He slipped off his headphones and let me pull him up out of his chair. "You sit too much. Go put on some jogging stuff and let's go."

"I don't have jogging stuff. I don't jog."

"Well, it's like walking, only faster." I pulled him out into the hall and toward the foyer. "And all you need is some sweats or whatever you've got. You can wear jeans, but you might get some thigh chafe."

I deposited him at the foot of the stairs and watched him reluctantly head upstairs. He turned to walk up the stairs backwards, raking his gaze over my body again. "You know, I'm only going with you because I want to see how well that sports bra holds in your tits."

"Great. I'll be here waiting. Hope you have some decent running shoes."

"I may," he said, and turned and jogged up the rest of the stairs.

While I waited, I tucked my earbuds away in my zipped pocket. When Cary reappeared, he had on some joggers and an old T-shirt. The shirt had a caricature of an obnoxiously handsome dude with a bum chin and a sparkling smile, with the words, *Born Like This*.

I snickered. "Nice shirt."

"Dean's idea of an uplifting Christmas gift."

"Holy shit, is that him?" I examined the caricature a little closer. "Wow.

You really have thoughtful friends.”

He made a doubtful snorting sound, pulled on the baseball cap he was carrying and said, “Let’s go before I change my mind.”

I led him outside and only realized he wasn’t following when I didn’t hear the door shut behind me. I turned to find him standing just outside the front door, at the top of the steps, staring at me.

“You okay?”

“Just need a sec.”

“Take a deep breath,” I said automatically. “I’m here.”

He turned and carefully shut the door and came down the steps, looking stiff. I took his hand. “Come here. You should stretch.” I drew him over to the grass at the side of the driveway and guided him through some stretches to warm up his legs. And to distract him. “Don’t worry. We’ll start at a slow pace. Ish.”

“Good. If I have a heart attack, it’s your fault.”

“First of all, that is not an okay thing to say to someone.”

“Isn’t it? I’ve lost my social acceptability meter.”

“You’re kidding me,” I said with mock surprise. “I didn’t notice.”

“And I’ve lost my filter, too. Your tits look huge in that top.”

“Anyway. Second of all, you’re too healthy for a heart attack. Probably.”

“Thanks for the reassurance.”

“And I’m sure a panic attack is more likely, given your history.” He wanted to distract me by talking about my tits? I wasn’t sure who he thought he was trying to play, but I wasn’t that bimbo. I held his gaze and told him point blank, “If that happens, I promise to sit your ass on the curb and calm you, and call Liam to come get us.”

“How do you intend to calm me?”

I tried to come up with something on the fly. “Remind you to breathe? Tell you you’re safe. Press my huge tits up against you.”

He took a breath like he was fortifying himself. “Okay. That’ll work.”

“Good. Now move your ass. And try to keep up. My legs are made of solid steel. I’m practically bionic.”

“I know,” he said appreciatively. “You’re bendy, too.”

“Quit looking at my butt and get up here.” I was striding toward the gate; he was somewhere behind me. Maybe he was stalling, but I was just gonna go ahead and treat him like a regular guy and not like he had a disability that needed to be accounted for. Unless, of course, he asked me to.

He caught up to me and opened the gate.

“Thank you. Now let’s run.”

“I thought you said jog,” he said from behind me as I took off.

“Same thing!” I called over my shoulder. But I slowed down. “Too fast for you?”

He jogged up next to me. “How does that bra keep you so supported?”

“Technology.”

“Your tits are barely moving.”

“They’re bionic, too.”

He laughed.

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Cary had to stop, a few times, to “catch his breath.” Which was not because of anxiety. It was because his cardio was for shit.

“You need to get out more,” I informed him.

“Quit making me laugh,” he complained.

I’d made him laugh several times in my quest to keep him distracted and happy, and hopefully make him enjoy this experience, but it just made him run out of breath.

“Aren’t you a vocalist?”

“So?”

“So, I bet if we amp up your cardio game, your vocals improve.”

“That might be true if I was singing onstage every night. But in the studio... I doubt it.”

“Doubt all you want,” I said.

At that point, he seemed to get mildly annoyed with me.

“Come on!” I sped up, egging him on. “Home stretch. Final push. Pick up those feet.”

Then we basically raced back to his place. I would’ve liked to say I beat him there, but when he actually gave it his all, he kicked my ass. He was through the gate and already halfway up the driveway by the time I reached the property. I caught up to him at the front door as he worked his key in the lock.

Then I shoved him out of the way and sprinted for the studio.

He caught me around the waist in the hall and I screamed. I managed to

wriggle away, streaked across the great room and dove onto his bed just as he piled on top of me.

“She wins!” I cried as he flipped me onto my back. “Champion! First place!”

“Cheater,” he said and kissed me.

I kissed him deeper, sucking his tongue into my mouth. “I want my trophy.” I was already tearing down his sweats and he was pulling up my shirt.

“Can’t believe you shoved me out of the way.”

“Obviously. That was the only way I was gonna win.” I grabbed his cock and gave him a tight stroke.

He peeled up my sports bra and sucked a nipple into his mouth. “You taste salty,” he groaned, like my sweat was delicious. He kissed his way down my stomach and I lost my grip on his cock. I groaned in complaint/pleasure.

Then he peeled off my pants, spread my legs, and shoved the crotch of my panties aside—so he could plunge his cock into me.

He fucked me just like that, hard and fast, one hand squeezing my breasts as he kissed me again, hungrily.

Whatever hesitation or niceties had made that first time sweet, semi-awkward and slow... they’d vanished. Or maybe they just melted away because we were both so burning up for each other.

“God, that’s hot...” I moaned, as he pounded into me. He didn’t even take my panties off. “But... the cotton is getting in the way of the naked clit-to-groin action.”

“Too bad,” he said, and kept pounding into me.

“You’re a jerk.”

“You love it.” He kissed me again, deep and possessive, like a conquering king.

And he was right, I loved his bossiness.

Then he slowed the pace of his kisses, slowed the thrust of his hips against me, and rolled to the side, taking me with him. We lay facing each other on our sides, my leg tossed over his hip, as he fucked me at a much slower pace. I snaked my arm up his back, inside his shirt. He slid his hand down to tug my panties out of the way and drifted his fingertips over my clit.

“Better?” he said softly between kisses, as his fingers drew warm little circles.

“Mmm,” I moaned.

He kept touching me like that, kissing me, until I grew breathless and I started to bear down on him. I squeezed his cock with my inner walls, trying to get more, to feel more, to feel everything, as he ground slowly in and out... I could feel the head of his cock, the thick ridge, stroking in and out, massaging me... and then I came. He buried himself deep inside as my pussy spasmed and the pleasure shook through me. He was watching me, pressing kisses to my face.

“More,” I gasped. “Harder.”

He shifted his hips, rolling on top of me and pressing me down to the bed with his weight. I spread my legs wider to take him and he pounded into me, slowly. The orgasm kept rolling through me.

“I want you to come,” I gasped out.

He kissed me again, his hips slamming against me, a little faster. Then he let go. His body shuddered against mine as he rammed into me a few more times. I loved that; how his whole body shook and he fell apart.

Then he collapsed on top of me. I held him tight against me, both of us breathing fast and deep. We lay like that, in a sweaty heap, for a long while as the pleasure ebbed through me.

“That was a really good jog,” I finally said, breathless. “Invigorating.”

Cary lifted his head just enough to grin at me.

I slapped his ass and wriggled out from under him. “Ugh... too hot.”

He rolled off me and we stretched out on our backs, side-by-side. He pulled his sweats up and I managed to cover all the important stuff with my stretchy clothes. My pants were gone but I still had my top on, and some very wet panties. I really needed to go peel this all off. But for now, I couldn't quite get up.

I sighed contentedly.

“I haven't kissed anyone in over five years.”

I looked at him. He held my gaze with his warm-honey eyes.

“Oh,” I said. “Wow.” I tried to wrap my head around that. Apparently, we were getting serious. Like right now. “But... what about that woman you said you had sex with this year?”

He sighed and looked grim. “There's something I have to tell you.”

“Okaaaay. That doesn't sound good.”

“It's fine,” he said, taking my hand gently. “It's not something you need to worry about.”



“Oh, now that just sounds bad.”

“Sorry. Did I mention I’m rusty with this whole relationship thing?”

I squirmed inwardly at that word. *Relationship*.

We weren’t exactly in a relationship. But then again... we weren’t exactly not in one, either. A unique relationship, maybe.

“I’m listening,” I said carefully.

He took a deep breath. “There’s this place I go. It’s hard to describe. Basically... it’s a sex club.”

I pulled my hand from his, automatically. I didn’t mean to. It was just... “Uh... that is not something a woman is ever prepared to hear, I don’t think.”

He blew out a breath. “Please don’t hate me.”

“Of course I don’t hate you. I just need a moment...”

I studied his face, the discomfort there. I could see how hard this was for him; opening up in any way. And I didn’t expect him to just tear open his whole life for me because we were now having sex.

But he owed me honesty, if nothing else, when we were together.

With all the times I’d been cheated on and dicked around...

I wouldn’t accept any less.

“Wait,” I said, something snagging at me. “What do you mean... you *go* there?”

He sighed. “Liam would drive me. I’d go once in a while. There was a woman I’d meet there sometimes. Can you hear me out before you decide I’m a creep?”

“I’m not deciding that. I’m just trying to figure out what I’m supposed to be picturing here. You say ‘sex club’ and I really have no idea what that means. I’m picturing whips and chains in a dark nightclub basement.”

“Then you have the wrong picture.”

“Good.” I struggled to wrap my head around what he was telling me, but I had way too many questions. “Does your sister know about this?”

“Why would my sister know about this?” he said dryly.

“I just mean... your friends seem to think you never leave the house. Is that even true?”

He closed his eyes, like he couldn’t even look at me while he said this. “I don’t leave the house. Except... to go there.”

“To a sex club.”

He opened his eyes. “I know. This sounds... fucking terrible.”

It did. It was not exactly something I was hoping to hear.

I didn't even know it was a thing I might hear.

But, he'd said it.

*Sex club.*

I took his hand again. "Okay. Look. This is a lot to digest. But if this is the only place you've gone in a while, there must be a reason. You can tell me. I won't judge. I can't say I'll be thrilled about it or anything... but I will really, really try not to judge."

"Okay. I want to explain this to you. I've been thinking about how to tell you..." He took a moment gathering his thoughts. "I was seeing a girl when Gabe died." Then he just stopped talking.

"We don't have to talk about that," I said automatically. I wanted to talk about it, honestly. But not if it was too hard for him.

"It was just a really bad time for me," he said, meeting my eyes. "She was there for me at first, for maybe a couple of months. And then she took off when I was having a rough time and I could've really used someone in my corner. I thought she would be it. But I guess that was unfair. Our relationship was new and wasn't that tight to begin with. I needed someone and she needed out from under the burden I'd become."

"I'm sorry, Cary."

"Yeah. Me, too, in a way. Not because she left. Obviously, she wasn't meant to stay. But it was pretty painful. Thing was... pretty much everything was painful at that point."

"I can imagine."

"Anyway, after that, I didn't exactly go out much. I kinda locked myself away and shut everyone out so I could try to cope on my own. Didn't always work out so well. I had other friends who flaked out, disappeared. Said shit about me in the media. People who were upset about Gabe's death and needed someone to lash out at, I guess. For some people, I was it. I guess it's easiest to kick a guy when he's down."

He hesitated again and I squeezed his hand, letting him know I was here. I was listening.

I couldn't even imagine the pain of what he'd been through, and I was pretty sure I hadn't heard the half of it yet.

The fact that he was trusting me with this... I knew this was huge.

"But anyway," he went on, "here I am. I'm okay, most days. But I never exactly got out there dating again. I didn't even care for a long while, because the medications my doctors put me on always fucked with my sex drive

anyway. My dick literally stopped working. I kept switching drugs trying to find one that would help with the anxiety but not mess me up in other ways, including sexual. Then eventually I went off all the medications because I couldn't take the side effects anymore. And my sex drive came back. And then Dean told me about the club. He said he knew some people who had memberships, thought it might be good for me since I was alone. And I decided to go check it out, because I figured for someone like me, it was the only way I could see a woman with zero strings attached, and keep it discreet and impersonal and still be able to stand myself in the morning."

When he explained it like that... it actually made a lot of sense. Even though it sounded kind of sad.

I wasn't even totally sure if I wanted to ask, but... I was morbidly curious. "What was it like?"

"It was everything I asked for it to be," he said. "You pay an insanely high membership fee and that's what they do. They provide you with what you want."

"And what did you want?"

"Just something quick and uncomplicated. I wanted someone who'd do what I said, no questions asked. And who'd actually enjoy it. I didn't want to pay someone who was just there for the money. People go to the club because they have a kink and the club is the way they scratch it."

"Okay... And what was your kink?"

His eyes held mine. "I'll give you one guess."

"Hmm." I considered the sexual encounters I'd had with him so far, and there was definitely a common theme.

Giving me orders like *Don't move* when he went down on me.

Holding me down by the throat while we both came.

The general bossiness that shone through, even when he was being gentle.

"That thing you said about telling someone what to do?" I guessed.

"Yeah, that would be it."

"And the women you were with...?"

"There were only a few," he said. "I saw a few, at first, and then I just stuck with one because I didn't like the idea of seeing a bunch of different people when I was there. I didn't want to have to get used to someone new again and again. So I arranged to only be with her. I wanted something predictable and the same every time."

"So you could feel in control of it."

“Yeah.”

“And what was her kink?” I brushed my fingertips down the side of his face. “Beautiful rock stars?”

“Her kink was being told what to do.”

“Oh.” I considered that. “Okay... Excuse my cynicism here, but if you’re paying her and she’s being told what to do... how do you know she’s really enjoying it? I mean, how is that different than any other prostitution situation?”

“She wasn’t a prostitute. She was another member of the club. I didn’t pay her. I paid the club, and she paid the club, and they hooked us up.”

“Oh.”

“A little different than what you pictured?”

“Yeah.” I tried to picture this. This wealthy woman, who met up with him to indulge her own kink. “So... the women you saw there... You didn’t kiss any of them?”

“No.”

“And they didn’t mind that you didn’t kiss them?”

“I don’t know. But that wasn’t their call. They were there to do what I asked.”

Wow. Okay, that was turning me on in a way I wasn’t sure how to feel about.

“So, after a while you told the club that you’d only be with that one woman?”

“Yes. You pay for that. If that’s what you want.”

“Are you... in love with her?” Obviously, I had to ask. I needed the answer to that question like I needed my next meal.

“No. I don’t really know her. I barely talk to her.”

“Except to tell her what to do.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly, like he was afraid he was seriously freaking me out.

He was. And he wasn’t.

“How often do you go there?”

“Not often.”

“How is that possible?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, don’t you get lonely?”

“Yeah. Of course. But Bliss isn’t really the place you go to get cured of

loneliness.”

“Bliss,” I said, considering that. “But... how do you go so long without someone’s touch?”

“I don’t know. You just get used to it. Or maybe you slowly go crazy, and because no one’s there to see it, you just don’t notice.”

Yeah. Maybe.

“But how long can you be alone in that way? I was just single for six months and it almost killed me.”

He smiled a little, maybe amused by that. “It sort of became unimportant. It was like everything else that I just swept out of the way so I could focus on what was important to me. Which was music, and that was about it.”

“Then why go to the club at all?”

“Because sometimes I just need to be in control of something. And the quickest way to feel in control is to have control over someone else.”

“But if you’re focused on someone else, then you’re also not focused on yourself, is that it?”

“You mean, like a distraction?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. I need those too.” He took a breath and hesitated, like he was trying to figure out how to explain himself to me in a way that would make sense. “I just didn’t care much about my sex life or any other part of my life. I eat okay. I work out and take care of myself okay. I have sex when I feel like it. I talk to people when I feel like it. The thing is, I just don’t feel like it much. But...”

“But what?”

“But then you came along.”

I considered that. That was flattering and all, but this was all a lot to absorb. It was probably gonna take me several beers and a deep dive with Danica to get my head around the whole thing.

“Could you stop going there?” I asked him. “To Bliss? I mean, if this thing between us wasn’t just, you know, a forty-eight hour thing?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “What, like a flu bug?”

I smiled. “Yeah, something like that. Get it out of your system and you’re over it?”

Any trace of humor vanished as he touched his hand to the side of my face. “It isn’t like that for me, Taylor.”

“Me either.”

He kissed me slowly, for a while, while we held hands, sprawled out on his bed.

Then I said, “Well, that was fun,” and let him go, getting to my feet.

Cary laughed shortly.

I grinned as I adjusted my sports bra. It was all stuck to me. I needed a shower.

“Come here,” he said, and I crawled back over him on the bed to give him just one more kiss. Then another one. We made out for a bit, kissing, our hands straying over each other.

Then I kissed him good night.

I went out to the poolhouse to shower and go to bed, alone.

This time, he’d asked me if I wanted to stay, sleep with him in his bed in the studio... but we both seemed a bit awkward about that.

I wanted to get closer to him, despite my misgivings. I wanted to believe him when he said he wasn’t going to that sex club anymore.

(Sex club! Was I seriously sleeping with a man who’d been a rock star, was now a recluse, and had a membership in a sex club?? Yes. Apparently, I was. And I wasn’t quite sure how I felt about it yet.)

I wanted to trust him.

But that took time, right?

Instalike was definitely a thing. I wasn’t so sure about instalove, but maybe.

Instatrust? Not in my world.

I liked him. The trust would come, or it wouldn’t.

Meanwhile, I kept trying to remind myself that this was just a job—with yummy sex benefits on the side. Maybe it wasn’t just a forty-eight hour thing, but it was a six month thing.

Or very possibly less.

# Chapter Fourteen

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**Cary**

# Heart of Gold

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*July*

Taylor tapped on the door to the control room. It was open, but she waited for me to turn and wave her in before she stepped inside. She wore a soft, black T-shirt that bared one shoulder and shredded jeans, which seemed to be rare for her, her hair up in a knot. Her feet were bare, and there was something beautifully intimate about that, that we both came to work in bare feet.

She had two travel mugs in her hands and her laptop under her arm. I took the laptop for her and set it on her desk.

“Thank you,” she said, and her smile washed down on me like sunshine.

I watched her get settled, wondering how this had happened. How I’d ended up with this incredible woman in my life.

Ever since I’d told her about Bliss, I’d been dreading the moment when she turned to me and said, *I can’t do this anymore*. Or simply disappeared. Left a note or something, and a trail of dust.

It had been days, and it hadn’t happened.

The morning after that conversation, she’d seemed a little wary or something. Guarded. But then we ended up having sex on her desk in the middle of the workday.

That night, when I asked her, again, to spend the night with me, she did. And since then, we’d slept in my bed in the studio together every night. Last night included.

This morning, she’d worked on her laptop in the great room for a few hours while I was in here. I always missed her when she did that. I liked it when she was here next to me, even when we were just working, each of us with music on in our ears and not talking.

“What a gorgeous day, huh?” she said, when she seemed to notice I was



watching her.

“Yeah.”

Honestly, I wouldn't have noticed what kind of day it was before she got here. But since I'd opened the blinds on the control room window for her on her first day, I'd left them open. She seemed to like the light. I usually didn't notice how dark it was in here. When I worked on music, I went so deep inside myself, I totally lost track of my surroundings. And yeah, I was aware that that was beautiful and kind of sad at the same time.

She handed me my *Good Morning, Handsome* mug, and I told her, “I finished listening to your vortex playlist.”

“You did?” She sipped her coffee and looked kinda nervous about that.

“I listened to it a few times, actually.” I didn't want to tell her how many times I'd actually listened to it now. It was a number fit for a stalker. “I enjoyed it.”

“You don't have to say that.”

“Why wouldn't I enjoy it? Helped me get to know you.”

“I thought you couldn't tell anything about a person by the music they listen to.”

“Is that what I said?”

She seemed to think about that. “Hmm. Actually, I guess that's not exactly what you said. And I don't think it's true anyway. Your vortex playlist definitely seems to say some things about you. I've listened to it, too. A few times. I love it.”

“You don't have to say that.”

She smiled at me. “I'm totally not just saying that. There are some songs on there I wouldn't have thought you'd pick, though.”

“No?”

“Well, I guess I shouldn't say that since I don't know you well. So how would I know what you'd pick? But Van Morrison and Bob Dylan surprised me, among others.”

“I see. Well. For me, if I'm making a deathbed playlist, it's not just the song itself but the imprint it made on me. I have a very personal connection, a memory or a series of memories, attached to every one of the songs on that list.”

“Right. I get that. Most of the songs on my list have a personal attachment for me, too. And usually it's a memory that involves someone I care about. It doesn't have to be anything monumental, just lying in the grass

at the park when I was thirteen listening to music with Danica.”

“Yeah. Most of mine involve Gabe, actually.”

She gazed at me, but didn’t ask about that. I liked that she didn’t pry, or even ask.

Most people, first question out of their mouth was something about Gabe.

“My dad used to listen to Neil Young,” she said instead. “‘Heart of Gold’ is my favorite. I feel like it’s one of the world’s great, sad love songs.”

“I didn’t realize I put any love songs on my playlist.”

“Are you kidding me? How is ‘Heart of Gold’ not a love song?”

“I just never thought of it that way. To me... it’s always been a lonely song.”

“Can’t it be both?”

“Yeah. Of course it can.”

She sipped her coffee as I eyed her. “Don’t feel bad,” she teased. “Even a great musician can’t know everything about music.”

“Apparently.”

She set her coffee on the desk. We needed to get set up for a virtual meeting with the band in a bit, but she made no move to open her laptop. “I noticed you have ‘Paint It Black’ on there,” she said. “You know, The Rolling Stones’ best song ever.”

“I didn’t say it was their best song ever. I said I thought it was everyone’s favorite Stones song.” I sipped my coffee. “But it is their best song ever.”

“You may be right. I’ve been doing a little informal poll. But ‘Gimme Shelter’ will always be my favorite.”

“That’s good. Since you tattooed it on your arm.”

“Yes, I did.”

“If it makes you feel better, ‘Gimme Shelter’ was also Gabe’s favorite Stones song.”

Her jaw dropped. “*What?* He’d agree with me?”

“Yeah. If he was here, he would.”

And he’d fucking love that she agreed with him, too. The two of us had a ridiculous rivalry about it. It really bugged him that “Paint It Black” was my favorite and he could never convince me to sway.

“Well,” she said, “me and my tattoo feel strangely vindicated.”

“What do you love about that song?” I asked her.

“I love the vocal duet on it, the woman’s voice... Her voice was the first thing that grabbed me the first time I ever heard it.”

“Merry Clayton.”

“Is that her name? You know, I’ve never looked it up. I never even thought to look it up.”

“I’m sure most people don’t know her name, even if they love the song.”

“That’s a shame, though. It wouldn’t be what it was without her.”

“True. Most great songs are like that. If one element was different, or not there... if one of the people who contributed didn’t contribute... it just wouldn’t be the same. There are usually a lot of people who make a song what it is.”

“Hmm,” she said, taking that in. “Forget what I said about ‘Heart of Gold.’ I’m sure I’m woefully ignorant on this whole topic. Actually... I hope no one expects me to say anything in the meetings today, because I’m warning you upfront, I have zero to add to the conversation and I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

“You probably know a lot more about music than you realize.”

“I doubt it. I just listen. I’m not a musician.”

“You do more than listen. You got ‘Gimme Shelter’ tattooed on your body. There has to be more to that than the voice of a woman whose name you didn’t even know.”

“True. I also love the mood of the song. It always feels like a brewing storm when I listen to it. And I love the lyrics.”

“What about the lyrics?” I pressed.

“I love the title, actually. The words I tattooed on my arm. It says so much with just two words. And I love the whole idea that you can still ask for shelter, and hope to find it, when the world is going to hell. The lyrics are dark. They sing about war and rape and murder, floods and fire. The mention of love... it only comes in at the very end of the song. It’s like this spark of light after so much dark. After that darkness, the very idea that love could be a mere kiss away... It’s simple but so powerful.”

“Deceptively simple. It’s hard to say so much with so little. There’s a reason the Stones have endured as long as they have.”

“I’m sure.” She hesitated, then said, “What do you think Gabe liked about that song? I mean, if you don’t mind talking about it. I’d love to hear a musician’s point of view.”

I considered that. I really didn’t talk about him much, with anyone. Mainly because the last many, many conversations I’d had about him had been so utterly painful... I’d just stopped having them.

I definitely tried never to talk *for* him.

However. Taylor wasn't just anyone. And her interest always seemed genuine.

"I don't like speaking for Gabe," I told her. "People are always asking me to do that. But... he told me that the first time he ever heard 'Gimme Shelter,' it gave him chills. The layered guitars and that haunting Mick Jagger falsetto at the beginning... We were fourteen and he sat me down in his basement where we always listened to music. He was all amped up about something. Said he had a song I had to hear. He did that a lot. Then he put on 'Gimme Shelter.'" I paused, trying to remember that day. "I'd never heard it before. And we listened to it over and over, trying to deconstruct it and pick out all the instruments we were hearing. There's this wounded harmonica on it playing, like, two notes. And the scraping ratchet sound is this Latin percussion instrument called a güiro. We didn't know what it was at first. We just had to listen. This was right before the days when you could just look up all this shit on the internet, you know?" I glanced at Taylor and she was listening intently.

"I didn't know any of that," she said. "I never even thought about what instruments were in it."

"Well, you're not a musician, so really, why would you? It has all the elements of an incredible song, and you don't have to be a musician to pick up on that. The catchy melody, lyrics that slip into your subconscious before you fully realize what they're singing about. And great production, including sounds that you don't expect to hear. But I think what Gabe liked about it the most was the emotion he got from it. Kind of like what you said about the mood of the song. It was actually raining like hell the day he first played it for me, and the song has this feeling like Armageddon raining down on you. It's apocalyptic. There's this aura of darkness and doom in it. Keith Richards actually said he wrote it on a stormy day, so I'm sure that had some impact."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It ended up being the opening track on *Let It Bleed*, which was a pretty groundbreaking album in 1969. It was probably the most sophisticated music the Stones had recorded so far. And somewhere in the process of recording and mixing that song, someone came up with the idea to bring in a female vocalist to sing the 'rape, murder' lyrics. And as you know, the result was pretty powerful."

I met Taylor's eyes again, and she was watching me with this dreamy

look. I realized I'd been lost in the memory of that day, hearing the song for the first time. With Gabe, down in his parents' basement. I almost thought it was raining out, and when I saw the sun shining through the window beside her it was disorienting.

"It was a brilliant idea," she agreed.

"Hard to believe they were so young. Mid-twenties. Merry Clayton was only twenty when she sang on that track."

"You're kidding me."

"Nope."

"Holy shit. How is that possible?"

"Well, she was a gospel singer and a session backing vocalist. She'd already sung with Elvis. Imagine that, as a teenager."

"Wow," Taylor mused. "What the hell am I doing with my life?"

I laughed.

She smiled, like she was surprised she'd made me laugh. She always looked at me like that when she made me laugh. "How do you know so much about this song?"

"I've pored over a lot of interviews about the 'Gimme Shelter' recording over the years," I confessed. "Thanks to Gabe being obsessed with the song. It's a pretty cool story. You wanna hear more?"

"Yes, please."

"You sure? Sometimes peeling back the curtain ruins the magic."

"I'll take the risk," she said.

"Okay. The story goes, Merry Clayton gets this call in the middle of the night from a producer friend of hers, asking her to go down to the studio and sing vocals on a song. She was pregnant at the time, and her husband convinced her to get out of bed and go do it."

"Really?"

"Really. She'd just come off of touring with Ray Charles, and she had no fucking clue who the Stones were. And this was three years *after* 'Paint It Black' was released."

Taylor grinned. "I love it."

"So, she went down to the studio in the middle of the night, with curlers in her hair. She had to sit down because she was so pregnant. She laid down three takes in total and then she went home. The rest is history."

"Wow. That's so fucking cool."

"That's fucking kismet at work or something. It was the most famous

performance of her career, in the end. And you can hear why, right? She sings it with such power and emotion, you can hear her voice actually break on the track.”

“Seriously? How did I not notice that? I’ve listened to that song hundreds of times.”

“Listen to it again. You’ll hear it. You can hear the guys like, whoop with excitement in the background. Because she fucking slays it.”

“Huh.” I could see her thinking about that.

“Sad thing is, nowadays, a lot of producers would probably cut that shit out, just loop the most ‘flawless’ cut of her vocals back around. Or fix it. But the album is called *Let It Bleed*. You’ve gotta let it bleed sometimes.”

“*Shit*. I can’t believe I razzed you about ‘Heart of Gold.’ There must be a ton of shit I don’t even *hear* when I listen to music.”

“Doesn’t matter. You just listen, and everyone hears what they hear, right? You have your own personal experience with it. You take it on and it becomes yours. Maybe it even becomes your favorite song. Like something you’d ink into your flesh.”

She smiled a little. “I love that so much. That her voice broke and they didn’t fix it. Makes me love the song even more. The soul she infuses into it... that’s what grabbed me when I first heard it. Not just the sound of her voice.” She reached to open her laptop and checked the time. “It’s almost time for your call with the band. I’ve got us set up. They’ll be calling us when they’re ready.”

“Okay.”

“So... how do you remember that whole story?” she asked me. “You paid attention, because it was important to Gabe?”

“Well, I’m a musician. What am I gonna do except make music... and listen to music, and read about music?”

“And yet you didn’t know ‘Heart of Gold’ was a love song...” she teased. I liked that. That she was comfortable enough to tease me.

“And that would be why I keep listening. There’s always more to learn.”

“That’s true. You just schooled me pretty thoroughly about one of my favorite songs. I seriously didn’t even know there was anything more to know about it than what I heard when I listened to it hundreds of times over. I feel kinda stupid now.”

“Don’t. Stupid would be not listening at all. Not being open to listening.”

*Damn*. I heard myself say it, and I could hear the voices of so many

people in my head. People who tried to get me to listen to them when I really didn't want to listen.

“So, before we get on this call, maybe I should ask you what exactly it is you do as a producer,” she said. “I wanted to ask you on day one, but I should probably confess that I was afraid to because I thought you'd fire me on the spot.”

“Good thing you didn't ask.” I smiled, so she'd know I was kidding. “By the way, you're fired.”

“Seriously.” She poked my knee. “If you had to sum it up, to try to explain to somebody like me who's utterly clueless...”

“Okay. Basically, I'm responsible for this album. It's my job to make sure that it turns out as good as it possibly can. So, that's it in a nutshell. But that didn't really tell you anything, did it?”

She smiled. “Not really.”

“The answer you get would probably depend which producer you ask, honestly. A producer's job can really vary. I've known producers who do little more than sit back and listen, and yay or nay things as they go, and maybe they earned that position, but that's hardly any better input than my dad could give.”

“And your dad would be...?”

“Moderately clueless about music. He still thinks Bon Jovi is what the kids are listening to.”

“Right. Go on.”

“I'm more of a hands-on, up-to-the-elbows type of producer. I'm providing the studio on this project because I can control the sound that comes out of that studio and that's what I want on this album. Basically, I put my favorite bands and any heavier bands through Little Black Hole because the studio, the equipment, and the staff there are set up for that. I oversee every single aspect of the project, no matter how small. My engineers and the assistants down at LBH take care of any physical work for me, like if they need to re-mic something or move something in the studio for me. And then I'm here, listening to every fucking thing that band does in there.”

“It's cool that technology allows you to do that.”

“Yup. I'll be co-writing and helping them weed through everything they write and organize what's good into kick-ass songs. I'll be playing on the album, too, as needed. Guitars, for sure, because we haven't locked down a second lead, which Ash wants badly, and I know he wants that collaboration.

Keys and piano, maybe, if it'll bring something to it on top of what Summer's doing. Vocals, maybe. I don't play drums or any percussion, really, but I play pretty much everything else we'll need, or I'll get someone else in who does. If I decide they need a Merry Clayton on a track or some obscure instrument or an entire orchestra or a fucking choir, I'll bring it in. When we're deciding which songs will go on the album, I'll oversee that, and I'll oversee the arrangements of the songs, who plays what, who sings what, how they play it, how they sing it, how it's recorded. Everything."

"Wow."

"Then if anyone in the band isn't getting their part right, I have to make sure they get it right. Along the way, I'm listening to what the band is coming up with and forming a vision of how the album will turn out, how each song will sound. And then I need to convey that vision, in detail, to the members of the band, any guest musicians we bring in, to the engineer, and to Brody and the record company, too. They'll be asking me all along the way how things are going. Am I hearing any hits? All that bullshit."

Taylor cocked an eyebrow at me. "And will you be hearing hits?"

"I fucking hope so. I'll want to make sure each song is as incredible as it can be so the whole album rocks, and that we have a handful of hits, or at least the potential to have some hits. I don't want the band thinking about that part, about what sells. I want them making art in there, expressing themselves from the heart, and then I'll help them make it into a sellable song. It's hard to know what'll hit, but after so many years and so many songs, you get a feel for things. You can feel it when you've got a great song. And you know when you've got a song that should sell well. You want to make sure it's competitive with what's out there. Like if Drake's been hanging out at number one for weeks on end, you want to make sure your song has at least a fucking chance of blowing it out of the water. If there's no hope in hell, why are you even releasing it? Sometimes you're wrong, but producers who turn out consistent hits are paid to get it right."

"Like you?"

"Yeah. Like me."

"So how easy is all of this to do, for someone like you?"

I considered that. There was really no simple answer to that question. "I told you the first day we met, it's never easy. And that's the truth. But some albums are definitely harder or less enjoyable than others. If everything's going smoothly, between the band's writing and performance, their ability to



work together, the engineering, the equipment, then things should roll smoothly. But there are always unforeseen glitches, and that makes my role get more complicated. Basically, whenever there's a problem, it's up to me to fix it or make sure it gets fixed. And all along the way, I'm balancing budget and logistics in the back of my mind, planning ahead for future days in the studio. Like booking session musicians to come down when I decide we need them, making sure the studio is on top of bringing in equipment I need or replacing shit that needs to be replaced. And while all that's happening, I've gotta be on top of everything that's going on, minute to minute. Which bass is Matt playing on this track? When is Summer laying down her backup vocals? Did they get Xander's snare replaced yet? Why is Ash not hitting that note properly? Why is that beat still wrong? Why is everyone hungover today? Do I give them shit or a pep talk or let it slide and see what happens tomorrow? Where the hell are those files I was supposed to be sent two hours ago? Etcetera. And if it all goes to shit, basically, it all lands on me. So there's not a ton of room for things to go too far sideways, or my life goes to shit."

"Well, holy shit," Taylor said. "I had no idea." I studied her thoughtful, mildly amazed look. "Right about now, I'm feeling pretty bad about handing over all those edibles to the band..."

"Don't," I said. It had annoyed me, at first, but I also appreciated that she had that side of her that didn't worry about the consequences of things like that too much. "This is rock 'n' roll, Taylor. I'm sure the band appreciated the gift. And I'm definitely way more uptight about that kind of thing than I need to be."

"But you *need* to be," she said. "Basically, there's a ton of pressure on you."

"Sure, but there's pressure on the band, too. They're more the public face of this thing, and if the album is no good, it's not the producer the fans and even the critics are looking to tear apart. Most people don't listen to a song and say, 'This producer sucks,' or 'The record label really got this wrong.' They say, 'This band sucks. I'm not buying their next album. I'm not going to the show.'"

"True." She sipped her coffee, studying me. "So, how did you get into producing? Was it natural, after you'd already established yourself as a musician?" She smiled. "I'm sorry, I feel like I'm interviewing you for a music magazine. But I'm just so curious."

“I don’t mind.” I really didn’t. I could talk to this girl all day.

If I didn’t eventually have work to do... I probably would.

“I think about that sometimes,” I told her. “There’s a part of me that feels like maybe this was always where I was meant to be. In the studio, rather than out onstage. I kinda hated touring, at least some aspects of it, but I loved it, too. And I miss it, sometimes. Other times I’m glad I’ll never have to do it again. It’s strange. I don’t regret anything I did professionally with Alive or other bands before that. But I belong in here, for sure. I think Gabe understood that better than I did, and earlier than I did. He always said I would’ve been the one who called Merry Clayton into the room on ‘Gimme Shelter,’ that kind of thing. Taking a good or great song we were writing and elevating it to outstanding, that was my thing. I found my place in the studio, so to speak, much easier than I did onstage. Gabe saw it, and he was always a huge voice for me producing our music. I didn’t produce Alive’s album, *Stand and Fall*. I probably wasn’t ready yet. Or at least, I thought I wasn’t. But now we’ll never know, will we?”

“That’s too bad,” she said gently.

“Yeah. I guess I always kind of regretted that part. That we didn’t give ourselves a chance, Gabe and I, to produce together. We planned to, but we just ran out of time.” I went silent for a minute, absorbing that. I didn’t like to think about it, and it had been a long while since I’d talked about it. “After Alive broke up, and I eventually got back to work... I went into producing because I guess I was trying to believe in whatever good shit he saw in me.”

“That’s amazing, Cary. He saw you as a producer even before you were one.”

“Yeah. He just knew the things I was capable of better than I did. I don’t know how he did that. He just always saw the best in me before I did, I guess.”

She smiled at me softly. “It’s probably out of line for me to say this. But... I think I love Gabe already.”

“He was pretty easy to love.”

Maybe that was why I had to fill every moment of my life with the thing I loved the most—music. Because without music, I just felt the emptiness in the recording studio, the void of him, when he wasn’t here.

He was supposed to be here, but he wasn’t.

That was the part that was always the hardest for me to accept.

Somehow, Taylor filled that void. It was hard to say why, since she

wasn't a musician. But when she was in the room, it didn't feel so empty.

I studied her. She was definitely listening with rapt attention to everything I said, like she was truly interested. She didn't seem to have an ounce of musical background in terms of playing anything, or any technical knowledge, so it wasn't like she was looking to produce. But I could see her becoming a great fit—not just in the office side of things, but in the studio, somehow. Maybe with her organizational skills, her communication skills, her ease with people. And whatever business savvy she'd picked up along the way at all her various jobs.

Plus, she seemed to have a pretty good ear. One that could be trained. And maybe the most important of all, she had passionate interest and she seemed dedicated.

“If you really want the best answer to your question about what it is I do,” I told her, “you can just watch me work as this album unfolds, and see what I do. We haven't really gotten into the creative thick of it yet. But that part is coming. The obsessive artist stupor. Staring at the wall, playing the same chord progression five hundred times trying to figure out why it sounds wrong. Agonizing over one wrong word in a line of lyrics. The sleepless nights. Forgetting to eat. Forgetting my name. It'll be a real treat.” I smirked and she grinned.

“Can't wait,” she said. “I promise, I'll make sure you get fed. You and Freddy both.” Then her gaze flicked to her screen. “The studio is calling. The rock star cats must be ready.”

“Good. Let's do this.” I sipped my coffee and waited while she got us connected.

I could see the inside of the studio come up onscreen. Isaac was setting up their computer and the band was in the background, Xander, Matt and Ash sprawled on a couch and Summer curled up in a chair.

“Good morning, rock stars!” Taylor said.

“Hey, Taylor,” Ash said. The rest of them said *Good morning* or waved, as Taylor turned her laptop toward me so they could see me.

When I was onscreen, we all said our hellos and got the small talk out of the way. I hated small talk. I'd never been good at it, for one thing. *How are you? How do you like the studio so far?* That kind of thing. They seemed relaxed and generally unfocused, like musicians so often did in the morning. I wasn't sure why that was, but it was a thing.

I eventually just cut it off by saying, “I've got no agenda for this meeting

so if you have questions, just let me know.”

The band kind of looked at each other and maybe telepathically nominated Ash to speak up.

“Yeah, we’ve got a question,” Ash said. “Trey Jones sent over this document. It’s like, this list of what Brick House thinks should be on the album. How many songs, what kind of songs. Assuming you got it?”

“I did.”

“And? Your thoughts?”

“I think it has no place in that studio.”

“Good,” Xander said, “because Ash already tore it up.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you,” I said.

“If he didn’t, I was going to,” Xander said. “But I was sort of sweating having to go back to Trey with that.”

“You don’t have to go back to Trey with anything,” I told him. “I know he’s a good friend of yours, Xander, but that doesn’t mean he has a different conversation with you than he has with the rest of the band. Frankly, he shouldn’t be having any conversation with you about the album. Brody and I will talk to him.”

“Pardon me, but what does that all mean, hon?” Summer asked me. “Are you saying you don’t care how many songs we come up with, or what songs we come up with? We have free reign to do whatever we like here?”

“I care,” I said. “I just don’t have a format that I expect you to adhere to. The way I see it, there are no rules in that room.”

No one said anything. Summer and Ash just kinda looked at each other.

“I can repeat that if you want,” I said. “There are no rules in that room.”

“There are always rules,” Ash said.

“Yeah... honestly, Cary, I’ve had producers tell me that before,” Matt said. “They’ve never actually meant it.”

“Or they mean it until the record company comes into the conversation,” Xander said, “and starts complaining about the bass drum being too loud.”

“Or the song being too long...” Matt said.

“Or, hey, let’s take out all the guitars and lay in some more electronic shit,” Ash said.

“Hey, now,” Summer said.

“You know what I mean,” Ash said.

“Well, I mean it,” I told them. “You have complete freedom to do whatever you want in that room.”

“Is that why you’ve literally given us no guidance so far?” Summer challenged.

Good; I liked that they were willing to challenge me.

“Yes. It is. I’ve given you a couple of weeks to get used to the feeling of freedom. To get comfortable in there and warm up, get used to being in a room together. No one breathing down your neck, including me. And I’ll talk to Brody. Any further commentary from Trey or anyone else at Brick House about the music needs to go through me. But I’ve got guidance for you, if you’re ready for it.”

“We’re hungry for it, man,” Matt said.

“Okay. You guys put together those vortex playlists, and you listened to each other’s. I listened to them too, and now I’ve sent you mine, so have a listen if you want. I listened through the list of your favorite bands that you gave me, their entire discographies, actually. And I’ve listened through your discographies. You’ve all got different influences and overlapping tastes, different but complementary styles, and you’re all incredible writers. Artists. So. Now I want you to forget about everything you’ve thought about so far. Everything you thought this band would be.”

No one said anything, but Summer smiled.

“Everything you thought this band might sound like when you came together... forget about it,” I went on. “Forget about your vortex playlists and your influences and the bands you’ve played in before. The music you’ve written before. Forget all of it. I’ll say it again. *There are no rules in that room.* No limits. I don’t want you to think about genre. Don’t think about the album. Don’t think about if or how the songs will fit together, or where they’ll get played after they’re released. Forget about what you think your fans want to hear. Forget about what you think I want to hear. Forget about what you think Ashley wants to play or Xander wants to play or Matt wants to play or Summer wants to play. Forget about how some new guitarist might or might not fit into the mix. This isn’t the Penny Pushers or Steel Trap or Dirty or DJ Summer, or any of your other previous projects. This isn’t any of you. This is *all* of you. Forget about what Dirty is doing or what Breakneck is doing or what anyone else is doing out there in the market right now. And forget about Brick House Records. I don’t want you to think about Trey Jones or anything he’s told you. Trey Jones no longer exists to you. Just write. Write without thinking about it. Make music without thinking about it. I want you to write like every song you write could be your best song,

because it is your best song. That's your only job in that room."

Summer was still smiling.

Matt looked kinda stunned. Xander looked relieved.

Ash looked fucking stoked.

"That all sounds great," Xander said after a moment. "But we have a deal with Trey."

"I'm aware of the deal. And I'm telling you not to worry about it. Me and Brody will deal with Trey."

"And when do you come into the writing process?" Matt asked.

"When you need me to. You'll know when that is."

No one said anything.

"Are we good? I've given you something to think about, and you guys are gonna get writing?"

"Yeah," Xander said, looking around at his bandmates. "We're good."

"Good. And anytime you start thinking about any of that shit I just told you to stop thinking about... Just remember, you are who you are and that's why you're in that room. No one else can do what you do."

"We love you, Cary," Summer said. Actually, she kinda sang it. I knew she was the one who wanted me to produce this album more than anyone. I was planning not to make her regret that.

"Let me know when you need me," I told them. "I'll be here."

"Cool. Thanks," Ash said. "Feel like I wanna go write some killer shit now."

"Good. Talk to you later."

I nodded at Taylor and after we said goodbye, she disconnected.

"Well," she said, "I think you just inspired the crap out of them. I've never seen Ash so speechless."

"Yeah, that or I just terrified them."

She smiled. "So that's it? You won't come into the writing process until later, when they ask you to?"

"I want to see what they come up with first, without me in the mix. We'll use that as a starting point and we'll go from there. But I'll be writing, too. And after they show me theirs, I'll show them mine, and we'll see where it crosses over, if it does. In the end, all that matters is that the very best songs make it onto the album. Whoever wrote them is irrelevant."

"You're very smart, Cary Clarke."

I smiled a little, because it was hard not to eat up anything nice that she

said to me. “Probably not as smart as people take me for, Taylor Lawson.”

# Chapter Fifteen

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**Cary**



## Afraid of Heights

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**A**fter lunch, Taylor worked in the great room again while I worked in the control room with the door open. I could hear her on the phone with someone, chatting. Merritt, maybe. Sounded like they were talking about the Players, but she was laughing a bit.

Could've been Courteney, actually, or maybe Ashley's wife.

Fuck, for all I knew she was talking to some delivery guy, and she was just that at ease talking to strangers.

I liked that. That it was so easy for her to talk to people. Really fucking unlike me that way.

I liked it that she'd seemed to bond with my sister. That she'd taken herself right down to Little Black Hole to introduce herself to everyone there, and bonded with Merritt, too.

That she'd made herself at home in my world so quickly. Even here, in my home studio.

I didn't even realize it was possible for anyone to do that anymore. The very few people who'd walked through these doors over the last few years had never seemed comfortable here.

Dean, maybe. But only because he was such a self-interested narcissist that he didn't really pick up on other people's social cues. Probably never occurred to him to feel uncomfortable here because whatever was wrong with me had nothing to do with him anyway. Alive's lead singer had always been marvelously impervious to other people's problems in a way that I envied.

Maybe that was why I put up with him.

Dean Slater just swept in here every once in a while, talked about himself, and went on his way. I didn't doubt that he cared about me, in his way, or he probably wouldn't bother, but the interaction probably didn't do much for either of us.

And then there was Xander. And my sister. Two people who definitely cared about me, but were never comfortable in here because they knew me

well enough to know that I wasn't happy. It was hard for them to take.

I got that.

It would be hard for me to take if I knew either of them was unhappy. Which was one of the reasons I stayed away from them as much as I could. It was a survival mechanism. I had enough of my own problems to try to deal with. I really couldn't handle other people's pain.

And yes, I was well aware of how pathetic that was, that I was too fucking fragile to handle normal human relationships and everything that went with them. That didn't mean it was something I wanted to chat about, though.

Just another reason on the long list of reasons to keep to myself.

Of course, there was Rose. And Liam, though he never really stepped through the front door. People who were paid to enter my world, but only for brief periods of time and a specific function.

Maybe you could put Nicolette on that list, too, though she'd never come here. I'd never seen her outside of Bliss.

But unlike Taylor, all those people did their thing and were gone.

Taylor couldn't really leave. Because I'd gotten her to move in, control freak that I was. But also, I could tell she wanted to stay.

I'd probably never fucking understand why.

I watched her for a while through the window, even as I slipped on headphones to try to concentrate. I was listening through the rough cut of a song that the Players had sent me after our morning talk. Something they'd been working on but weren't sure I'd like.

It had potential.

But I kept getting distracted, watching Taylor working on the couch.

I kept letting myself get distracted.

I was impressed by her passion for her job. The hard work she was already putting in. All the little things she did, like making sure I had coffee and food, and even feeding my cat. But she was also several steps ahead of me on most things, facilitating conversations between me and Merritt, me and Brody, me and Trey, before I even knew they needed to happen. Maybe that was because she was actually answering my phone, my emails, and even my texts.

On day three of her working for me, the morning after I first fucked her, I'd basically handed her my phone and let her have at it.

When she started working for me, I'd had over forty-thousand unread

emails in my inbox. Taylor had taken on the herculean task of diligently sorting through them for me.

*I don't even know how you can think straight with the pressure of this number staring you in the face,* she'd told me.

Embarrassingly, there were many dozens of other things that I'd left neglected like that, like weeds growing up in the cracks all over my world. I just dealt with it by pretty much ignoring them, but she was right. They created clutter. Pressure. I knew they were there, gradually pushing through the walls I'd built, until one day they'd crack. It wasn't a comfortable way to live, but I'd done it for so long that I thought I'd gotten used to it.

Taylor literally opened the curtains to let the sun into the studio, and she was now metaphorically pulling up the weeds I'd let overtake the place.

Felt like I could breathe easier in here already.

It was all very impressive, and I appreciated it. But the most striking thing about her wasn't her competence or her friendly professionalism or the warm support she offered. It was the way she did it all without judgment.

She didn't seem to judge me at all.

Was that what I found so irresistible about her?

That she didn't put pressure on me to change? Or judge me for not being something that I wasn't?

She didn't seem to judge me for being reclusive or private or antisocial, or anything else. Even the sex club thing, which I assumed would be a big ask for most women. She didn't criticize my behavior or my habits, even in a subtle, non-verbal way. She didn't even seem to question them, other than to try, carefully and respectfully, to understand.

Like when she'd gently asked me if I was agoraphobic and tried to talk to me about stage fright.

But when I didn't want to talk about it, she took my cues and let it go.

Obviously, she fucking noticed that I wasn't a normal guy. She lived out there, in the real world, and when she walked in the door, she saw me. But she didn't treat me like there was already something wrong with me before she met me. She didn't act like she'd already made up her mind about me before that day.

It was like I had a blank slate with her. And it was a little intoxicating.

I really hadn't been *new* to anyone in years.

People who didn't even know me already knew me, or thought they knew me, in the most ignorant, judgmental, intrusive ways imaginable. People

who'd maybe met me once, twice, they all had an opinion. I'd learned that as I got famous; that everyone had an opinion about the public you, and that seemed to make them think that they knew the private you when they didn't.

And for someone they didn't even know, they became fanatically invested in everything you did—especially your highest highs and your lowest lows.

They loved it when you were on top, a shining star, so bright they could hardly fathom your brilliance.

And they loved it when you fell.

There was no in-between. No one cared about a mediocre musician, a halfway famous person known for ordinary things. *Musician dropping off kids at soccer practice* just didn't stop anyone's scroll.

*Rock star losing his shit at nightclub where ex-wife showed up with another man* was somehow irresistible.

Staggering amounts of success sold.

Pain sold.

Godlike. Untouchable. Idolized. Beloved. Superhuman.

Fallen. Broken. Dead. Dying. Disgraced.

That was how the world wanted its rock stars. There was no in-between. And everyone wanted to figure out which end of the spectrum they could slot you into.

A lot of my peers still put me in that first category. Beloved. Untouchable. Out of respect, pity, or a lingering belief in me and my work. Out of respect for the work I still put out there, even though I was no longer touring, no longer in a band, and regardless of anything that had happened in my personal life.

Most of the rest of the world saw me as fallen. Broken.

In hiding.

I wasn't onstage. I wasn't shining like a star. I'd reversed into the shadows, and that meant something was wrong with me.

Even if everything had been right, they wouldn't have believed it.

But maybe that was unfair of me to assume. Because it's not like everything had ever been right with me, so how would I know?

Taylor didn't seem to be looking to put me on a pedestal or to condemn me.

She didn't seem to have any preconceived ideas about me. If she did, she shed them when she walked into my house, or she allowed them to fall away

as she actually got to know me. She seemed to genuinely want to get to know me. Like she found me interesting, and not just because I was paying her. And not because I was some freak show.

It made me want to be a better version of myself.

Or maybe some mediocre version of myself who could offer her a regular sort of life? Dinner dates. Walks on the beach. Pillow talk.

But all I knew were the extremes.

If I wasn't on top of the world, I was deep in the shadows.

It had always been this way.

Gabe was the only one who understood me without trying. Who kept me balanced. Who helped me navigate between the highs and the lows and stay afloat.

I stared at the old, brown leather bracelet on my wrist. Gabe's bracelet.

I had a couple of his basses, some of his vinyl records, clothes. All kinds of things that had once belonged to him.

But the bracelet was the only one I could really stand to look at. I'd worn it until it became a part of me.

"Hey, you." Taylor's soft voice reached me. I realized she'd been knocking on the frame of the open door. She was standing there, looking in at me, while I'd gotten lost in my thoughts. I didn't even hear the music playing in my ears.

I slipped the headphones off. "Hey."

"Sorry to interrupt. We're confirmed for two-thirty with Brick House."

"Good."

"That's in less than an hour. Just wanted to give you a heads up. I'll get us set up about five minutes early. And if there's anything you want to go over with me first, let me know?"

"Sure. Thanks."

She smiled and headed back out to the great room. I watched her go back to work at her laptop.

*Shit.* There was just something about her belief in me, the way she treated me, the way she talked to me... like I was somehow normal... that made me want to try harder.

I'd never felt like that around anyone except Gabe. Maybe Xander, on a good day on tour, onstage together; when I felt like we were in sync, like I was at my best and he wasn't judging me. But that was it. My two best friends.

And her.

I got up and went out there, and sat down across from her, on one of the couches.

She looked up from her laptop.

“So what’s the purpose of this meeting?” I asked her.

“Uh, you didn’t give me an agenda. So... I’m not sure?” Her lips quirked.

“Venture a guess.”

“Well, Trey’s assistant mentioned something in her email about that memo he sent over to the band. You know, the one Ash tore up?” She gave me an amused, cringey look. “So, I’m guessing they want to go over that?”

“I called the meeting, though.”

“Right. So, you want to go over it? Are you planning to give them hell? Should I practice my poker face?”

“No. I wanted them to go ahead and assume that’s what I want to discuss. And it may come up, if Trey brings it up. But this conversation is to set the tone of our communication going forward. This is the first formal conversation we’re having since the band went into the studio. Contracts are all signed now, so it’ll be a different conversation than it was before. This is the part where we remind them we’ve got four artists in that studio and we’re not gonna piss all over that with whatever Trey Jones thinks will get the most likes on Instagram.”

She cocked her head at me, considering. “How do you mean?”

“Trey Jones is a pretty brilliant businessman. And he knows it. He also knows music. And the music business is a pretty different world than the world the band lives in, in the studio. The music business is where the music goes to be sold, or to die. And sadly, nowadays, it’s often a lot more about which artist has the biggest social media following, not which song is the best song.”

“Huh. That’s fucked.”

“Yeah. Well, if you haven’t heard, money makes the world go ’round.”

“I hate that that’s true. Ash is so talented. That’s all it should be about.”

“It is about that, but it’s complicated. We need the record company, just like they need us. We need to make sure Trey doesn’t see the band as disposable, though. I’ve had a lot of issues with record companies in the past, like so many musicians do. So I guess you’d say I’m cautiously optimistic that Trey might be a little different. Because he’s local, he knows the local scene and where these musicians are coming from. He’s good friends with

Xander. But even so, it's kind of a record company's nature to take advantage of bands. They make their money off the artists' work. That's part of what the band has Brody for. To protect them. But when it comes to the creative, there's all kinds of bullshit that comes into play."

"Really? Even when you have a contract?"

"Definitely. For one thing, the record company can just shelve an album that you put your heart and soul into. If they don't want to put it out there for whatever reason, they don't. It happens to all kinds of bands. Even successful, established musicians. Albums just gathering dust on virtual shelves. Worse than that, a record company executive can totally butcher the creative process because they don't know what the fuck they're talking about. Because they're business people, not musicians. Trey is a fan of music and he was a musician, casually, when he was young. Played in a few bands that didn't really go anywhere. He's got a great ear for talent, which is why he signed the Players. He knows who we've got in that studio. Hopefully this all works in our favor. He might listen better than other executives I've known, in theory. But when it comes to the money, at the end of the day, it's hard to know if he'll make the right choices."

"What kind of choices?"

"Well, bottom line, if he thinks the album won't sell or won't make him look good, he could shelve it. Or release it but then not bother backing the band any further than that. Or drop them from the label. That could stop the career of a new band in their tracks. Even a new band made up of already established musicians."

"Holy shit. I had no idea."

"I mean, the Players would probably have room to bounce back. Other avenues. Ash and Matt probably have that kind of star power at this point. Xander, maybe. Summer, probably not on her own, at least not at the level she'd like to be. But together, they have a currency. Doors will open for them and for Brody. But we don't want to see this door close. We don't want to lose momentum. We also don't want Trey or some A&R asshole from his company telling the band how to make music. It's a delicate balance."

"That's what the conversation was about earlier, with the band? You don't want them getting bad advice from Trey's staff?"

"I don't want them getting bad advice from anyone. And I don't want them thinking they need to please anyone but themselves in that room, including the record company."

“But... if the album doesn’t please the record company, then won’t that be a problem?”

I considered how to put it. “Here’s the thing, Taylor. If the Players make the album that’s in them, the one they really want to make, and do it from the heart, as cheesy as that may sound, that’s the album they’ll be happy with. And it’s more likely that that is the album that the record company, and everyone else, will end up loving, including the fans who buy the music. But maybe more importantly, it’s the album that will stand the test of time and when the band members look back in twenty years, they’ll still be proud of. Whether it’s a commercial success or not.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. But don’t you also want it to be a commercial success?”

“Of course. But the way I see it, money’s not the most important outcome. Neither is fame. I know the Players want it, but we can all make more money. This is a chance to make something original, and something that matters. That’s what they put this band together for. They might say they want to be rich and famous, and I’m sure they do, but what they really want is to make music they’re proud of. Music that they fucking love.”

“That sounds about right,” Taylor agreed. “Ash would probably be the first one to tell you he wants to be super famous. I’ve heard him basically say that. But everything he does says he wants to be respected. He wants to be known as a killer singer and songwriter, not just known.”

“So let’s make that known. Without being assholes about it.”

She laughed softly. “Is there a way to do that?”

“You and me, we’re gonna make sure Trey gets that message. That his role in this is hands off. He signed this band, he helped bring me in, and now he trusts us to do what we do.”

“You and me?”

“Yup.”

“You keep saying ‘we.’ And I’m not sure why.”

“Because you’re my assistant now, right? And, you know, my protégé.”

“Uh, protégé?” Her eyes sparked. Clearly she didn’t hate the idea, even if it confused the hell out of her.

“I don’t make a move without you,” I told her. “You’re a part of the Little Black Hole team now. And I expect you to make sure if I’m about to make a giant mistake, you’ll point it out to me.”

“Okay... I’m not sure I’m qualified for that—”



“Sure you are. You love music. And I trust your judgment.”

“Cary, you’re making me sweat.”

“Good,” I said. “That means you care.”

Taylor studied me like she was looking for signs that I was joking. But I didn’t laugh.

“And that’s why you’re gonna call Liam right now,” I told her, “and get him to come pick us up, and we’re going down to Brick House Records in person to have this meeting face-to-face.”

Taylor stared at me, obviously stunned. But she didn’t question it. Because for whatever fucking reason, this woman believed in me.

“Okay,” she said.

“This is the only face-to-face meeting Trey is getting with me, so we need to make it count. And I’d like to make it fast.”

“Of course.” She grabbed her phone. “I’ll get Liam.”

“Good.” I got up.

“Should I change?”

I stopped in my tracks and looked down at her. Her jeans were dark gray, tight, with rips in the knees, and cut off above the ankle. Her asymmetrical, black T-shirt bared one shoulder and her turquoise bra strap. Her pink hair was up in a tidy top knot and her makeup was done.

“Why would you ever change?”

“Uh…”

“I’ll meet you at the front door in ten minutes.”

---

Liam couldn’t get a parking spot close enough to the door at BHR Tower, where the offices of Brick House Records were located, so he dropped us right at the door and Taylor and I walked in together, just the two of us.

You know, like two totally normal people.

It was a sleek office tower in the financial district with a small, cold lobby, and we didn’t see anyone except one man in business attire who came off an elevator and brushed past us.

We got into an elevator and Taylor pressed the button. As the elevator started to rise, she checked her phone. Meanwhile, my stomach sank into a low, tight knot. I forced myself to consciously keep breathing. *Four in. Hold*

*four. Four out.* I crammed my fingers into my pockets so I didn't start tapping them on anything in sight, and made myself visualize a non-disastrous outcome to this, where no one died in a fiery elevator shaft.

Like kissing Taylor's neck while my cock slid inside her...

We could see each other in the mirrored walls of the elevator as we stood side-by-side. She hadn't changed, but she'd put on a soft-pink velvet blazer before we left the house. I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, as usual. I still had on my sunglasses and a flat cap, but maybe she knew I was looking at her.

"I talked to Trey's assistant," she told me. "Made it clear there's to be no welcome wagon or lineup of people wanting to meet you. She's assured me the coast is clear."

"You really didn't need to put on a blazer."

"I couldn't help it. I'm nervous."

"Don't be," I said, as my own body vibrated with the weird unreality of this feeling. Was I seriously in an elevator in an office tower, walking into a business meeting?

I hadn't done anything like this in years.

I wondered how many steps it was from my front door to Trey's office.

Not many.

*You can do this.*

The elevator stopped on the ninth floor and a couple of women got on, chatting quietly. They didn't really look at us. Taylor and I stood silently at the back of the elevator, which stopped again on the twelfth floor, and the women got out. When the elevator door closed behind them, I found Taylor staring at me in the mirror.

"What?" I said.

A smile ghosted over her lips. She looked up at the digital display, watching the numbers climb as we rose. "Nothing. You look like a rock star."

I looked over at her. "So do you."

She smiled at me. "Look, I'm just gonna ask you this once, because I don't want to make a big deal out of it or make you nervous or treat you like a baby or something. But are you gonna be okay? Do you want to give me a signal or something if you need to leave?"

"If I need to leave, I'll get up and walk out."

"Okay. Then I'll get up and leave with you." She reached over and slipped her hand into mine.

My fingers twined with hers automatically. She held my hand as the numbers shot up.

Twenty-one... Twenty-two...

Our hands slid apart just as the doors cracked open on the top floor, the twenty-third. Taylor stepped out first and walked straight over to the low, curved wall that wrapped around the reception area as I hung back. No one was around but the woman seated there, tapping softly on a keyboard.

The only indications that this wasn't a run-of-the-mill corporate office were the receptionist's Primus t-shirt and the Dirty song that was playing quietly. They probably had it put on for Brody's arrival.

I wondered if that meant Brody was already here.

The receptionist looked up with a generic smile as Taylor approached her desk. "Hello. We have an appointment with Trey Jones..."

The receptionist's smile froze and she popped up out of her seat. Her eyes widened just enough to make it obvious that she knew exactly who I was, and maybe how fucking unusual it was that I was here.

"Of course. This way." She directed us around the long, curved wall that led towards a waiting area, but we weren't waiting. We followed her up the hall, past the floor-to-ceiling windows with an unobstructed view of Coal Harbour.

Trey Jones had done well for himself. Especially considering that when we'd met as teenagers, he'd been a wannabe rock star with not much actual musical talent of his own. Just a passion for music and money. And now he owned a successful record label. Brick House Records had turned out a number of charting musicians in recent years, mostly in hip-hop, rap and pop.

But his successes reached much farther than that.

Not only did the Brick House Records office inhabit the top two floors of BHR tower, but Trey Jones himself—or at least one of his holding companies—*owned* the tower. The man had a lot of diversity in his portfolio, so to speak. I was here to make sure the contract he'd signed with the Players, and this album, weren't just another property.

In my world, music wasn't just a product. If he planned to handle the Players' album like it was just another investment to pad his portfolio, we were gonna have a problem.

Greed bred bad decisions in the studio.

But I was also here for Taylor. If it wasn't for her, I would've taken this meeting virtually and called it a day. I wouldn't have even thought twice

about it. I would've maybe even blown the whole thing off and relegated the conversation to email, depending on the day I was having.

But now I wanted to prove something to her, maybe. And to myself.

That I wasn't an antisocial freak, incapable of taking a business meeting with my peers.

That I *chose* to do all my business from my home studio.

And now, I chose this in-person meeting.

I was in control.

And maybe, just maybe, I even deserved all that admiration and awe Taylor gave me earlier today when we talked about my work. Because deep down, I wasn't so sure.

I heard the receptionist offering her beverages as I trailed them to another small reception area outside an office door. Taylor declined the drink offer, maybe knowing I didn't plan to have time for that. The receptionist vanished back down the hall, leaving us with the woman at the desk. I watched as she greeted Taylor, who didn't introduce me.

I didn't want her to, and she knew that, but I was definitely starting to feel like a freak. Everyone looking at me and trying not to look at me.

Someone stepped out of an office up the hall, saw us, and actually scrambled back inside.

Trey's assistant knocked on the office door, then ushered us inside the huge office, which looked out over the water. Trey's desk was on one side of the room, half-facing the view. He was reclined behind it, and Brody sat in one of the guest chairs.

I wondered if they'd been talking about me before I walked in.

Of course they had.

They stood up and Trey's assistant left, shutting the door. "Cary," Brody said, "good to see you." He said it casually, like he saw me all the time, and I appreciated that. He looked good, as always, in his leather motorcycle jacket and designer jeans, his short brown hair a little more dusted with gray at the temples than the last time I'd seen him. Fucking years ago.

Brody was the same age as I was, but it just reminded me how much time had passed, and that we were all getting older.

"Hey, Brody." I shook the hand he offered first, because he was closest, but he really wasn't who I was here to see. I had no issues with Brody. He didn't even need to be here, technically, but I was glad he was—so Trey knew that the Players had multiple sets of eyes looking out for them.

Then I shook Trey's hand, as he came out from behind his desk. "Cary Fucking Clarke. It's a goddamn honor," he said, giving me a solid handshake, and then a quick chest-to chest hug and a back slap.

"Hey, Trey." I took off my sunglasses and looked him solidly in the eye. I wanted him to know I had skin in this game. I wasn't some hermit holed up in my castle, to be manipulated over passive-aggressive emails, and placated over phone calls when I wasn't in the room to see the eyes rolling.

Been there before.

Didn't love it.

But I'd never worked with Trey before, and I figured as two men from the same scene, we could come to an understanding. We'd hung out as kids. Ended up on different paths, career-wise, but we started out in the same place.

Then I watched him shake Taylor's hand. "The lovely Taylor," he marveled, and kissed her cheek. He held her hand a little too long, and when he smiled at her his dimples popped. His white teeth flashed.

And I realized I'd almost forgotten that Trey Jones was also a model, not so long ago.

He probably could've still been a model, if we wasn't full up with running his record company, buying up real estate and investing his wealth in building more wealth. He was tall, athletic and charming, one of those guys whose sex appeal just oozed off him—which was also one of those things I'd forgotten since I hadn't been in a room with him in so damn long. Kinda like Xander, but in a very different way. Xander was all muscles and tattoos and dirty thoughts, and I'd definitely seen way too many girls get drunk on him. But if Xander Rush was a row of tequila shots, Trey Jones was a bottle of wine. Would get a girl just as fucked, but she'd probably be more inclined to savor it.

I knew Xander had changed. Matured. Settled down, so to speak. He was with my sister. But even at the height of our fame with Alive, and the height of his bed-hopping phase, I never saw him as competition for women.

Maybe because the women I wanted usually didn't want him.

If I had to choose a man to compete with for a woman's attention, it definitely wouldn't be Trey Jones. I didn't enjoy losing, for one. And if Trey and I went head-to-head for a woman, obviously, these days, I'd lose. He was just way too confident. Totally at ease in his business tower, and probably just as at ease hanging out with a girl like Taylor in her old apartment,

drinking beers while she blasted Metallica and sucked him off.

I realized they were all looking at me. They'd all sat down and I was still standing there, just staring blankly at Trey. I was barely fucking breathing.

"Cary?" Taylor said softly. She started to get up, and I sat down.

She sat back, but kept watching me.

I took a deep breath. What the fuck was that? I got my ass all the way up here, then fucking froze, nanoseconds after we walked into the room, because I watched her shake Trey Jones's hand?

*Yeah. Because you know he's normal, and you're not.*

*Because he could give her things that you can't.*

I wanted to get right the fuck up and leave, right then, but I didn't.

"So, it's nice to see you again," Trey said, to Taylor. And it hit me...

"You've met before?"

"Just once," Taylor said. "At a party."

"Xander's place, right? You were there with..." Trey snapped his fingers like he was trying to recall it. "Danica? Ashley's girl."

"Yes. She's my best friend."

"You know Courteney, too. Am I right?"

"Wait. You're Larissa's brother! I just put that together."

Trey laughed. "Yup. That's me. Hope she didn't say anything bad about me."

"I've just met her a couple of times through Courteney. I totally forgot she had such a cool older brother."

"Taylor is my assistant now," I interjected, "and I'm training her to work with me in the studio, more like a studio manager."

Taylor's eyes went wide. Maybe she thought I was kidding about that protégé thing.

"Very cool," Trey said. "That's quite the gig you've landed, Taylor." Then he gave me the slightest congratulatory smirk, like, *You're fucking her, aren't you?*

Perceptive.

"So what have you been working on over here, Trey?" I baited him. Might as well get his self-congratulatory sales pitch out of the way. I knew it was coming. "I'm sure Taylor would like to hear about your artists. She's a big music fan."

"Oh, yeah? What kind of music do you listen to, Taylor?"

"Anything good," she said, and he laughed.

I sat back and watched as he casually bragged to all of us, under the pretense of bragging to her, about the other artists he'd signed recently, a couple of singles his artists had on Billboard right now, the Grammy nomination. He looped Brody into it several times, riffing with him about the local music scene, how diverse it was and how it had blossomed in recent years—thanks to him and Brody, of course. Trey definitely acted like a man who had all morning to explain his business to my assistant, maybe because she was my assistant, and maybe because she was hot, but either way, I knew none of us had that kind of idle time.

As for Taylor, I wasn't sure why she said she was nervous in the elevator. She didn't seem nervous. She had natural instincts, she was articulate and quick with words, and clearly she was used to working with VIPs, executives. If she was intimidated by Trey or Brody, or the conversation, she didn't show it.

I was so focused on her, it kinda took the pressure off me. Just like back in the days when I'd gone pretty much everywhere with Gabe, I functioned better with her at my side.

Besides that, she was the best kind of distraction. All I had to do was focus on her deep-sea eyes, her easy smile, and I felt better.

Trey was still talking, and while his credentials were impressive enough to get us all in the room, I didn't really listen. I already knew more about him and his business than he was willing to offer up. Like the fact that there was no way his artists generated enough bank to carry this office, which meant that Brick House Records' fancy, sky-scraping digs with the killer view were at least partially funded by Trey's other endeavors, and that meant they were for show. This was show biz, right? And guys like Trey always wanted you to feel like you needed them more than they needed you.

But that was bullshit.

And Brody knew it, too.

If the Players were allowed to do what they were capable of, and they stuck with Trey over the course of their career, they'd put Brick House Records on the map. Secure them a serious presence in music and, more importantly, in rock music, which was where Trey started out, and likely it was where his heart still beat.

He wanted us here as much as we wanted to be here.

"I'm always looking to spread our wings here at Brick House. Diversify." He was still going on with his sales pitch when I tuned back in, but I'd had all

I could take of the *let's-jerk-each-other-off* small talk. “We’re excited as hell about having our first hard rock album on the label—”

“It might not be a hard rock album,” I cut in.

They all looked at me.

“What?” Trey said.

“It might not be a hard rock album,” I repeated. “It might not even be a rock album.”

Trey smiled his charming smile, like maybe I was joking. “The Players are a rock band, are they not?”

“Presumably. They just formed. I guess we’ll see.”

“I’ve been promised a rock album, brother.”

“Well, they probably shouldn’t have promised you that before I got in the room.”

Trey’s smile kinda faded. “I didn’t know it was an option to get you in the room.”

“Here I am.”

Brody shifted in his seat, like he was gonna say something, but didn’t.

“I need an album, Cary,” Trey informed me. “By December. That’s the deal. Beyond that... you’re gonna start running up a bill that the Players are gonna have to pay for. That kind of debt can drown a band before they even get their heads out of the water.” He looked over at Brody.

“You’ll have your album,” I said.

Trey looked at me again. “And you don’t even know what genre it is yet. It’s July, Cary.”

“Fuck genre.”

Brody cleared his throat. I didn’t bother looking over at him. I knew Brody Mason well enough to know he didn’t really care about this dance with Trey. We had contracts locked down, and he stood behind his talent. This was just a bunch of peacock strutting bullshit, dudes whipping out their dicks and rulers to size up who was the alpha in the room.

In terms of actual power in the music industry, Brody was the alpha in the room. Dirty was the hottest ticket in town, and they had been for at least the last five years. Everyone knew this. This whole conversation was probably amusing to him. I was surprised he hadn’t sent some underling to sit in on this meeting, but hey, he probably just couldn’t resist the opportunity to experience a rare Cary Clarke sighting in the wild.

Trey was still staring at me, sizing me up, though he looked mildly



amused himself. Possibly just happy to see me here, no matter what came out of my mouth. We'd always been friendly.

Still, this was business, right? And I wasn't naive about the reality that with a man like Trey, business always came first.

"How many albums have you played on, Trey?" I asked him. "Written? Produced?"

He sat back in his seat and studied me. "I don't play anymore, brother. You know that."

I just let those words hang in the air for a long moment to make sure he heard them.

"Let's just let the album flow, yeah?" Brody spoke up. "The album will rock, Trey. Can we all agree on that?"

"Yeah. We can agree on that," I said. Then I got to my feet, and I told Trey, "You'll have your album, and it'll probably even be on time. It'll be a whatever-it-is album. And whatever it is, it'll be brilliant. I can guarantee you that. I can't guarantee you anything else other than that. Give us a chance to deliver on that, and we'll deliver."

Trey was silent, considering that.

"And by the way, if you've got any more notes on creative, of any kind, you can send them to Taylor. Your assistant has her email."

Trey smiled, slowly. Then he got to his feet. "Sure, Cary. You work your magic, we won't have a problem." He offered me his hand. Yeah, he just ate that shit. In front of witnesses.

Which meant he was giving me *one* chance to deliver, and if I didn't deliver the magic, his A&R monkeys would be so far up our asses, the members of the Players wouldn't be taking a shit in that studio without his approval.

I shook his hand.

When I turned around, Taylor and Brody had stood up, too. I shook Brody's hand.

"Take care, Cary," he said, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

Then I headed the fuck out and Taylor followed. I'd had about all I could stand in that room.

When we headed back through the halls to the elevator, I noticed Brody stayed behind. Pretty solid chance they'd be talking about me, again, as soon as I left the room. Knowing it just made me want to get out of there faster.

We blew past the reception desk and got into an elevator. Taylor stole a

couple of glances at me, but she didn't say anything. As soon as the elevator doors closed, I realized I was holding my breath and forced myself to breathe again.

Four in. Hold four...

Taylor turned to me. "Am I allowed to say that was hot?"

"Fuck yes," I breathed. I grabbed her velvet blazer and kissed her. Her body softened against mine, and she moaned as I thrust my tongue into her mouth. When I broke the kiss, I pressed my lips to her jaw, to her throat, and she clutched at my back.

"Cary. Why did you tell them I was going to be your studio manager?"

"Because you are. If you want to be." I looked into her eyes. "Do you want to be?"

"I... I didn't even know that job was available."

"It's what Merritt does at Little Black Hole."

"But that's an actual studio. With people in it."

I cocked an eyebrow at her. "You're saying my home studio isn't an actual studio? And I'm not people?"

"I just didn't know you needed, or wanted, a studio manager."

"You can give yourself whatever title you want." I took her face in my hands and kissed her soft lips. "But I'm not gonna waste your talents on fetching coffee and sorting emails." I kissed her again, lingeringly, and I could practically feel her swoon.

Yeah, so maybe seeing her in a room with the likes of Trey Jones, superbachelor, had shocked me to crank it up a notch.

I wanted her. So I was gonna do everything I could to keep her, as long as I could. Even if it meant trying even harder to act like a normal person than I was accustomed to.

I dragged my lips over hers again, feeling her heartbeat against mine.

*Stay.*

Then I let her go, because we were almost at the lobby and I needed to put my sunglasses on.

"Funny," she said breathlessly, "I've had so many bosses who've been happy to waste my talents on those things. And worse things."

"Well, maybe your other bosses were assholes."

"I can't argue with that."

I took her hand. And this time when the elevator doors opened, I didn't let go.

# Chapter Sixteen

---

**Cary**

## Rescue Me

---

“Just a few... more... steps.”

Taylor led me out into my backyard with a silk sleep mask over my eyes, so I couldn't see shit. It was about ten o'clock and I'd just finished working for the night. It was quiet in the neighborhood, as usual, but she had music on in the yard. Not super loud, but I could hear Jack White singing “I'm Shakin'” all the way in the living room, and it got louder the closer we got to the pool.

I was surprised I could hear it at all over my heartbeat pounding through my bones. My limbs were fucking vibrating with the adrenalin punch. I didn't particularly like being blindfolded and led into something I couldn't see, even if it was just my backyard. Anxiety, for me, was often nonsensical like that. One minute I'm walking into a business meeting downtown with very little issue, and hours later I have trouble walking into my own backyard.

That unpredictability was one of the strongest arguments for just staying put in my controlled environment. Why take the risk of having a panic attack in public?

I was pretty sure, though, that Taylor had no idea how nervous I was right now, and the song wasn't meant to be spot-on.

“If you're about to shove me into the pool,” I said dryly, trying to keep my voice steady, “let me know so I can haul you in with me.”

She stopped me with a hand to my chest and slipped the mask off for me. I almost shuddered with relief. “Ta-da!”

I stared at the pool, and the bar cart she'd wheeled over to it.

“What is this?” I asked her as I looked around.

“It's the scene of our pool party!” She waved her arms at the patio around us, glowing in the warm light of the golden lanterns. The pool looked vividly turquoise in the night, kinda like her eyes, and the music flowed from hidden speakers on either end of the patio. It really was a sweet setup for a party.

The backyard was half the reason I'd bought this house. Back then, I'd planned to have a lot of parties here.

"Too bad I never throw parties," I deadpanned. I definitely looked for it, just in case, but there was no sign of anyone here but the two of us.

"I'm throwing one for you," she informed me.

"What?"

I looked her over in her gauzy pink cover-up thing, which really didn't cover up her black string bikini at all.

On the way home from the meeting at Brick House, I'd tried to make out with her in the back of the car—she'd stopped me out of respect for Liam, a respect that escaped me when my hand slipped between her legs and felt her heat through her jeans. When we got home, she'd deposited me in the studio to work, interrupting me only for dinner and then sending me back to work. Which was good, because if I didn't get at least a few hours of work in before she lured me out here, I would've felt guilty and stressed.

Honestly, the meeting at Brick House today took so much out of me, I either needed to fuck her or bury myself in work to feel better.

But the girl had flawless timing. When she came to collect me from the studio, I was just about to tear myself away from work anyway and see what she was doing. I'd heard her going in and out of the house and making noise in the kitchen, and talking to my cat in a sweet, indulgent voice.

She'd sent me upstairs to change, and when I came back down, she'd whispered, "Trust me," as she slipped the eye mask onto me. And the anxiety had closed down around me in the blackness. She'd led me out here, and I followed, my heart racing. I didn't like being led into who-the-fuck-knew-what, but I wanted to trust her. I wanted her to fuck me again and I really didn't want to fuck any of this up by having a meltdown on her over nothing.

So I thought about what a normal guy would do in this situation—crack jokes? Flirt with her? Play along and be nice? And I bit my tongue. Actually, I bit into the side of my mouth and sucked back quiet, belly-deep breaths through the taste of blood.

I was half-terrified there was gonna be someone else out here, someone I wasn't prepared to see, or just too many someones. But right now, I didn't even see my cat.

Taylor looked at me expectantly, waiting for some reaction.

"You can't have a pool this nice and never have pool parties, Cary," she scolded me, teasingly, when I didn't react at all. She couldn't taste the blood

in my mouth or feel my bones shaking.

I wanted to sit down, but she was standing, so I stood.

I forced the words out. "Is someone coming over?"

Her smile faltered. "No. Of course not." She drifted her fingers lightly down my arm. "Just you and me. Come on." She led me over to the bar cart. On top, there was a platter of bakery bread cut into chunks, a bowl of dill pickles, and a full bottle of Crystal Head vodka.

She'd gotten this stuff for me?

"Did I get it right?" she asked me. "Is the bread supposed to be slices? I thought chunks would be easier. And I got the mini dills."

I studied the offerings, just trying to bring my heart rate back to normal as the anxiety subsided.

*No one's here.*

*The beautiful woman put on a bikini and brought you alcohol. It's called a date.*

*Fucking relax.*

I lifted my chin at the skull-shaped vodka bottle. "What the hell is that?"

"It's vodka."

"Aren't you Polish?"

"Uh." She looked lost. "My grandparents are."

"With a name like Lawczynski, I thought you'd know. Never buy any vodka that isn't Russian or Polish."

She blinked at me. "Why?"

"Ask your grandfather."

"Huh?"

"What the hell do Canadians know about making vodka?" I wandered over to the pool as I stripped off my shirt.

"But it comes in this cool crystal skull bottle!"

I said nothing. I watched her eyes follow my hands to my swim trunks, which she'd told me to wear. "So, is this work time or play time?"

"I think they should just blur together," she said, meeting my eyes. "So I can touch you whenever I want to."

Sounded good to me. I stripped off my swim trunks, and she watched me do it.

She tried to pretend like I wasn't buck naked by not staring at my cock. "You can't distract me that easily, though." She set two shot glasses meaningfully next to the skull bottle.

“Uh-huh.”

“Dan Aykroyd invented this vodka. He’s a Canadian treasure. How can it be wrong?”

“You should return it,” I teased her.

She cracked it open defiantly. “It’s made with grains from Ontario and water from Newfoundland...” I dove into the pool. She was still talking when my head reemerged. “... it’s gluten free and has no additives, baby. Just pure, boozy goodness.”

“I don’t think that’s a selling point. Doesn’t Screech also come from Newfoundland?”

“The dude at the store really sold me on it,” she went on, “but I mean, this bottle really sells itself.”

“Of course he did. You were the hottest customer in the store, so he took his time.”

“He really did.”

I rested my arms on the side of the pool, watching her as she poured out our shots. Yeah, so I was jealous of Trey Jones today, and now I was jealous of some guy who worked in a liquor store, stocking shelves and operating a cash register for a living, for what, just above minimum wage? Because he got to talk to *her* in that liquor store, and possibly flirt with her while he sold her a bottle of vodka, while you couldn’t pay me enough to walk into a liquor store. Or any store.

“You know, this was the official vodka of the Rolling Stones’ fiftieth anniversary tour,” she informed me. “Have I convinced you yet?”

“We’ll see.”

She handed me a shot and a pickle, looking happily undaunted.

“This dude really saw you coming, huh?”

“I mean, I may have been wearing several skulls.” She stood above me, lifting her shot and her pickle ceremoniously. “Wait. Do we do a Russian cheer or a Canadian cheer?”

“I don’t speak Russian, so...”

“What is that *nosto-vitia* thing Russian gangsters say in movies when they drink? *Nosdro-vee-ah? Nos-do-via?*”

“I think that’s just in movies.”

“You’re leaving me hanging here.”

“Alright,” I said. “To your good health.”

“Is drinking straight vodka healthy?”

“The pickle adds nutrients. I think.” I tipped my shot glass at her, accidentally spilling a bit of my vodka. She gave me a dirty look like I was cheating on purpose. Then we sank our chilled shots.

I bit into my pickle as the cold burn went down my throat.

Taylor popped the end of her pickle in her mouth and sucked on it tentatively. Then she bit through the crunchy skin and ate off a chunk. We eyed each other, neither of us revealing a reaction.

“Did you ever try that shot-of-rye-followed-by-a-shot-of-pickle-juice thing that went through Vancouver last year?” she asked me.

“Nope. Sounds gross.”

“You know, it really was.”

“That was a thing?”

“Yup. ‘Hipster’s delight’ or some shit.”

I handed her my empty shot glass with a short laugh. “Really?”

She grinned. “I have no idea what it was called. It was all the rage at parties. And by parties I mean hipster knitting circles, book clubs and baking exchanges.” Her eyes met mine, and maybe she realized as the words came out of her mouth that I wouldn’t know that, because I never went to parties, of any kind.

“I didn’t know ladies at knitting circles drank liquor shots.”

“They do when they’re twenty-nine.”

“I had no idea you belonged to any of the aforementioned social happenings.”

“I don’t. I have friends who tell me these things. I’m not a joiner.”

“Me either,” I said humorlessly.

She tipped her head, like, *Why you gotta be self-deprecating like that?*

I really hoped she didn’t think she had to be antisocial, or pretend she was antisocial, on my account—as much as I was definitely jealous of her life outside this house. Even if it involved knitting circles.

“Anyway, this is way better,” she added, picking up the vodka bottle and changing the subject. I could already tell she was getting protective of me that way. Steered us clear of topics that might make me feel bad. “I hate rye. Tastes like vomit to me. Maybe because I experienced so much of it in reverse while throwing it up in my teenage years?”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“Too much information?” she asked, as she poured us out more shots.

“Nope. I prefer you uncensored.”



“That’s good. Because when have I ever censored myself while we’ve had a conversation?” She handed me my next shot and a pickle.

“The first several times we had a conversation.”

“Well, what was I supposed to say?” She raised her shot glass, holding my gaze. “You’re strange, but you’re hot and more interesting than anyone I’ve ever met. Please hire me, I want to see what you do all day and maybe stare at you a bit.”

“You’re strange,” I replied, shot glass in the air, “and gorgeous, and sexier than anyone I’ve ever met. Please work for me and move into my poolhouse so I can make you hang out with me all day and maybe stare at you a lot.”

Eyes still locked, we drank to that like it was a toast or something.

Then a smile crept over her face like she couldn’t help it. She broke eye contact as she collected my shot glass again. I watched as she poured out another shot. “How many of these are we drinking?”

“I mean, might as well while it’s ice-cold, right? They go down easier. When it gets too warm, we’ll stop.”

“So... you did this tradition with Gabe?”

“Yup. We all did it together, the guys in Alive. After shows, special occasions... whenever Gabe rolled it out.”

“Interesting,” she said, pausing to munch on her pickle.

“Bring that shit over here and get in the pool with me.”

She handed me my shot, then got the skull bottle, the bowl of pickles, the platter of bread chunks, and laid them out poolside, within my reach. Then she went around to the shallow end of the pool, shrugged off her see-through pink thing, and walked herself slowly down the stairs into the water like some bikini babe in a video. While eating the last of her pickle and trying not to spill her shot. She sank into the water up to her chest and glided over to me, vodka held carefully above the water.

“So, what’s the bread for?” she asked, as I handed her a chunk.

“I dunno. Same as the pickle? It’s uncouth to drink straight liquor without eating something?”

“Really?”

“Honestly, this came from an actual drunk who wasn’t even Russian, so who knows.”

She laughed a little. “Gabe’s vodka guzzling uncle wasn’t Russian?”

“Ukrainian.”

“Hmm.” We tapped shot glasses and tossed the cold vodka back. Then we both helped ourselves to a pickle from the bowl. “So, why are we doing this again?”

“Because a drinking tradition is just like music. It’s personal. Imprints on you. Even if it makes no sense. It’s why you listen to certain music even if your friends hate it and you’re supposed to, too. And it’s why you drink straight vodka with a pickle and bread. Memories.”

“Ah. Well. I have no memories with this.”

“Guess we’ll have to make some.”

She just looked at me with the reflection of the water shimmering in her shipwreck eyes.

“So, what do you think of the vodka you chose?” I asked her. “How do the waters of Newfoundland taste?”

She licked her lip. “I confess, I’ve never drank straight vodka before, much less with a pickle chaser. I have no idea what it’s supposed to taste like. You?”

“No idea.” I handed her another piece of bread; I didn’t want her getting sick tonight. “Eat that.”

She gaped at me. “What? I thought you did this all the time.”

“Yeah, when I did this, I was already hammered. You think I’m drinking straight vodka sober?”

“But you said—”

“I had to say something. You asked me what I drink in the studio. I couldn’t say *nothing* and burst your bubble. Guy sitting around staring at the ceiling, writing music by himself, no cigarettes, no drinks, no drugs, it’s not the romantic vision you had in mind.”

She was gazing at me dreamily with those ocean-bottom eyes of hers. “It looks pretty romantic to me.”

“You look like a siren.”

“Huh?” She laughed a little, then frowned. “*Siren*,” she said, like she was searching her mental database for the word through the vodka buzz. “What is a siren, exactly? Is that one of those vague sexual compliments-slash-insults that men make up for women?”

“No,” I said, pouring us another shot, “it’s an actual thing from mythology. Enchantress who lures sailors with music, so they wreck their ships on the rocks.”

“Wow. Savage.”

I handed her a shot. “Not your style?”

“Hmm. The guys on the ship are stranded with me now, right?”

“I guess so.” I clinked my glass to hers and we threw back the vodka.

She shivered and sucked on her pickle. “Do some of them survive the wreckage? Like the cute ones?”

I plucked her shot glass from her hand. “It’s your fantasy, sweetheart.”

“Do I have somewhere to collect them? Is there vegetation on this island so I can feed them and keep them alive? I’m on an island, right? So I don’t have to share the cute guys I shipwrecked?”

“You may be putting too much thought into this.”

She was still thinking as she munched on her pickle. “Can I have a mermaid tail, though?”

“How are all these sailors you’re collecting gonna fuck you if you’re a mermaid?”

“Mermaid’s don’t fuck?”

“Think about that,” I said, as I tried to pour us shots without wasting vodka. My aim was already getting a little dubious.

“*Holy shit*,” she said, her eyes wide. “Check out this mindfuck, Cary Clarke. Why have men fantasized about mermaids for centuries if they can’t fuck?”

“Dunno.”

“Is it because they have boobs?”

“Maybe it’s the seashell bras.” I handed her a shot.

“Huh. Do you think they give really good blowjobs or something?”

“How about when I meet an actual mermaid, I’ll let you know.”

She gave me a dirty look, but laughed. We clinked shots and drank.

“Come on,” I said, eating a pickle. “I don’t get a free pass for a mermaid?”

“Okay, fine. You meet a mermaid, you get a blowjob. But I get to watch.”

“Fine by me.” I took the empty shot glass from her and set it aside. How many shots was that now? The pickles were making them go down weirdly easy.

“And I’m making a video of it,” she went on. “’Cause then I’m selling that shit, and we’re gonna be rich as hell.”

“You’d use me and my dick like that?”

“It’s not about your dick. Duh. It’s about the mermaid.”

“Oh. Right.”

“You come on a mermaid’s face, that’s the money shot of the millennium. I wonder if her skin would be slimy...”

“You have a vivid imagination, Taylor Lawson.”

“I know. And it’s vividly dirty.” She rested her head back against the side of the pool. “How do mermaids make babies? Do you think some guy fucked a fish long ago and that’s how the first mermaid came about?”

“You know mermaids aren’t real, right?” I slid over in front of her, kinda trapping her against the wall of the pool. I smoothed the wet ends of her hair back off her shoulders. “Also, pretty sure fish don’t fuck.”

“Maybe mermaids drop eggs, like fish,” she mused.

“Sexy.”

She slid her arms around my shoulders, gazing up at me. “What if I dropped eggs right now? And then I made you come in the water and then we had little fish babies living in the pool?”

“I knew you were strange when I met you.”

“We could charge admission.”

“Is this another of your get-rich schemes?”

“Hey, you started it by calling me a mermaid.”

“I called you a siren.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said, like she’d forgotten how this whole conversation started. “What do sirens have between their legs?”

I slid a hand between her legs and stroked her through her bikini. “This, I imagine.”

“Oh...” Her eyes softened.

“So you can see why those poor fuckers crashed their ships,” I said, my voice getting husky.

She melted, holding onto my shoulders as I ran my fingertip back and forth against her slit. “Yeah?” she breathed. “You’d cross the ocean for that?”

“Uh-huh. Few oceans.”

“Hmm. Easy to say when you can just hire a private jet.”

“Hey, don’t let the mode of transportation kill the compliment.” I brushed my lips along her jaw, my mouth drifting closer to hers. “It’s not my fault it’s the twenty-first century.”

She pushed me away a little, smiling. “Pour me another one of those vodka shots.”

I poured us both another one. We clinked and shot it back.

“You know, it grows on you,” she said, as I plucked the shot glass from

her hand and set it aside.

“Mmm.”

“My chest is warm.”

“Mm-hmm,” I said, pressing in closer. “My balls are warm.”

“Is that the vodka talking?”

I kissed her instead of answering that. I pressed my body, naked, against hers, sliding her soft, vodka-soaked lips open and plunging my tongue inside. She tasted like booze and dill and salt and sweet and I could’ve eaten her all night.

Her hands slid onto my shoulders. Then she pushed herself up while shoving my shoulders down—and shoved me underwater with all her drunken strength. She was already scrambling away when I reached for her, and when I popped back to the surface, she was splashing and screaming, kicking at me while I tried to grab her slippery feet.

I grabbed an ankle and hauled her back toward me. I yanked her into my arms. Then I kissed her again, holding her locked against me as she wriggled, laughing into our sloppy-drunk kiss. The strings at the back of her bikini top drifted over my hands and I grabbed hold, tugging gently.

Then she wrenched her lips away from mine.

“Wait! Turn it up!” she shouted, to no one in particular. Metallica had come on, “Don’t Tread On Me.” “*Aughh*, song orgasm,” she moaned, pawing at me, trying to push out of my arms. “You can’t have a song like this come on and not turn it UP.” She squirmed away from me, swim-walking over to the side of the pool where her phone lay on a towel.

I sent a couple of small waves sloshing over her.

“Stop it! Phone! NO WATER!” I stopped splashing and she turned up Metallica. Then she hauled herself quickly out of the pool, slipping away from me.

“You know, I have neighbors,” I informed her dryly.

“Well, they should be enjoying their backyards right now. I’ve kindly provided them with music.” She smiled, pleased with herself, and walked out to the end of the diving board. She plucked her swimsuit fabric out of her ass crack, which was somehow sexy when she did it.

Then she hopped up in the air and did an impressive cannonball into the pool that slapped me in the face with water.

I wiped water from my eyes, kinda laughing. When she surfaced, she sputtered, “Shit,” her head spinning around like she was looking for

something.

“You okay?”

Then a piece of black fabric surfaced in-between us.

Her eyes met mine. I grabbed it before she could, holding it up. It was her bikini top.

“So, *that’s* what happens when you do a cannonball in a string bikini after I loosen the string, huh?”

She grabbed at it, grinning. “Gimme that.”

“Nope.” I flung the bikini top into the bushes and her jaw dropped. “Didn’t you get the memo that this is a naked pool party?”

“Your assistant must’ve failed to send that memo out.”

“Guess I’ll have to fire her.”

She grabbed my shoulders and hopped up, clamping her thighs around my waist. I caught her ass and held her there. “You can’t fire me,” she said, wrapping her arms around my neck so her bare breasts pressed against my chest and her lips hovered close to mine. “You like me too much.”

“Guilty,” I mumbled against her lips as I drove her back against the wall of the pool. I held her there, brushing my lips over hers.

“I like you,” she said abruptly, and I paused before kissing her more deeply. “I want to keep you.” Her turquoise eyes, wide open, looked into mine. “And I don’t want your money.”

I just looked at her.

“I mean... I like your pool and everything. But I like you more. I like working for you. But I don’t need your riches. I can make my own money. I just want you to know that isn’t why I’m here. I’m here letting you smush me up against the wall of your pool with barely any clothes on because I like you. And if you lost your entire fortune tomorrow, I’d make sure we survived on chip sandwiches and Coke. My treat. Because I like you.”

Wow. That was a lot of *likes* in one paragraph. If she’d sent that to me in an email, it would’ve been peppered with heart-eyed smiley faces and thumbs-up emojis.

I smoothed the wet hair out of her face. “You don’t know me very well, Taylor.”

“I know I like how I feel when I’m with you. What more is there?”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I said nothing. I was hardly gonna give her a list of things she shouldn’t like about me.

“I think two people are what they are at the moment they meet,” she said.

“You shouldn’t change for each other. You either like each other or you don’t. Or maybe you hate each other, but you’re still drawn to each other. That part is chemical. And spiritual. I think the idea of getting to know each other and then having feelings develop is bullshit. It’s either there or it’s not. Everything else is just time. And time means nothing. It’s just a construct invented by man, to try to control things we can’t control. You choose what you do in every moment, but moments are fleeting. Underneath that is who you are and at the core, that doesn’t change, even when you grow.”

Okay, that was a lot of vodka-induced introspection. But Taylor usually did speak her mind. I loved that about her.

I wasn’t lying when I said I preferred her uncensored.

Even if uncensored Taylor scared me sometimes.

“That’s probably what scares people,” I said, trying to digest everything she’d just said, and the implications of it. The more layers of *I like you* she’d piled on with that revelation. “It scares us away from commitment. Maybe we’re scared that we don’t have a choice, from the moment we meet that other person and we want all in.”

*Out. In.*

I wanted her *in* from the moment I met her. So I thought I’d just keep her out.

Simple.

But when she came back, wanting in, I pulled her in tight and close, and locked her down in every way I could in a matter of days, with no intention of letting her go. Getting her moved into my place, signing contracts, filling her bank account with money. I might as well have pissed all over her, written my name on her forehead and given her a ring.

“I actually think it’s kind of stupid to fear something you have no control over anyway,” she said.

“Are you calling me stupid?”

“I would never call you stupid. You’re very brilliant.”

“I think it’s dangerous to accept that you have no control. Because then you have no illusions, nothing to hold onto when the fear creeps in.”

“I think fear is natural and holy and good. It’s primal and there’s a reason for it.”

“I think not everyone is as brave as you.”

“I think anything worth doing is frightening at its core. Because it makes you face the truth, that if it’s something you want to do or want to have, it’s

worth losing.”

“I think you’re way too smart to be an executive assistant. And way too special to be wasting your time on me.” I was flirting with her, flattering her, but there was so much naked truth in that statement it was kinda terrifying.

“I think it’s not a waste of time if I wanted you from the moment I met you. Because that means I have something to gain, something to learn, or something worth losing by being here.”

“I think you’re fucking beautiful.”

“I think drinking straight vodka makes people really drunk.”

“I think you’re way too sexy to not have my cock in you right now.”

“I think I like it when you make me wait for it.”

“I think you’re gonna be naked in a few seconds.”

“I think I can’t think anymore—”

I kissed her, trying to erase the burden of thought. I buried my tongue in her mouth, like I wanted to sink my dick into her and probably would’ve, immediately, if there wasn’t still something in the way. I’d been half-hard ever since she slipped into the pool, and hard as hell since her lips touched mine the first time.

“Thinking’s overrated,” I mumbled against her lips as my dick throbbed and I untied her bikini bottom with one jerk of the string. “You don’t have to think when you’re with me.”

She laughed.

I paused, brushing my thumb over her wet cheek. “That came out wrong.” I held her by her jaw and looked in her eyes. “I meant, I’ll take control. You just give.”

“Give?”

“Give me everything. I can’t get enough of you.” I melted into another kiss as her soft lips moved against mine.

“Okay,” she breathed. “I give. You take. Take everything you want from me, Cary.”

I kissed my way down her neck as she arched her back, lifting her breasts out of the water. I slid my hand between her legs, smearing my fingers over her naked softness. That soft, intimate part of her that was so deeply personal and so beautiful, it was a fucking miracle any woman wanted to share it with any man. That *she* wanted to give it to me. Open herself like that. Let me in.

Let me touch her inside and possess her.

That she wanted me enough. That she was willing to trust me enough,



already.

I kissed my way down her chest and flickered my tongue over her nipple, making her back arch. She gripped my hair and made a soft hiss of pleasure.

I wondered if she had any idea how jealous I was of her freedom. Her strength.

The fact that she let me hold her down while I fucked her, take control, that she liked that shit, seemed far more than I deserved.

But she did. That much was clear.

I pulled her out of the pool and laid her out on one of the long, cushioned lounge chairs. I would've gone down on her first but she told me to take, so I put my dick out of its thudding misery and plunged right into her. She hitched one leg up around my hip and panted as I pumped into her. My hand went to her throat automatically, the other one into her hair, gripping. I kissed her, deep and hard as I fucked her, and her hands strayed over my back. She slid one hand around and up my chest, to my throat, where her fingers curled into me gently, pulling me toward her as we kissed.

I pushed myself up on my arms, looking down at her for a bit while I fucked her in smooth, pounding strokes. Her hand fell away from my throat. She watched me as I watched her, her hands landing on my hips and gently holding on.

“If I smacked your face right now, what would you do?”

She blinked up at me in pleasure. “Uh...”

I smacked her face. Lightly, but enough to make her cheek sting a little. My fingertips tingled.

Her eyes flared and her mouth dropped open, but she said nothing. She did nothing.

I smacked her again.

She moaned a little.

I dragged my fingertips over her jaw and pressed my hand to her throat, holding her there. Not forcefully. She could've moved, but it was the fact that if she tried, I'd tighten my hold and keep her there that made her so wet. Her pussy made wet, sucking noises as I pumped into her.

She moaned and twisted a little beneath me. She planted her heels on the chair, on either side of my hips, and pushed herself up into me, meeting my thrusts. I thrust harder, pushing her down with my weight and kissing her. I bit her lip gently.

“Why do I want to hurt you?” I asked her, my voice raspy against her

lips.

“I don’t know,” she breathed. Her eyes locked with mine, those fathomless, bottomless depths. “You can slap me again if you want to.”

I didn’t. I just stared at her.

I wanted to watch her come.

*Take.*

I ground into her clit with my pelvis, digging deep with my cock, answering her body every time she rolled her hips. Pressing into her deeper, harder, every time she pressed into me. I watched her face as she moaned. I watched her eyes, drifting, the dark turquoise depths stirring. I watched her skin flush and I watched the sounds falling out of her mouth. Her soft, swollen lips.

When I knew she was close to orgasm, I slowed down but I didn’t let up on the intensity. I wanted to draw it out. I wanted to savor it. I didn’t want to miss a thing.

I slid myself in and out of her slowly as she started to come. I felt the spasms in the tight sleeve of her pussy as she gripped me. I reached down between us and pinched her clit, and she gasp-moaned. “*Ahh, Cary,*” she groaned, and I held on, trapping her flesh with my fingertips, squeezing. She thrashed around a little as the waves crashed through her body.

Then I felt my own pleasure about to tear loose. I couldn’t hold it back anymore.

I sank my mouth over hers and plunged my tongue into her, letting go. And when I came, my whole body convulsed. Felt like I pumped a gallon of wet heat into her. We slid together, both of us pool-wet, sweat-wet and slippery. She was shuddering beneath me as we kissed, breathing against my face.

I collapsed on top of her, my head swimming with vodka and pleasure.

She sighed, her hands playing gently in the hair at the nape of my neck.

“You’re afraid I don’t need you,” she whispered against my neck, her lips brushing my ear. “But I do.”



We went to shower in the poolhouse, then I made Taylor eat some food and drink a ton of water. Then I slept next to her in her bed in the poolhouse. I

couldn't let her out of my sight after all the vodka.

Just the thought of anything happening to her made the blackness creep in around the edges of my vision. And because I was kinda drunk, it was worse. Harder to control. I had a terrible, restless sleep.

I kept jerking awake in the night to check that she was okay.

That she was still breathing.

That she hadn't thrown up on herself and suffocated, or fallen and hit her head.

We really didn't drink all that much. She seemed pretty sober, considering, by the time we went to bed. But it was just my anxious nature. I couldn't even rest.

It wasn't because I loved her.

It was just my nature to worry.

I liked her. That was all.

And I felt responsible for her. The vodka was my idea, and she was here because of me.

No matter what she said about two people being what they were and feeling what they felt from the moment they met, or how right she might've been about that, I wasn't falling in love with her. I knew that much.

That kind of thing took a fearlessness I just didn't possess.

Maybe I used to. But not anymore.

Anyway, as I lay in her bed in the middle of the night, sleepless, I knew Taylor Lawson didn't need a man like me. She needed someone fearless, like her.

Someone who meandered around life's rules and really didn't give much of a fuck about them, deep down. Someone who laughed out loud at crude comedy specials, who splashed around and did cannonballs when they were in a pool, and picked the vodka with the coolest bottle. Someone who knew how to have fun and not always take every moment of life so damn seriously.

Sure, I could bend the rules, even break them, in the studio, and in bed.

But in life?

I'd pretty much opted out of life in general a few years back.

*In. Out.*

My career and sex; those were the only two parts of my so-called life that I gave a damn about anymore, and the second one I'd only really showed up for recently—when Taylor came along.

Those were the only parts of my life where she fit.

Where I had a need for her.

I'd told her when I hired her that I didn't need anything. But that wasn't true.

I needed a distraction from myself. And it didn't hurt that she could help me blow off steam while I was working on this album.

I'd had Bliss before, but now I had her. The sex was better, the conversation was better, the convenience was better, and anyway, I liked her.

That didn't mean I ever had to love her.

She might've liked me, but she definitely didn't know me well enough to love me. She was a smart woman.

She'd figure out that she didn't love me, that she couldn't love me, long before she ever got that deep.

# Chapter Seventeen

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**Taylor**

## Lonely Lonely

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**I**t was Saturday evening, and Danica had been texting me every five minutes for like an hour. I'd been jogging, then showering, and when I got out of the shower to find the string of texts on my phone, I laughed out loud to myself.

**Me:** Can't wait to see you! Just picking out the perfect LBD.

I sent that text and started getting ready, searching through my many little black dresses hung up in the poolhouse closet.

I felt like I hadn't seen my best friend forever. And clearly she was as excited about tonight as I was. It had been ten days since I saw her at Little Black Hole and we went out for lunch together; I may have been a little caught up lately with my new employer-slash-lover. But for the two of us, ten days without a hang out was way too long.

Tonight, we were having a much overdue ladies' night.

Cary would probably be working late anyway. He never seemed to take any days, or full evenings, off.

As the sun went down tonight, we'd gone for a jog together. He wore the usual cap pulled low over his eyes, and we stuck to the quiet residential streets. We barely saw another human other than the odd car driving past and the occasional couple walking a dog. No one ever bothered us on our jogs, and so far, so good. He didn't always join me when I asked, but sometimes he did.

I was taking that as a major achievement.

Over the past couple of weeks, the routine of Cary's life had become very clear, and I'd adjusted to it. He worked late almost every night, even on weekends, though he rarely asked me to stay late. Being in the studio, even alone, just seemed to be his happy place. In the mornings, he usually drifted

into the studio a little later than I did, which worked out just fine. It gave me a little time to get myself organized, check emails and messages, make coffee, and get things ready for him to walk in the door.

I liked the idea that there was someone there to turn on the lights for him and just get things going so he could walk into a welcoming space.

During the day, we worked together and separate. We'd go over things first, usually. I'd bring him up to speed on correspondence from Little Black Hole, Brick House, whatever important emails or calls had come in that deserved attention. We'd set up a plan for the day, set goals. He didn't really do that before I came along and he seemed to like it. He said it helped him focus on what he needed to get done that day. Of course, that part was up to him, but saying it out loud to me and watching me write it down seemed to give him motivation to stay on track.

Whenever he had headphones on and he was deep in the music, listening or working, or if he was writing, playing one of his instruments... I made myself scarce. I went into the other room or took my laptop out to the living room or the patio.

Sometimes he asked me to come in and listen to some melody he was working on on his guitar or whatever.

I loved those moments. But what could I say? Everything he wrote sounded good to me.

My feedback usually just defaulted to *I love it. Can't wait to hear it in a song.*

We'd started eating together, too. Usually I ordered takeout or I threw together something for us for lunch. I didn't have to, but I liked to. And at night, I'd order in takeout or sometimes I'd cook dinner. Sometimes he cooked dinner, too. He was actually a pretty good cook.

I supposed he had to be, living alone for so long.

In the evenings, we usually had sex. And sometimes we had sex in the morning or afternoon, too.

Afterwards, Cary would go back to work. He was dedicated and focused like that.

It was impressive.

In the evenings, I'd go do my laundry, talk to friends. Or I'd head down to the animal shelter and put in some time, take the dogs for walks, help clean out kennels. At least a few nights a week I'd go for a jog, and sometimes, like this evening, he'd join me. Or I'd do some yoga in the backyard to an online

video on my laptop, or swim in the pool. Cary sometimes came out for a bit to sit by the pool or swim with me. Most of the time he seemed distracted at night, until he got enough work done to feel satisfied. He said he was most creative in the evening and he liked to lose himself in work.

But he seemed to want to be here with me, too.

Eventually, we'd meet up in his bed in the studio or in my bed in the poolhouse, or on the living room couch. But he never took me to his bedroom upstairs.

I wondered if he'd be in bed when I got home from ladies' night tonight. Or if he'd just stay up working until I came home.

I liked that he'd be here, waiting for me. It was nice having a boyfriend.

Okay. Yeah. I'd admit it to myself.

My boss was now my boyfriend.

When I was all ready for ladies' night, I grabbed my purse and headed into the house to say goodbye. As I walked into the foyer, I found the studio doors open, as usual. I could hear water running faintly in the studio bathroom; he was still in the shower.

Which meant I had a little time to kill.

I glanced up the stairs to the second floor, and it didn't take long to decide to go up. I figured I would at some point. I'd hoped he'd ask me up. But there didn't seem any harm in taking a look around. He rarely seemed to come up here, but Rose kept it tidy like the rest of the house.

I peeked into a couple of bedrooms down one hall. The biggest one was white and clearly decorated for a girl. Lacy bedspread and curtains. There was a photo of Courteney and a couple of other girls, friends of hers I'd met, stuck on the mirror over the dresser. This must've been the room she used when she visited her brother and stayed in the house rather than the poolhouse. I knew she'd done that sometimes.

I'd heard him call her *cupcake*. It was obvious that he adored her.

Yet she seemed so unable to reach him. It was clear to me by now that he didn't talk to her all that much.

I went up the other hall and I found the master bedroom. It was huge, with a king-sized bed and simple, luxurious decor in shades of dark gray, black and white. There was a fireplace and a walk-through closet leading into the bathroom.

I didn't linger.

It just seemed like a shame he didn't use it. That his world had gotten so



small, he barely even used his whole house and yard.

As I headed back down the stairs, I paused to look at the framed photos of Cary's family and friends on the wall over the stairs. He still had people in his life who clearly cared about him. Not only his sister, but Xander, too, for sure.

Merritt checked in with him regularly from Little Black Hole, and it was obvious it wasn't just because of her duty to her job. She seemed to genuinely care about Cary and check in out of concern, just making sure he was okay.

Trey had checked in, too, a couple of times that I knew of, since our meeting at Brick House. He called Cary *brother*. He seemed really nice, and like he cared about Cary, despite the friction Cary gave him in the meeting.

Cary's former lead singer, Dean, had dropped by a few days ago, and just like Cary said he would, he'd scaled the fence and let himself in. I'd run into him in the kitchen and almost pissed myself. He'd given me a lazy smile, and after I directed him to where he could find beer, he'd spent a few hours with Cary in the studio.

People definitely seemed to like Cary and wish good things for him. That goodwill came from somewhere. Obviously, he'd earned it. And I'd heard him on the phone talking to friends, colleagues. He seemed to have pretty good rapport with them all, though the conversations never really got personal.

As far as I could tell, his friends never seemed to ask him to come out and do stuff with them.

This seemed really wrong. I had three messages on my phone today alone from friends asking to see me. He was a former rock star. How did it get to this?

This tiny, closed world he'd constructed for himself, where everything was in his control. Where he lived so alone.

At first, I'd wondered if he was crazy, like people said. But there was so much more to Cary Clarke than the eccentric recluse people seemed to think he was.

All you had to do was hear the stories behind Rose and Liam, and why they worked for Cary, to know that the man had a big heart.

Rose lived in her son's guesthouse, just two blocks from Cary's place. She'd put a flyer in his mailbox one day that she was offering her cleaning services. Cary had called her and when she came for an interview, she'd told him her son took care of her housing but she still wanted to work. When he

asked her why, she'd confessed to him that she was lonely since her husband died. So Cary hired her, paying her a generous salary even though she only worked for him once a week.

Liam had been Cary's bodyguard when he was with Alive. His wife was ill, he was already a dad, and when the tour ended, Cary had put Liam and his family up in a condo that was a five minute drive from Cary's house, and kept him on salary—even though he so rarely called him in to work.

Rose and Liam had told me these stories themselves when I'd asked how they'd come to work for Cary.

Obviously, the man cared about people. He was generous and thoughtful.

Yet I knew I had to ask myself some painful questions about where this was headed. Eventually.

I was so drawn to him, but I didn't know where that would leave me. If I loved him, could he love me back? Or was this just another relationship that was doomed to failure while I refused to want to see the signs?

At some point, would he push me away like he seemed to push everyone else away?

Despite Cary's obvious kindness towards Liam and Rose, they were only allowed into his life in limited ways, at specified times, for a specific function. His employees, the band, his family, his friends, they all had a place, at arm's length from him, and that was where he kept them.

I had my place, too. Much closer to him, but it still had its parameters.

I was his employee. His lover.

For now.

But what happened when this album was done?

Did he really mean it when he called me his protégé? When he said he wanted me to manage his studio and be part of his team?

He'd said other things, too. Things that gave me hope. Like that he was thinking about going down to Little Black Hole to see the band. And he said it like he meant it.

But he hadn't done it yet.

As I walked into the studio, I found the bathroom door open, the light inside turned off. I found Cary lying on the floor of the great room on his back, wearing jeans and nothing else. With his guitar on top of him, staring at the ceiling. His hair was damp.

I smiled to myself as I watched him there for a moment. "What are you doing?" I asked softly.

He cracked a small smile and turned his head to look at me. “Working.”

“This is what a great musician looks like when he’s working?”

“Pretty much.”

I went to sit on the floor next to him.

“Wow. You look incredible.” He surveyed my short and fitted, asymmetrical black dress.

“Thank you.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“I’m going out with the girls tonight.” I hadn’t told him this before. I wasn’t sure why.

Maybe I didn’t want him to feel left out. Like I was abandoning him to go out into a world he didn’t belong to anymore?

“Cool,” he said. He didn’t seem upset about it. He put the guitar aside and sat up to face me. “Where are you going?”

“Just to a bar. You know, drinks and drunken conversation. It’s Saturday night.”

“Is my sister going?”

“No. Just Danica and a few other girls. Her crazy twin sister, her cousin, and a few others.”

“Sounds fun.”

I smiled. “You want to come?”

“I would, but the girls probably wouldn’t appreciate me crashing girl time.”

“True.” Not true. I was pretty sure if I dragged his gorgeous ass into that bar and told them he didn’t get out much, they’d be pouring shots straight down his throat and dragging him onto the dance floor. “How about you?” I asked him. “Do you ever hang out with Xander? Have a guys’ night? Invite him over for vodka shots and pickles?”

“Sometimes,” he said vaguely.

I wondered about that. Courteney had told me that he didn’t talk to Xander as much, ever since she hooked up with him.

“Are you still upset about him and your sister?” I probed gently.

“No. I’m not upset that they’re together. I just hated the way they got together.”

“What do you mean?”

“She was living here at the time, and so was he. I could feel something brewing. It was the way he acted when her name came up. I didn’t know

what it was. I assumed he was hot for her, but I told him to leave her alone, and I actually thought he would. Then I caught them fucking in the poolhouse.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yeah. He was on top of her. I saw them through the window. They had the blinds open. They didn’t mean for me to see that, but I did. Just pissed me off that he didn’t give a shit that I’d asked him to stay away from her.”

“I can see how you’d be pissed about that,” I said carefully. “But maybe they were in love and it was unreasonable to ask them to stay apart.”

“That’s not the point.”

“The point is it’s your house and you like things your way.”

He studied me, maybe thinking that over. “Is that unreasonable?”

“No. But, Cary... you can’t control everyone in your life as condition of being in your life.”

He got up and walked away, almost leaving the room.

He’d never done that when we were talking before.

He stood by the entrance into the studio kitchen, looking in, like he was gazing out the window. I really didn’t love having to talk to the back of his head, but I pressed on. Firmly but gently.

“You and Xander go way back, right? You were in Alive together, toured together?”

“Yup.”

“You don’t have to talk to me about this, Cary. It’s not in my job description to pry. But I just hope you talk to someone.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Do you ever really talk to anyone?”

“About what?”

“You know about what,” I said. “You have friends who care about you. No matter what, I don’t think you could make them not care. They’re just waiting for you to talk to them.”

“Are they?”

“Why wouldn’t they be?”

“I don’t know.” He turned back to me. “I stopped trying to make sense of the world outside those doors a long time ago.”

“Like when Gabe died?” I asked gently.

He took a breath. I could practically see him doing that deep, slow breathing thing he did. And I didn’t want to upset him. But I did need him to

talk. To me. To *someone*.

“There were a lot of people who were supportive,” he said, not really answering that. “People who loved me. People who still love me. I know that. But the world went on without him. They went on without Gabe, and for whatever reason, I just couldn’t do that.”

“I get that. But... he’s gone. And at some point you have to really deal with it.”

“It might not always be visible to you, but I deal with it every single day. And keeping my anxiety in check... it’s a constant process.”

“How do you do that?” I asked, genuinely wanting to know.

“Breathing. I do this box breathing technique one of my therapists taught me, where you breathe slowly and deeply and hold, to a four-count. It’s used by athletes, the Navy SEALs. It helps you control stress and anxiety by calming your nervous system. And I meditate, sometimes. In the moment, when I feel anxiety coming on, I ask myself questions to challenge my fears about what could actually go wrong, versus what I’m irrationally afraid will go wrong. That, combined with breathing, is the best way I’ve ever found to prevent a panic attack.”

“What about self-care?” I asked him. “I know you work out in your gym a few times a week. Do you do other things to make sure you’re taking care of yourself?”

“Yeah, I do. Actually, I have a list somewhere...” He went into the control room and I waited, getting up to sit on the couch, while he returned and handed a single piece of paper to me. “This is a list of self-care stuff I’m supposed to do. I do most of it.”

I started skimming the printed list. “Coffee?!” I gaped at him. “You’re supposed to stop drinking coffee? It says here that caffeine can increase anxiety.”

“Your point?” he said dryly, settling in next to me.

“I’ve been supplying you with this shit.”

“And I love it.” He played with a lock of my hair, but I slapped his hand away lightly.

“That is *it*, Mr. Bossy. You can’t flirt your way out of this.”

“Hey, I showed you the list. I’m not hiding anything.”

“We’re switching to decaf tea,” I said, ignoring that.

“Sounds delicious,” he said sarcastically.

“We can try a million flavors if we have to, until we find something that

you like to replace the coffee.”

“Gimme that.” He tried to take the paper from me, but I snatched it back.

“I am keeping this and I am going to *memorize* it. There’s yoga on here!!” I shouted, holding the paper out of his reach as I scanned the rest of it. “Why didn’t you say so? We’re totally doing yoga together.”

“As long as you don’t mind every session ending in sex.”

I gave him a look.

“You look so good in your yoga wear.”

“You’ve been watching me do yoga?”

“You do it in the backyard. How can I not look?”

“Okay, fine. If you do your yoga with me like a good boy, I’ll be so turned on, I’ll probably pounce on you afterwards anyway.”

“Yeah?” He slid a little closer to me, so his thigh pressed to mine. He slipped his hand over my knee, his fingers flirting with the hemline of my short dress. “How about right now?”

“I can’t right now.” I kissed him softly on the lips. “You’ll just have to wait ’til tomorrow to get bendy with me. I have a date with the girls, remember?”

“Right,” he said, sounding adorably disappointed.

I laughed. Then I slipped my hand over his and gave him a little squeeze. “Are you talking to someone these days, Cary? Like any of the therapists you’ve casually mentioned?”

He sighed and confessed, “It’s been a while.”

“Did I ever tell you I used to see a therapist on a regular basis? Pretty much from the time I was eighteen until a few years ago?”

“No. You didn’t mention that.”

“Well, I probably haven’t mentioned my family, either. They’re a little... difficult. My upbringing was... complicated. The short version is I basically grew up on the road.”

“Don’t tell me your parents were in a band.”

“I wish. I would’ve been happy if they could hold down any job, frankly. We lived out near Osoyoos, kind of in the middle of nowhere, just me and my parents and my older sister. We had this RV that wasn’t anything special but it was nicer than our house. My parents were kinda vagabonds. We travelled more than we lived at home. And then when I was thirteen, we came to Vancouver. My mom’s parents lived here. She’d had a falling out with them when she was nineteen and left, and never came back. Until they were

basically dying. We moved into their house in Kitsilano. They had this big place blocks from the beach. It seemed like a mansion to me, but it was old and not all that nice. Still, nicer than anything I'd ever known. And my grandparents were great."

I paused, feeling unexpectedly emotional at the memory.

Cary squeezed my hand.

"My grandpa died two weeks after we arrived. He was already on his deathbed when I met him."

"I'm sorry, Taylor."

"Me, too. My grandma lived for another three years and then she died, too. I was really sad about it. But I still loved living in that old house and being close to the beach. And I got to meet Danica when I was thirteen. We were in school together. I'd never gone to school before that. My parents home schooled me, in theory. Danica helped me get used to school. She helped me with so much. She was kinda my Gabe, I guess."

Cary didn't say anything.

"So, after my grandma died, we lasted about another half a year in that house. My parents at least let me finish high school. Then they packed us up and we took off. They never came back. I did."

"You came back to the city alone?"

"Yup."

"That must've been hard."

"It was."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because I wanted to be here. I didn't want to live on the road anymore."

"I can relate to that."

"Well, trust me, this life was no rock star tour. And living with my family was not easy. It was never easy when I was little, but I didn't know anything different. When we hit the road again just before I turned eighteen, I knew different. I'd seen how it was in Danica's family. They were always a little eccentric, but they were solid. She would complain about how self-centered they all were, and they definitely had a flair for drama. But there was so much love in their homes. They were so close. We'd go visit one of her aunts and there would be all this food. They'd treat me like one of their own. My family wasn't like that. We had so little, yet they were always out for themselves. They weren't evil or anything, just ridiculously narcissistic for a bunch of people who lived in an RV with no working shower."

Cary actually smiled a little at that.

“I needed to see a therapist for a few years to sort through my childhood,” I explained. “I actually saw a few. Sometimes you need to, to find one that’s a good fit for you and what you’re going through. I just want you to know, I know what therapy is like. And I know how it can help.”

“Yeah. Sometimes it can.”

Okay. So at least I’d gotten him to admit that.

His self-care list was great and all the techniques he used to manage his anxiety were great, and obviously they were working.

But not working well enough.

“You know,” I told him, “it does fit under my job description to set up an appointment for you. I’m sure we could arrange a virtual therapy session, anytime that works for you. Or maybe even a house call, if you’d ever like that.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

I smiled.

“What time are you meeting the girls?” he asked me.

I checked my phone. “Oops. About half an hour. I should go.”

“Let them know you might be a few minutes late.” He was pulling out his phone, putting his bossy pants back on. “Liam will drive you.”

“I can just take a cab, Cary.”

“I’m getting Liam. I’d feel better knowing you have him on call to drive you around if you go barhopping. And to bring you home.”

“Okay. Thank you. Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“I can’t, Taylor,” he said. He didn’t look at me when he said it.

He acted like he was fine with me going out without him. But as usual, with Cary, there was so much more to the story than met the eye.

I watched him messaging Liam, and I tried to put myself in his shoes.

I was going out tonight, with friends, without *him*... and maybe it was finally hitting me for the first time. How *long* he’d been going through all of this. Alone.

How hard it must’ve been for him.

And how much he’d missed out on.



# Chapter Eighteen

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**Taylor**

## Saturday Night

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“This place is awesome. How long do you think it’ll last?”  
“Not long, unfortunately,” Danica said. “Madeleine put a lot of work into it.”

“Well, it looks great.”

We were leaning on the long, lit-up bar, just Danica and I, sipping our first drink of the evening. The bar in question had just opened, mere weeks ago. It was pretty much on the razor’s edge of the worst part of town, a block from “needle park” as we so fondly called it, in a once beautiful old building with a renovated interior. Danica’s aunt Madeleine’s interior design firm, where Danica worked, had handled the renovations.

It was the first time Danica and I had checked it out together, and so far, so good. The DJ was playing chill, start-of-the-night music with just the right vibe—sexy—and they had an incredible cocktail list. There was cushy seating around well-spaced tables, a small danceable area at the back, a well-dressed, cool crowd, and basically, it was way too good to be true.

It would probably be closed down by the next time we tried to come here. That seemed to be happening more and more with every hot new place we found.

“I’m so glad you could make it,” my best friend said, and I felt like a dick that she actually had to say that to me.

Had I really been that busy and unavailable to her lately?

Yes. Yes, I had. Since I’d started working for Cary, I’d been sucked right into his world. I’d barely left his property. And I’d definitely skipped out on a couple of ladies’ nights.

Walking in here tonight, being surrounded by noise and people, it felt like a big change from being alone with Cary all the time in his house. It felt good to be out with my best friend. But it also felt strange to not be with him.

I wondered if he’d ever walk into a place like this.

The meeting at Brick House Records had given me hope, but that was

only one outing. And other than the few times I'd managed to drag him out for our night jogs, he hadn't left the property again.

"So, catch me up on the latest," I said. "What's going on in your world?"

"Mmm, not much," she said. "Work is good. The usual. But who cares about that. The big news is I'm making Summer a custom necklace to wear at her wedding."

"What! That's incredible. Seriously, when are you gonna quit the day job and just be a jewelry designer already? That's where your heart is."

Danica shrugged, sipping her hard cider. "I dunno. If I could make enough money just doing the custom work, one piece at a time, for buyers with bank... I'd consider it. I'm never gonna run some fucking sweatshop. I don't want to mass produce."

"I know. But you get someone like Summer wearing a few of your custom pieces, maybe Elle sees it, and some more of her famous friends, and boom. This time next year, maybe that's exactly where you are. Making custom jewelry for the stars."

"Huh," she said, like she hadn't even thought of it that way. My best friend was an amazing, creative artist. She had great taste. Obviously; just look at who she'd chosen for her best friend. Ha.

But she just didn't have that business-minded gene that told her how to leverage it into an income.

"That would be fun," she admitted. "Like, especially making custom jewelry for rock stars. For video shoots and events and stuff..."

"Well, isn't it handy that you happen to know some?"

"Wow," she said, clearly thinking it over. "I think you're blowing my mind a little."

"How did you not think of this already?"

"I think Dani mentioned it, actually. But I usually just ignore her when she speaks."

I snorted. "Yeah, and I'd usually say that's the right thing to do." Seriously, taking advice from her twin sister—the evil twin—was rarely a good idea. "But in this case, I'm not surprised Daniella sniffed out the opportunity before you did. You should think about it."

"I will."

"And how's Ash?" I asked her, though I already knew the answer. "How's married life?"

"Dreamy," she said, literally getting a dreamy look in her blue eyes. She

had nowhere near enough alcohol in her system yet to blame that look on the booze, though.

“Are you aware you look drunk whenever you talk about him?”

“I’m in love.” She shrugged. “It’s addicting.”

“I know.”

How many times had I been drunk on love? A few.

None of them were really worth the heartbreak hangover afterwards, though.

But I’d never been married before. Or as in love with a man as she was.

“He’s been working a lot, obviously,” she said. “But Ash is always pretty respectful about it. The band is keeping to the Monday to Friday only thing, so they all get to have a life and keep their sanity, in theory. I mean, everyone’s in a serious relationship, other than Matt. They work late some nights, but Ash always makes sure to come home to me at a reasonable hour. Ish.”

“What’s he doing tonight?”

“Same as us. Drinking with the boys.” She hesitated, then asked, “How about Cary? What does he do when you go out with the girls?”

“Work, probably. He works every day of the week, and late pretty much every night.”

She considered that. And I could see she had a ton of questions, but she was holding back because she was polite like that. “Do you think he’s a workaholic? Or just super driven?”

“I don’t know.”

“I guess a workaholic would be someone who gives up everything else in his life for work?” she posited gently.

“Maybe. But it’s hard to say, when he gives up everything in his life anyway. I’m not sure he does that for work, or simply because he doesn’t want to deal with it.”

She studied me. “Do you think he’s happy?”

“I don’t know.”

No. No, I did not think he was happy, in general. I thought he was happy with me, when we were together. It wasn’t like he said he was happy, but we had a good time together.

A really good time.

“Well, Ash says the band is absolutely loving working with him.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Apparently Xander had his doubts. Concerns, I guess, that it wouldn’t go well. But Ash seems thrilled about the way everything is going so far. He says Cary keeps sending him feedback on the music they’re writing that blows his mind. He says Cary is a genius.”

I smiled. “Yeah. He’s pretty incredible.”

Danica smiled at me. I was glad we got to talk about this a little, face-to-face, before the other girls got here. Because talking about Cary and the band’s work in the studio was private. That was part of the reason I’d met her a bit early.

And while I had her here, all to myself, I figured I should ask her about that other private thing...

“So, I’m just gonna say this, and it’s gonna sound weird,” I warned her, “but here it is. Cary told me he has a membership to a private sex club.”

“Uh...”

“Hold your judgment. He said it’s really expensive and he met with a woman there, another member, who he’d have sex with. I think it was the convenience, but also, because he likes to be a little... dominant during sex.”

“Oh-kay,” Danica said, listening with stunned attention.

“I don’t mind any of that. I was a little shocked at first, but I got over it. He promised me he’s not going there anymore, now that we’re involved. And it doesn’t weird me out all that much or anything. I guess I wanted to make sure that that isn’t crazy of me, though. You’re my gauge. You know, my sanity gauge.”

“Right...”

“And also, I wanted to know if you’ve ever heard of a sex club called Bliss. You know... through Madeleine?”

“Uh... no.” I could practically see my best friend scraping together her thoughts and struggling to come up with a response to all of that. “No... I don’t think you’re crazy, obviously. I think you need to trust your judgment and your gut instincts, and you know better than anyone else what’s going on in your relationship with him, and if he’s trustworthy.”

“He is. I think.”

“Okay.” She considered that. “And you’re sure he’s not still going? And he has no contact with this other woman? And he was safe when he was there, like using protection? Etcetera?”

“Yes. I mean, I can only go by what he tells me. But I do trust him.”

“Okay.” She took a sip of her drink. “Wow. I was not prepared for that.”

“Sorry.” I grinned and tapped my cider to hers, and we took a swig together. “What about Madeleine, though?” Danica’s aunt Madeleine was a self-described Dominatrix, and I’d wondered if she might have any intel on the club. Being in that scene and all, maybe? Not that her scene was my business, but obviously I knew all the gossip about Danica’s family, as she knew mine.

“Uh, no,” she said. “Sorry. Madeleine and I have a strict agreement to absolutely not share any details about our sex lives with each other. I may have instigated that rule myself after I learned she was a Dominatrix when I was seventeen. And I’m not sure I could break the rule, even for you.”

“Yeah. Okay.” I got that, really. I probably wouldn’t want to hear about my aunt tying guys up and whipping them or whatever it was she did.

“What about Xander?” I asked. “Remember that ‘date’ he went on last year with that rich guy, for the charity bachelor auction thing? Courteney said the guy invited him to some sex club. Do you think it was Bliss?”

Danica’s eyes widened. “I don’t know. How many expensive sex clubs can there be in this city?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t know there was one.”

“Do you want me to ask Courteney?” she offered.

“No. I don’t want any chance of it getting back to Cary. And anyway... it doesn’t matter. Cary told me he wouldn’t go anymore. So maybe that’s really all I need to know.”

“Do you really believe him?”

“I do. He gives me access to everything. Like his phone, his texts, whatever. He’s very open with me that way. It was weird, though... I actually saw it on his schedule a few times. On his calendar, like any other appointment. Like, *Bliss, 8:00*. But at least it was only on there a few times this past year. I didn’t look any further than that. Felt creepy.”

“That is kinda weird. To see it in your face like that. But maybe the fact that it was in his calendar and he didn’t try to hide it from you is a good thing? It sounds like he treated it kinda like a business appointment? And that’s probably much easier to put aside than something that felt personal to him.”

“Yeah. That’s what I was thinking.”

Danica eyed me as she sipped her drink. “I am curious, though...” she admitted.

“Me, too.”

“Like... what kind of stuff do you think he did there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because Courteney said that guy invited Xander to come with him so they could have group sex.”

“Not that kind of stuff,” I said. “Cary can barely handle one person in a room with him most days. No way he’s letting multiple people touch his dick at once.”

“Good point.” She smiled at me, tentatively, like she was making sure it was okay she found humor in that. “You really like him, huh?”

“Yes. I like him. I like—” My sentence dropped off midway, because some guy had just walked right up to me. I looked at him. This total stranger stood there, way too close to me. He was wearing a suit with the tie loosened and he looked very average-normal. Except for the fact that he was suddenly in my space, staring at me.

Then he blinked, too slowly, obviously drunk or something. And his drink landed on the floor at my feet.

It fell out of his hand.

I glanced down. Somehow, the thick highball glass didn’t even break.

“Holy shit, you’re beautiful.” He held up his hand immediately, like, *Don’t say anything*. “I just wanted to say that.”

Then he backed off, turned and stumbled away. Without his drink.

“Uh...” I looked at Danica, who was gaping at his retreating back.

She glanced over at Ash’s bodyguard, Haz; Ash had sent him along to keep her safe tonight, because he was protective of her like that. He was sitting further down the bar, giving the drink-dropper a dirty look.

Then Danica’s eyes met mine. A smile curled the corner of her mouth.

“Was that a droppage,” I asked her, “or did he just throw that drink at my feet?”

“I think he kinda threw it? Like a sacrifice to the goddess of beauty? Or maybe he spontaneously forgot how to hold it? It was hard to tell.”

“Well, that was fucking weird.”

Danica shook her head. “Not that weird. You have always had that effect on men.”

“What? I’ve never seen a guy just, like, forget to hold onto his alcohol because he discovered that I existed.”

Danica snickered. She reached over the bar to get the attention of a bartender. “Hey, some guy just dropped his drink right here.” She pointed at

the floor, then at me. “She has that effect on men.”

I turned my back to the bartender, kind of embarrassed. Seriously, did that just happen?

Was I supposed to want that?

A normal guy who went out to bars, like normal guys did, and could just walk up and hit on me in public?

*Maybe?*

But all I wanted was Cary. And I really didn’t care that he didn’t hang out in bars. Or that he hung out in a sex club before he met me. I didn’t care that he was different.

I mean, maybe I just plain liked it that he was different.

Anyway, weren’t we all different?

“Let’s get a table before this place fills up,” Danica said, taking me by the arm and pulling me deeper into the bar. “And before you shock more men out of their drinks.”

---

We’d just managed to snag a hightop table near the small dance floor when Danica’s cousin, Jolie, arrived.

Like almost everyone I knew, I hadn’t seen Jolie since I started working for Cary. As soon as we got the catching-up small talk out of the way and got seated, she asked me, “So, who’s this new guy you’re dating? Danica said you’re seeing someone. But she won’t tell me who it is.”

“Sorry,” Danica said. “I wasn’t sure if you were in the telling- people phase yet or not.”

“It’s okay.” I knew Jolie wasn’t gonna exactly blab it all over the internet or anything. I pulled up a photo of Cary on my phone; it was a pic I took a few days ago while we were hanging out by his pool. He was shirtless, looking thoughtfully at the camera. Or at me, I supposed. I could’ve just explained to Jolie who he was, but I figured the photo probably got the point across faster. “Here.” I handed the phone to her.

“Whoa.” Jolie pushed her glasses up her nose and adjusted the distance of the phone from her face, seeking sharper focus. “Did I say whoa? I meant holy fucking shit. Where the hell do you find these guys?”

“What do you mean?”



Jolie almost rolled her eyes. “You two always date the hottest guys. Tell her,” she said to Danica, but Danica just innocently sipped her drink. So Jolie went on. “Your last boyfriend was so bangable, Taylor, even I kinda wanted to do him. I mean, I wouldn’t. But you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, well, apparently a lot of other girls thought he was bangable, too,” I said. “You know, while I was with him. And he reciprocated the kindness. Which is why I’m not with him anymore.”

“Right,” she said.

“Dominic was a grade A asshole,” I reminded her. “This one is actually a good human being.”

“Like as good on the inside as he looks on the outside?” Jolie inquired, still examining the pic on my phone. She was moving her fingers on the screen like she was scrolling in. At what, I wasn’t sure.

“So far,” I said.

“Well, nice catch. I’m happy for you.”

She held the phone out to me just as Danica’s twin sister, Daniella, slipped up behind her.

“Oh, now *that* is what I’m talking about,” Daniella said. “Who is that?” She snatched the phone from Jolie’s hand and tossed her purse on the table. “If you don’t want him, Jolie, I’ll take him. This guy is totally my type.”

I plucked *my* phone from her hand. “No thank you.”

Daniella laughed. “No? Who is he?”

“Absolutely no. Get your own.”

“He’s Taylor’s new boss,” Danica supplied.

“Ooh, juicy,” Jolie said. “A workplace romance?”

“Sounds like someone likes her new job,” Daniella said. “And her new boss.”

“My new job is great,” I informed her. “And I like him very much. And if you ever eat him with your eyes like that again I will do very nasty things to your drink when you’re not looking.”

Really, you had to be firm with a girl like Daniella Vola. Girls who ate men alive and spit them back out, destroyed. She grinned at me, slowly. “Wow. Kitten’s got claws.”

“Yes, I do. And I will sharpen them on your face if you say a single dirty word about him.”

Dani feigned shock and innocence. “I just said he’s handsome.”

“Shush. He’s special,” Danica told her sister. “And... it’s complicated.”

“I see that.” Dani was sizing me up, her blue eyes narrowing. “Does he have any special friends you might introduce me to?”

“I’ll let you know.”

*Maybe when hell freezes over and you grow a soul.*

My best friend’s twin looked around, already bored with the conversation. “Where’s the waitress? I’m thirsty.”

“Me, too,” Jolie said. Then she uttered the war cry of every young woman on ladies’ night in a bar since the beginning of time. “Let’s do shots!”

---

One of the bartenders made this shooter called a Punch Drunk Pussy, which was not on the menu, for obvious reasons, but our waitress was cool and recommended a round. All I knew was it was pink and by the fifth one I forgot what was in it.

Then the sexting started.

**Me:** I just devoured five punch drunk pussies.

**Me:** Wait. Six.

**Cary:** Tell me more.

**Me:** They were pink and delicious.

**Me:** I think they were booze. I’m slurring.

**Cary:** Where are you?

**Me:** Bar.

I took a sip of my cocktail—it was also pink—and checked to make sure no one was gonna bust me for being on my phone. Then I discretely checked it again.

**Cary:** What are you wearing under your dress?

Now there was an interesting question.

**Me:** Why...?

**Cary:** I need a visual.

**Me:** I forget.

**Me:** Purple lace thong. I think.

Danica poked me. “Whatcha doin’?” She looked and sounded drunk, her blue eyes all hazy, and I grinned.

She giggled.

“Sexting,” I said. “Let’s order more shots.”

She did. A couple of Daniella’s girlfriends arrived and our table filled up. The music had gotten louder and the place was getting packed.

After I said hi to everyone, I checked my phone again.

**Cary:** Take off your panties and send me a pic.

*Whoa.*

Okay. I really, really wanted to do that. Right now.

I’d never done that for a guy before.

But Cary Clarke was totally the guy you did that for because he ordered you to.

**Me:** You’re so pretty and bossy.

**Cary:** Is that a compliment?

**Me:** Yes.

**Cary:** I'm waiting for my pic.

**Me:** See? Bossy.

I put the phone down for a sec to do another pussy shooter with the girls. Then I excused myself, gathered up my phone and my cocktail, and stumbled off to the ladies' room.

I shut myself into a cubicle and wondered how I was gonna pull this off. I reread his text, aware that my brain was now pickled in pink booze.

**Cary:** Take off your panties and send me a pic.

Okay, wait. Did he want a pic of the panties after I took them off? Or did he want a picture of what was under the panties?

*You know the answer to that.*

I just wanted to be sure, because sending your boss a picture of your bare pussy that he didn't ask for seemed kinda wrong. Even if you were already sleeping with him.

I started laughing, to myself, in the cubicle. I took a swig of my drink and set it down on the toilet paper thing.

Okay. *Focus.* I read the text one more time.

Yeah. Obviously, he wanted a photo of the goods.

I slipped my thong off. It was indeed purple. I took a picture of it dangling in my hand, and sent him the pic with the words: *Wait for it...*

Then I stuffed the thong into my purse. And tried to figure out how to take an attractive picture of my pussy. Was there such a thing?

If I just stuck my phone up my dress, it was gonna look like a scary dark cave.

How the hell did I get a favorable angle?

I turned to face the toilet and decided to put my foot up on the seat—after I laid down a piece of toilet paper, for hygienic reasons. Then I let my knee fall open and my skirt ride up, and lowered the phone to get the shot. I laid the freshly-painted fingernails of my free hand—no chips—just above my clit, so it would look like I was touching myself.

I took a picture.

Then I looked at it.

*Oh my gawd.* That was so X-rated.

Did he really want to see that?

Yup. He asked for it.

So, I sent.

Then I went back out into the bar and tried to look normal, and not like a woman who'd just taken a picture of her pussy in the washroom and sent it to someone.

When the girls all seemed to be carrying on as usual and taking no notice whatsoever of me, I grabbed my best friend's arm and leaned into her. "I just took a picture of my pussy in the washroom and sent it to someone."

Danica's eyes popped and she burst into laughter. "What? Why?" she sputtered.

"Because he asked me to."

"Cary?"

"Yup."

"Oh my God."

"I need another drink." We sipped our cocktails while she grinned at me. She shook her head. In awe, I supposed. "You know what you need to do, right?" I prompted.

"What?"

"You need to march into that washroom and take a picture of your pussy and send it to your husband."

She wrinkled her nose, but she was still grinning. "Really?"

"Really."

"And why do I need to do this?"

"So I don't feel like a slut."

Danica smirked drunkenly. "What's wrong with feeling like a slut?"

"Nothing. Just don't make me do it alone."

She rolled her eyes a little, but she laughed. I figured she was just drunk enough that she might actually do it.

"Has Ash never asked you to do that?" I asked, curious.

"Not explicitly. But I'm with him every night. So he doesn't really need a pic."

"He's not with you now," I pointed out.

And a few minutes later, she headed off to the ladies' room. Alone. Because my best friend was devoted like that. To both me and her husband.

When she returned, looking breathless, her eyes sparkling with that same

happy-horny rush I'd felt when I did it, I pulled her close. "You took a pic?"

"Yup."

"You sent it to Ash?"

"Uh-huh. Mission accomplished." She held up two fingers in the universal sign for *two*, but also the universal sign for *spreading open a pussy*.

I blinked at her drunkenly, impressed as shit. My best friend could really surprise me sometimes. One thing about Danica Vola, she was waaayyy more dirty minded than she looked. "Did you seriously spread your—?"

"Ixnay!" she hissed at me.

I looked up to find her sister looking over at us. Dani gave us both a drunk, narrow-eyed look across the table. No way she could hear what we were saying, I was pretty sure. She flung her butterscotch hair over her shoulder and leaned in to talk to her girlfriend.

"Not in front of my sister," Danica scolded. "You know the rule!"

"No talking about boys you like in front of Dani," I recited. She'd made me memorize that rule many years ago. Apparently, it still stood, even now that she was married.

She picked up her phone to check it. "I wish I could see his face when he looks at—Oh. *No*."

"What?"

"*Oh dear fuck no...*"

"What?" I leaned into her, darting a glance at the other girls. None of them were paying attention to us.

"Ohmygod." My best friend looked up from her phone, her eyes meeting mine.

She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

"What is it?"

When she didn't answer me fast enough, I grabbed the phone and she tried to hold on, covering part of the screen with her hand. "Don't look at my pussy!" she shouted.

Every girl at the table turned to us. Danica and I froze, both holding onto her phone.

"Excuse us." I took Danica by the wrist and dragged her off to the back hall that led to the washrooms. She was kind of hysterically choking when we got there, maybe trying not to laugh/cry? "What!?" I demanded.

"Look!" She thrust her phone in my face.

"Oh, now you *want* me to see your pussy?" I drew back to try to focus on

the screen that was way too close. She was still covering half of it with her hand. All I could see was part of a text conversation. And at the top, the name of the person she'd been texting with.

*Matt.*

My gaze shifted to Danica's face, trying to refocus on her horrified, this-can't-be-happening expression. "Danica. What did you do?"

"I sent a picture of my pussy to Matt!" she cried, shoving the phone at me again.

"Matt Brohmer?"

"Yes!"

"Seriously?" I swatted the phone away. She was practically jabbing me in the eye, like my eyeball had the power to erase history.

"Yes, seriously!" she hissed. "Shit, how did I do this?" She was poking at her phone, like it could somehow turn back time. She definitely looked on the verge of crying, but not devastation tears. More like drunken mortification tears. They shone in her eyes and her cheeks were turning pink.

"Okay. Holdthefuck on," slurred my wise, drunken self. "Let's just stay calm."

"Stay calm? I just sent a picture. *Of my pussy.* To my husband's bandmate!"

"*How?*"

"I don't know! He was texting me earlier. And I'm fucking drunk. Is this the point here?"

"Okay, look. It's not a big deal. Ash will understand. It was a drunken mistake."

"I'm not worried about Ash. Of course he'll understand. I've had like a dozen of those pink shooters. But that's not the problem. This is a very intimate photo intended for my husband's eyes only."

"Maybe Matt hasn't seen it yet. Maybe we can—"

"He totally saw it! The little bubble with dots just appeared, like he was typing something," she said, her voice bordering on hysterical as she studied the screen. "And now it's gone. *Gone, Taylor!* What does that *mean?*" she practically shrieked.

"Okay. We can fix this," I insisted, my executive assistant's brain scrambling around in the alcohol swamp to find a solution. I knew there was one. I'd once managed to "fix" a mishap for a boss of mine that involved him accidentally emailing a video of himself in ladies' lingerie to his mother. I'd

swooped in and convinced her that it was an office prank situation of the joke Halloween costume variety, even though it was nowhere near Halloween. Sometimes people just wanted to believe what you told them.

Compared to that situation, this was nothing.

“Let’s just think this through,” I said. “It’s just a picture of a pussy, right? It doesn’t have to be *your* pussy.”

“It was sent from my phone!”

“Yeah, but we’re drunk, right?”

I took the phone from her hand, covering most of the screen so I didn’t have to see the pic, and tapped Matt’s contact at the top.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m fixing this.”

“Oh my God. Taylor, who are you calling?”

Seriously? Was she really that drunk?

“I’m calling Matt. Just trust me.” It was ringing, but he wasn’t answering. *Shit*. Was he not gonna answer?

*Pick up.*

*Please pick up please pick up please pick up.*

I *needed* him to pick up, right now. Before I lost the will to take the fall for this pussy mishap. It wasn’t exactly on my list of life dreams to call up a man I’d once made out with at a party over an errant pussy pic.

He picked up. “Hey,” he said. Obviously, he’d seen Danica’s name on the display and thought it was her.

“Heeeyyyyy. Matt. Hi. This is Taylor.” I swatted Danica’s hands away as she pawed at me. I wasn’t sure if she was trying to halfheartedly take back the phone, or just cling on to me for support.

“Taylor?”

“Yeah, you know, Cary Clarke’s assistant? Ash and Danica’s friend?” I made sure to throw Ash’s name in there, to remind him that yes, Danica was married. And also, yes, he and I had once made out at a party thrown by the aforementioned couple.

But there was a whole lot of alcohol involved that night.

Kinda like tonight.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, hesitantly. Obviously, he was wondering what the fucknuts was going on. “How’s it going, Taylor?”

“Welllllll... this is *incredibly* mortifying. But I may have just accidentally sent something to you that I totally didn’t mean to send. From Danica’s



phone. We're drinking right now and I'm suuuper drunk, and I grabbed her phone by mistake. We both have the same iPhone." We did, though hers was in a distinctive bejeweled case and mine was black. And really, what idiot wouldn't know she had the wrong phone in her hand?

Maybe an idiot who sent her pussy to the wrong man?

I was really hoping he was buying this, but he didn't say anything, so I kept talking. Surely he could hear how drunk I was? "I texted a photo to you, accidentally, because as I mentioned, I'm super drunk. Did you happen to receive a photo that looked like it was from Danica in the last few minutes?"

"Uh, yeah. I got that."

Fuuuck.

I gave her a look, like, *Yup, he totally saw your pussy.*

Danica covered her face with her hands.

"Okay. Well. As I mentioned, the photo is not from her. It's totally my picture and I meant to send it to someone else. Like, this guy I'm dating. So... do you think I could ask you to delete it? And forget you ever saw it? Like scorch it from your memory? And then pretend we never had this conversation?"

"Sure, Taylor," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. No problem."

Well, that was easy. Matt always did seem like a nice guy.

"Okay. Well... thank you, then. And goodnight." I hung up and handed Danica her phone. "Done."

"Really??"

"Yup."

She stared at me. Drunk, confused and hopeful. "You think he bought that?"

"I think so..."

Actually, I wasn't so sure.

The more my liquor soaked brain cells chewed on it... Yeah, that was way too easy. I wasn't sure he believed me at all.

And either way... I wasn't sure he was gonna delete that photo.

For one thing, he answered a phone call he thought was from Danica, like minutes after she sent him a picture of her pussy. Eager much?

"He knows it was me," she moaned.

"No, he doesn't," I told her. "He deleted it. He's not gonna have time to

like, study it and figure it out.”

“Okay.” She tucked her phone away, looking like a wilted flower. “I feel stupid.”

I threw my arm around her. “Don’t. I’m sure it’s a very nice pussy.”

# Chapter Nineteen

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**Taylor**

## This World

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**B**ack at our table, we promptly downed another shot and ordered a fresh round of cocktails. Danica got talking with Jolie and trying to act like she didn't just accidentally send a pic of her pussy to her husband's bandmate—and luckily, everyone was too drunk to notice anything was up.

I checked my phone and found a new message. Cary had responded to my pussy pic.

Thank fuck I actually sent it to the right guy.

Poor Danica.

**Cary:** I wanna put my tongue in that.

**Me:** I really wish you would.

**Cary:** When are you coming home?

**Me:** Soon. Ish.

**Cary:** I can't wait that long. Touch yourself.

Oh, no. *He didn't.*

Except he totally did.

I glanced around at my girlfriends, smiling like I was listening to their conversations.

Then I slipped my hand down, between my legs under the table. It was dark in here, right?

I looked around. No one seemed to be staring at me or anything. I drifted my fingers over my clit through the thin fabric of my dress. I hadn't put the

thong back on.

Felt pretty good...

Okay, this was naughty. This was very, very naughty.

I was in public. Anyone could see this.

How drunk was I that I was actually doing this?

**Cary:** Are you doing it?

**Me:** Yes.

**Cary:** How does it feel?

**Me:** Like I want it to be you.

**Cary:** Will you come for me?

Well, wasn't that sweet. He was asking instead of bossing.

**Me:** No. I want to come on you.

**Cary:** Come home. I'm so hard.

**Me:** Save some of that for me.

I removed my hand from between my legs. Probably for the best. I didn't want Danica to think I'd turned into a total sexual deviant overnight.

She'd been traumatized enough for one evening.

On that note, I decided it was time for me to take off. One, I wanted to see Cary, like stat, and before I got so wasted I couldn't function.

And two, I had a phone call to make.

I texted Liam to let him know I was ready to leave. A few minutes later, when he texted back to let me know he was waiting outside, I finally broke it to Danica that I was heading out.

Her face fell. "What? You can't go yet."

"I know. I should stay. But I'm kinda tired." Honestly, I would've stayed

out a little longer, despite the sexting. It was ladies' night, after all. But I didn't want her to know the real reason I was taking off a bit early. I had to take care of this, and it felt like I needed to do it in a timely manner.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "You're going home to have sex with your hot boss, aren't you?"

"Yes." I couldn't exactly lie to her face.

She studied me, drunkenly.

"What?"

"You know, I thought maybe you'd be good for him," she said gently. Seriously. "But what I see is you getting pulled more and more into his world. I'm a little worried."

"You don't need to worry," I told her. "I'm having fun with him, I promise. It's all good."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

She softened. "Okay. Then go have fun." She gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and once I'd said good night to the other girls, I headed outside. Liam was waiting curbside and opened my door for me.

"Where to next, Ms. Lawson?" he asked me, as he slid into the front.

"Home," I said, then caught myself. "I mean, to Cary's place."

He smiled at me in the rear view mirror. "Yes, ma'am."

As we pulled into traffic, I pulled out my phone and dug up Matt Brohmer's phone number. I'd never called him or anything, but I had his number. It was on a contact list Cary gave me, important numbers of everyone in the band and at the studio, etcetera. I found the list and called Matt.

He didn't answer.

And as it rang, I considered again the fact that when Danica called him, right after he received that pussy pic from her, he answered.

But of course he didn't pick up now. He was a rock star. He wasn't going to answer a call from some number he didn't recognize.

So I texted him instead.

**Me:** This is Taylor. I'm trying to call you from my phone. Can you please call this number? Right now.

Maybe that wasn't the friendliest text he'd ever received, but whatever.

This was serious shit. I programmed his number into my phone and waited.

A few minutes later, it rang.

*Matt.*

“Hey,” I answered.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s up.”

Like he didn’t know what was up.

“Did you delete that photo?” I demanded.

“Yeah,” he said, but it took way too long for him to say it. Long enough for him to ponder his lie and if I was gonna buy it.

Nope. Not buying it at all.

“You better delete it,” I told him. And yes, I knew Liam could hear this, but I knew he wasn’t the nosy type. If he was, Cary wouldn’t keep him around. “It is not cool to keep a picture of a woman’s privates on your phone that she did not mean for you to receive.”

“I get that.”

“And it’s also not cool for you to lie about it.”

“And you’re not lying?”

“What?”

“I know it’s not you, Taylor,” he said, and I realized he sounded a little drunk himself. It was Saturday night, after all. *Oh, God.* Was he drinking with Ash right now? “I can see Danica’s rings. You know, her wedding ring and such?”

Oh, Christ. Her fingers were in the photo.

Was she really spreading herself open? I did not need that mental image in my brain.

But worse, *she* sure as hell didn’t need it on Matt’s phone.

“Delete the pic,” I said, in my I’m-not-fucking-around voice. “This is not Cary Clarke’s assistant speaking to you right now, you understand? It’s Danica’s best friend. And Danica is *mortified.*”

“Okay. Consider it deleted.”

“Good. Then consider yourself off my shit list. And let’s never speak of this again.”

“Fine by me.”

I hung up on him, wondering if Liam would say anything, and he did. “Everything okay?” he asked me, sounding like a concerned father, which I supposed he was.

“Yup. Sometimes a girl’s just gotta put the boys in their place, you

know?”

“Agreed,” he said. “And good for you.”

He didn’t say anything else for the rest of the drive.

---

When Liam dropped me at the house, I found Cary in the studio. He got to his feet as I staggered in. He’d been playing guitar on the couch by the window, with the drapes open, but he set the acoustic aside as his eyes drank me in, head-to-toe.

“You. Are. In. Trouble,” I said, shedding my purse and my shoes as I crossed the room.

“What? Why?”

I walked past him, heading straight for the alcove and his bed. “Because you should never tell a drunk girl to send you a pic of her pussy.”

He smirked, following my drunken, weaving path across the room as I squirmed out of my dress. “Why the hell not?”

“Because then she tells her drunk best friend to do the same thing.” I tossed the dress at him. I vaguely remembered that I had no panties on, which meant I was now naked except for my bra.

“Uh, you asked Danica to send me a picture of her—”

“No. I told her to send one to her husband, obviously.” I stopped at the bed and spun to face him. “But because she’s too drunk to properly operate a device as complicated as a phone right now, she sent it to the wrong man.” I plunked down on the bed.

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. Oh, shit.” I started wrestling with my bra, trying to take it off. “And now she’s mortified and you are in trouble.”

He stood in front of me, watching me fight with the bra and lose. It had a halter back and for some reason it was completely besting me right now. “How is this my fault?” he inquired.

“It was your idea.”

“Hey, I never told Danica to send a picture of her pussy to anyone,” he said, sounding way too amused. “That was all you, babe.”

“Ugh.” I slapped a hand over my face, giving up on my bra.

He sat down next to me. “Can I help? Who did she send it to? Can we



intercept it somehow?”

“You know text messages are instant, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m a secret spy, remember?”

I smiled at him.

“Maybe I can pay Dean to climb in his window,” he said, “and steal his phone, erase it, and put it back before he’s ever the wiser.”

“That’s kinda sweet,” I said, sighing. “But it’s too late. He already saw it. I called him and told him to delete it. Do you think he will?”

“Uh. Honestly... I don’t know.”

“Why would a guy keep an unsolicited pic of a woman’s pussy on his phone that she sent to him accidentally??” I practically shouted.

“Hey, I don’t know. I’m just saying. Guys are pigs. We like pussy. And... finders keepers, right?”

My jaw dropped.

Cary grinned. Then he started laughing.

“Is this funny to you?”

“Maybe. Who did she send it to, anyway?”

“None... of your... business...” I said, poking him in the chest with each word, driving him back until he fell back on the bed. I climbed over him. “You... are... naughty...” I poked my way down his stomach toward his pants as I straddled him.

“You... are... naked...” he said as I unbuttoned his jeans.

“No, I’m not. I couldn’t get my bra off. It’s impossible.”

“Let me help you with that.” He unhooked the bra and peeled it off over my head.

“That was very sober of you.”

He grinned.

“You’re very smiley tonight,” I told him.

“Come here.” He tugged me gently toward him and I leaned down over him so our lips could meet. I was naked on top of him and he was still dressed. I didn’t like it.

I squirmed, trying to shove his jeans down enough to get at his cock. I slid my hand down over the smooth head and gripped his hard shaft.

“Yeah, Taylor,” he groaned. “Touch me. Show me what you want...” He kept talking dirty as we made out and I peeled his clothes off to get at all the good stuff. His hard chest. His lean abs. His sexy hips. I licked the lines of his long, lean muscles as I went. “Yeah... *fuck*... I want to slide deep inside

you and fuck you slowly, until you come all over me...”

Usually, he was pretty vocal and bossy during sex. I liked it.

I kinda noticed though, even drunk—or maybe especially because I was drunk?—that he wasn’t all that vocal about much else. Music; he was vocal about that. But we never talked much about his issues.

I tried not to let it bother me, but it was bothering me more and more.

Maybe that was unfair of me, though.

Maybe we didn’t need to talk about his issues? Maybe they’d work themselves out, with time and patience and...

*Love.*

Cary grabbed my hips and tried to guide me where he wanted me so he could fuck me, but I pulled myself back, just out of reach.

“Come back he—” I silenced him by shoving my tongue deep in his mouth. After I’d kissed him into submission and he stopped trying to yank my pussy to his dick, I broke the kiss and looked into his eyes.

“What if I want to be the boss this time?”

He absorbed that, his eyes all hazed up with lust. “Have at it.”

“Yeah? You can handle that? A woman...” I slid my hand down over his dick again, which flexed under my touch, hungry. “Giving you orders...” I squeezed him and he groaned. He was insanely hard. “Telling you what to do and how to do it...”

“Please,” he hissed, right before I kissed him again.

Then I slid my hips up to his and lifted, placing myself directly over the head of his cock. I pointed him where I wanted him, then pressed my hips down, taking him inside me. When I’d pushed him deep enough that I could let go with my hand, I grabbed both his wrists and pinned them above his head.

“No touching,” I ordered.

Then I sank my hips down, taking him deep.

His mouth fell open.

Yup. He liked it when I was the boss.

“You... are so... bossy...” I told him as I rode him slowly. “Tonight, it’s my turn...”

He didn’t seem to have any problem with that, so I stretched out, pressing into his wrists to hold him trapped beneath me as my hips did the rest. I rode him as slowly as I wanted to, and then faster, just watching his beautiful face.

“Kiss me,” he said.

“I’m giving the orders. Shut up and fuck me.”

His eyes flashed with pure lust. He lifted his hips, grinding into me with each undulation of my hips. I met each thrust as his movements grew more impatient, more hurried. I could see him getting close to losing it. I could hear it in his stuttered breaths.

“Now, I’m gonna come,” I told him. “Be a good boy and don’t come until I’m peaking. If you go soft before I’m done, there’s gonna be trouble.”

He’d been watching my body move up and down, mesmerized. But now his eyes met mine. He choked out a strained laugh. “You’d better hurry.”

I started fucking him harder and pressed one hand over his mouth, silencing him. Then I got serious, working my hips against him so the pressure built, working myself closer and closer to orgasm.

“I’m gonna come,” I told him, right before I went off.

His hips had stilled, and I took my time, grinding my clit against him as I tumbled over the edge. I wasn’t gentle about it. I slammed against him with unbridled, drunken enthusiasm, with everything I had, and I probably smushed his face with my hand. He didn’t complain or push me off or anything. When my orgasm peaked—sending tremors shooting through my body—I slackened my hold on him, crying out.

He slammed his hands down on my hips, holding me tight against him, and fucked me, hard and fast. A few quick thrusts, and he exploded inside me with a groan.

I rode him slowly as he came, his body shaking beneath me, until he squeezed, his fingers biting into my hips. “Ah... slow down,” he gasped. Then he added hastily, “Please.”

I smiled and flopped down on top of him to kiss his lips. “You’re so cute when you’re polite.”

“You’re so hot when you’re fucking me.”

“Only when I’m fucking you?”

“Especially when you’re fucking me.”

I kissed him again, then kissed my way over his jaw and down his neck while he panted. “Holy Christ,” he groaned. “That was... I’m spinning. I can’t move.”

“And you’re not even the drunk one,” I said, flickering my tongue over his nipple before I tumbled off of him. I stretched out on my back with a grin.

His wide, honey-colored eyes gazed at me as he panted. “I can’t feel anything but the blood pounding in my cock. You’re like a cock vampire or

something.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t it? There’s no blood left in my brain.”

I giggled.

The room spun a little, but not totally in a bad way. I wasn’t even sure which way was up. But it didn’t even matter. I just closed my eyes, reached out and took Cary’s hand, lacing my fingers through his. Because I was falling, right?

I was totally falling in love with this man.

And you know what? I’d changed my mind about fighting it. Or avoiding it. Or promising myself not to do it.

Maybe I was drunk right now... but wasn’t it a better idea to fall head-over-heels in love with him instead, and live happily-ever-after together?

Yeah.

Much, much better plan.

# Chapter Twenty

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**Cary**

## Everything Is Automatic

---

**T**ake that and get some sleep.

I woke up in a cold sweat. I was covered in it. The pillowcase was soaked through beneath my head.

*Stay here in my room so no one knows where you are.*

I rolled onto my other side, trying not to wake Taylor. I was in bed with her in the poolhouse and the nightmare was fresh, like I'd just stepped out of it. Like it was there in the next room. Like if I got up now, in the dusky dawn light, I'd find him sitting in the chair in the living room, smiling at me.

*I love you, brother.*

I dreamt about it often. About the last time I ever saw him. I still had the dream, at least once a month or so. But I never dreamed about him more than I did on this day. On this fucking day.

My birthday.

I flipped the wet pillow over, then flopped into it. I rubbed my hand over my face and wondered if I could fall back asleep. If I wanted to risk another nightmare. Or just get up and get on with this fucking day.

Neither. I didn't want to do either of those things.

I should've known this time it would be no different. Even with Taylor at my side.

This was always, always a very bad week for me.

We'd spent the last six days in and out of the studio, as usual. Working. Eating. Going for jogs. Together. Taylor even got me doing yoga with her, as threatened.

We swam in the pool.

We had sex.

We talked and listened to music and laughed.

Everything was a distraction. I'd managed to barely think about it.

Barely think about Gabe.

But the nightmare would find me when I fell asleep. After he died, I'd

barely slept for months. I couldn't stand to see him in my dreams.

*Turn off your phone. I'll wake you up in time for dinner.*

It was the worst day of my life: the last birthday I celebrated with him. Because it held my last happy memories of him. The day before I said those words, and then failed him.

It was the worst fucking week of my life, playing out again and again.

So much shit happened this week.

No. I had to stop and remind myself: it *already* happened. It was all in the past.

I was born.

Gabe died.

Joseph Fetterman, the man who was held legally responsible for his death, died, too.

All history.

But my birthday, it just kept coming, year after year, to remind me.

And all I could do was try to focus on something else. Try not to fall apart, as my best friend's last words to me would replay, over and over, in my head.

*I love you, brother.*

He trusted me.

He counted on me, like I counted on him.

That was the part I could never quite see when he was alive. Could never quite see past all my own shit to understand how much he needed me, just like I needed him.

He trusted me, and I let him down.

"Hey." Taylor's hand slipped over my hip. Her body shifted as she pressed against my back. She felt warm and soft and inviting, and I practically shuddered with sudden need. It was all consuming, like smothering flames, as the goosebumps rippled across my body.

*Someone's walking over your grave.*

That's what Gabe used to say when I got those strange goosebumps as I overheated, just before a panic attack. When I told him I had nightmares about performing onstage, and about the cold sweat that accompanied the dreams. When I got those hot/cold chills, as the anxiety threatened to pull me under.

*Someone's walking over your grave, man. It's just the clock ticking.*

It was his way of reminding me that one day I'd die, so right now I should

live while I could. Fear and anxiety be damned.

*We'll sleep when we're dead.*

I rolled toward her in the dusky light and reached for her. I saw her full, bruised-looking lips. The dark, layered depths of her eyes. Tidal pools. Shadows stirring in the deep. Restless things with too many questions, wanting answers, unable to forget.

Some things just wouldn't die, even when you wanted them to. They lurked in the dark, waiting. Looking right back at you.

Why did it always feel like I was drowning when I reached for her? Right before I touched her...

"Hey, it's okay," she said softly, just before I kissed her. Could she tell I was having a nightmare?

My hand slid between her thighs and found her wet center. I slipped a finger inside her and she shivered, gasping into my mouth. Her hips pressed closer to me. My cock was already thudding and I rolled over her, pinning her down and shoving myself between her legs. My knees dug into the mattress. The head of my cock stretched her open. I plunged my tongue into her mouth, my teeth scraping hers.

I thrust into her and she clutched at my hips.

I pulled her hands off me and pressed them down on either side of her head, kissing her until I thought we might suffocate and I didn't even care. I fucked her in long, determined strokes, grinding my pelvis against her. She whimpered as her orgasm crept up. I could feel it pulsing around me where she squeezed me, her hips jerking against mine. She moaned, sucking on my bottom lip.

Then her teeth bit down on my lip, and I came so hard my brain did a somersault through the blackness. The whirlpool sucked me under.

*Don't take too many of those.*

I jerked back, blinking my eyes open. "Don't..."

"What?" Taylor reached for me as I pulled away. I pulled out. "Are you okay?"

I shook my head, clearing out the darkness. The remnants of ghosts and memories and whispers in the dark. The ones that told me I was at fault. It was my fault.

I gave him the sleeping pills.

I collapsed next to her and buried my face in her pillow, smothering myself in her scent. My heart was thudding too hard. I needed to breathe.



“Sorry,” I croaked. “That was intense. I was half asleep, I think.”

She laughed softly. “What a way to wake up.” Her hand trailed lightly over my back, raising goosebumps across my skin. “Happy birthday,” she sighed.

She barely had the words out when I kissed her again. And I kept kissing her so she wouldn’t say it again.

I hated this fucking day.

I never would’ve even told her it was my birthday if she didn’t find out on her own. From my sister. Either way, I didn’t want to talk about it. About this day or anything it meant to me.

She smiled as I pulled back and looked in her eyes. When she looked at me like that, it was like tendrils of light slithering out of the dark to wrap around my heart and squeeze. I still couldn’t breathe.

I looked away. I tried to breathe, deep. Controlled breaths. Four in. Hold four. Four out.

*In. Out.*

I was falling for her. I knew I was.

I *wanted* to take a risk with her in a way I hadn’t let myself since Gabe died. I hadn’t let any woman get close to me since then. Since the last one fucked off and I decided I hated the world for abandoning me.

What a convenient excuse to check out of it.

But. Taylor...

She made me wonder what it would be like to let go, to dive right into the deep with her. She was so at ease moving in and out of my shadows. It was the least I could do to try. Really try.

Show up for life again.

Show up for *her*.

I wanted to make this work between us.

To try to fix myself.

Because what we had... it was so good between us.

As long as she wasn’t asking me questions I couldn’t answer.

She brushed my hair out of my eyes with her thumb, and I met her eyes again. She was gazing at me. She made me feel vulnerable and naked, and the more vulnerable I felt, the more I either wanted to retreat—or take control. I was obsessed with pleasing her, any small way I could. With dominating her in bed. Making her feel good.

It was another distraction.

It also felt good having that control over her. Made me feel like I had some power over this beautiful thing that I had no power over.

“I love you, Cary,” she said softly.

I knew she did. Otherwise, why would she be here?

I wanted to say it back. “I feel overwhelmed,” I said slowly. “I don’t know how I deserve you. But I love you, too.”

She smiled.

I felt like I’d been gutted. My underbelly sliced right open. Offering her my love... it was like I was asking her to trust me, and I knew I wasn’t trustworthy.

I was struggling again. Drowning. Caught between Taylor’s love and this darkness in me that weighed me down.

I felt it pulling at me, jagged and black. A broken anchor, sank so long ago.

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“So, are you gonna let me wish you a happy birthday, or what?” Taylor asked me, as soon as I walked back into the bedroom. I’d gone into the bathroom to clean up while she lingered in bed. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who doesn’t celebrate their birthday.”

“I don’t,” I said, pulling on my underwear.

She just lay there, the sheet wrapped around her waist and her breasts bare. She looked like some goddess from an old painting. Like the women on the walls at Bliss. An ageless fantasy, too pure to be real. Too strong to ever be broken. “You know, I’m really, really proud of you.”

“Why?” I looked away as I pulled on my jeans.

“Because you’ve gone down to Little Black Hole twice now,” she said with wonder, as if I’d walked on water or found a way to feed all the world’s poor. “That’s amazing.”

“Functioning like a regular human isn’t amazing,” I said. Then I leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. “Curing childhood illness is amazing.”

“Of course. That’s true. But I am proud of you.” She caught my hand as I tried to slip away, and tugged. I sat down on the bed next to her. “You’ve worked hard to be able to do this. You should be proud. Feel good about your accomplishment, Cary.”

“I do.”

She kept hold of my hand, entwining her fingers gently with mine. “Would you ever consider staying with the band?”

I avoided that look of hope in her eyes. Ever since I’d forced my ass down to Little Black Hole a few days ago, and then done it again... she’d had that look in her eyes. Like I was cured.

Like I magically had my life back.

When all I’d really done was stretch my very small bubble to include one more building. A building that I owned.

Big fucking deal.

It was twenty-three steps from my front door to the back entrance of LBH. Twenty-three fucking steps.

I wasn’t a musician. I was a fucking magician at this point. Spinning illusions to convince everyone they were seeing something that wasn’t really there.

I wasn’t cured. I was sick.

I’d always be sick.

And Taylor was dreaming big, expansive, glittery things for me. I could see it in the depths of her eyes. My former career wrecked on a coral reef, overgrown with sea life. Lost treasure smothered in sand.

“What do you mean, stay with the band?” I said blankly.

“You seem to be enjoying writing with the Players and playing guitar with them. It seems like they’re enjoying it, too. Ash told Danica he loves working with you. Would you consider joining the band, if they asked you to?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I’m not looking to join a band,” I told her. “If I wanted that, I could’ve done that by now.”

“I’m sure,” she said carefully. “But the Players are kind of special, aren’t they?”

I didn’t answer that. I was sure it would be special as hell for her if I joined her best friend’s husband’s band and we all rode off into the rock star sunset together. But that was never happening.

I pulled away, grabbing my shirt off the floor to put it on.

She sat up, watching me. “I mean, Xander’s in the band. He’s your best friend. You could be bandmates again.”

“I’m not interested in joining the Players, Taylor. When the album is done, they’ll be touring. I’m not interested in touring.”

“Why? Because of your stage fright?”

“Yes.”

“But you toured before.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“But how do you know that you couldn’t do it again? You’re a great musician. And you’re enjoying working with the band, right?”

“I’m not in a band anymore. And I’m not going to be. I can’t tour.”

“Why?”

“I can barely leave the house, Taylor,” I said, my frustration edging to the surface. *Don’t take it out on her.* “How am I gonna go on tour?”

“You’ve been going down to the studio.”

“Twice,” I bit out. “Two times, I’ve walked through the door of the recording studio that *I own*, in the last five years.”

“And that’s amazing,” she said softly. “Given what you’ve been through. Plus, you went to Brick House Records. And to Bliss,” she added. I hated that that was all the evidence she had to prove her point. It was pathetic and it was my fault. That the only other time I’d left my house in the last few years was to fuck a stranger, and she knew it. “And you go jogging with me.”

“So?”

“So, you do leave your house. You’re leaving your house more and more.”

“Jogging with you through the empty streets of this neighborhood, after dark, is about zero-percent the same as walking out onstage at a concert.”

“I disagree.”

“Well, you haven’t been onstage.”

“You had ways of getting yourself onstage before,” she said, undaunted by my shitty attitude, “even though you had stage fright, right? Maybe you could do that again.”

“Maybe.” I said it so she’d stop talking about it. But it only encouraged her.

“What did you use before, to get yourself out onstage?”

“Gabe. Drugs, prescription and otherwise. Alcohol. Mostly Gabe.”

“Oh,” she said softly.

“Gabe’s gone,” I said. “I know that. And I stopped using drugs and alcohol to try to cope long ago. That’s a very fucked-up road I have no

interest in going down.”

“What about Xander? Maybe he could be your support, help you get onstage.”

“Xander isn’t the supportive type.”

“But maybe—”

“Anyway, he doesn’t understand me like Gabe did.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know him.”

“Well, maybe that’s how he was five years ago. But maybe he could be supportive if you asked him to. Maybe he’s matured. I know he cares about you. He’s practically family. He’s with your sister now—”

“Xander isn’t Gabe, okay?”

“Of course not. But I just thought—”

I walked into the bathroom, closing myself inside. I splashed cold water on my face and dried off, as my heart pounded so hard I could hear it in my head. My skull squeezed, hot and aching. I gripped the side of the sink, hard, shoving the anxiety down until my muscles stopped shaking.

I looked myself in the eye as I got control of my breath.

I saw the dark circles under my eyes. I saw a young man who was way too old. A man who was tired of dragging around an invisible anchor.

Then I walked back out there like nothing happened. Like I didn’t just walk out on her abruptly while we were talking, with no explanation.

Taylor watched me sit back down on the bed next to her. I leaned my elbows on my knees and hung my head.

“I’m sorry if I upset you, Cary,” she said after a moment. “I didn’t mean to.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I was just thinking that Xander was part of Alive, too,” she said gently. “He’s been there for you through everything, right? He’s the best friend you’ve got.”

“I know.”

“I know he’s not Gabe, but... he’s alive, Cary.”

I looked at her. The concern in her eyes. The love. I could see it all there, plain on her face.

I was hurting her. I knew I was.

It was starting, just like I knew it would.

“I’m sure Xander would do anything to help you if you gave him the

chance,” she said, so fucking hopeful that I was listening to her. Really listening.

“I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Which part?” she said quietly.

I looked away. “I’m tired. Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure.” She snuggled over close to me and draped her arm around my shoulders. “Have a good time at the studio today, okay? I’ll be here if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

She nuzzled into my neck and kissed my jaw. “Maybe we can have dinner to celebrate your bir—I mean... the anniversary of the remarkable occasion of your birth? Just the two of us, tonight. A tiny, itty bitty little celebration?”

I could hear the hope in her voice, and I knew she was just trying to cheer me up. Because she didn’t know.

She had no idea what this day meant to me.

I didn’t have the heart to tell her no, so I just said, “Maybe.”

Maybe I was trying to make up for the way I’d just shut her down when she tried to talk to me about the band.

Maybe I’d say anything if it meant I could just keep her here with me until the end of time.

I looked into her deep-sea eyes. “You look beautiful,” I told her. It just came out before I knew I was going to say it.

She rolled her eyes a little. “My bed hair is getting scary. And it’s like three different colors right now. I need to get my roots touched up. I need a salon day or something. My boss really works me to the bone,” she teased.

I smiled a little. “Take it easy today. Hit the salon if you want. I’m gonna head down to the studio. I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

“Okay,” she said, and kissed me goodbye.

---

About six hours later, I walked out of Little Black Hole and had Liam drive me to West Vancouver. I told Taylor I’d be home for dinner when I texted her. But I wasn’t ready to go home just yet.

We drove toward the turn-off to the British Properties, where we usually

took the turn to head to Bliss. But we didn't turn. We kept going. North, up the mountainside. To the very end of the residential area, where the streets and yards gave way to tall trees. Liam parked us at the side of the road, at the foot of a hiking trail.

I got out without a word and started walking through the woods, alone, sunglasses on and my hat pulled low. The trees absorbed me and I was gone, into the dense cool of the forest. The filtered sunlight floated down. The path beneath my feet was packed dirt, some stones and tree roots. And it was so familiar, even though I hadn't been here in years, the forest unchanged.

Gabe and I used to come here to ride our bikes when we were kids. Maybe twelve years old or so. His dad would drop us off, and we'd ride for hours, exploring the trails.

After we started to get famous, we used to come here just to disappear.

I followed the winding path with no end in mind, until I reached one of the little wooden bridges that arched over a trickling creek. I crossed it and sat down on a slab of rock, watching the water meander by below.

I felt spun out, like a shredded tire that had gone around the track one too many times. I felt exhausted, and I'd barely done anything today except wake up in a cold sweat, have sex with Taylor, and spend a few hours at the studio basically chatting with the band.

Then Xander just couldn't keep his mouth shut. When he walked me out to Liam's car and hugged me goodbye, he'd said quietly, right in my ear, "Happy birthday, brother."

The look in his eyes was full of concern and compassion, and that *Happy birthday* meant so many other things. It was a quiet nod to Gabe, an acknowledgment of what he knew I was going through today. It was his way of saying, *I know what this day means, and I'm here for you.*

I wished I could be there for him.

But really, when had I been there for any of my friends?

Most days, I was drowning so deep in my own shit, it was hard to understand why they'd even stuck around. I didn't deserve Xander's patience, his concern, his loyalty.

It just sent me running.

It threw me off, a ripple in the surface of my desperate calm and control.

What control?

If I was in control, I'd be functioning like a normal person. But I'd never known how to be normal.

You'd think after so many years I'd have figured it out.

But I still felt like a baby when it came to this stuff. Blank and new, blinking at the world, hoping someone would pick me up and help me. The problem with that was I just couldn't stand to let anyone waste themselves on helping me anymore. It made me nauseous to think of anyone I cared about trying to help me and getting hurt.

I'd vowed long ago, sometime after I resurfaced from the breakdown after Gabe's death, that I'd never let people take care of me like he did again.

Because it *killed* him.

If I loved someone, how could I do that to them?

Courteney. Xander. Taylor. I couldn't let them get that close. Because I feared what would happen. It was my greatest fear and it was fucking crippling. The one that always surfaced during the worst panic attacks.

The fear that something bad would happen to someone I loved because of me.

It had already happened, once.

I wanted to go home and hide. That was my failsafe. The only fix I knew. It never really fixed anything.

But it was all I had. My greatest coping mechanism.

My prison.

My home was my safe place. That was what I told myself. But it was more like a crypt, where I slept with my ghosts and shut out the rest of the living world.

I wanted to bury myself in the dark and suffer for my sins.

But Taylor was there, waiting for me. And that meant she'd have to see me like this.

She was too smart. Too perceptive. And she cared about me too much. I knew I couldn't hide what I was going through from her for long.

I couldn't stand to have all this shit come down on her, though.

I wasn't sure I could bear to even tell her why I hated my birthday. To tell her what I'd done to Gabe.

I didn't know if I could find the words without triggering a panic attack.

I was still drowning in the guilt of it, five years later. Barely keeping my head above water.

*Take that and get some sleep.*

*I'll wake you up in time for dinner.*



# Chapter Twenty-One

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**Taylor**

## Way Down We Go

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“**S**urprise!”

I hopped to my feet as Cary stepped out the back of his house. I knew he was coming, because he texted to let me know he was on his way home. Plus, I had his laptop with me, open to the security cam feed, so I saw Liam’s car pull through the gate.

Same way I saw his mom and dad out there half an hour ago, ringing the buzzer.

They were standing next to me on the poolside patio now, as Cary walked slowly up the path toward us.

“Happy birthday,” I added softly, when he looked not only unhappy but... completely shellshocked. It was a look I’d never quite seen on his face before.

Which was my first clue that something was deeply wrong here.

He stopped at the edge of the patio and blinked at the three of us. Me, his mom, his dad. Then his gaze swept over the little patio tables that I’d arranged by the lounge chairs with food, and the bar cart I’d rolled over. His parents were sipping wine that I’d poured for them.

There were gift bags on one of the tables, too, and Cary stared at them.

“Happy birthday, son,” his dad said, his voice tight and uncomfortable. Not at all as friendly as it had been when he spoke to *me*, a person he’d just met.

What the hell was going on?

Cary looked at his dad like he’d spoken some foreign language that not only confused him but offended him. I didn’t know why, but I knew this wasn’t good.

I had to admit, Cary’s parents had taken me by surprise. Not only by showing up unexpectedly on his birthday, but by how they seemed, in general. Mr. Clarke looked vaguely like Cary and Courteney; once blond, probably, his hair was now whitish, and he was about six feet tall like Cary.

But unlike his children, he was very stiff and proper. Mrs. Clarke was even more of a question mark. With dark, curly hair that was obviously colored and too much makeup, she was strangely awkward when she moved, when she spoke. She gave off a very nervous vibe that was... unnerving.

She also seemed heavily medicated.

I'd tried to be welcoming, but I'd definitely felt uncomfortable hanging out with them for the last half-hour, making small talk and answering Mrs. Clarke's awkward, slurring questions. The discomfort was only increasing, a thousandfold, as Cary and his dad stared each other down.

Cary still hadn't said anything, to any of us.

Mr. Clarke's already stiff jaw hardened into jagged iron. He set his drink down on a table very purposefully.

Mrs. Clarke took a small step toward her son, then stopped, leaving a wide berth between them. "Hello, dear."

Cary looked at her but said nothing.

"I hope you don't mind," I said gently, trying to project *Do you mind? I can't tell what's going on.* Cary's eyes met mine. "I ordered dinner for us, and there's plenty to share." I pointed at the food spread, and he looked at it. I'd gotten a bunch of his favorites. I even had "Paint It Black" playing for him—the cover version by Gob, a local punk rock band, which maybe I hoped would impress him or something.

He said nothing.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" his dad demanded.

"He's been working so hard," his mom said, to his dad, like Cary wasn't even standing there. "Let's just give him some space." Then she turned her back to Cary and sipped her wine.

When Cary's eyes met mine again, it looked like all the color had drained from his face.

Then his fingers started moving. The left ones, tapping against his thigh.

*Shit.* Obviously, letting his parents in, unannounced, and blindsiding him like this was a bad, bad idea. I didn't know, though. It was his parents. They dropped by on his birthday. What was I supposed to do, tell them they couldn't enter the property?

Who was I to tell them that?

"I got you a gift," I said, desperately trying to distract him. I indicated the gift table. "Your parents even brought one from your grandmother."

Cary didn't seem interested in the gifts, though. He was staring at his dad

again, and his jaw was starting to tick.

“Oh! And I got this for us.” I indicated the bar cart, which was stocked with pickles, bread and vodka. “With proper Russian vodka this time.”

All Cary said was, “What are they doing here?”

He addressed me, not them.

“Uh... your parents dropped by as I was setting up for our little birthday dinner.”

“And you let them in,” he said, his eyes shifting back to me. They were so cold and dark, a shiver ran through me. He didn’t even look like the Cary I knew. He looked.... sick.

Why was he turning that strange color?

Was he about to have a panic attack? I had no idea, really, what the signs were. Reading about it was not the same as witnessing firsthand, I was pretty sure.

“Cary...” I took a few steps toward him.

“Of course she let us in,” his dad snapped. “Your mother’s come to visit you on your birthday.”

“I’m *not* celebrating my birthday,” Cary ground out. His jaw was so tight, his lips barely moved.

“You know that’s a slap in your mother’s face every time you say it?” His dad’s voice was rising.

“Oh, stop talking about it,” Mrs. Clarke said. “It just makes you argue. So fine, no birthday party.”

“Why, Mom?” Cary said, his voice frighteningly low. “Why can’t I talk about it?”

She didn’t even look at him. And as I watched them... it felt like something curled up and died inside me. I could feel his pain and the tension in his body as his mom refused to look at him.

“You *know* I don’t celebrate my birthday,” he said through his clenched teeth.

“Why on Earth not?” his dad demanded.

“Because Gabe *dies* tomorrow,” Cary spat out.

Mr. Clarke made an angry, exasperated noise. “Gabe died five years ago, Cary.”

I inched closer to Cary. Clearly, this family conversation needed a mediator or something. But I had zero knowledge of the family politics here. “Maybe we should—”

“I know he died five years ago, Dad. *I was there.*”

I reached for him. “Cary.” I tried to touch his shoulder, but he recoiled. He didn’t even look at me as he turned away and walked stiffly into the house.

“Don’t waste your time,” Mr. Clarke muttered.

I looked at Cary’s dad. Was he talking to me?

I turned to Cary’s mom, maybe for help. She was looking around at the trees that lined the property, like they had eyes. “My God,” she whispered. “Why does he always have to make such a scene...?” I wasn’t even sure who she was talking to.

Then she downed the rest of her glass of wine.

Clearly, no help was forthcoming.

I hurried to follow Cary into the house. But by the time I reached the studio doors, he’d locked himself inside.

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“Oh my God,” were the first words out of Courteney’s mouth when she found her parents standing in Cary’s foyer, putting on their shoes.

When they’d showed up, I decided to text her and invite her to join us for the little birthday party. She’d arrived in record time, but not before Cary came home—and locked himself in the studio. And definitely not in the mood I’d expected her to be in, as she stormed in the front door.

“Hello, dear,” her mom said.

“Oh, *no*,” Courteney said, as I shut the door behind her.

“Let’s not have dramatics, Courteney...” her dad said.

“You *can’t* be here,” she told them. I lingered behind her, not sure what to do.

“Don’t be rude, Courteney,” her dad said.

“We’re *here*,” her mom said.

“No. You need to leave.” Courteney turned to me. “Where’s Cary?”

“In the studio.”

“Does he know they’re here?”

I glanced at Cary’s parents. “Yeah.”

“We’re not criminals,” her dad growled. “Why do you both treat us like this?”

Courteney turned back to her parents. “You have no right. Cary didn’t invite you in here. You can’t just show up. You *know* how he gets.”

“We simply dropped by with a birthday gift, Courteney,” her mom said. “Where’s the harm in—”

“That!” Courteney stabbed a finger toward the alcove where the studio doors stood closed. “That is the harm, Mom! And your clueless attitude about it doesn’t change anything. *It never has.*”

“*Courteney,*” her dad warned.

“You know you shouldn’t be here when he’s not home,” Courteney went on, ignoring him, “and you shouldn’t be just dropping by. It’s not fair to him. And *you* of all people should understand that.”

“Do not talk to your mother that way,” Mr. Clarke growled.

I started to sidestep out of the way. “Maybe I’ll just—”

“Stay,” Courteney said firmly. “They’re going.”

I stood there, feeling awful. For Cary. For his sister. For whatever this horrible tension was that looked like it was about to crack her dad’s jaw.

“We’re leaving,” Mr. Clarke announced. “When Cary’s calmed down, you tell him to call us.”

“Right,” Courteney said bitterly. “*Calmed down.* Nice, Dad. He has, like, catastrophic anxiety that almost killed him and you guys always send him spiraling. Why can’t you understand that and respect his boundaries?”

“We didn’t mean to upset him, dear,” Mrs. Clarke said, looking a little panicky herself.

“Please. Just leave.”

Mrs. Clarke glanced at me. All I wanted was to be on the other side of those closed doors with Cary, but he’d locked me out. He’d locked us all out. I’d called his phone, texted him, but he didn’t answer. And his mom was looking at me like I was supposed to know what to say here, because she sure as hell didn’t. She looked utterly stupefied, her face drained of color, like she’d never experienced a moment like this in her life.

But how could that be true?

I could feel the resentment seething off her daughter right next to me.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

Mrs. Clarke said nothing.

Courteney looked at the ceiling while her parents let themselves out. Then she went and locked the front door behind them. “God, I hate them sometimes.” She took a deep breath, seemed to collect herself, then looked at

me. "I'm sorry you had to be in the middle of that."

I still wasn't sure what *that* even was.

"Courteney, what happened?" I asked her, lost. "Your parents showed up with a birthday gift for Cary, so I let them in. I had no idea I wasn't supposed to do that. I wish I'd known." All Courteney had told me when she messaged me earlier this week to let me know his birthday was coming up was that he didn't like to celebrate his birthday.

But lots of people didn't like to make a big deal out of their birthday. Danica was one of them.

But this... this was something else.

"This isn't your fault," she assured me. "I should've warned you. *Fuck*. My brother's relationship with our mom and dad is a natural disaster. I pretty much have to call in the National Guard to sort through the debris every time they do this shit."

"They didn't really do anything, though," I said carefully. "He just showed up and found them here."

"Yeah. That's the problem." She pulled out her phone. "I'm just gonna text him to let him know they're gone, and you and I are here. It might not do any good just now, though."

Oh, God. My stomach was sinking.

"What the fuck did I do?" I said, feeling kind of panicked myself.

Courteney sent her text and tucked her phone away. "Okay, how do I put this..." She rubbed her face and looked around the room, at the framed photos halfway up the stairs above us. At the closed studio doors. "They hurt him a lot, Taylor."

"I'm so sorry, Courteney. I didn't know. He just came home and he freaked out when he found them here. He locked himself in the studio..."

"I know. Here." She gave me a hug and I felt the tears creeping up. I blinked them back. "What did he do, exactly? What did he say?"

"He barely said anything. He just went very pale and vanished. He locked me out."

"It'll be okay, Taylor," she said, but I wasn't sure she really believed it. "There's just so much crap in that relationship, it's hard to explain. I totally blame Mom and Dad for that. They know they're not supposed to ambush him like this or show up uninvited and unannounced. They don't take these things seriously, but they should."

I still wasn't sure what she meant when she said *these things*. "Please

explain this to me. I don't understand what's going on."

Courteney took my arm and guided me to the living room, where we sat down. "Okay. Let me try to explain this for you. All the shit my brother's been through, and all his... difficulties... after Gabe died? My parents just don't understand any of it. Or they pretend not to. They totally abandoned him when he fell apart. Mentally, emotionally. Physically."

"Oh, fuck. I didn't know. He never mentioned that to me. He's mentioned feeling abandoned by people, but I didn't know he meant your parents."

"Yeah. They were the worst, unfortunately." Courteney sighed. "My dad still refuses to acknowledge his anxiety disorder. They even refused to go to Gabe's funeral because Cary was in 'inappropriate hysterics' over his death. That is a direct quote. My dad actually said that to him, in front of me, the day before the funeral, after he read some stupid article in the paper that had a picture of Cary crying in public."

"Oh. God." Tears were forming in my eyes, and I brushed them away. I couldn't believe I'd done that to him. Ambushed him, like she said. In his own house. Letting his parents into his inner circle when they weren't necessarily welcome there, and certainly not without warning.

"He gets along okay with Mom," she said. "Sometimes. She can be clueless, or like I said, pretend clueless. And she can be kind. She's a mom, you know? She cares, in her way. But Dad is harder to deal with. He treats me like a princess as long as I'm perfectly happy, or pretending to be perfectly happy in his presence, and I don't complain about a thing. But Cary... he's hard on Cary. He always has been. He treats my brother's issues like they're all his own fault, and punishes him for it, with judgment and criticism and callousness. My brother has never had a safe place to fall down in this family."

"What about you?" I said gently.

"I try," she said, tearing up. "But I'm his little sister. By fourteen years. I don't always have what it takes. That's what Gabe was for. Gabe was his brother in every way. The brother he needed. He was so lost when Gabe died..." She stopped, wiping her tears away. "My parents stopped coming around. My dad said they wouldn't talk to Cary unless he 'collected himself.' I was the one who found him on the floor of the studio when he'd fallen apart. He basically had a nervous breakdown. He had a panic attack and fainted and he was all alone. I was so scared. I begged him to see a therapist after that. But even when he was getting help... Mom would listen a bit when



he told her about it, but all she wanted to hear was that he was getting better. ‘Don’t depress me with the details.’ There’s one of her classic sayings for you. And my dad didn’t even want to hear about therapy. I think he’s under some fucked-up illusion that real men shouldn’t need therapy.”

“This is all very fucked-up, Courteney,” I told her. “I hope you know that. The lack of support they give him... it’s not okay.”

“Oh, I know. It never felt right to me, even when I was a kid. And the way they treated me after Gabe’s death was almost as bad. They practically pretended like it didn’t happen. They ignored my feelings about it. It was like they expected me not to mourn, to just pick up and carry on. I was so, so angry with them. And that was nothing compared to what Cary went through. Gabe was his best friend.”

I shook my head. “I don’t understand how your parents could be so cold about it.”

“I don’t think they’re cold. I don’t think they don’t feel. I think they just try to pretend they don’t so they can ignore it and avoid suffering. But my mom has anxiety attacks of her own. They should understand what Cary goes through, because she’s suffered from anxiety all her life. That’s probably a lot of where my brother gets it from. But her way of coping with her son’s problems is denial. She won’t accept that Cary has any serious problems because God forbid anyone actually blame her for anything. It’s all about her. It always has been. And my dad just can’t accept flaws or weaknesses. He coddles my mom’s anxiety because she worships him in return. He’s number one with her and she’s number one with him, and then my brother and I are kind of seen and not heard. But not really seen either, you know? They just expect us to be perfect and that’s all they want to see. It’s like, they think Cary should be just fine, so they convince themselves that he is. And then they conveniently forget to respect his needs.” She sighed again. “I’m sorry. This probably makes no sense to you.”

“Not really. But honestly, my family has its own dramas, and I wouldn’t expect anyone outside of our family to understand, either. So I get it. It’s complicated. And it’s dysfunctional. And you and Cary had to find your own ways to survive it.” I touched her arm. “I’m sure it helps that you’re both so smart and likable.”

She smiled a little. “Thanks.”

“But seriously, Courteney, this is devastating. What do I do to fix this?”

“Well, the thing that I’ve learned over time is that you can’t. You can just

be there for him.”

We both just looked at each other for a long moment, maybe thinking the same scary thought.

“What if he won’t let me?” I said.

“No,” she said firmly, taking hold of my hand. “That’s not up to him to decide.”

I tried to absorb that, but it was like I was in shock. I couldn’t quite believe that he’d locked me out. *Me*.

“Things were going so good, Courteney. He told me he loved me. I can’t believe I fucked this up.”

Courteney stared at me. Her eyes softened to two liquid pools as she absorbed that. I had no idea if she knew, before this moment, that her brother and I were falling in love.

But now, she knew.

“You didn’t fuck up, Taylor,” she said gently. “You tried to do something nice for him on his birthday.” She cocked her head, a smile playing at her mouth. “He told you he loves you?”

“Yes.”

She glanced out the French doors, toward the pool. “And you were throwing him a party?”

“Yeah. Just a small one. It was just supposed to be me and him. But the way he looked at me... I guess this surprise didn’t go over so well.”

“It would have, I’m sure. If my parents weren’t here.”

“I’m so sorry,” I told her, again, because right now I couldn’t tell him. Because he wouldn’t let me.

“Trust me, Taylor. You’ve made things better for my brother. My parents... they just make things worse.”

“I had no idea his relationship with them was so bad. I should’ve realized, though. I mean, I’m no stranger to messed up family dynamics.”

“It’ll be okay,” she said. “You didn’t know. He’ll realize that. Just give him some space.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

I could. This was just a glitch, right? I made a mistake and he’d understand that.

I’d give him space.

And then he’d come back to me. He’d let me in again.

He told me he loved me. Which meant he’d forgive me for fucking up,

because that's what you did when you loved someone.

We'd talk it out.

And then things would go back to the way they were before.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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**Taylor**

## Look Alive, Stay Alive

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Things didn't go back to the way they were.

After Courteney left, I sent Cary another carefully worded, apologetic text, asking him if we could please talk. Then I cleaned up every trace of the party stuff, except my gift for Cary, which I left outside the studio doors for him.

I knew there wasn't much that he couldn't buy for himself, so I'd opted for something personalized that he probably wouldn't buy for himself, and got him a new, brown leather bracelet. The one he always wore was getting worn. And maybe I was optimistic that he might wear the new one in the future. Maybe onstage? Part of reinventing himself as a rock star—Cary 2.0—if he ever managed to do that. I could feel it when we talked; as much as he protested it, he wanted it, too.

The bracelet was plain, like his old one, with a simple pattern stamped into it, but on the backside it said: *Heart of Gold*.

Because, you know, he had a heart of gold. And he liked that song.

I hoped he'd like his new bracelet.

I spent the rest of the night in the poolhouse, alone for the first night in weeks, barely sleeping.

By late the next morning, when I still hadn't received any response from Cary, I hauled my ass over to my best friend's place so I wouldn't have to spend the rest of the weekend alone, indefinitely. Danica and Ash often went to their house on the island on weekends, but they'd stayed in town this weekend because I told her I might need her. And need her I did.

It was now Saturday night, and we were sitting in the living room of their downtown condo. Me, Danica and Ash, plus Matt and Xander. Courteney stayed home to work. Apparently, she was working on some mysterious, top-secret book, which I only found out about tonight. I didn't even know she was a writer.

I had a feeling she was maybe a little bummed out herself about what

happened yesterday. But when I texted her to ask if she was okay, she'd replied, *Just really want to get some work done.*

She'd also assured me, again, that Cary just needed some alone time. So I was doing my best to give him that, rather than plaster myself to his windows and beg him to speak to me.

My plan was to spend the rest of the night drinking chilled vodka shots with dill pickles and hunks of pumpernickel bread, with my best friend and three rock stars. Xander was well-versed in the tradition, so he explained it to the rest of them. Which was good because I didn't have the will to do it. I was too sad, preoccupied and using my entire life force to keep breathing through my devastation.

Right now it was just me, the support of my best friend, a bunch of booze and one moment at a time to get me through this.

I could barely digest anything else, mentally or physically.

I'd done my best to choke down some fried chicken when Danica ordered in for us and forced me to eat. I'd washed down the bakery treats she served up for dessert with the wine she poured. Then Ash cleared off the coffee table and we convened around it for the vodka drinking.

As I arranged my ass on the floor by the coffee table, Ash put some music on, and Xander complained, "Enough Snoop Dogg already."

"What's wrong with Snoop?" Danica said, plunking down next to him on the couch.

"Not much," Xander said, "if I didn't have to hear it every time I come over here."

"What do you want?" Ash said. "'Moby Dick' on repeat, so you can jack off to Bonzo?"

"Who's Bonzo?" Danica said. "Isn't it Bono?"

"She's so cute," Xander said, and patted Danica's knee.

"It's John Bonham's nickname," I informed my best friend. "Led Zeppelin's drummer."

"Oh." She laughed.

"Don't patronize her because she doesn't know the names of every famous drummer," I said, flicking Xander's knee.

"What? I'm not patronizing. She is cute."

"Aw," Danica said. "Thanks, Xan."

"Hey, yahoos," Matt interjected. "You're all irrelevant. Taylor gets to choose the music tonight."

“Why?” Xander blinked at him.

“Can’t you see she’s bummed? She’s literally sitting on the floor in pajamas, drinking wine from the bottle.”

All true. I’d put on my sweats before dinner in my commitment to doing nothing of importance with the rest of my day—and these sweats were clearly of the jammies variety, not workout gear.

They all looked at me. Ash was still standing, phone in hand, mid music selection. The rest of them were sitting on furniture, properly dressed and drinking out of actual glasses.

“I’ll get a glass.” Danica popped up to get one. She passed it to me and I poured a glass of wine.

They were all still looking at me as I took a deep swig. I’d only told Danica the reason for my funk, and she was sworn to secrecy. They all seemed to be waiting for some explanation, but fuck no, they weren’t getting one.

“Fine,” I relented. “I’ll have Twenty One Pilots, ‘My Blood,’ please. And if you love me at all, you’ll just put it on repeat.”

“Done.” Ash put the song on for me in the background and came to sit on the floor across the coffee table from me.

Matt, who was sitting on an ottoman, pulled up to the table and poured us out a round of vodka shots. “So, we each get a shot, a pickle, and a piece of bread?” He slid a shot across the table toward each of us.

“Really not important.” I threw back my shot to wash down my wine, not even waiting for the rest of them. “Vodka’s the important part. Pickle and bread are at your leisure.” I glanced at Xander on the couch. “Amiright?”

“Yup. Nailed it.” He lifted his shot, the rest of them toasted, and we all helped ourselves to pickles and bread as desired.

“That wasn’t bad,” Danica remarked. “I thought it would be stronger, but it’s so cold and thick, it slides down nice.”

“That’s what she said,” Xander quipped.

I snorted.

We had another shot.

Then we briefly argued over whether or not to drag our asses out to the bar. Matt’s weather app said there was a ten-percent chance of rain and Xander decided we were too lazy, I decided I was too pathetic, and Danica suggested we play a game instead.

Then we argued for a while over which game to play—or not play.

We took a break from the vodka to have a round of wine and beer.

Then we started playing “The Game of Things...” which basically consisted of one person, the “reader,” saying a topic, then all of us including the reader writing down a (usually crass) response to that topic on a piece of paper, along with our name, then handing the papers to the reader, who read them out loud.

We then went around the circle and had to guess who wrote each twisted response. It was seriously the simplest game that even me, drunk, could follow, but with this particular group of people, it was dirty as fuck.

No one owned the actual game, so we also had to make up our own topics, which didn’t help.

And we ran repeatedly off topic. Like way off topic.

For example, the topic “Things you should never say to a woman after you fuck her” somehow ended up in an argument over whether or not men should be allowed to wear bikini bathing suits.

I had no idea how we got there. The vodka was going down too easy.

Incidentally, all of us said yes to that particular question, except Xander. But then again, all of us were sexually attracted to men, except Xander.

“You’re just saying that because your man is fit,” Xander challenged Danica. “I’m saying picture, like, the average man, and if that’s not enough, picture the very unattractive, unfit, aging, hairy man in that same bikini, and tell me your answer is still yes.”

“I’m not here to body shame anyone,” Danica said simply. “Age and body hair are not a crime. And beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So my answer is still yes.”

“Should only fit women wear bikinis in public?” I challenged Xander.

“Can’t wait to hear this,” Matt said.

Ash chuckled.

Xander considered, then concluded, “I’m not answering that. This room is too hostile.”

We laughed and did another shot.

“So,” I said, unwilling to let it go, “in your mind, only people you find attractive should wear bikinis in public?”

“In a perfect world,” Xander said carefully, “yes.”

“Well, I’m here to tell ya,” I said, topping up my wine, “the world ain’t perfect, and it also ain’t yours.”

“Don’t give her a hard time,” Danica told him. “She’s having a rough



day.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Xander said.

“You just sitting there on the couch is giving someone a hard time,” Ash said, and Matt snorted.

“Why?” Xander said.

“Because you basically exist to irritate other humans.”

Xander smirked.

“We’re all here for you, Taylor,” Ash said solemnly, passing me another shot as Matt poured a round. “Why don’t you just tell us what’s wrong?”

I met Danica’s eyes, and she gave me a hopeful look, like, *Why not just tell them? We’re all friends here.*

I rolled my eyes. “It’s no big deal, you guys. I’m just tired. And I kinda had a fight with my boss.” I shot back my vodka and nibbled on a pickle.

“Oh, shit,” Ash said. “Cary?”

“Yeah. Cary. It’s fine, though. It was just... shitty. He’s...” I struggled for the right words as they all sat there, looking at me. The words that would explain why I looked like this, without totally giving away my feelings. I wasn’t sure that Cary would like me telling everyone he knew that we had an intimate relationship. That conversation hadn’t come up yet. So far, our relationship was like everything else in his life—it only existed inside his home. Courteney knew, because I’d told her, but that was it. “He’s just cool. I really like him. I feel bad that I screwed up.”

“I’m sure you didn’t screw up,” Xander said, which was nice of him. “Cary can be pretty private. He might just need some time to chill out.”

“Thanks. That’s what Courteney said.”

“She kinda told me,” Xander said. And I could see it, in his eyes. He knew. Courteney told him. “He locked you out of the studio, huh?”

“Yeah. I don’t wanna talk about it right now, though.”

“Cary’s cool,” Matt put in. “I like him.”

“How does that help?” Xander said.

“He is cool,” Ash said. “He’s also fucking hot.” Which really didn’t help, either.

Xander rolled his eyes. “You and Summer, Christ. ‘He’s so talented.’ ‘He’s so gorgeous.’ ‘I want to spread him on a cracker.’”

“Huh?” I said. “Who said that?”

“Actually, that was me,” my best friend said. She gave me an apologetic smile. “I think we were drunk and eating Nutella out of a jar when Cary’s

name came up? Hard to remember. It made sense at the time.”

“You guys realize you can afford to eat better than Nutella out of a jar, right?” I teased. I was just glad to steer the conversation elsewhere.

“Nutella isn’t a budget situation,” Matt informed me. “It’s a midnight craving situation.”

“Right.” I eyed him, kinda wondering what “midnight craving” situation he was referring to, and why I wasn’t invited to that party.

“Have you got a problem with the fact that I find your best friend attractive?” Ash asked Xander innocently. He seemed to enjoy trying to irritate Xander almost as much as Xander liked trying to irritate him.

“It’s not a problem,” Xander said, feigning near corpseslike boredom.

“It’s the mere idea that you find men sexually attractive at all that keeps him up at night,” Matt clarified.

“Not true,” Xander said. “I just give such sub-zero level fucks about it that I don’t need to hear about it all the time. ‘I like pussy. Wait, I also like dick.’ Blah blah blah. Bisexuality is so 2010. Fuck whoever you want. I. Don’t. Care.”

“Alright,” Danica interjected. “Shut up, Xander. Let’s keep playing the game.”

“What game are we playing?” I inquired, because who could remember that far back?

“The Game of Things,” Ash said. “Rock star version.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Who’s turn is it to come up with a topic?” Xander asked.

“It’s my lovely bisexual husband’s turn,” Danica said cheerily.

Matt snickered.

“Great,” Ash said. “People I’d rather fuck than Xander.”

“That’s your topic?” Xander groaned.

“Yup.”

“Wait. Is the ‘I’ in that sentence *us*?” Danica asked. “Like people we’d rather fuck than Xander?”

“Nope. I, Ashley,” Ash said.

“I’m confused,” I said, sucking on my pickle. My ability to follow along was gradually fading as the vodka pickled my brain.

“The topic is ‘People Ash would rather fuck than Xander,’” Matt translated for me.

“Hmm,” Danica said thoughtfully, tapping her pen against her paper.

“Take your time,” Ash said, grinning at Xander.

Xander scratched his forehead with his middle finger.

“Oh, I get it.” My brain clicked into gear, and I wrote my response on my little paper. “This one is easy-fucking-peasy, people.”

“Yeah, just like Ash,” Xander quipped, and Ash chucked a cushion at his head. It bounced off and Xander ignored it, writing carefully on his paper.

When everyone had written down their responses, Ash gathered up the little papers, including his own, mixed them up and said ceremoniously, “People I’d rather fuck than Xander. Here we go.” Then he read off the papers, one by one, to the background of our snorting and snickers. “‘Almost no one.’ ‘Literally anyone.’ ‘Me.’ ‘Danica every day and twice on Sunday.’ ‘Everyone in this room.’”

We all cracked up.

“That was the last one,” Ash said. “Matty, you’re up to guess first.”

“‘Me’ was Danica,” Matt ventured.

“Yup.” Ash leaned over to kiss his wife.

“Good job, Matt,” Danica said supportively.

“Too obvious.” Xander rolled his eyes. “Take the easiest one first, Matt.”

“Obviously. I’ll even take a shot, so you don’t feel bad when you have to drink because you suck at this game.”

“Taylor?” Ash said.

“Uh... ‘Almost no one’ was obviously Xander because he’s full of himself like that.”

“Yup,” Ash said. “Xander?”

“‘Danica every day and twice on Sunday’ was Taylor,” Xander guessed.

“Yup. I actually fuck her three times on Sundays,” Ash said. “But nice effort, Taylor.”

“Thanks.”

“Danica?” Ash said.

“I’m thinking Matt said ‘Everyone in this room,’” she concluded.

“And he’s not wrong,” Ash said.

“You know, when you hear the truth, you just know it,” I said, giving Matt a high five.

“Fuck you all,” Xander said, and poured us out another round of shots. “This game is too easy because you’re all so fucking predictable.”

“Uh-huh,” Matt said. “And that’s why you’ve already had twice as many shots as the rest of us?”

“He’s just a team player like that,” Danica said, patting Xander’s chest as she came to his defense. “Right, Xan?”

“Thanks, Danica.”

“And if it makes you feel better,” she added, “there are a lot of people I’d rather fuck way less than you.”

Matt laughed and Ash frowned.

“That’s my girl,” I said.

“That’s my girl,” Ash said.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Danica Vola,” Xander said, and kissed her on the forehead.

“No forehead kissing my woman,” Ash said.

“Where would you rather I kiss her?” Xander said, deadpan, and slugged back his shot.

After that, I kinda tuned them out as the drinks flowed, the testosterone surged, and they all got drunker, ruder, and somehow more dickish yet more flirtatious with one another.

And every little bit of it made me miss Cary, a hell of a lot.

I wanted to call him.

But I didn’t.

Instead, I kept drinking.

Eventually, someone threatened to jump out the window if we didn’t change up my song, which was still on repeat. I told them, “Twenty One Pilots, Our Last Night, Highly Suspect, that’s all you get to play. Remember, I’m sad.”

“Highly Suspect,” Xander said, and Matt put on “Look Alive, Stay Alive.”

“Matt. You’ve got good taste in music,” I told him, recalling his vortex playlist. “You and me, we shoulda hooked up.”

Matt came over and sat down on the floor next to me, bumping his shoulder to mine. “But we didn’t.” He gave me a sympathetic look and handed me a fresh glass of wine.

His warmth against me felt way too good and I felt so stupidly drunk, the idea of spreading my naked body on almost any warm male felt disturbingly alluring.

So I decided to make sure that didn’t accidentally happen somehow. Because every one of the males in this room was off-limits to me, for one reason or another.

Or several reasons.

And anyway... I didn't want any of the men in this room.

I was in love with Cary Clarke. The one man who was currently not even allowing me to see his face or speak to him.

*Fuck.*

"By the way," I told them all, raising my voice over the music, "you all need to get the fuck out sometime soon so I can pass out on the couch. This is my bedroom tonight." True. This apartment had only one bedroom and as close as we were, I wasn't snuggling in with my best friend and her husband tonight like a sad, drunken cockblock.

More drinks circulated, but I didn't have any. I didn't even finish my wine. It wasn't going down so smoothly anymore. There was dancing and jumping around, but I stayed where I was on the floor. Until someone—Matt?—scooped me up and put me on the couch.

The next thing I knew it was quiet and semi-dark. I was alone.

I dragged myself off the couch and stumbled to the guest bathroom in the hall.

I heard voices from the hallway, and poked my head into the bedroom, where I found Danica and Ash—with Matt. I'd assumed everyone who didn't live here had gone home, except me. Wrong.

Danica was lying on her stomach on the bed, talking quietly to both of them, giggling and telling a story or something. The guys were sitting on the floor, a few feet apart, drinking beer as they listened. Ash had a guitar in his lap and was playing idly, a drunk smile on his face.

They didn't see me. Maybe they went in there to let me sleep, like I asked them to.

I went into the bathroom and for some reason, I slammed the door. Maybe I was annoyed with Danica. Maybe I was annoyed with them all. Maybe I was annoyed with Cary Clarke and myself and the whole damn world.

I went pee and swished some toothpaste and water around in my mouth because it tasted like vodka and pickles, and not in a good way anymore. And I just tried not to be angry for no reason.

I fucking *knew it*, though.

Usually, Danica told me everything. Which was why it was bugging me, maybe, that she wasn't telling me everything about what was going on with Matt. I mean, I knew almost everything.

But not... *everything*.

And I knew Danica. She told me way more than she even told her twin sister. I knew that if there were things she wasn't telling me, she had her reasons. We'd been tight since we were thirteen. The day we met, we did a pinkie swear to be best friends forever.

With some people, it was definitely instalove.

Maybe I would've asked/pushed/begged her to tell me more, but I had my own problems to deal with. And currently, I was busy drowning them in vodka.

To be fair, I really hadn't told her every little detail about Cary. Maybe because I wanted her to like him and not tell me not to see him anymore?

I wondered if that was the same reason she hadn't been totally open with me about Matt.

I dug my phone out of my pocket and checked it, actually half-expecting to find something from Cary.

*Nothing.*

I stuffed the phone away and stumbled back out into the living room.

"Taylor?" I heard my best friend call after me as I went searching for the vodka.

I rifled through the kitchen and found enough clean glasses, and carried them into the bedroom with the vodka. They all stopped talking when I walked in. I sat down next to Ash on the floor. I handed him the bottle and he put down his guitar.

He didn't say anything. He just poured vodka into the glass in my hand. One of my best friend's husband's finest qualities as a friend was knowing when to just shut up and pour you a drink.

Then he poured everyone else one and passed them around, and they drank with me. Ash put his arm around me.

Danica came over and sat down on my other side and slipped her arm around me, too. I slumped against her, putting my head on her shoulder.

"It'll be okay, Taylor," she said softly.

But she knew it had been over twenty-four hours, and Cary still hadn't spoken to me.

I'd called him.

I'd texted.

I'd even knocked on the studio window, once, where the shades were now closed.

*It'll be okay*, Danica kept saying.

*He'll come around*, Courteney kept telling me.

But with each passing hour, I believed them just a little bit less.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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**Taylor**



## I'm a Stranger

---

**W**hen I arrived back at Cary's place on Monday morning, tea in hand and ready to work, I really wasn't sure what to expect.

Half of me had gradually absorbed this strange new reality over the weekend—the one where Cary had locked himself inside his studio and was no longer communicating with me. The other half of me actually expected to walk into his house to find the studio doors standing open, as usual, welcoming me in to start my day with him.

The studio doors were closed.

I placed the decaf chai tea I'd brought for Cary on the floor. I tried the doorknob, but it was locked. I didn't bother knocking because I knew he wouldn't hear me.

I pulled out my phone and sent him a text to let him know I was here.

Then I stood staring at the closed doors in front of me for a long moment, absorbing this sight that I'd never seen, not once, since I came to work with Cary.

Not until I screwed up.

*You guys always send him spiraling.*

That was what Courteney said to her parents. And the thought that I'd now sent him spiraling... into sadness? Pain? Anxiety? Depression? Such fear or anger that he felt the need to lock himself inside his studio and stop talking to me and his sister?

I couldn't stand it.

But I just didn't know what to do about it.

I was only dimly aware that I wasn't alone, that Freddy had appeared and was now rubbing against my ankles. I finally snapped out of it and bent down. I ruffled my fingers into the thick fur of his cheek, the way he liked. He purred and rubbed against my fingers.

"I hope you're keeping him company in there," I told him, my voice small in the big, empty foyer. "Give him lots of love, okay?"

Cary's cat made a happy little chirping sound as I stood up, gazing up at me with his big, green eyes. When I smiled at him, he cocked his head and swished his tail, which meant he was waiting for me to play with him or feed him.

I wasn't in the mood to play, so I went into the kitchen. He trotted after me. I put some of his kitty treats in his bowl and he purred loudly as he ate.

I crouched down next to him and ran my hand down his back and along his tail. "You know, you're pretty easy to read, Freddy. I wish Cary would just tell me what he needs. Wouldn't that be nice?" At the sound of Cary's name, Freddy flicked his head up, looking at me a moment as he chewed, then crammed his face back in his bowl. "I'm glad he has you."

I got to my feet, almost bursting into tears with the sudden swell of emotion that hit me as I watched Cary's cat. This sweet little creature, the only one he let into his inner sanctum when he was upset.

Then I dug in my purse and did the only thing I had left to try: I wrote him a note on my star-shaped purple notepad, ripped it off, and folded it.

*I'm sorry I let you down.*

I tucked it snugly under Freddy's collar.

"You give him that for me, okay?" I stroked him one more time, then headed through the house, passing the closed studio doors on my way to the living room. I phoned Courteney, and she picked up just as I was stepping out into the backyard through the French doors.

"Hey, Taylor," she answered. "Good morning."

"Not so good, actually. I'm at Cary's place. I always start at nine. He leaves the studio doors open for me. But today, they're closed. And he hasn't returned any of my messages over the weekend. I'm worried, Courteney."

"I know. I understand." She breathed a small sigh of worry herself. "There's an emergency key, in the cupboard above the fridge. You can use it to enter the studio."

"Really?" I stopped at the door to the poolhouse, considering that. I was relieved to know it was there. But... "No. I don't want to do that. He'll see my messages at some point when he checks his phone. I have to trust him to reach out when he's ready. I can't betray his trust again." I let myself into the poolhouse and set my tea down on the kitchen counter.

"Okay. We'll give it a few days, then. But after that, I might use the key myself. If I'm worried about him. We can see how it goes. But do you want to reach out to Merritt this morning, and ask her to let you know when she

communicates with him? He might talk to her first, about work stuff, and she can at least let us know that he's okay in there."

"Of course. I'll do that."

"Thank you. And please keep me in the loop."

"I will. For sure. Let me know if you manage to talk to him, too. Or if Xander hears from him. Just so I know he's okay."

"I will, Taylor."

I took a deep breath. I still couldn't believe it had come to this.

I looked around the poolhouse, the small living room / kitchen area. What was I supposed to do now? Try to do my job on my laptop here, when he wasn't speaking to me? Or just take off for a few days and leave him to his privacy?

"I still can't believe I screwed up this bad," I said quietly. "I hurt him, just like your parents did. He might think of me like he thinks of them now, because I let them in—"

"Don't do that to yourself," Courteney said. "This isn't your fault, Taylor. He doesn't think of you like he thinks of our parents. I promise you that. This is just what he does to everyone. He did it to Xander, his best friend. He did it to me, his sister. Even when we try to help... sometimes he doesn't want that help. There's only so much you can do."

"I just don't know how you can help someone who doesn't want to be helped."

"Please, *please* don't take it personally, and don't let it ruin this," she pleaded with me. "You're helping him. The fact that he's been working down at Little Black Hole with the band, at all, that's *huge*."

"Yeah. I know." I took another breath. I'd just get through this, one breath at a time.

Until he was willing to talk to me... I'd just have to wait.

I was strong. I'd been on my own for a long time. I could do this.

I'd been afraid, in my own darkest moments, late at night in my apartment after I'd been through some crushing breakup, that I might be alone forever. Maybe that was why Cary's situation had hit me in the heart so fast and so damn hard. Because I saw him struggling, on his own, and I knew he'd end up struggling on his own forever if he didn't let someone in.

I really didn't have family around who could help and support me, but he had a sister who wanted so badly to help him, and he wouldn't let her.

"You're gonna be okay?" she asked me hopefully.

“Yes. I’m okay. Have I told you you’re an amazing sister?”

She laughed bitterly. “I really wish I was. I try.”

“Keep trying.”

“Thanks, Taylor. Keep in touch, okay?”

“You, too.”

After we hung up, I tried to regroup to face this day.

I could set up my laptop in here, and maybe go out on the patio later, and I’d try to work like normal. I’d be in touch with Merritt, and through her and Danica/Ash, I’d find out as soon as anyone heard from Cary. I’d know he was okay in there and just needed some time alone to work, and to sort through the negative emotions brought up by what happened at the world’s worst surprise party.

I’d do some more research on anxiety disorders to try to understand how I could help.

And then we’d talk things through when he was ready.

I told myself, firmly, that this was temporary.

And I really, really wanted to not take it personally, like Courteney advised. I wanted to believe what she told me, that I was helping Cary.

I wanted, *needed*, to believe that I was good for him.

That I was helping, not harming.

But then I walked into the bedroom to collect my laptop, and I saw the envelope sitting on the bed. A white, letter-sized envelope.

And the gift bag I’d left for Cary, sitting on the floor by the bed. The gift bag I’d left outside the studio door for him before I went over to Danica’s place on Saturday.

I’d forgotten about it. But there it was.

Cary had been in here. He’d left both the gift bag and the envelope for me.

My stomach sank with dread as I approached the bed. I picked up the envelope, ripping into it as my heart slammed in my chest, and I noticed that the tissue paper poking out of the gift bag looked untouched, like he hadn’t even opened it.

It was a brief, handwritten letter on plain white paper.

*Dear Taylor,*

*You’ve done a really great job and I’m sorry that it has to come to this, but hiring you to work with me while I produce this album was a*

*mistake. I'm just not ready to have someone like you in my life.*

*I don't know how to write a formal termination letter. It feels too cold, and you deserve better. But I can't have you working here anymore.*

*You can keep the money I already paid you, as we agreed, of course.*

*You're welcome to live in the poolhouse until the end of the six month term.*

*It might be best for both of us, though, if you move out now.*

*Cary*

The paper shook and the words swam in my blurring vision. I had to wipe my eyes to make out the rest of it. At the bottom of the page, he'd written:

*I never should've started something with you that I couldn't finish. I'm sorry.*

I dropped the letter on the bed. I was moving before I could even process everything he'd written.

*a mistake*

I pulled the single rolling suitcase I'd brought with me out of the bedroom closet and started packing it with clothes, toiletries, my laptop, everything essential. I'd just have to send Courteney or someone back for the rest.

*someone like you*

I left the garage opener and his car keys and his house keys all on the kitchen counter in the poolhouse, with his letter.

*can't have you working here*

I locked the poolhouse behind me and I rolled my suitcase up the driveway, opening the gate with my remote opener. I'd give it back to Courteney the next time I saw her.

*move out now*

I walked up the street, then up the next street, and just kept walking until I felt like I could calm down enough to stop walking. Then I pulled out my phone and called a cab. I sat down on the curb in front of some beautiful house, and I waited.

*I'm sorry*

It was the hardest thing I'd ever done, walking out of there. My whole body vibrated with adrenalin and pain. My bones felt achy. I had a headache. I was trying so hard not to break down in racking sobs that my teeth hurt. But

I'd promised myself. I'd promised myself that I would know when to walk away, *before* he hurt me.

So now I had to walk away.

*Too late.* I was always too damn late.

But I couldn't even be angry with him for pushing me away. I wouldn't blame him.

It was my fault.

I knew he was too damaged, too hurt, too broken, too *lost* when it came to love and his entire fucking life... and I still got involved. I let my heart get involved.

I let myself fall in love with Cary Clarke.

And he didn't love me back.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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**Taylor**

## Fool for Waiting

---

*August*

**T**he love I had for Cary was so big... I didn't even know how big it was until I lost him. Until I was nowhere around him. Until he was nowhere to be seen, heard or touched.

Until I'd been kicked out of his world.

Denied access.

My VIP, all-access backstage pass revoked.

*It's just for a few months.*

That was what I kept telling myself, so I could carry on.

It wasn't so easy to do.

It came out of nowhere and hit me like a bullet to the spine, this love. Or the loss of it. I wasn't sure which. I felt oddly paralyzed, even as the world kept spinning around me.

Eventually, he'd responded to my texts. Many days after he locked me out and then fired me, broke up with me by way of a letter, he responded.

He told me he needed to focus on the album.

And when I pressed him, he told me we could talk after the album was done.

It was the same story he'd told his sister, apparently... album after album.

And I held onto that hope, that fragile timeline, with my heart beating steadily in a dark, quiet box, on hold.

*Could take a week.*

*Could take the rest of my life.*

The first time I ever met Cary, that was what he said to me, when I asked him how long the Players' album would take to be completed.

And when I looked back, all the time that had passed since that first day became a murky blur. It was like I didn't want to remember. Nothing seemed



quite real. Like if it never even happened, it wouldn't have mattered.

It shouldn't have mattered.

That was fucked-up, but I let myself indulge in the idea that it shouldn't have hurt me like it did. I didn't know him very long. I didn't love him that deeply.

It didn't matter.

What evidence did I have, anyway, that it was real, except for this hole inside of me? This dark box wherein my heart stuttered along, waiting... unsure of whether or not it should actually be in mourning.

And of course, there was that money Cary had put in my back account.

And the text stream that I couldn't bear to delete from my phone, even though we'd exchanged maybe twenty words... and none that actually meant anything at all.

All I got from him, if anything, were one-word answers to my occasional questions about the album and how it was coming along, when it would be done. It was the only thing he'd actually answer me about.

*Yes. No. Thanks. Soon.*

---

## *September*

Unfortunately for me, it was the season of love. Romance was heavy in the air, like too much perfume.

*Everyone* seemed to have something to celebrate.

Except me.

I really didn't feel like celebrating. But I still tried to show up.

For the most part.

I went to so many parties, I lost track. Old friends of mine and new ones were getting engaged. Getting married. Having babies.

Landing dream jobs.

And then, of course, there was my dream job. The one I'd landed after Cary broke my heart.

Life went on.

Courteney and Xander got engaged, and when Courteney called to tell me, I cried.

I wasn't sure if it was joy or self-pity.

Bit of both?

She said Xander had proposed to her on the Cambie Bridge. The same place where, exactly one year before, he'd told her he was going to ask her to marry him someday. It sounded incredibly romantic.

They threw an engagement party at their condo, and Courteney invited me.

I went.

Cary didn't.

He didn't even show up to celebrate and support his own sister's engagement to his best friend. I wasn't sure who I felt more sorry for that night. For Courteney, for Xander, or for myself.

I wondered why we did this to ourselves.

For *him*.

I couldn't not love him if I tried. I knew that much. And I knew Courteney and Xander felt the same.

And so, we waited.

I deliberated.

I stalled out.

I texted him. I waited, long and hard and breathless, for him to text me back.

I really wasn't sure what to do with the money he'd paid me. I'd worked for it; for some of it, anyway. But I didn't need it. I kept wondering if I should give it back. If he'd ever ask for it back.

I kind of wanted him to, just so he'd say more than one word to me.

An actual sentence. Was that too much to ask for?

I kept dreaming of Liam showing up in a dark car to drive me over to Cary's house, where he asked me for his money back. And held me down while he fucked me again.

Yeah. Those dreams.

I had a lot of those dreams.

I just kept thinking that this nightmare would end, that it would have to end. That he'd reach out to me when the album was done, and we'd work things out.

And in the meantime, I waited.

I waited for him.

It was like there were two Taylors: the one who worked her ass off at her

job so maybe no one would notice how bad the other Taylor was suffering... and the one who zoned out while jogging, while driving, while lying on the couch, spiraling endlessly over a puzzle that could never be solved. The *why* and the *how* that could never be explained, because the one person who had the answers wouldn't tell me what they were.

I wondered if this was anything like what it was like for him after Gabe died.

After his heart was broken.

Did it ever mend?

In all those days, those months and years, alone in his home?

And sometimes I wondered... was this anything like what dying was like?

I felt like a ghost.

It was like the world went on without me in it.

How much could you keep talking to yourself, asking yourself questions, and getting nowhere, before you feared that your sanity might be slipping?

Before you told someone how bad it was?

Before you sought help?

How would I know when I'd reached the end of my rope, if no one was there to catch me?

---

*October*

One of Brody Mason's staff, a girl named Talia, was promoted to assistant manager of the Players.

And all I could think was: why didn't I think of asking Brody for that job?

I would have, if I knew it existed.

But I already had a job. After Cary had kicked me to the curb, off Ash's suggestion, I'd called up Brody myself and asked him if he might have any work for me. I told him I'd do anything, and I meant it. I'd tear wax strips of the asses of rock stars if I had to. Better than purse dog lady; at least I'd get to go to free concerts. I told him there was only one thing I wouldn't do.

Work with Cary.

Because Cary had made it clear he didn't want to work with me. And I didn't want to interfere with the Players' album.

I just wanted it to be done.

Brody had taken me up on the offer, and put me to work with his assistant, Maggie, on Dirty's team. She had me filling in the holes wherever she needed them filled. And I threw myself into the work with a fervor.

Dirty, as usual, seemed to be on fire; they were deep into writing their next album. I went down to their rehearsal space a bunch of times with Maggie, the old church where they wrote and practiced. And later, to Left Coast Studios, where they were recording.

It was incredibly cool being a part of all that, working with such a big band. And the part of Taylor that showed up for her job in a big way was both aware of it and grateful for it.

I tried to fit in, do my job as well as I could, and save my lying-flat-on-the-couch-and-pondering-the-black-hole-inside-me moments for my days off. Even if I was just fetching coffees and running errands and taking notes for people to remind them of what they'd said later, I was loving every minute of my job.

I couldn't believe how much stuff they had to do, and all the stuff people were constantly demanding of them.

No wonder they had a whole team of people to just get them through the day when they were writing and recording.

No wonder Cary had broken under the pressure of his grief. I couldn't imagine having so many eyes on me on a good day, let alone at a time like that.

I couldn't even imagine how crazy it would be on tour.

Good crazy, hopefully.

I told myself I was up for the challenge, if the offer came my way. If I'd managed to prove myself to Maggie and Brody by the time Dirty went on their next tour.

Why not? I was single. I rented. I didn't even own a pet.

I had nothing keeping me here in Vancouver.

Or so I told myself on my bravest days. My angriest days. My saddest days.

But the truth was, I was still waiting for Cary.

And there was a downside to being around Dirty, too. Because it just reminded me, day after day, of Cary and the work he was doing—without

me.

Plus... I had to see Maggie with her husband, Zane Traynor, Dirty's lead singer, and the way they looked at each other. The way he looked at her.

And Katie and Jesse Mayes.

And Elle Delacroix with her man, Seth Brothers.

And Dylan Cope, Dirty's drummer, with his girlfriend, Amber.

And on and on.

*Season of love.*

---

## *November*

I went to a toddler's birthday party at my boss's house, and I cried in the bathroom.

Brody's little boy, Nick, was turning two, and he and his wife, Jessa, announced at the party that she was pregnant with baby number two. Elle and Seth's baby, Emma, who'd turned one this summer, and Katie and Jesse's baby, Madsen, who would turn one next month, were there, too. Amber, who was a photographer, took photos of the future generation of rock stars—or whatever they were going to grow up to be—for posterity.

I wasn't ready for kids and marriage and a mortgage. After what happened with Cary and the deep well of secret sadness it sent me into, I wasn't even sure I knew what the hell I wanted anymore, so forget making babies and committing my life to another human in holy matrimony.

Hard to want anything when the one thing you knew you wanted you couldn't have.

But I was jealous. It was visceral. I couldn't help it.

When those babies played together, my whole stomach tied in a knot. My ovaries throbbed. My heart ached.

But babies weren't the only reason for my envy.

Elle and Seth had gotten engaged; I'd gone to their engagement party, too.

Then Dirty's head of security, Jude, and his girlfriend, Roni, bought a house together in North Vancouver, not far from Brody and Jessa's. They threw an epic housewarming party, and I went to that, too. The party was

filled with bikers, Jude's brothers in the West Coast Kings MC, and of course, rock stars.

Cary didn't come.

I actually thought he might when I saw the crowd. All the VIPs and industry people.

When we were together, I'd fantasized about going to parties like that with him. And that night, I definitely fantasized, once again, that he'd walk through the door. I knew he was almost done producing the Players' album. Ash had told me it was almost done.

It killed me a little that Cary was doing so well in that area of his life—even though I was so glad to hear it—because he didn't want me to be a part of it anymore, or even see him. I knew he'd continued working down at Little Black Hole with the Players after he fired me. Ash even said they'd put their search for a guitarist on hold while Cary played for them in-studio; that they were all hoping he'd stick around.

I let myself feed off that hope, too. That he'd get himself strong and get his head straight enough that he could walk into the Players' album release party. Even if he just showed up for a few minutes. Put in an appearance.

That would've been something.

But he didn't show up at Jude and Roni's housewarming, and with every party he missed, my hope faded just a little bit more.

That night, I'd ended up hanging out with another blond rock star instead—Johnny O'Reilly—and making out with him.

I only did it because I was so drunk and feeling so sorry for myself. He'd started talking to me first, and he seemed nice. (Though I'd heard from his ex-wife, Amber, that he was not.) He also kissed me first.

So, yeah. That happened.

He was hot. And he kissed good, too. Really good. It just felt so damn wrong having another man's tongue in my mouth. The idea of another man's... you know... in my...

Wasn't happening.

I definitely regretted the whole thing afterward, once I'd sobered up. Even though it was just some kissing.

Other than that, I'd been an absolute nun. Just sitting on the sidelines of everyone else's love story.

*Don't mind me. I'll be just fine.*

---

## *Last Night*

Summer and Ronan had a giant, storybook wedding at a fancy country club her parents belonged to, just outside of Victoria, on Vancouver Island. They booked the whole place out and the party was filled with VIPs, family, friends.

It was nothing short of utterly magical. I'd never seen so many white roses and little twinkly lights in one place. It was like being inside a fairy's magic wand.

Summer wore an amazing dress, and she wore custom jewelry made by my best friend.

And when Summer's best friend, Elle, gave her toast to the bride, she also raised a toast to the Players. To celebrate their album coming to completion.

While everyone drank to that, I drank to the black hole inside me, trying to drown it.

The album was done.

That was what Danica and Ash had told me. Brody told me. Maggie told me.

Everyone told me.

Except Cary.

I'd waited, fucking glued to my phone.

I'd wanted to text him to ask him about it.

I didn't.

He told me we'd talk when the album was done. But I hadn't heard a word from him about it.

At the end of the night, Summer had insisted that we all go home with an armload of roses, because her parents had filled the place with so many. Must've been nice to have parents who cared about you so damn much that they made that much of a fuss over you when you got married.

Seemed like a small miracle that I'd gotten through the whole event without crying. But maybe by then I was kind of numb.

Plus... tequila.

I'd tried to have fun. Just keep it light. Keep dancing. Mingling.

Drinking.

I'd stuck with Danica most of the night, but we couldn't even turn around without running into some famous musician one of us now knew. Like Johnny O.

I definitely got the feeling that he wanted to make out with me again. But then I attached myself to Amber and Dylan by the bar. I did shots with them, and I managed to shake Johnny's attention. Pretty sure it probably just landed on someone else, and just as well. I wasn't interested in getting involved with him on any level.

I wasn't interested in getting involved with anyone.

That party was like a fairytale, it was filled with eligible men, and *none* of them interested me.

The only man I actually wanted to see wasn't there. I was sure he was invited. But as always... Cary didn't come.

---

*Now*

I lay on my best friend's couch, staring at the ceiling.

Ash, Danica and I had come back to their house on Isabella Island, with Xander and Courteney and all the usual suspects, after the wedding.

Danica and Ash had gone next door to Dylan's place a little while ago to get beer or something and hadn't come back. Along with various wedding guests who'd crashed at Dylan's place last night, a bunch of his family was over for the big barbecue tonight. Kids, teens, adults, babies. Apparently, one of Dylan's sisters had some new boyfriend, and that was an event worthy of throwing a barbecue and inviting everyone they knew to come over and celebrate the beautiful miracle that was young love.

I was tired of feeling jealous of everyone around me.

I was too numb to cry.

And I was still waiting. Waiting for the nightmare to end.

I had music on. The coffee table next to me was smothered in white roses from yesterday's wedding. And I was hanging on by a sad thread.

It was my last one. I was sure of it.

Dirty and frayed, it twisted idly, back and forth, as I dangled over the crevasse that was gradually cracking open underneath me.



I was hungover, too, which wasn't helping anything. Thanks to an open bar and the fact that last night's wedding was the most epic party of the year so far, I'd drowned my sorrows a little too thoroughly.

I wasn't gonna just lay here all night, though. I had a barbecue to go to. I could hear people next door, at Dylan's place, spilling out onto the back deck and into the yard. I'd be partying with them soon enough. Putting my game face on.

But I just needed a fucking minute.

*Stop the ride. I need to get off.*

Right about now, I was supposed to be helping my best friend and her husband make skewers for the barbecue. According to Danica, I was also supposed to be helping her plan my birthday party. At the end of the month, I was turning thirty.

I just couldn't seem to muster a fuck to give about it.

Not. One. Fuck.

Three-and-a-half months had passed since Cary left that letter for me and I moved out of his poolhouse.

Ten weeks.

Seventy-two days.

And now I was decimated by the truth: that the album was done and Cary hadn't reached out. That he wasn't counting down the seconds until it was done, like I was.

That he wasn't dying to talk to me. To see me.

He'd officially left me.

Obviously, he'd left me months ago. But only now, I knew it was true.

He wasn't coming back.

Early in the New Year, less than two months from now, the Players would go on tour.

Danica would go with them.

And sometime after that, once their new album was also released, Dirty would go on tour. Maybe Brody and Maggie would ask me to go with them.

Maybe I would.

All I'd wanted was the Players' album to be done. And now that I'd reached that precipice, and there was nothing beyond, I gazed out into the abyss, lost.

I was counting down the hours until I had to get my shit together and go back to work. I was supposed to be back in the city tomorrow to do some

work for Maggie.

But right now... I just needed one more minute. Maybe three. Four and-a-half?

Maybe just one more song, and I'd feel better.

How long would it take me to get over this?

To get over *him*?

*Could take a week.*

*Could take the rest of my life.*

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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**Taylor**

## Things Ain't Like They Used to Be

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“I can't believe you forgot the Strongbow,” I heard Danica say, as she and Ash came crashing noisily through the back door. “You know it makes me happy when I cook.”

“Sorry, babe. Forgot. I'm a beer guy.”

I glanced over to see him setting a box of Strongbow, which they'd obviously foraged from next door, on the kitchen island.

“Taylor would've remembered,” she teased, as he broke open the box.

“You think so?” He handed her a Strongbow—and backed her up against the island, dick-first.

“Uh-huh.” She cracked open the cider, as Ash started grinding against her. I looked away. “She knows the way to my heart. You just know the way between my legs.”

“Yeah, and then I try to blow my load all the way up to your heart...”

That romantic statement was followed by making out noises.

“Do you guys have to be so grossly in love all the time?” I called out so they knew I was right here, I could hear them, and they could spare me the twisted foreplay.

Danica hopped up on her tiptoes to see over the bajillion white roses next to me and saw me sprawled on the couch. “There you are!” As if I was ever anywhere else? “Tay, come drink with me.”

I grumbled something that wasn't really anything and turned the music up. I had “Gimme Shelter” on repeat, but who knew how many times it had already played.

“Are you kidding me with that?” Ash said, cracking open a beer. “It's worse than waking up to your blaring ‘Master of Puppets’ alarm every goddamn morning. You're gonna trance yourself into a coma.” He took a swig of beer, and when I didn't respond, he told Danica, “Get her off the couch.”

“Hey.” I pointed at him. “When she met you, I told her you're a keeper.”

Don't you dare ever forget it."

"And I love you for it," he said. "Now get the fuck up off my couch."

I sat up, unenthusiastically, and put my feet on the floor. But I didn't get off the couch.

My best friend's husband shook his head like I'd disappointed him. "What's up with her, anyway?" he asked her.

Danica looked me over empathetically. Then she started washing vegetables in the sink. "Can we just tell him already?" she asked me.

Ash frowned. "Tell me what?"

I gave her a warning look, which she returned with a sad face.

Then we exchanged a silent but vehement back-and-forth, while Ash said, "What? Tell me what? Tell me tell me tell me."

"*Fine*," I grumbled, dragging myself up.

"Taylor got her heart broken," Danica blurted, like she'd been holding that one in for way too long and the pressure was killing her.

"Really?" Ash said.

I cracked open a Strongbow and gave her a dirty look.

"I'm sorry, okay?" Danica eyed me. "But enough is enough. You can't keep this dirty little secret forever. For one thing, it's not dirty. And for another, it doesn't need to be a secret. You've got to let people who care about you help you."

"Yeah. I get that." She was right, though I really didn't want to talk about it.

Ash came over and leaned on the island. He was still just looking at me.

"That's what this is all about? You got your heart broken?"

"Why do you think she's been moping around, on and off, for months?" Danica said gently.

"I dunno. PMS?"

"That, too," I joked. I took a swig of my Strongbow.

"But you've been working with Dirty," Ash said. "You must be meeting hotties all over the place."

"Yeah. The hotties are all married," I informed him. "The work is going great, though. I think I may have found my calling."

"See?" Ash said, like that was all wrapped up. "Next thing you know, you meet a hottie, life is good."

"Whatever." I ignored the hottie thing, sipping my drink. "I don't know why I never thought of this career path before. I love music. Working with

musicians is really interesting to me. I guess I just never had the opportunity before. They weren't exactly handing out jobs with rock stars at the temp agencies. But I like it. I think I'll keep doing it."

"Well, that's awesome," Danica said. "I bet Maggie could give you tons of guidance, if you want. Or... Talia." She glanced at me, uncertain.

"Yeah." Talia. Who now had the gig with the Players that I probably could've gotten if A) I'd thought of it first, B) I actually applied for it, and C) I could've actually worked with Cary. But since he was barely even speaking to me, I figured that was never happening.

"Anyway, my career isn't the problem," I told Ash. "As you just heard."

"I didn't know." He glanced at Danica.

"Well, I couldn't really tell you," she said. "It's Taylor's story to tell. And it's kind of... private."

"Yeah." I sighed. "But only because it's so private for him. I guess it doesn't matter anymore anyway."

Ash cocked an eyebrow. "Him?"

"Cary," I said.

"You're shitting me."

I just took a sip of my drink.

"You were involved with Cary?"

"Yup."

"Like, while you two were working in his studio all that time... You were screwing?"

"Ash." Danica gave him a look.

"Yup," I said. "Constantly."

"Damn. I thought he just fired you." He studied me thoughtfully. "So, he broke your heart, too?"

"Yeah. Well, he won't talk to me anymore. That hermit thing? It's real."

"No doubt."

"It didn't even bother me so much, when I was on the inside. But then... he kicked me out."

"Ouch."

"Yeah. It hurt. Like... really bad."

Danica gave me another sad face.

"Hey. Come here." Ash waved an arm at me and I went over so he could pull me into a hug. "You're prime cut though, babe. You'll find someone else." He kissed me on the head.

“Ashley! That’s all you have to say to her?”

“What?” He released me. “I’m just saying. She’s not gonna die alone. Look at her.”

Danica rolled her eyes a little. “I’m sure what my husband meant to say is... You deserve to be happy, Taylor. And we’re here for you.”

“Thanks. I know.”

My phone chimed and I went to grab it from the couch. While I did, I heard Danica gently giving her husband crap. “When your friend is hurt, you don’t tell her she’s hot meat and she’ll find someone else,” she told him. “You tell her you love her. Etcetera.”

“No, that’s what *you* say,” he replied. “You tell her she deserves good things and you’re here for her. Your husband tells her she’s hot. That’s the way it works.”

“Really,” I told them, “you both said the exactly right thing.”

While they continued to debate the issue, while drinking, flirting, and chopping veggies, I checked my messages. A text had come in from Talia. At the top it said: *Dear Cary*.

My heart almost stopped.

I stared at his name for a long moment. Below it was a cut and paste of a bunch of info for the Players’ album release party. The date for the party had been set in stone for a while now. It was happening in a matter of weeks. But now they also had the location confirmed and all the details.

“Hey,” I asked Ash, “did you get a message about the album release party?”

“Nope,” he said. But then he pulled out his phone, and when he looked at it, he amended, “Yup. Forwarded from my assistant.”

“Mine has Cary’s name on it.” I looked at Danica, who gave me an *EEK* face. “I must still be on a contact list somewhere as his assistant.”

“Well, Talia’s still learning the lay of the land, right?” she offered.

“Yeah. No biggie.” I was already writing out a text to Talia, asking her to remove me as Cary’s contact from wherever she’d found it.

Talia replied to me with lightning speed.

**Talia:** Sorry!! That was a mistake. I meant to send it to you. But it shouldn’t say Cary on it. Oops!

**Me:** No worries.

I sent that to her, then hesitated.

**Me:** I'll forward it to Cary.

**Talia:** Thank you! And I hope you can come.

**Me:** Yes. I'll be there.

I looked over at Danica and Ash, who were now kissing. I turned away and took a closer look at the party information. It was at the Crystal hotel ballroom, and I was sure the event would be filled with VIPs. They could only fit so many people into that venue, and surely Brody and the band knew a lot of VIPs. The fact that I was invited, as part of Brody's team, was flattering.

I wondered, as I had so many times these last three-and-a-half months, if Cary would be there.

Since I'd been fired, we hadn't spoken about the release party. We really hadn't spoken about much.

I copied the party info and forwarded it to him, like I said I would. I hadn't had an excuse to message him in a long while.

When I looked over, Danica was watching me. She was still cutting veggies and Ash's arm was slung around her shoulders. "You okay?" she asked me gently.

"Yeah. I'm just gonna go outside for a bit, get some air."

"Okay, babe. We'll head over to Dylan's in a bit."

"I'll see you there."

I grabbed my coat and slipped on my UGGs and went out the back door with my Strongbow. I was just heading down the path when my phone chimed in my hand. I glanced at it.

**Cary:** Thank you.

I stopped in my tracks, and I reread the message. A few times.

"Hey, pretty lady."

I looked up. Amber was standing on the other side of the low gate in the fence, with a glass of wine in her hand, looking a little flustered as a group of



kids streaked by, shooting each other with water pistols.

“Hey.” I smiled. “Having fun?”

“I’m overrun.” She gestured over her shoulder, where Dylan’s family members were spilling out of the house, onto the back deck. Music was playing and kids were screaming. “Hey! Spray me again and I dunk you in the ocean!” she called out to a couple of little boys who blurred past, but she was smiling.

“Strong genes in that family,” I observed. “Hope you’re on top of the birth control.”

Amber laughed.

Just then, her boyfriend swaggered out onto the deck, looking incredibly virile sans shirt and beer in hand, his auburn hair drifting over his eyes in the breeze. He looked every ounce the rock ‘n’ roll drummer and underwear model he was.

“Does he know it’s November?” I asked her.

“He’s impervious to the cold,” she said, admiring her man’s assets.

“Taylor,” Dylan called over when he noticed he was being ogled. “Come join us.”

“I will. In a while. I was just going for a little walk.”

“Get her a beer, Dylan,” one of his brothers-in-law called out. There were a few of them lounging in the hot tub/pool.

“You want a drink?” Dylan offered. “Take it with you?”

I lifted my Strongbow. “I have one.”

“Cool. Well, come over anytime.”

“Thanks. I will.” I reached my bottle over the gate and tapped Amber’s glass in cheers, then continued along the path, down to the water and out to the very end of the dock. I took a big gulp of fresh air, then sat down with my bottle of cider.

I hadn’t been sitting there a minute when the dock vibrated beneath me. I turned to find Merritt approaching.

I’d liked Cary’s studio manager from the moment I met her, though I’d never talked to her much outside of work. And I hadn’t talked to her much at all since Cary fired me. I’d avoided everyone who still communicated with him, even Ash at times, because it was just too painful.

Merritt wasn’t at the wedding last night, though I was pretty sure Summer would’ve invited her. Maybe she’d come to the barbecue to make up for missing the wedding? I knew it was a pretty big deal she was here. She didn’t

exactly seem to party with the Players much. She'd even brought her little boy to the barbecue.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Nope."

I did, kind of. I wanted to be alone. But I didn't want to be rude. And the dock wasn't exactly mine.

She sat down next to me and dangled her legs off the dock. "You're coming to the barbecue?"

"Yeah."

"Good." She sipped her beer. "I guess it would be obnoxious to ask you how you're doing, so I'm not going to. Unless you want me to."

"I'll pass on that."

"I figured," she said gently.

Silence fell, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

"Do you ever get used to it?" I asked her. "Being around all the superstars?"

"Well, you either get used to it, or you find another job, I guess."

"Yeah. I guess."

"You can't really hold it against them. The superstar thing. It's obvious why everyone likes them. I like them, too. You can't fault them for being talented, charming, sex symbols..."

"And yet you sound sarcastic right now."

She laughed. "How about you? Is it strange, having your best friend marry a rock star?"

"No. I think it's stranger for her than it is for me." I shrugged and took a sip of my drink. "I mean, that part hasn't really changed my life any. Except that I now get invited to the big parties, too."

"Yeah. I guess that's nice. But you get invited to them yourself these days."

"So do you, I'm sure. Yet you don't seem to come out much."

"Well, I have two other jobs. One of them is night shifts in a bar. Plus, I have my son."

"Right."

"I think we have it pretty good," she said. "We get to just pick and choose the perks we like and leave the rest. It's not like that for them."

I considered that. "What do you mean?"

"Well, they don't really get to pick and choose. They think they do."

But... their lives are controlled by the will of the masses a lot more than they realize. Like I think if the Players put out this album and the fans decided they didn't like it, it would crush the band members. And Cary. They try to act like that kind of stuff is irrelevant, that it's all about the music, but I know they thrive on the fame, too. The love. Even Cary. When you're that high... it's a long, long way to fall."

Yeah. That sure was one way to put it.

Cary had fallen so, so far, when his best friend died. That much was obvious. He acted like he didn't want the fame. He tossed it away. Rejected it. Closed the door on it, quite literally.

Or at least that was how it looked from the outside.

But I'd been on the inside. Inside his world, as small as it was these days. And I knew it still mattered to him. That was why he obsessed over the albums. That was why he was a perfectionist and pretty much a workaholic. Or at least, that was part of the reason.

If an album he produced bombed... I knew he'd be devastated. He'd take it personally, even if he shouldn't. Even if it had nothing to do with how good the music was, and way more to do with the marketplace or how the record company didn't promote it properly or whatever.

"Have you ever dated one of them?" I asked Merritt. "A rock star, I mean?"

She laughed a little, uneasily. "Oh, I don't think so."

I studied her for a moment as she looked out over the water, her dark hair dancing around her shoulders. Merritt was pretty, like super cool *and* pretty. So I wasn't sure what that response was about.

Maybe she felt me staring, because she looked at me. Her brown eyes twinkled as she smiled. "Hey, it's okay. You don't have to feel sorry for me. I mean, rock stars aren't really my thing."

"Yeah. Me neither." I looked away, taking a sip of my drink.

They really weren't my thing. Even when Danica met Ash... I was happy for her. She was so into him, and he was definitely hot. He treated her well from the beginning. And I loved rock bands, rock music. But I just never saw myself with a famous musician. I always thought I liked guys who were down to Earth. Everyday, real world guys.

But in the end, the real world guys I dated hadn't been all that good to me. Not nearly as good to me as Cary had been.

At least... he'd been good to me for a while.

“So, I’m gonna ask. Are you having a bad day?” Merritt asked me. “Or is this just you hungover?”

I laughed a little. “The wedding was pretty wild.”

“I heard. Everyone says it was incredible.”

“It really was. It was the biggest wedding I’ve ever been to, but it was also really personal. The bride’s dad cried. It was gorgeous.” My voice actually broke a little. I was feeling really emotional today. The wedding last night, the whole scene, it was so emotional for me.

“Do you want to talk?” she offered. “We could be friends?”

“Sure. I’d really like that. But... there’s not much to talk about. I just... had one of those summers that break you.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, and I wondered if she’d put two-and-two together. Me getting fired and disappearing. And seeing me like this—so not okay.

I wasn’t exactly hiding it well right now.

“Yeah. Me too.” Tears sparked in my eyes and I looked over the water. “It still hits me in waves.” I cleared my throat. “Some days... I still feel like it might take me under at any moment.”

Merritt was quiet for a bit. I wasn’t sure what I could expect her to say to that. A virtual stranger, pouring out their heart to you....

“Well...” she said. “How about this. Whenever you feel like that wave is going to take you under... you can message me or call me to talk. I’m a good listener.”

I blinked back the tears. I nodded.

“I’ve had my share of broken times, too,” she confided.

“Okay. I’d like that.”

“Good. I guess I should head back up. Check on my kiddo.” She got to her feet.

“I’ll probably head up soon, too. Help prep some food.”

“I’ll see you at dinner, then.”

“Yeah. And thanks, Merritt.”

“Anytime.” She hesitated before walking away. “You know, whatever it is... Whatever left you feeling so broken... You can probably fix it.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“For what it’s worth... I’m pretty sure he’s broken, too.”

I looked at her. She gave me a sympathetic, knowing look, and walked away. The dock vibrated a little as she walked back up to the path and disappeared through the trees.

Cary. Was she talking about Cary?  
Or just making a general, sympathetic statement?  
I looked out over the water. I watched a boat drift by in the distance.  
Cary. She meant Cary, didn't she?  
Was he broken?  
Did he miss me?  
Why the fuck wasn't he reaching out to talk to me?  
I pulled out my phone and stared at the text he'd sent me in response to the party invitation.

**Cary:** Thank you.

I wrote and rewrote my reply in my head a dozen times, and then I actually typed it out and sent it to him.

**Me:** Maybe I'll see you at the party. I'm going with Danica and Ash.

Maybe twenty minutes later, while I was still sitting there and wondering if this could ever be fixed, and if I could be the one to somehow fix it, he messaged me back. Just three small words that tore my heart out all over again.

**Cary:** I'm not going.

I took a breath and texted him back.

**Me:** I'm sorry to hear that. Everyone will miss you.

He didn't reply.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

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**Cary**

## Apparitions

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Summer had sped by, autumn had gone and winter was fading in. Now that the Players' album was finished, the passage of time had slowed to a dull drip. All I could feel was the paralysis creeping in, the fear that the whole world would stop when I gave the okay.

When I handed the album over for final mastering.

So I kept delaying it.

I needed more time to go over it. More time to listen. More time to think.

More time.

But time was running out. I couldn't speed it up anymore. Everything was grinding to a halt around me, leaving me with nothing to distract myself with. Nothing to bury myself under.

My head was above water again, and all I could think about was *her*.

"Maybe we need to forget about the title," Ash said. "Just leave it as it is." He was lying upside-down on the couch, his black-and-white Vans up on the wall. "Maybe we need to just move forward."

"Agreed," Xander said. He was splayed out in a rolling chair, tossing a foam basketball through a hoop on the wall.

I looked at Matt and Summer. Matt said nothing from his seat on the couch, just nodded. They were all in agreement. They'd all told me so, many times. I was the only one holding things up here.

"It's done, sweetheart," Summer told me gently. "The title is what it is."

"Yeah," I said. "I'm just not sure about it."

Xander shot the basketball through the hoop again and Ash kinda groaned.

This was my latest excuse to stall: we still didn't have a title for the album. We'd considered taking a title from one of the songs, but while "Panic Room" and "Up Your Sass" and "Fuck Me Two Times" worked as song titles, none of them felt right to encapsulate the whole album. We'd tossed around some other ideas, but nothing had stuck.

So far, officially, the album was simply called *The Players*, and unofficially, *The Red Album*, because of the mostly-red cover. Which actually slightly sucked because everyone from the Beatles to Stone Temple Pilots to Weezer to Grand Funk Railroad, among others, had an album known as *The Red Album*.

“What aren’t you sure about?” Matt asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said, and everyone exchanged a look I probably wasn’t supposed to notice.

At least they’d all stopped asking me how I was doing a couple of months back. I’d definitely noticed that.

Ever since I first set foot in the studio, they’d asked me pretty much daily, *How you doing, man? And How’s it going?* They always seemed to be looking for a progress report. Evidence that I was incrementally getting better, or at least feeling better. I’d tell them I was good, which seemed to make them happy. But after I’d kicked Taylor out of my life, I told them I was shitty and they’d stopped asking.

Good thing. I was still doing shitty. Better than I was on my birthday, when I flipped out on her and locked myself in the studio to have a panic attack. But still shitty.

Therapy was helping, maybe. It was hard to tell anymore, with all the lies I told myself.

Maybe that was how therapy was helping. Helping me to see all the lies I’d been telling myself over the years, to fool myself into believing that I was doing better whenever I really wasn’t. Now, I told myself I was living a normal life because I left my house a few days a week and I saw other humans regularly. But really, I’d just swapped the controlled one-man environment of my home studio for the controlled ten-or-so-man environment of Little Black Hole studio.

The album had kept me busy enough that I didn’t need to think much about that. So I could just keep deceiving myself. And the album had turned out incredible. But now that it was done, I kept second guessing if every little thing was perfect. Basically, I was driving everyone crazy—except Summer, maybe. She’d seemed to appreciate, and defend, my perfectionism, at first.

But now even she was telling me that I needed to let it go. That I was overdoing it.

*The songs don’t need to be perfect, she’d say. They need to be authentic.*  
She was right.



The band members were anxious to get the album out to the world. Like yesterday. Brody had given it a thumbs up. And the band had brought in a few other close, trusted friends to listen to the album. A few days ago Summer's best friend, Elle Delacroix, had come to listen with Seth Brothers. Earlier today we'd had Ash's best friend, Dylan Cope, and Zane Traynor in here to hear it.

Everyone loved it.

At this point, we were actually ahead of schedule. Production on the album had gone smoothly, and everyone had brought their A game. I knew I was just trying to delay things because I was scared. Scared of the album release.

And of what would happen next.

Terrified of the release party that I knew everyone was silently expecting me to show up at.

It wasn't the crowd that was the problem, exactly. It was being looked at, talked about. The reclusive freak. It was the fear of not being able to handle it. Of freaking out, losing control. Of having a meltdown like the one I'd had on my birthday—in front of so many people.

*Taylor.*

When she texted me, a couple of weeks ago, to say maybe she'd see me there, and I told her I wasn't going... I'd never felt more like a failure.

Without her these last few months, I would've been a fucking mess if it weren't for the Players. This album. Music had saved me, and not for the first time in my life.

And now it was over.

I hadn't even lined up my next project yet, because I couldn't stand to see an end to this one. This time, I didn't want everyone to move on, without me.

I'd never felt this way before. Not once since Alive broke up.

I'd never wanted to continue on with the other bands I'd produced after we'd finished the album.

But here we were.

I was about to be alone again. The band would be leaving, on tour. And Taylor had left, because I'd asked her to.

It was the second worst thing I'd ever done.

I wanted to fix it. I really did. I fucking missed her, every hour of every day. I wanted her like I'd never wanted anyone before. But that just scared the shit out of me.

I was afraid, more than anything, of hurting her.

I'd promised myself I wouldn't be with her again, wouldn't even see her, until I could be sure I was better. So I wouldn't ever do something like that to her again—like freak out on her like a psycho when she tried to throw me a birthday party.

I broke things off with her and let her go because I could see how I was going to hurt her.

And she deserved so much better than that.

So did this band.

I looked around at them all, just waiting for me. They'd been more patient with me than I deserved. They respected me and my input too much.

"Alright," I said. "Let's move on. We'll call it *The Players* for now, *The Red Album*, whatever. If we come up with something else before the official release, we can go with that. Let's get this thing mastered and over to Brick House. And you guys can enjoy your party."

The party for the album was happening next week, on the eve of the release of the lead single. And they all deserved to get on with it already. Release the album so they could finally reap the rewards of their hard work. Celebrate.

"Aren't you coming to the party?" Matt asked, after they'd all exchanged another loaded look.

"I don't think so," I said. Which they all knew by now meant no.

Matt and Summer got up and gave me a quick hug before heading out. Summer thanked me, like she always did, like I was doing them some major favor by gracing them with my presence. She followed Matt out, but Xander and Ash didn't budge from their seats.

I met Ash's eyes. He was sitting up now, on the edge of the couch, and he was staring at me. "We should talk."

"Okay." I sat back down, facing him.

"It's about Taylor."

Oh.

"Right."

"She doesn't have a brother," he said seriously. "Or a dad who gives a fuck, apparently." His black eyebrows angled in that look of his that meant you either listened to what he had to say, or you were on his shit list. "So now I guess that shit is my job."

I glanced at Xander, who looked away with a smirk and pretended to be

absorbed in searching for splinters on a drumstick. Of course, I'd given him shit about putting his hands on my sister, not so long ago. He was probably loving the hell out of this.

"Here's what I know about Taylor," Ash said, and I met his eyes again. "She's strong. She's got a huge heart. She'll admit when she's wrong. She doesn't ask for much. And she's been a hell of a friend to my wife. So I guess what I'm saying is it would be swell if you could get over your shit enough to talk to her. If you're pissed at her—"

"I'm not pissed."

"Well, whatever it is. Even if you just don't want to be with her... Taylor can take it. If I know anything about having your heart stomped on..."

I looked away, and he got to his feet. He came over and stood in front of me.

I looked up at him.

"Trust me," he said. "I know a thing or two. She'd rather hear it from you than not hear anything. Don't leave her wondering what the fuck went wrong. I've been there. It sucks. And I know you're better than that, man." He tapped his fist to my shoulder. "Don't leave her like that, adrift."

I didn't say anything.

He lifted his chin at Xander, who said, "See you tomorrow," and Ash headed for the door. But then he stopped and turned back to me.

"And maybe while you're at it," he told me, "you make a decision on what you want to do here. Are you in our band, or are you out?"

Then he slipped a joint between his lips, lighting it as he shouldered through the door.

The door shut in his wake. I met Xander's eyes across the room.

"How about you?" I said. "Got anything you need to unload in my direction?"

"I'm not Taylor's daddy stand-in," he said. "But I mean, if you're asking for my opinion on the matter... You fucked up. You had a woman who not only helped you in the studio but somehow motivated your ass to walk in here. She's the first woman I've seen you show any interest in in the last five years. Throwing that away because what, you're scared? That seems like a douche move to me." He got to his feet, stretching. "Ash is right. You're better than that."

I got up. "Thanks for the pep talk."

He grinned. "Always here for support and advice."

“Was there advice in there? I didn’t hear any.”

“The advice is simple. You fucked up. So, unfuck it.”

“And how do you suggest I do that?”

“You look her in the eye. Tell her the truth. Whatever the truth is.”

“Maybe she was right,” I said grudgingly. “You have matured.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, not really listening. “Or, you get down on your knees and beg. And while you’re down there, slip your tongue in her panties. There’s not much that can’t be fixed by a mouth-to-pussy apology—”

“Nope. Totally not hearing this from the man who’s engaged to my sister.”

He patted me on the back as I walked away. “Come on, aren’t you and Liam dropping me at home?”

“Only if you promise not to say another word.”

“I’m telling you, though,” he said, following me out. “Mouth-to-pussy. Works every time.”

“I’m calling you a cab.”

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At home that night, I put on Taylor’s vortex playlist, like I did pretty much every night, just trying to soak up the essence of her while I flaked out on a couch in the studio.

According to Ash, she was hurting.

She was *adrift*.

I didn’t want that.

Imaging what she must’ve been thinking when she asked me about the release party, it killed me. I wanted to reach out to her, but the impending party was fucking with my head.

*Are you in our band, or are you out?*

I knew the Players had to be close to giving up on me. Maybe that was what I’d been waiting for.

When were they finally gonna give up on me? Make an offer to another guitarist and move on?

I kept waiting for them to do that. Maybe that was one of the reasons I’d been stalling the album. Just waiting on them to get tired of me and all the bullshit I brought along with me, and move the fuck on.

Like Taylor had.

I kept telling myself she'd moved on by now. Hooked up with some other guy. A Trey Jones. A Matt Brohmer. An actual catch. A normal guy with everything to give her.

Because I wasn't that guy. I wasn't sure I even knew what 'normal' was anymore.

Did I ever?

*Fuck*, I missed Gabe. The one person who made me feel normal even when I wasn't.

Taylor made me feel that way too, but I just couldn't stand to be the fucked-up guy who dragged her through the depths of this madness with me.

I could feel myself wanting to retreat. Just quit the band. Quit everything.

I thought if I quit Taylor, she'd give up on me.

But Ash's words kept replaying in my head.

*Don't leave her like that, adrift.*

So there I lay, for hours, blaming myself for fucking up. Like I always did. My guilt drove my anxiety and my claustrophobic need for control. I wasn't just protecting myself from the world. Ever since Gabe died, I'd limited my relationships to protect other people from *me*.

Or so I told myself.

I didn't even know anymore. I felt lost and so out of control... I didn't know what was gonna happen tomorrow, and I hated this feeling. I'd never been able to handle it.

The unknown.

So instead, I held onto the past with a death grip, squeezing the life out of everything around me.

*Let go of your ghosts.*

How often had Gabe said that, or some version of that, to me? I'd written that line into one of the songs on the Players' album, the only mellow, melancholy song, "(Can't) Take It Back." It was a song about regret, and I had a shit ton of those.

I really couldn't afford any more.

I picked up my phone and opened Instagram, like I did on a daily basis. Just hoping Taylor had posted something new to give me a glimpse of her life, a hint at how she was doing. I kept reading the song titles she'd posted since we broke up, and trying to piece together what they meant.

*Days Gone By*

*Low*

*Mister Asylum*

*Fool For Waiting*

*Things Ain't Like They Used to Be*

The only thing they all seemed to have in common was that they weren't exactly upbeat, happy songs. If anything, they got more depressing as time wore on.

Today, when I pulled up her profile, she'd posted the single word: *Apparitions*.

I stared at the song title in bold, black script. She'd told me she loved Matthew Good Band, and I remembered I'd told her that Gabe loved them, too. And there it was.

Was it a message to me? Or did she just like the song?

I searched for the song and put it on, then fell back on the couch.

I wanted to talk to her. So badly. I wanted to see her. I'd replied to some of her texts, but it was never enough. I wanted to say more, but I wouldn't let myself. I wouldn't let myself hurt her. I wouldn't talk to her until I knew I could be trusted. Until I was ready.

I didn't feel ready. I didn't know if I'd ever feel ready.

But this time, I couldn't stop myself.

I picked up the phone and hit the first number on my *Favorites* list.

"Hey, Cary!" My little sister picked up, sounding breathless, like she'd just dove across the room to get the phone. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." *Shit*. Had it really come to this? I called my sister and she thought someone was dying or something? "I was just thinking about that interview you asked me to do. You know, for your book about Gabe."

There was a stunned pause. Then: "Oh. Okay."

"Now that the album is done, I think I can make some time for it. How does this weekend sound?"

"Uh, that would be amazing. I can come to your place—"

"Actually, I'd rather not do it here. Can we do it at your place?"

"Yeah. Of course. You can come over anytime."

"Okay. Let me get back to you with a time that works."

"Sure. And thank you. I promise, we don't have to talk about anything you don't want to."

"Yeah. I know. I'll call you later."

I hung up; my heart was pounding. I was in no way ready to do this

interview, but maybe I'd actually started to accept that I never would be.

Courteney had told me, way back at the beginning of the year, that she was writing a biography about Gabe.

I wasn't happy about it, at first.

But that didn't stop her.

She'd already been working on it for a long time, and judging by the argument we'd gotten into about it and how she'd stood her ground with me, it was important to her. By now, she'd gone ahead and interviewed Xander and Dean for the book, as well as a bunch of other friends of Gabe's, and even his parents, who'd read a draft and approved of the book. She'd forwarded me the email they'd sent to her about it, and they'd seemed so pleased with the book, I'd finally read it. Yesterday.

It had taken me all day to get through it, because I kept having to put it down. It was that good, which meant that for me it was bitter and it was sweet. I'd actually cried a bit, for the first time in a long fucking time. Partly because of the memories it brought up and partly because I was really fucking proud of my sister—and pissed at myself that I'd actually considered trying to stop her from writing and publishing the book.

A book that honored Gabe.

I knew mine was the last interview Courteney needed to finish the book, and one of the most important ones. And if I held it up any longer or cancelled on her, it would fuck with her getting the book done.

I hadn't just been stalling the Players' album. I'd been stalling my whole goddamn life, for years. And now I was stalling my sister's book—her *dream*—and that was not fucking fair.

Courteney deserved better than that.

They all deserved better.

Better than what I'd given them.

I'd completely stalled out my relationship with Taylor, cut her loose and left her adrift, like Ash said. I'd promised her we'd talk after the album was done, and she had to know by now that the album was done.

If she hadn't moved on... if she was really hurting like he said she was, I had to make it right.

I had to try.

So I manned up and I called her, desperate to do that any way I could.

"Cary?" she said softly when she answered.

"Yeah. It's me."

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then... she started crying. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm emotional. It's been a rough week."

*Fuck me...* What was I doing? Was I making this worse?

"I didn't mean to upset you. *Shit*, I'm sorry. I just wanted to say happy birthday. For this weekend."

"Oh." She sniffled. "Thank you."

Yeah, I knew her birthday was coming up in a few days. Just made it extra fucking terrible of me to leave her hanging right now.

Or call her up out of the blue and fuck with her head. *Happy fucking birthday.*

But I wasn't trying to fuck with her. I was trying to fix this.

"Look, I know you must have plans this weekend," I said, forcing the words out with whatever balls I had left. "But... if there's any chance you have some time on Saturday or Sunday... I've decided to do an interview. My first one in years. And I wondered if there's any chance you would consider going with me."

There was a long, silent pause. "What time is the interview?"

I exhaled, realizing I'd been holding my breath. She was actually considering this?

"Whatever time you want. Courteney is interviewing me for her book. She's writing a book about Gabe."

"I heard."

"She said anytime is fine." I took a deep breath. "Honestly, I'm not even one-hundred-percent sure I won't bail."

"Why?" she said softly. "Why would you bail?"

"Because I'm fucking scared," I admitted.

"You can do it, Cary. I know you can."

"Maybe..." I dug deep, again, for the sheer balls it took to ask this of her. "If you were there, I could. I know I don't have a right to ask you for anything. But this just isn't the type of thing I've ever been able to do alone." I took another deep breath, prepared to beg if I had to.

I just wanted to see her. I wanted to make it right. And this interview would be a chance to tell her all the things I just didn't know how to say to her.

*Tell her the truth. Whatever the truth is.*

Jesus. Never would've thought I'd be taking relationship advice from Xander Rush.



“Would you please consider going with me? I know I don’t deserve it, but it would really help Courteney. She wrote an amazing book. I want to do it for her.”

Taylor was silent again for a long, long moment.

Then she said, “Just tell me when and where, Cary. I’ll be there.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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**Taylor**

## Live Wire

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“S hhhh!” Danica hissed somewhere behind me. I knew it was her, because even when she hissed at people to shut the fuck up, she did it politely.

“Xan, quit breathing so loud,” Courteney whispered.

“Yeah, I’ll try not to breathe so it doesn’t bother anyone,” he whispered back.

“Shut the fuck up. You’re all too loud,” Matt whispered, accompanied by the sound of guzzling beer.

That was followed by the flick of a lighter sparking a joint. The smell of fresh, burning weed mingled with the crisp, November night air as I felt my way along the fence in the dark. A branch snapped and someone grumbled a nasty word. I heard shoving and a small squeal.

I tried to quicken my pace. Maybe I could lose them all in the dark.

“Quit stepping on my toes,” Courteney whispered.

“Who’s hand is that?” Xander whispered.

“You wish,” Ash muttered.

“Everyone be quiet, okay?” Danica whispered. “You’re making too much \_\_\_”

Someone belched. Fucking loudly.

I turned on them and they all stopped. Danica, Courteney, and four rock stars, all of them wasted, creeping along in the shadows behind me like a bunch of rejects from ninja school.

“Who was that?” I demanded.

They all pointed at Dean. Cary’s former lead singer smiled his lazy, drunken smile at me.

“You seriously *all* didn’t have to come with me,” I informed them in a whisper. We’d been drinking at the bar tonight with a bunch of assorted people. Dean was in town and Xander thought we should all get drunk to celebrate. Beer circulated, shots were devoured, and the resultant, incredibly

intense discussion between me, Danica and Courteney about Cary was unfortunately overheard by said drunk rock stars.

So now they ALL knew my business.

Advice—unsolicited—was doled out, support was offered, motivation was rallied, my praises were sang, and then for some reason when I decided to leave the bar, the six people hovering in the bushes with me right now decided to come with me.

We'd all piled into taxis, and while I'd hoped to lose at least some of them along the way, no such luck.

“Like we have anything better to do?” Xander whispered.

“Look, this is really more of a solo mission, you guys,” I said, just like I had back at the bar.

“But then who's gonna boost you over the fence?” Ash whispered.

Good point.

I gazed up at the top of the fence. It had to be seven feet high.

Then I sized them up: four men, all in pretty great shape, minus the current level of intoxication. There had to be at least one of them capable of hoisting me up, drunk or not.

“We're here for you,” Danica whispered soberly, though sober she was not. She placed a hand on my shoulder and gave me a firm squeeze.

“I'm touched,” I whispered back. “Now shut up.”

Matt put his finger to his lips and Ash made a zipper motion across his mouth with his joint.

“Is she always this hot?” Dean muttered to Xander, eyeing my nipple area through my puffer jacket.

“Yup.”

Courteney poked her fiancé. “Shush.”

I turned and proceeded through the trees along Cary's fence, and they stumbled along behind me in the dark. We were in his neighbor's yard, unbeknownst to his neighbors. Either that or they'd already called the police on our drunk asses.

Dean was our navigator on this mission, and I was starting to wonder if that was a piss poor idea. Though he had managed to get us onto the property—through the front gate that he happened to know was never actually locked—and into this dark stretch under the trees where we probably weren't visible from either house.

“This is it,” he announced, and we all stopped.

“This is where you sneak over the fence?” Xander whispered.

“Yup.”

I looked up the high fence. “Okay. I think if you guys hoist me up I can do it.”

“It’s sturdy,” Dean informed me. “You’ve got a clearing on the other side. It’s about the only spot you won’t land in bushes or a tree.”

“Cool. Thanks.”

“Want me to come with you?” he offered, and I glanced over at him. Dean had been really kind, actually, when he found out Cary and I had an unfinished love story and I was intent on rewriting our tragic ending. Clearly, he cared about Cary.

“Really, no. I need to do this alone.” I looked at all their glassy eyes and rosy cheeks. “You guys are awesome, but I’m good. I’ve got this. I’m going full commando on this mission.”

“You’re not wearing underwear?” Xander said, and Courteney elbowed him in the stomach.

“Yeah. I’m climbing a fence in a dress with all of you underneath me and I’m not wearing panties.”

“Sweet,” Dean said, totally missing my sarcasm.

“I meant, I’m gonna strike fast and I’m not leaving until I achieve my objective.” I totally meant it. I’d really worked up my liquid courage at the bar. And trespassing on someone’s property, sneaking through the dark and scaling a fence was just fueling my hunger for victory.

“And what is your objective, exactly?” Danica asked gently.

“I’m getting him to open his door and talk to me,” I said, with one-hundred-percent confidence.

They all just blinked at me like drunk owls in the dark.

“Well... I’m getting him to open his door,” I amended, maybe downgrading to fifty-percent confident. “After that... we’ll see.”

“Okay,” Danica whispered supportively. “You’ve got this, Tay.”

I took a deep, fortifying breath. “I feel like I need war paint.”

“Try the no-panties thing,” Dean whispered. “It’ll be fierce.”

“Maybe on the other side,” I said dryly.

He flashed me a thumbs up.

“Cmon, let’s do this,” Matt said, lacing his hands together and lowering them in front of me. “Up you go.” Xander hunkered down next to him, offering his back as a stepping stone.

I stepped into Matt's hands, then put a knee on Xander's back, then my other knee on Matt's as he turned around.

"That's my eye," Xander groaned as I grabbed at his face, struggling to get my balance.

"Quit moving, Matt," I whispered.

"Sorry."

Danica grabbed Matt's shoulders to hold him steady, though she probably wasn't so steady herself. I grabbed the top of the fence with my gloved hands and started trying to hoist myself up.

Then a pair of strong hands landed on my butt cheeks and squeezed, lifting me up.

"That so better not be Dean..." I grumbled, although the move was effective. "Or Xander."

"It's me," Ash said. "Sorry." As he lifted me, I scrambled up; I was able to hike one leg over the top of the fence and hold on. He gave me a final shove and I was all the way up, kinda lying on the fence. I clung to the top of it like a koala.

I peered down at them all. "You know, scaling a fence is a lot harder than it was when I was like ten," I panted. I wiggled awkwardly on my stomach until I could get both legs over to the far side. "*Ouch*. I shouldn't have done this in a dress."

"You okay?" Danica whispered.

"I'm good. Here goes." I pushed off and let go, dropping down into Cary's yard. My feet hit sooner than I thought they would in the dark, and I fell awkwardly on my ass, sprawling on my back. "*Oof*."

I looked up to find Ash peering over the fence. "Taylor?"

"Yeah." I groaned, pushing myself up. "I'm good." I got to my feet, brushing myself off. Actually, I was kinda dirty and I'd scratched my leg, and if I wasn't semi-drunk that fall might've hurt more than it did. I gave him a thumbs up. "I'm going in," I whispered.

"Okay. Kick ass, woman." Ash's head disappeared.

"We love you, Taylor!" Danica whisper-shouted through the fence.

"Don't take no for an answer!" Xander said.

"And don't forget the balls!" Dean said.

"What?" Danica whispered.

"Dudes like their balls handled," Dean said. "Women overlook that."

"Christ, would you shut up?" Xander said.

“Letssgo!” Courteney hissed. “You’re all drunk.”

“We’re drunk?” Xander said. “You’re slurring, babe...”

Branches cracked and I heard them whispering to each other and laughing as they stumbled back through the trees. I wondered if they’d get lost in the neighbor’s yard and just end up flaking out on the patio, smoking up.

Fifty/fifty chance?

I sighed.

Then I looked up at Cary’s house. The light over the front door was on, but it was always on. The windows along the front of the house were all dark.

I went over to the control room window. The shades were drawn and the light seemed to be off.

So I went up to the front door and rang the bell like a maniac. Jab-jab-jab, jab-jab-jab. I could hear it ringing obnoxiously through the house.

When that didn’t work, I went around the house, knocking on every window I could reach. Loudly.

Then a terrible thought occurred to me.

What if he wasn’t even home?

And where the hell would he be if he wasn’t here?

And what if he’d gone to Bliss to fuck some rich lady who liked to be tied up and spanked and shit?

I mean, he could’ve tied me up and spanked me if that was what he was into.

Maybe I needed to tell him that?

Maybe I would. Once I finished giving him shit.

He’d called me up out of nowhere to ask me to come to this book interview with him—and that was grand. But seriously, were we leaving it at that? Were we not going to deal with *us* at all?

He’d left me hanging for *months*.

And then he called me up to invite me to escort him to an interview? To be his emotional support?

I could do that. I would do that.

But what about me and my emotions, and the total mess they’d been in ever since he booted me out the door?

*Not cool, Cary Clarke. Not cool.*

But hey, he was socially challenged. I knew that.

And that was why I was here right now. To school him on how a man should treat a woman. Because you don’t tell a woman you love her and then

the next day tell her to get lost. And then call her up months later to ask her for something, without even addressing the royal hike you'd told her to take, like it never happened.

Which was basically what he'd done to me.

I knocked on each window again, all the way back around the house. Then Freddy appeared, wandering up the driveway and sitting down on his butt to watch me.

"Hey, Freddy." I strode past him on my way to the front door. "What's up?"

Freddy didn't answer, because he was a cat.

I rounded the garage and stopped just short of climbing the front steps again. The front door was wide open, the lights on inside the foyer.

Cary was standing there, staring at me.

It was surreal. It felt just like the first time we'd ever laid eyes on each other. Except he wasn't a stranger anymore.

He was... *Cary*.

"What's going on?" he said, looking me over. "Are you okay?" And I realized I'd scared him.

"I'm fine," I said. Then I marched up the steps and stood in front of him. "I came to give you shit."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Oh. And this is a long time coming, buddy, so I hope you're ready for it because it's gonna be bad. You've been very, very mean, and it's not okay. And I have a thing or two to say about it, so..."

I trailed off. His warm, honey-colored eyes, like a melting sunset, were holding mine. And they looked so... warm. "So...?"

"So..." I drifted closer to him. "I... I came here to tell you, Cary Clarke..."

His gaze dropped to my lips. *Oh, fuck.*

"I... I'm gonna..."

I jumped on him. Like threw myself at him and latched on like a drunken koala, slamming my mouth to his. He caught me, a low, guttural groan in his throat as I plunged my tongue into his hot mouth. We made out like two starving alley cats fighting over a saucer of milk.

Then I wrenched myself away from him, panting.

"You... you promised me you'd talk to me when the album was done," I accused, my voice shaking as my whole body quivered from that frantic



mouth-to-mouth. “And it’s done, fucker.”

“Come inside.” He grabbed my wrist and tugged me through the door, but I resisted. A little.

When he kissed me again, I only kissed him back, but I didn’t moan or rub up on him. I shook with the effort of holding back as his hands slid up and down my back and his tongue swept against mine. He sucked on my bottom lip, left a trail of delicious kisses across my mouth, and a little moan slipped out.

“I’m mad at you.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He pressed kisses all over my face, and I let him. “Why is your leg scratched like that?”

“Oh. Uh... I scaled your fence.”

He looked at me, searching for signs of damage. “Are you really okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m a commando.”

“What?”

“Also... like a half dozen of your friends are out in your neighbor’s bushes, drunk.” I felt obligated to tell him, in case he gave a shit. “Do you want to invite them in?”

“No.”

“Good.” I kicked the door shut behind me and he pushed me up against it. His mouth molded to mine again, and I heard the thunk of the deadbolt sliding into place as he locked the door. “Take me upstairs,” I whispered between kisses. “To your bedroom.”

Cary pulled back and took a breath. He looked me in the eyes again, and all his pain and regret and relief was all over his beautiful face. The circles under his eyes spoke volumes. “I thought you were here to give me shit,” he said quietly. “You have every right to.”

“I know. But it’s different standing here... looking in your eyes.”

His expression softened, and I realized we were clinging to each other, his hands gripping my arms and mine gripping his. He felt it, too. We were holding onto each other like we’d been cast out to sea, together, clinging to our last life preserver.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Taylor,” he said, and my heart broke for him.

“I know.”

Then he took my hand and without another word, he led me upstairs to his bedroom. He switched on a lamp by the bed and turned to face me. We stood a few feet apart now, and neither of us made another move.

I looked carefully around.

“You know, I came up here, once,” I confessed. “Not long before you broke up with me. I wanted to see what was up here. I thought maybe I’d see something that explained to me who you were, or why you were the way you were.” I met his eyes again. “I didn’t find anything. It’s just a room.”

He didn’t say anything.

“It’s a nice room. Why don’t you use it?”

“I don’t know.” He took a breath and looked around. He shook his head a little. “There was a time... I could barely leave the studio downstairs. I guess I just got used to it. Even once I was venturing out more, into the yard, using the pool, telling myself I was okay... I never got back into the habit of coming up here or using the dining room, the living room. I just kept living in the studio.”

“You felt safe there,” I ventured.

“Yeah. I felt safe.”

“Because you make music there?”

“I guess so. I had control there.”

Yeah. That made sense.

I never really thought of it that way, but now... it became clear.

He was a master at music. The studio was filled with things he’d mastered. Musical instruments. The sound board in the control room.

Maybe anything beyond that space was uncharted territory. Even his own bedroom.

“You used to bring women up here?”

He hesitated, and I knew he was afraid of saying anything to make things worse. But it was just a simple question about his past, and it wasn’t a crime to have had a life before he met me. I’d never held that against him. I just wanted to know.

“Yeah,” he said.

I considered that. I was getting warm in my puffer jacket, so I slipped it off and set it on a chair. “I always wondered why you didn’t bring me up here.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and I could read his remorse all over him. “It wasn’t personal.”

“I actually thought you didn’t want me enough. That you pushed me away because you didn’t want me. But then I remembered how you told me you loved me. And I believed you.”

“It was the truth,” he said, his voice scratching.

I wandered over and stood in front of him, looking deep in his eyes. “Is it still the truth?”

“Yes.”

I held his gaze for a long moment, just letting that sink in. I could feel the truth of it warming my bones.

Then I leaned in, slowly, and brushed my lips to his. He kissed me back, just as slowly. We kissed and kissed, our lips brushing over one another’s as the heat rose between us and our bodies met.

“You make me feel like I’m whole,” he breathed, pressing his forehead to mine. His whole body was pressed to mine now. “Like I’m whole again.”

“You are whole, Cary.”

“I need you, though.”

“I need you, too.”

Then our lips collided and we didn’t speak again.

We undressed each other with a gentle, hurried desperation. Once we were naked, he laid me on the bed. He kissed me, slowly, all over my body until I was more than ready to take him. I was hungry, aching, drowning in my desire.

My cries as he swept his tongue over my pussy sounded like music in his sumptuous bedroom.

I wanted him to fuck me fast and hard. Possess me. Use me.

I wanted him to hold me down, so I could feel the ferocity of his desire.

I wanted him to *take* like he used to.

But when he thrust into me, a strange thing happened.

He seemed to abandon his control and everything just... flowed. Every touch. Every kiss. Every breath. It was like a perfect, rolling tide. Like silk rippling on water. Everywhere I ended and he began, every caress I reciprocated, every moan he echoed back to me.

We became one pulsing, living entity as we entwined.

Like it was always meant to be this way.

It was always meant to be *us*.

Together.

We moved together. We breathed together. We rolled together.

We even peaked together.

The intensity of everything I was feeling was only heightened knowing he was feeling the same thing. We held tight as the pleasure destroyed us both.

As it stripped us down, tore us apart, and fused us back together, naked and new. The pleasure and release and *trust* in each other's arms was our promise.

A new beginning. A clearing of the slate.

I'd forgive him anything if he'd just hold me like this forever.

He'd never shut me out again if I'd just keep him safe, deep inside me.

We gripped each other and whispered sweet words against one another's skin, kissing and holding each other long after we were both spent. He didn't even pull out.

We couldn't stand to let each other go.

*Why did he ever let me go?*

"I'm lost without you," he whispered against my neck.

"You were lost when I found you," I told him.

"Yeah. But this is a different kind of lost." He shifted his hips, finally pulling out. He looked into my eyes, settling on the pillow next to me with a deep sigh. "If I could never make music again, I'd be so fucking lost, I don't know if I'd ever find my way out of the dark again. I feel lost like that when you're gone, Taylor. I need you like I need the music."

I blew out a breath, trying to relax into this shift between us. We were together again, at least for now. We were talking. I was in his bed.

I'd wanted this moment, so bad. But now that it was here and he was saying the things I so needed him to say... I was still angry. I was still scared. I was still hurt.

"Then why did you send me away?" I asked him.

"Because I didn't want to hurt you."

"You are such an idiot."

He choked out a laugh. "Truer words have never been spoken."

"What did you really think would happen?" I propped myself up on my elbow, looking him in the eye. "I'd go merrily on my way like we never met? Like you'd never seared yourself right into my heart and possessed my soul? Like my whole world didn't rip right open when we fucked? Like I didn't love you?"

"I don't know," he said, at a loss. "I thought... I was keeping you out of harm's way."

"Out of *your* way?"

"Yes."

"And then what?"

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what did you think was going to happen next? You know, when I got over you, like, *Fuck that guy anyway*, and moved on?” I was joking, but he wasn’t amused.

“I really didn’t want to think about that.”

“But you did. Didn’t you? I move on without you, and then, what? I meet some other guy who treats me like crap? Pretends to be a nice guy, but then deceives me? I’ve been there before, and I can tell you, it harmed me.”

He shook his head. Clearly, he didn’t like hearing about that, but too fucking bad. It was true.

“Or maybe I meet a guy who does treat me well. Like gold. But guess what? He’s not *you*. He doesn’t understand my weird questions about mermaid sex or think it’s cute that I have a hole in my sock or think I’m worthy of being his music studio manager even though I’m woefully underqualified. *He’s. Not. You.*” My eyes sparked with hot tears. “And that means he could never be right enough for me. Because he doesn’t love me like you do. Is that what you want for me?”

His eyes gleamed with tears, too. “No.”

“You really think you can trust some random jerk to love me like you do?”

“No.”

“Then what the hell were you thinking all that time we were apart?”

He shook his head again. “I just... I kept thinking of you out there meeting other guys, and I fucking hated it. That wasn’t what I wanted, Taylor. But I knew it was my fault. I pushed you away. I kept thinking about all the time we spent together, how you made me laugh when I’d totally forgotten how. I was falling in love with you, early on, and I knew it. It terrified me. And I kept thinking about that. About how I felt when I was with you, before I fucked things up. So scared and so fucking happy. I actually tried to convince myself I’d done the right thing even though it felt so wrong. I knew I was wrong. You just wanted me to enjoy life, and I pushed you away. You made my life so much better than it was before I met you, I can’t even tell you. But I swore to myself I was doing the right thing. I was protecting you.”

I knew, when he said it—with such conviction and such pain, and such regretful, bleeding sorrow in his voice—that he meant it with impossible conviction. He’d really convinced himself that he was protecting me—from

himself.

“But you weren’t protecting me, Cary. You were hurting me.”

“Can you ever forgive me for that?”

“Yes.” I kissed his temple, his cheekbone, his lips. “Just please don’t ever do it again.”

He took a deep breath, looked me in the eye and promised me, “I won’t. I swear to you, Taylor. I won’t.”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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**Cary**

## Brother

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When Courteney opened the door and saw Taylor, a surprised smile lit up her face.

“Taylor! I didn’t know you were coming.” My sister’s gaze dropped to our hands—mine and Taylor’s, interconnected. Then she looked up at me.

“Hey, CC. I, uh, brought a friend.”

“I see that.”

“If it’s not okay...” Taylor started.

“Of course it’s okay.” Courteney opened her door wide for us. “Come in.”

We stepped into the condo she shared with Xander and she shut the door.

“Taylor’s here for moral support,” I told her, taking off my hat. “You know, interviews make me nervous.”

“I’m glad you’re both here.”

“I don’t want to get in the way...” Taylor said.

“You’re not in the way,” Courteney assured her.

She directed us into the living room, where she’d set out two glasses of water on the coffee table, with a box of Kleenex.

*Shit.* We were really doing this.

I looked around as we took off our coats. The condo was modern and clean, everything in shades of white, a little slate gray. Xander had owned this place for a few years, but I’d only been here for the first time about a month ago. It was as freakishly neat tonight as it was then, which I knew was Xander’s style.

“Where’s Xander?” I asked her.

“He’s out. He won’t be back. I asked him to make himself scarce while we do this.”

“Right.”

I sat down on the couch with Taylor as Courteney went to pour a third glass of water. She set it on the coffee table for Taylor, then hovered. “Do



you guys want a beer or anything? Coffee? Something to eat?”

“No, thanks,” I said. I was just hoping she wasn’t gonna be too nervous about this, because it was gonna make me nervous.

“I’m good,” Taylor said.

Finally Courteney sat down, in a chair facing me. “Should we get started? Or do you want to have some warm-up chat first?”

“I’m not very good at small talk. So we can get started. I want to get this over with.” I was looking around the apartment again, but then met her eyes. “Sorry. You know what I mean.”

“I understand.” My sister gave me a supportive smile. “I’m going to record this, so I get everything you say exactly right.” And just like that, she seemed to switch into professional mode. Kinda like when Taylor walked into the studio. She was in her element. I watched her set her iPhone carefully on the coffee table between us.

“Did I tell you I’m proud of you?” I asked her.

My sister actually looked startled. “Um, no. Not lately.”

“I read the book. It’s great.”

“Thank you.” She seemed unsure. “Do you really think so?”

“I do. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t, even if you are my sister.”

“I kinda figured that.”

“I’d be proud of anything you put your heart into, Court. But where Gabe is involved... I’m pretty selective on who I’ll talk to about him.”

“I know that. I just want to pay tribute to him. I want to make sure people remember him and they know why his life was important. And I can’t have that full story without hearing what he meant to you, in your words.”

I nodded, trying to swallow the emotion that rose up. I didn’t want to get too emotional about this. I’d always had a hard time with emotions. Rampant emotions were the gateway to Anxiety Land, and I was pretty fucking determined not to have a panic attack in the middle of this conversation, in front of the only two women I truly loved.

“Sure.”

*Breathe.*

Four in. Hold four. Four out...

“Are you sure you want me to be here?” Taylor asked quietly, and I met her eyes. “I can go. Or wait in the other room, if it’s better for you.”

“If you want to,” I said, and I took her hand. “But I want you to stay.”

She glanced at Courteney, then looked at me again and nodded. “Okay.

I'm here."

"Maybe you can start by telling me about Gabe when you guys were young," my sister said. "What was he like as a best friend?"

I drew one more deep breath and took a moment finding the right words. "He was like a brother to me," I said. And as soon as I started talking about it, the words just started to flow. It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. Maybe because I had the right audience. "I guess... I was like that for him, too, because he had no siblings. You weren't even born until I was fourteen, and I really couldn't take a baby on the back of my mountain bike or anything. So I was pretty much an only child growing up. By the time you could even play with me, so to speak, I was eighteen. I grew up with Gabe more than I grew up with you, which is too bad, in a way. I would've liked to have hung out with you more."

"You were a great big brother," Courteney said.

"I could've been around more."

"You always made time for me. You always made me feel special."

"You are special," I said simply.

She cocked her head a little, and I could see how she softened at that. My little sister loved me. I knew she did. She looked up to me, too.

*You're doing the right thing.*

*Just get through it.*

"Thank you," she said. "But this isn't about me, so I hope charming me with compliments isn't your play to get out of talking about Gabe."

I smiled a little. "No. We can talk about Gabe."

"So tell me more about growing up with him."

"We were pretty inseparable. We met when we were nine. He'd moved into the neighborhood, just a few blocks away. We met at the skateboarding park."

"I didn't know that."

"He was new in the neighborhood, but already making friends. He was there with some older guys, skateboarding. And there I was, sitting on the sidelines, just watching. He said hi to me and asked me if I wanted to use his skateboard. I didn't like doing things like that in front of so many people, so I said no."

"You had social anxiety, even back then?"

"I think so. I thought I was just shy. That was what all the adults said about me. They said I'd grow out of it. I remember I always felt like a freak,

though. I didn't like speaking up in school or playing sports. I didn't like people looking at me. It made me anxious. I knew I was different, that I wasn't normal. But I didn't know why. I didn't make friends easily because of it. I'd be invited to a birthday party or something and I'd feel sick and have to go home, or I wouldn't even make it there. I don't even know why Gabe hung out with me. I guess I was lucky I was the only kid his age at the park that day. Maybe that was why he gravitated toward me. But he didn't seem to notice that I was weird. Or it just didn't bother him."

"You guys had chemistry."

"Yeah. We were friends from that day on. It was summer, and when we found out he wasn't even registered in the same school as me that fall, we petitioned his parents to move him to my school, and they did it. They were always cool like that."

"I'm sure. They still are."

"Gabe loved his parents. That was one thing that always stood out to me. I mean, he really liked them. They hung out together all the time, listened to music, joked around, and it was just a totally different vibe than it was at our house."

"I can imagine," my sister said.

I studied her for a minute. I could see the pain and disappointment there, the resentment she felt toward Mom and Dad. I felt it, too. It was the one thing I regretted the most from the years after I'd left home—that I wasn't there to help her navigate the emotional minefield that was living in our parents' house.

But I had to get out of there, for my own mental health. I knew that already at eighteen.

"You know, the thing you have to understand about Mom and Dad," I told her, "is that they care about us and they think they know what's best for our family. But their priorities are just different from mine and yours. They always have been. Mom has struggled so much with her anxiety and she found her own way to cope. I don't think it was easy for her living with Dad. He had expectations of her she couldn't meet, and things were much harder for her when I was little. He used to leave for days at a time because he was pissed off at her."

"I didn't know that," Courteney said quietly.

"They probably didn't want you to know. They didn't want anyone to know. You know how they are. They're more concerned about what the

neighbors will think than anything else. Mom used to have these debilitating panic attacks, and it was so fucking tense in the house all the time. She wouldn't even leave the house for long stretches, and I'd be left to take care of her because Dad didn't want anything to do with it. Things were way worse before you were born."

"I'm sure they were," she said softly. "I always got that sense. And I'm sure that affected you."

"Yeah. But for Mom, things changed with medication. Drugs were the only thing that seemed to work for her. That's how she copes. And Dad... he was just never able to accept that I had some of the same issues that she did. He just wanted to go on with life and pretend everything was fine. He wanted to travel, so Mom had to be medicated so they could travel. It was that simple to them. When I went off my meds because I felt like they were doing more harm than good, they were so devastated. It was like they thought I'd given up or something. They thought I was suicidal because I didn't want to be on medication. They could never seem to understand the bad association I had with pills, because of what I'd been through."

"Because of Gabe."

"Yeah. Because of Gabe."

"Is it okay if I put all that in the book?"

"Yeah. You can put that in the book. I don't care if people know I took medication for my anxiety, or that I went off it. It's the truth. But maybe go easy on Mom and Dad. It's not worth making your relationship with them any worse."

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind," she said. "Tell me some more about when you were kids. You were saying how Gabe loved his parents, and how different it was at their house."

"Yeah. I spent a lot of time there. They had this rec room in the basement that was Gabe's hangout. We'd listen to music down there. That's where I learned to play guitar. I didn't even know I was gonna be a musician until Gabe put a guitar in my hand and basically told me so."

She smiled. "And what was it like, hanging out with him?"

"Fun. Gabe always knew where the party was, and he was always invited. People just liked him. He got along with everyone in school. The geeks. The jocks. Everyone. People just knew he'd do anything for them. He cared like that. I'm sure everyone says nice things about people they love after they die. But Gabe really was one of the good ones. He always found something to be

happy about. Life just filled him with awe. Where I was hesitant and kinda cynical, he was always game to jump into something new and just find out where it took us. He had a great laugh, too. The infectious kind, you know?”

“I remember.”

“He used to call you cutie-pie. Do you remember that?”

My sister’s eyes softened. I really hoped she wasn’t gonna cry at some point. “I do.”

“He used to say, when you were like three years old, ‘That girl’s gonna be gorgeous.’ He always thought you were so cute. And so smart. He’d do math with you.”

Courteney wrinkled her nose. “Math? Really?”

“Yeah. You’d practice your counting and he’d show you how to do addition and subtraction using marbles. And he’d try to teach you how to read music. He’d teach you the notes.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“It was right before you started kindergarten. Before we got so busy with everything else.”

“Wow.”

“He loved you like you were his own little sister.”

“I know.” She smiled again. “Did you know I had a crush on him?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but only for a minute. When I was like twelve.”

“Huh. How many more of my friends did you have a crush on?”

Taylor kinda snickered next to me.

“A few,” Courteney said, unapologetic. “But I knew they were all too old for me.”

“Good. What about Xander?”

“Nothing happened between me and Xander until I was eighteen, Cary.”

I considered that. “I hope so.”

“Were you worried about that?”

“I wondered.”

“Well, something probably would’ve happened when I was sixteen, if I’d had my way,” she admitted. “But Xander wasn’t having it.”

I rubbed my jaw. “Good to hear. We can move on.”

My sister smiled. “It still makes you uncomfortable.”

“No. As long as you’re happy and he takes care of you.”

“He does.”

“Good.”

“So tell me more about Gabe. You guys learned to play guitar together?”

“More or less. He started first and he got me into it. He gravitated toward bass and he wanted me to play guitar so we could join a band. So we did. We played in a whole bunch of local bands as kids. We started to get pretty good around seventeen or so.”

“You must’ve been the hottest ticket in your high school,” my sister teased.

“Something like that. We played all the school parties.”

“And when did you know you were going to become professional musicians?”

I thought about that. “I remember when we were about twenty, we’d been struggling in our band and we decided to break up. Gabe and I had written all this material and we were trying to put together a new band. We were crap at writing songs and actually finishing them at that point, but we had all these ideas. We wanted to make a demo and seriously pursue it, so we could quit our day jobs. He was working in a restaurant kitchen and I was detailing cars. We’d do anything back then just to keep enough money in our bank accounts to get us to the next show or to buy the equipment we needed. But there were a lot of musicians just like us, coming up in the scene. I don’t think we knew, back then, that we were actually going to make it.”

“And how did you find the right musicians to form a band with?”

“We didn’t, at first. There were a lot of false starts. When we were still in high school, we kept hearing about these guys, Jesse Mayes and Zane Traynor. I remember, there was all this buzz about these guys over in Dunbar. We felt like we were on the other side of the world in Kerrisdale.”

Courteney laughed. “You were practically neighbors.”

“Yeah. Gabe would’ve gone to high school with them if he hadn’t switched schools. And maybe he would’ve ended up in a band with them and never even met me.”

“Wow. Fate is crazy, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s that.” I thought back to that time, and how we’d taken so much of it for granted. We had no idea the things we were setting in motion. But kids never really did, right? “We ended up meeting Zane and Jesse a few times. But they were running in different circles. They had Brody managing them already and eventually he hooked them up with Elle Delacroix and Dylan Cope. Elle was only eighteen then, and when Gabe heard her play

bass, he was so jealous. He said something like, ‘She’s so hot, and fuck can she can *play*.’ He figured our chance at hooking up with Jesse and Zane was over at that point. I guess he was right. But Brody actually introduced us to some other guys we played with for a while.”

“You guys were actually almost part of Dirty?”

“I don’t think so. Elle and Dylan were the right fit for Jesse and Zane’s band. We jammed with them once, but I think Jesse and I would’ve conflicted too much on guitar. Back then, we were both trying to assert ourselves in a certain way and neither of us would’ve given up on lead. I think that’s the same issue they had when they were in negotiations with Johnny O’Reilly a few years back, before Seth Brothers rejoined their lineup. They wanted Johnny to slot into that rhythm guitar spot and leave all the lead to Jesse, and Johnny wouldn’t go for that. I wouldn’t have, either.”

“I really can’t see you playing second fiddle, or second guitar, to Jesse Mayes,” Courteney agreed. “But you and Ash... you seem to work well together.”

“Ash is more collaborative that way. He never wanted to be the lead guitarist in the strictest sense. He tends to lead more with his vocals. With the Players, he wanted the freedom to play the guitar or not, depending on the song. To play some lead, some rhythm, whatever felt right in the song. He’s versatile, and over the years I’ve become that way, too. So, we play the songs as we think they should sound. Sometimes it’s him doing a certain guitar part on a certain guitar, and if that’s lead and I need to cover the rhythm because that’s what’s best for the song, that’s what we do.”

“And you and Gabe were okay with missing out on Dirty?”

“Yeah. We knew we’d find our band. There were a lot of us back then, just coming out of our teens, trying to make it. And the cream naturally rises to the top, right? I knew a lot of musicians who never made it out of the local scene, or else they quit playing bands altogether by the time they were twenty-one and got a ‘real’ job. Those of us who were gonna go the distance, we all found our place, eventually.”

“You know, all the musicians I’ve interviewed for this book have talked about that period of time with such fondness. Even though, for most of them, that was before they made it big. Why is that?”

“It was just a special time. It was the late 2000’s, and the local scene was pretty exciting. I didn’t even know how special it was at the time, because I’d never experienced anything different. But I learned. There was this real return

to rock going on. Like the core of rock 'n' roll, with this modern edge. I think the Players encapsulate that perfectly right now. They have this hard rock/electronic fusion that's totally on point, and they've found their own sound within it."

"And what about the bands that came before the Players?" Courteney asked me. She was a great interviewer, actually. Had a lot of questions at the ready, kept things flowing to get at the information she wanted. I had a feeling, though, she'd eventually go there—to the hard questions.

"Well, before the Players, the Vancouver scene was already broiling over with talent. There was Ashley's other band, the Penny Pushers, who were more alternative rock. The Pushers had this Vancouver/Los Angeles fusion that brought a unique sound. Johnny O's band, Breakneck, have a more indie rock vibe, and they're kind of bicoastal, with a mix of guys from Vancouver and Toronto, so that also gives them a unique sound. Xander and Dean's band, Steel Trap, were straight-up hard rock. Our band, Alive, was hard rock but more sophisticated, I'd say, and more radio friendly. And of course Dirty basically became the best of what Vancouver produced at the time. They're definitely radio friendly, but they've developed their own sound that's basically hard rock mixed with so many different influences from classic rock to electronic."

"You think Dirty is the best band to come out of Vancouver this millennium? Like, better than Alive?"

"Definitely. We might've given them a run for their money, if we'd lasted long enough."

"What about before Dirty and Alive, and the other bands you just mentioned? I've read interviews where you talk about all the bands who came before, like it was important to you to get that into the conversation."

"I just think you can't pat newer bands like Dirty or Alive or the Players on the back like they're a totally unique phenomenon, and pretend no one else put in a lot of hard work before us. Including other bands who never get as much attention, and ones who did. Before we came along, in the late nineties and early 2000's, there were other bands doing alternative hard rock that was actually radio friendly, too. Theory of a Deadman, Matthew Good Band. It was actually Matthew Good Band that really inspired Gabe to pick up a guitar. We were like ten when *Underdogs* came out and it was all over the radio, and then a couple years later, they put out *Beautiful Midnight*, and Gabe just saw that band as a shining example of what we could do. Before



that, in the nineties, you had this wave of alternative and really grunge influenced rock because of our proximity to Seattle and everything that was coming out of that scene. Moist, Econoline Crush, Rymes with Orange. And it goes all the way back to the seventies with classic rock. Chilliwack, Trooper, Prism. And that's not even touching what was going on over the years in the punk scene, folk rock, hip hop, pop. And all the smaller indie stuff that doesn't get as much exposure. We were coming out of a scene that had a wealth of musical influences and history and just trying to get heard, get noticed, so we could break out of the local circuit. And then out of Canada, which not a lot of Canadian bands really do."

"You succeeded."

"Yeah. Somehow. Gabe had a lot to do with that."

"Tell me about that."

"Well, along the way, he'd started his podcast, *Alive at Five*, where he basically got to indulge his geek streak and also get us some attention. He interviewed musicians and technicians and road crew, anyone who was willing to talk to him about music. He'd make his own bass guitars from scratch in his garage. Whenever we weren't in the studio or playing gigs, he'd be in there working on one. He just loved working with his hands and experimenting with sound. He was a true innovator. And he worked really hard to get us heard. He sent our demos to radio stations and record companies. He got us to make our first indie music video and sent it to MTV, MuchMusic, and even got it played a bit, somehow. He booked our gigs. He was basically our promoter from day one. He even made our posters and shirts. It was Gabe who landed us our record deal with this major label out of Seattle. At least, it was major by our standards back then. We put out our first album and got booked on a tour, opening for a band out of San Francisco, and off we went. It was a quick summer tour, but we got a taste and that was it. We were hooked. At least, hooked on the idea of being professional musicians. We were barely making any money at that point, and probably the only reason we were able to keep going was because we were basically living in Gabe's parents' basement when we weren't on the road. But that wasn't a problem for us. We would've kept going like that forever if we just got to keep making music. But... I had issues with touring and performing, right from the start."

"You guys didn't stay with that band. Was that because of your issues with touring?"

“Yes and no. We had a lot of conflict on that tour. Some of it because of me and my stage fright. But there were other problems. Interpersonal conflicts. A lot of disagreement over the direction the band should take. Our lead singer came from this tiny mining town up north and he had a great voice but a real chip on his shoulder, like a small fish in a big pond trying too hard to make noise. He seemed to think it was more important to buy himself a new jet ski and disappear back home to get high with his old high school buddies, than invest what money we had in the band. That kind of thing. He butt heads with everyone, but when he started butting heads with Gabe, that was when I knew it wasn’t gonna last.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone got along with Gabe. And besides, Gabe was the heart of the band. He co-wrote the songs with me and he was basically driving the bus from day one. He literally drove the old van we toured in when we started out. He got our asses to every show. He held us together. It was his vision that we needed to follow, and I knew that.”

“Is it okay if I put all this in the book?” Courteney asked me. “Including your opinions on your former band members? And your stage fright?”

“Yeah. It’s all pretty public knowledge at this point. It is what it is.”

“And what is stage fright? In your words.”

I searched for the right words to describe what it was, in my experience. And I realized I’d never really described it to my sister before. I hadn’t described it to many people. Gabe. A few therapists. Xander, maybe.

“It’s this crippling fear. This kind of panic-induced paralysis that hits me when I know I have to perform. Onstage, mainly. Whenever there’s an audience. Interviews... those are hard, too.”

“You’re doing great with this one.”

“Because it’s you. And because Taylor’s here.”

Courteney looked at Taylor and smiled.

I didn’t look at her, but she gave my hand a little squeeze. I wasn’t sure I could handle looking in her eyes right now. Because I wasn’t sure I could handle whatever I’d see reflected back in them.

I just wanted to keep focused on the conversation, so I didn’t have to think about whatever she was thinking too much. Because I knew it would derail me.

“When was the first time you experienced stage fright?” Courteney asked me. “Do you remember?”

“Yeah. I was a teenager. I was about to perform for a real crowd for the first time, onstage, in the school gym. I got so nervous, I felt sick. I had this pins and needles feeling in my fingers, and I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to play the guitar. My bones felt like jelly. I thought I was going to faint, but I didn’t. Gabe coaxed me out onstage somehow, and once I was playing it was okay. I got through it. But I avoided performing again for a long while.”

“Gabe helped you get onstage a lot, right?”

“Yeah. He was like my security blanket.” I laughed a little. It was stupid, but it was true. I leaned on him so much. Too much. “He’d come with me everywhere. If there was any kind of camera or stage or interview involved, he was there, so I could get through it.”

“And did the stage fright ever get better, or just worse?”

“It got worse the bigger the audiences got, but I didn’t think it was abnormal. Or maybe I didn’t want to see it that way. I figured everyone had some level of nerves before going onstage. And that was what everyone told me. I just kept coping by leaning on Gabe, and it seemed normal enough to drink or get high backstage. That was pretty fucking common before a show. I’d do whatever I had to do to get through the show. I’d play facing our drummer sometimes, turn my back on the audience. And my commitment to the music, to the band, helped me focus on what I needed to get done, get through it somehow.”

“Then you came back from the tour and the band broke up.”

“Yeah. Gabe and I decided to go our own way. We were dropped from our label, but we decided to put together a new band and go back into the studio as soon as possible, just keep going. Gabe put out calls for musicians to audition for us, and as it turned out, everyone knew who we were by then. We’d had some real success, and people wanted to play with us. We held a bunch of auditions, and that was how we found Xander and Dean.”

“Can you tell the story of how you guys named the band Alive?”

“It was just something Gabe came up with.”

“Really? When I interviewed Dean, he said it was your idea.”

“No. It was Gabe. Actually, Dean might not even know the whole story.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

“Okay. Gabe once said to me, when we were fourteen and actually starting to get good on guitar, ‘This is my favorite day that I’ve ever been alive.’ We were in his basement doing nothing at all, just lying around listening to music, like any other day. But he was learning a song on guitar. It

was Neil Young's 'Heart of Gold.' And that was what he said. 'This is my favorite day that I've ever been alive.' The way he said it, with this innocent wonder... even then, it struck me how charming it was. I remember making fun of him. 'You've had other lives?' And he just said, 'I don't know. But this one is the best.' Years later, when we were putting the band together, I remembered that conversation. Plus, he had his podcast called *Alive at Five*. So it just seemed natural. We decided to call the band *Alive*, and that was it."

"This is my favorite day that I've ever been alive," Courteney repeated. "I didn't know he said that. But I love that he said that about such an uneventful day."

"Yeah. That was Gabe. But he ended up repeating those words a lot, years later."

"Tell me about *Alive*. You know, a lot of people wanted more from that band."

"We would've liked to give it to them."

"What was it like, being in the band with Gabe, Xander and Dean?"

"It was incredible, for the most part. We were really cohesive and everyone not only fit into their slot but we all seemed to bloom together. That's what happens when you've got the right fit. Me and Gabe wrote a bunch of songs, excited about the new lineup. We just wanted to get out on tour again, have another chance. We cut a demo and played in the local scene as much as we could. We had a booking agent at that point who kept us busy. And before the end of the year, we'd been picked up by a major label again. We recorded our album, *Stand and Fall*, and then we were touring again. We opened for a few other bands, including *Dirty* for a short stretch in Europe. But along the way, we started headlining our own shows, too. We'd had three hit singles off the album and we were getting really big, especially in the US. So, we were headlining a tour down the east coast..." I thought about that time, lost in the memory for a moment. "We were twenty-eight, Gabe and me. I guess Xander would've been twenty-six. Dean was twenty-seven. Fuck, we were young."

"That was only five years ago," Courteney pointed out.

"I feel much older now."

"How was touring for you at that time?" she asked me gently, because we both knew what was coming.

"It was better, because it was more comfortable. Better hotels, better tour buses. But better drugs, too. I was on several different prescription drugs just

to get through the day. My anxiety just seemed to increase with the size of the tour, the crowds, the daily demands, but I was in a bit of a fog. I actually had my first hardcore panic attack on the Alive tour when I tried going off my meds. It was triggered by stage fright, right before a show. And that was how it rolled out. I started having panic attacks sporadically, always in response to bad anxiety before a show. We were late going onstage sometimes because of it. And I just leaned harder on my crutches to get through it. Substances. Obsession with my work. But Gabe was my rock. And him and me and Xander had gotten really tight. So it wasn't all bad. I was having fun, offstage, and onstage, too. It was the getting out on the stage part that was always hardest. The anxiety that preceded a performance."

"What about Dean?"

"Dean was more out in left field, doing his own thing. We were close, but he had an ego that was hard to get near sometimes. I once read that Eddie Van Halen called that *lead singer's disease*, and unfortunately Dean Slater was afflicted with it. But we didn't have any major problems, just minor conflicts, the kind that you might have on tour with any group of people who were constantly together. We all had each other's backs, in the end..."

I faded off with those words. *In the end.*

"Then Gabe died and the tour ended," Courteney said gently.

"Yeah."

"Was there ever any discussion between you and Xander and Dean about carrying on with a new bassist?"

"No. No one even suggested it. At least, no one suggested it to me. Not that I recall. They encouraged me to keep working, I remember that. Xander asked me to form a new band with him. But I didn't want to. I wasn't ready. I could barely even function in those first few months. I was so deep in grief. I think I was in shock, really. So him and Dean formed Steel Trap and they cut an album and went on tour, like musicians do. They went on with their lives. And that was good."

"And what about you?"

"I just couldn't."

"Why?"

I took a deep breath. "I don't know what to tell you. I was traumatized. I've never felt anything like that before or since. It wasn't just pain. It was shock and anger and shame and guilt and so many things at once, I drowned in it. I had a very bad, very public panic attack the day Gabe died. I was

hospitalized overnight. And I guess I went into a kind of stupor. I can't even remember the next few days or so. It's just gone. Xander and Liam brought me home. I don't even remember that. I guess I basically had a nervous breakdown, so to speak. I've been told that's not really a medical term, but I don't know how else to describe it. I didn't leave the house. I basically ceased to function. I remember, at one point, waking up in the hospital again." I studied my sister's face. She was listening closely, without judgment. "Xander told me that you found me on the floor of the studio, passed out. They said I probably fainted from another panic attack."

"Yeah. That was my worst day, I think," she said quietly. "Worse than when Gabe died. Because I actually thought you might die."

I didn't say anything. I didn't know what to say

It was kind of unforgivable, that I'd done that to her.

"It was a really sleepless night," she went on. "I remember the people at the hospital said you were fine. They just wanted to keep you to monitor you. And I couldn't believe they used those words. *He's fine*. Like if you weren't bleeding out or having a heart attack or something you were okay."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to deal with that."

"I remember talking to Mom and Dad. I was only fourteen, you know? I begged them to get you some help. I heard Mom telling the doctors you were just exhausted from touring, and sad because your friend died. They didn't want to take it seriously. They were never willing to accept that you were seriously in need of help. They just told me you were in mourning, like I was too young to understand what that was. They said that it was natural, that you just 'needed time' and you'd be fine."

"I'm sorry, Courteney."

"It's not your fault," she said. But I knew it was. "Tell me about what happened after that. How did you cope with everything?"

"I didn't, really," I admitted, because she knew that was the sad truth. "Some of my friends, especially Xander and Dean, kept coming around for a while. Checking in on me. They kept trying to get me to come back to work. I wasn't ready for that. But I started trying to act 'normal' when they came around, so they'd think I was okay. Meanwhile, Mom and Dad seemed totally confused that I hadn't reemerged into life again. They started trying to 'fix' me by dropping in with bad advice and expectations I couldn't meet, and just making things worse. So I had to make normal for them, too. I did it for you, because I didn't want you to worry. I did it for everyone. I hired Rose to

clean my house and I even did it for her. I guess because of the breakdown, all the public scrutiny and the negative attention, and my self-imposed isolation, I'd let myself become ruled by this intense fear of having another panic attack in public, or in front of anyone. I self-managed by keeping myself shut away in my house. That was how I developed agoraphobia. I just didn't know what it was."

"What did you think it was?"

"I don't know. I guess I tried not to think about it. I just had this intense fear of leaving my home, my safe place, because I was so afraid of losing control and having a panic attack in public. That's like, textbook agoraphobia, I guess. I had no idea, though. At that point, I wasn't diagnosed because I wasn't talking to anyone. I wasn't seeking any help. So it went untreated for a long time."

"When did that change?"

"I had another panic attack, while I was at home, alone, and it was fucking terrifying. And I just knew I couldn't go on like that anymore, so ruled by my fears. So I sought therapy for the first time."

"Do you want to talk about your diagnosis?" my sister asked.

"I was diagnosed with agoraphobia, which is an anxiety disorder. Also performance anxiety, a type of social anxiety disorder that was specific to my performance. And I had panic attacks associated with my performance anxiety. With a smattering of depressive tendencies, a drop of PTSD and a dash of codependency... all kinds of interwoven shit. The doctors I saw, there were several over the years... they said my agoraphobia was likely caused by a bunch of factors. Anxiety disorders can run in families, and Mom has diagnosed social anxiety. The buildup of stress as my career built was also a factor, and already having performance anxiety. And the trigger of excessive anxiety when Gabe died. Responding to the panic attacks with fear and avoidance just made it worse. Avoidance was a big problem for me. I started lying to myself. Or maybe I'd done that all along. And I lied to other people, too. People I cared about." I squeezed Taylor's hand, hoping she knew that I was trying to apologize for the time she asked me about my agoraphobia, and I told her that I wasn't agoraphobic. "It was one of the ways I tried to cope."

"It's understandable," Courteney said. "You were afraid of being judged. You were judged when Gabe died."

"Yeah."

“What kinds of things were you afraid of besides leaving the house?”

“Crowds. Enclosed spaces, when they’re crowded. I got overwhelmed so easily. Just the thought of walking into a concert venue again made me feel sick. Sometimes, when I was about to go onstage and a panic attack hit, I was sure something terrible was going to happen. There was no other way I could justify how bad I felt. I thought I was going to die. And then when Gabe died... Every time I started to panic, I was overwhelmed with this fear that something would happen to someone I loved. Because that did happen.”

“I’m sorry, Cary,” my sister said. “I don’t think even I understood how bad it was for you. I tried.”

“I know you did. But maybe another person would’ve coped with everything better than I did. I couldn’t really cope, because I hadn’t dealt with the anxiety. There were times when I even wondered if I *let* the anxiety go unchecked so it would take over, and I wouldn’t have to face what happened to Gabe. Maybe I *wanted* to drown in it.”

Courteney said nothing. I could see the tears in her eyes now. I was barely hanging on myself.

But I was determined not to cry today. I just wanted to get the words out.

It was an unburdening, maybe. I was trying to release the anchor. And maybe I hoped that after this conversation, I could finally stop drowning.

“The thing with an anxiety disorder like this,” I said, “is that the fear is way out of proportion to the actual danger in the situation, which often doesn’t even exist. But the physical cues in your body, the terror you feel, is so real to you in the moment, it overrides rationality. To cope, you either avoid those situations where you think you might be triggered, or you need someone to go with you, someone you can trust, to lean on, like I did with Gabe. And your world gets smaller and smaller the more you avoid. The thing about treatment is that you pretty much have to face your fears. And that’s been hard for me to do.”

“Because it’s so tied to Gabe?”

“Yeah. That whole situation.” I took a breath, because I knew we were getting close. Would I really be able to talk about it? “It’s hard for me to revisit it,” I admitted, though I knew both Courteney and Taylor knew that by now. “Therapy and healing, for me, has been kind of an on-and-off thing. One step forward, two steps back. An uphill battle, I guess.”

“But you eventually kept working,” my sister said. “Professionally, you did well for yourself. You started producing other bands.”



“Yeah. Eventually. I started working in my home studio, just tinkering around, and then it grew from there. I think that saved me. Music saved me.”

“And the rest is history,” Courteney said with a small smile, “paved in platinum albums.”

“I guess you could say that.”

“Do you want to talk about his death at all?” she asked me gently. “How it happened? You don’t have to.”

“I don’t know, Courteney.”

“When I interviewed Gabe’s parents,” she said, “they wanted to talk about it. They told me afterward that they were glad they did. That it was helpful. A lot of people lost him that day, Cary. And when you put your experience into words, it can help.”

Damn. She was wise for a little sister.

“What do you want to know?” I asked her. It was just her. I focused on her, and Taylor. They were the only ones listening to this right now.

“What happened that day, from your point of view?” Courteney asked me.

“It’s not something I like to think about.”

“Do you ever think about him?”

“Of course,” I said. “Every day.” My fingers started tapping involuntarily on the arm of the couch. I tried to breathe slow and deep.

“Do you remember the last time you saw him?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not going to ask you about the pills, Cary,” she assured me. “You’ve been asked about it enough. It’s public knowledge that the sleeping pills were prescribed to you and you admitted that you gave them to him. I have all the facts in the book. But what I don’t have is your point of view.”

I was silent for a moment, gathering my thoughts. Trying to remember that day, as objectively as I could.

“The tour was bigger than we expected,” I started. “Everything was bigger than we expected, including the pressure we were under and the intensity of the schedule. We were overworked. Overstressed. I don’t think we had good enough management, people watching our backs, making the right decisions for us, and we were probably afraid of complaining and rocking the boat too much, losing everything. We’d already had so many band breakups. We’d already been dropped from a label. We didn’t know how many chances we were gonna get, and here we’d hit the big time, so

fast. We were afraid of capsizing. We were just trying to stay afloat. We were coping in all the ways we knew how to cope, and we didn't have many. Alcohol. Drugs." I went silent for a moment, and Courteney waited for me to go on. "I just wanted him to get some sleep that day. That was all I wanted."

"You went to do an interview for him so he could sleep," she supplied.

"Yeah. Me and Dean. And partway through the interview, we got interrupted. Our tour manager was with us and he got the call. Someone had called in a bomb threat at the hotel. We didn't even know if we could take it seriously. We cut the interview short and headed back to see what was going on, and Dean even slept in the car. But I had a bad feeling. I was so used to feeling anxiety back then, though, and I was medicated. I couldn't distinguish one bad feeling from another. I figured I was just anxious because I knew Gabe was at the hotel, plus a lot of our team was there. But we were in contact with some of them, and everyone seemed to be accounted for. The bomb threat turned out to be bullshit, as you know. We'd had a bomb threat at the hotel we stayed at a few days prior, in the next city over. We didn't know it at the time, but it turned out we had this crazy fan, this guy named Joseph Fetterman."

"It's in the book," Courteney said. "You don't have to say much about him."

"I don't know much about him," I said. "He'd called in both bomb threats. At the trial, he said he did it because he wanted to meet us. Me, actually. He said he wanted to meet me." Fuck, that still stuck in my throat. I tried to swallow past it, but it was hard to do. "He tried to get the hotel evacuated. I guess he thought we'd come running outside, and that would be his chance to get an autograph?" I laughed darkly, because it still made me fucking angry. "When that didn't work, he set a fire."

All trace of humor left me, and I went silent.

"Do you want to keep going?" my sister asked me after a moment.

"Yeah. I'm okay."

I wasn't okay. Some psycho killed my best friend, and it was my fault. Even though the court held Fetterman legally responsible for Gabe's death, and he died in prison a year ago, I knew Gabe's death was on me.

How would I ever be okay?

I cleared my throat a little. "It wasn't until we got back to the hotel and connected with our crew that we realized Gabe was missing. Some people thought he was with us. Other people thought he was somewhere else.

They'd checked his room and he wasn't there. The police and hotel management went door to door clearing people out, but they didn't make it to my room before they had to evacuate because of the fire. Or so they said." I met Courteney's eyes. "I guess whatever they said is all in the court documents."

"It's okay. I'm not worried about that right now. Just tell me your truth."

"The truth is someone fucked up. Or maybe a whole lot of people fucked up, including Gabe." *But mostly me.* "And he died because of it."

"At his memorial service, you said you were broken."

"I was."

"I know it was hard for you, afterwards. To put yourself back together. Some people wouldn't have even been able to do that, Cary."

I looked away from the sympathy in my sister's eyes. "It was the hardest thing I've ever experienced. There were times when I felt like I'd died. But there was no relief. No peace."

"What's it like now?" she asked.

"I have dreams of water all the time."

That was all I said. Then I went silent again.

Courteney waited for me to go on.

Next to me, Taylor stirred. She squeezed my hand, gently. I wanted to look at her, but I couldn't.

I looked at my sister instead. "Did I ever tell you that?"

"No. You didn't tell me."

"I dream about Gabe drowning in that bathtub. I don't know why. He didn't drown. There was no water. They said he didn't wake up because of the sleeping pills."

"I know, Cary," she said softly.

"The smoke from the fire killed him. He didn't even run water in the bath. They said he was still in his clothes, lying in the empty bathtub, like he'd laid down to go to sleep. Why would he do that?"

Courteney just shook her head a little, her eyes shining with tears. Clearly, she had no answers. Neither of us did.

"The fire never touched him," I said. "It was the smoke that killed him. And all I dream about is water. I dream about him drowning."

Courteney listened, and when I said nothing else, she asked me, "Do you feel like you're still broken?"

"I think I'll always be broken. But that's not Gabe's fault." I realized my

fingers were still tapping restlessly on the couch, and I stopped myself. “Can you not put that in the book? All that stuff about the water?”

“Okay,” she said softly. “I won’t put that in the book.”

I nodded. Then I just sat there in silence for a long moment. Courteney waited patiently. She didn’t take her eyes off of me.

“Did you know that he couldn’t swim?”

“I didn’t know that,” she said.

“I always thought I dreamed of him drowning because I feel guilty that I can’t save him. One of my therapists said maybe I’m trying to rewrite the event. If he drowned because he couldn’t swim, it’s not my fault anymore. It wasn’t the pills.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Cary,” my sister said softly.

I blinked a couple of times, bringing her back into focus.

Then I glanced at Taylor, but the look in her deep-sea eyes almost killed me, so I had to look away. I raked my hand through my hair. “I don’t think I have anything else to say.”

“That’s okay,” Courteney said.

I got to my feet, and my sister did the same. She walked over and hugged me tight. I buried my face in her hair.

“I’m sorry, Court,” I whispered.

“It’s okay, Cary. You know he’d forgive you, if he could.”

“Yeah,” I said, after a moment. “If he could.”

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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**Cary**

## Low

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“Just a few... more... steps.”

I led Taylor into my dining room with her hands over her eyes. She was wearing my cheesy, Dean Slater *Born Like This* T-shirt—her choice—and her panties, and nothing else. I’d turned on the gas fireplace to warm the room up for her; until this morning, I hadn’t turned it on or even stepped foot in this room, probably, in years.

“Okay,” I told her, standing her at the head of the table. “You can look.”

She dropped her hands. “What! This is awesome!” She stared, open-mouthed, at the spread on the table.

I’d set the table for two, with the good dishes, the ones my mom gave me when I bought this place and I never used. They were pretty, and I thought Taylor would like them. I’d put out toast and jam, eggs and bacon, some olives and hummus and whatever else I could find in the kitchen that seemed good for brunch.

I knew she liked white wine, so I’d poured her a glass.

There was also a big bouquet of pink and black lilies in a vase as the centerpiece. I’d had Liam pick the flowers up for her yesterday, after the interview, when I realized I should’ve gotten her something for her birthday. I’d wrestled with that a lot.

On one hand, I wanted to get her a birthday gift.

On the other hand, I hated doing anything that might remind her of what happened on *my* birthday.

“I would’ve set this up outside, by the pool,” I told her. “But it’s November. Figured it would be more cozy in here.”

Taylor turned her awed gaze on me. “It’s amazing.”

“Happy birthday,” I said, but my eyes darted away when her eyes seemed to melt.

“Thank you, Cary.”

“It’s just a quick surprise brunch I whipped up. I didn’t exactly know I’d

be waking up in bed next to you again this morning.” I pulled out her chair and she sat down.

I sat down across the corner of the table from her. Close enough to touch her. I also didn’t know she’d be spending most of yesterday, other than the interview at my sister’s place, in my bed. But I wasn’t complaining. Figured I could at least feed her before we ended up back there again.

I watched her fawn over the food. “Almond stuffed olives! My favorite.”

“I know. You left them behind when you moved out.”

She looked at me. Her eyes softened again.

I started filling my plate and she did the same.

“Your hair looks nice.” I wasn’t sure if I’d actually mentioned that yet, during the many hours of telling her how beautiful she was and how much I’d missed her and what an asshole I’d been while we made out.

“Thank you. I got tired of upkeeping the pink.” She ran her fingers through the blonde strands.

“This is your natural color?”

“Not exactly. This is lighter than my natural. I’ll let it grow out now, maybe, let the natural take over. I don’t know. I figure at some point I’ll start going gray anyway, so I should get used to going lighter. I want to make sure I can pull off silver fox.” She waggled her eyebrows at me and popped an olive in her mouth.

“I think you’ve got a long time to go before the silver fox years kick in.”

“Not that long. I found a gray hair just the other day. I named it Cary.” She took a sip of her wine and smiled at me. “Then I plucked it out.”

“Funny.”

“The flowers are gorgeous,” she said, sounding suspicious. “Since when do you have flowers in your house?”

“They’re for you.”

“You picked them from the neighbor’s garden this morning?” she teased.

“I bought them at a florist. Yesterday.” I darted a glance at her. “Well, Liam did. I wasn’t sure what to get you. I wasn’t really sure if I should get you anything. So I went with flowers. The black lilies are kinda rare, I guess. I thought you might like them.”

“I love them.”

“And I wanted to thank you again for coming with me to the interview.”

“Of course,” she said gently. “Anytime.”

“I guess that was pretty fucking self-centered of me. Some birthday

present, huh?”

She smiled a little. “It was a good present.”

“I guess it was my way of trying to let you in on some of the stuff that’s hard for me to tell you directly.”

“I get that.”

“And I know the flowers and meal aren’t much. I just didn’t want to do anything over the top. I didn’t want you to think I was trying to buy you back or something.”

“Cary... There’s something you need to understand,” she said.

“Uh-oh. I know that tone. Is this another one of your confessions coming?” I was teasing, but half-scared that it was.

“Maybe?” she said.

“Did you make out with Matt again?”

“Actually... no, but I made out with Johnny O’Reilly. That’s not what I was gonna say, though.”

I stared at her.

“Uh, it was nothing. It was drunk. It was brief. It’ll never happen again.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath, knowing I deserved much worse than a brief, drunken moment with Johnny O. Much, much worse.

And anyway, I’d asked.

“Anyone else?”

“No,” she said. “You?”

“No.”

“Bliss?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I was too busy with the album. And... I’m in love with you.”

Her shoulders softened as she gazed at me. Then she cringed. “Did I mention I was really, really drunk when that thing happened with Johnny O...?”

“Let’s forget it.”

“Okay. Let’s.” She sipped her wine.

“You didn’t tell me your confession yet. Should I lie down?”

She smiled a little. “No. I promise it doesn’t involve another man.”

“Good.”

“I just wanted you to know... All that money you paid me? It’s still sitting in my bank account. I haven’t touched any of it. I actually want to give



some of it back to you. I didn't work for you for the full six months."

"You don't have to give it back, Taylor. It was my fault. If I hadn't freaked out on you like I did—"

"It doesn't matter. I didn't finish the job, so I'm not taking all the money. I'll accept pay for every day that I worked for you, but that's it. The thing is... I have my own money."

"I know you do. I never meant to insult you."

"You didn't. I totally understand now why you did it. You were afraid that something bad could happen. Something like what happened on your birthday. And if you couldn't handle things and you pushed me away, you couldn't stand that it would hurt me. So maybe you convinced yourself that paying me upfront would protect me?"

"Yeah. Maybe something like that."

"But it didn't protect me, Cary. I got hurt."

"I know that now."

"I really don't care about the money. And I don't need it. That's what I'm trying to tell you." She took a breath and added, "I have almost a million dollars in the bank."

I stared at her as she nibbled on an olive. "You do?"

"Yes." She sighed. "After my grandma died, just before my parents left Vancouver, they sold my grandparents' house. Like I told you, it was big and old, but it was on a large corner lot not far from the beach, and the property was bought up by a developer for almost three million, to be re-developed into townhouses."

"Wow. Not bad."

"Yeah. It was in my grandmother's will that the house was to be sold and all the money from the sale was to be split three ways between my parents, my sister and me. Because I was underage, my share was put into a trust fund for me, for when I turned nineteen. I could've stayed with my parents until then, and then lived off the money, but I didn't. I left them, like I told you, to come back to Vancouver, when I was barely eighteen. I basically clawed my way through a college program while living with five roommates and eating ramen and waiting tables. On my nineteenth birthday, I got this weird phone call from my mom. My parents and my sister were in town, and they wanted to see me. I literally hadn't heard from them since I left them in Ontario almost a year before. I met with them at a restaurant, and they eventually confessed to me that they'd blown through all their money and now they

wanted some of mine.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. They took me to the bank and I gave them twenty thousand, and they were gone by nightfall. They came back a month later asking for more. I gave them another ten, and the next time they came back, I cut them off, and they basically haven’t spoken to me since.”

“I’m sorry, Taylor. That’s fucking terrible.”

“Well, what can I say. They’re kind of terrible people.” She tried to make light of it with a small smile, but obviously, it hurt her. “Other than the thirty grand I gave them, I haven’t even touched that money. I finished my college program while living with those five roommates and eating ramen, and waiting tables. And then I got my first executive assistant job, and a few months later, when I felt secure enough with my paycheck, I moved into my own apartment. It’s not exactly much, but it’s mine. I’ve been really careful, really thrifty with my money, because I want to live off what I make, live within my means, and I want that money from my grandparents to last. It’s my nest egg. It’s not even enough to buy and upkeep a nice house in Vancouver, which is the sad part. But it’s enough to keep me feeling secure while I try to figure out my life. I never wanted to be an executive assistant for the rest of my life, Cary. But it’s given me the opportunity to work with really successful people in all kinds of industries, and I hoped that along the way I’d find where I belonged. I just wanted to be self-sufficient, no matter how hard it was. And I found my place in the music industry. That couldn’t have happened without you.”

“That’s incredible, Taylor. You should be proud.”

“I am.” She grinned, and I loved that confidence she had. That spark. That thing I’d felt the first time I met her. “I love working with Dirty. Brody and Maggie have been really amazing to me.”

“That’s because you work hard and you’re great at your job. They need people like you who are there to get things done, not just party with the band. You’re more valuable than you know.”

“I figured that much. After being to about a billion industry parties this year, I truly get that. The people around Dirty party hard, but the closer you get to the band, the harder people work. And the band members party hard, but they work much harder. I really can’t wait for the tour... I’m hoping they invite me to go with them.” She paused, maybe considering what she’d just said. “But even if I’m back here in Vancouver, I’m sure Brody will have

work for me.”

“I hope you get everything you want, Taylor.” I said it, even though it was gonna kill me if she went on tour with a band.

And left me.

“I will. For the first time in my life, I really feel like I will. I know the money I have in the bank isn’t exactly Cary Clarke money, and I’m not a rock star, but I’m becoming the most kick-ass version of Taylor there is. And I know I’ll be okay.”

“Of course you will.”

We ate in silence for a moment. I didn’t really know where this day or this morning or this conversation was going to go. I just wanted to make her brunch. Give her her flowers. Find out if she was okay.

I wanted to be near her.

But there were so many things I could feel her wanting to ask me. So many things she wanted me to say.

Did she want me to ask her not to go on tour with Dirty? To come work with me again? To move back in?

I was afraid to ask her for those things. To ask her for anything... and then fall apart on her.

“I’m just gonna ask you, Cary,” she said, after a long moment. She took a sip of her wine, then looked me right in the eye. “I’m weary of being afraid to ask you things because I’m afraid of the answer, or I’m afraid you won’t answer me at all. So here goes. Is there any chance you would join the Players and tour with them?”

I took a sip of my water and cleared my throat. “I don’t know, Taylor. I wish I could tell you what you want to hear. I wish I could tell them what they want to hear. But my answer is pretty much the same. I can barely leave the house. I don’t see how I could ever go on tour.”

I expected her to agree with me, maybe, but I really shouldn’t have been surprised when she didn’t. “That’s just not true.”

“Which part?”

She shook her head a little, studying me. “You know, when you say you barely leave the house, you sound like I must sound to my friends when I complain to them that I don’t have enough money to buy a house in Vancouver. They look at me like I’m a fucking dumbass who has almost a million in the bank and is still complaining. Do you get that? I’m practically a millionaire, technically, but I feel poor because I live in a city where real

estate is expensive.”

“It’s not the same thing, Taylor.”

“Oh yes, it is. It’s just how you look at it. How you *choose* to look at it. And if you really think that you ‘never leave the house,’ then I think maybe you’re a dumbass who just produced an album—down at Little Black Hole, *not* in your house—with a band who are probably going to be the next hottest thing in rock music, and you’re still looking at yourself like nothing has changed.”

“I’m not sure it has.”

Taylor slipped her hand over mine on the table.

“In case I’ve never said this out loud before,” she said, “I believe in you, Cary. I want to support you any way I can. Please tell me. What is it you need from me? What can I do?”

I took a deep breath and tried to answer that question as honestly as I could. I’d been afraid to ask her for so many things I wanted. But where had that gotten either of us?

“I just need you to be here for me. Support me without pressuring me.”

“Okay,” she said softly. “I can do that.”

And I wanted to believe her. But many, many people in my life had told me they could do that, then let me down.

“Eat,” I said.

“Hmm.” She plucked an olive off her plate. “Still bossy. Glad to see you haven’t lost your edge.” Her gaze drifted down my bare chest. I was wearing sweats and that was about it, and her eyes flirted with me. “I promise, I’ll do my best on the no-pressure thing. Maybe you can tell me if this is supportive or not.” She got up and walked away. I watched her go, my eyes drifting down to her naked thighs. She glanced back over her shoulder, catching me checking her out, and smiled.

I sat back in my chair, waiting for her. I was just about to go after her, when she came back, papers in hand.

“I did a bunch of research,” she said, plunking down in her chair, “about your anxiety disorder.” Her eyes met mine and held.

“When?”

“Last night, while you were sleeping.” She shrugged. “I couldn’t sleep. And everything you said in the interview was fresh in my mind. I needed to act on it.” She unfolded her papers. “I found all types of therapy that can potentially help. I know you’ve struggled in and out of conventional therapy.

I know you've been talking to a therapist again. But maybe it's best not to put all your eggs in one basket, and be open to trying other things? This sounded interesting, and it might just be right up an eccentric rock star's alley... Have you ever heard of equine therapy?"

"No."

"Well, it's where you basically hang out with a horse. A woman came into the shelter this summer to adopt a rescue dog, and she mentioned that she had a stable and a couple of therapy horses. That was the first time I heard of it, and last night I remembered and I looked it up. Apparently it can be really effective in treating anxiety. Horses are super sensitive, and they pick up on whatever energy you're giving off. So you have to master control of yourself to be able to guide the horse." She blinked at me expectantly.

I didn't even know what to say.

"Have you ever rode a horse?" she asked me.

"No."

"Me neither. But if it's something you'd be interested in trying... there are a bunch of places in and around Vancouver that offer it. There are a couple down in Southlands, right here in the city, you know, where all the stables are? And there are a bunch of others just outside the city." She held the papers out to me. "Maybe we could go together. Or you could go alone, or with Xander. Whatever feels better for you."

I took the papers from her. Three sheets, printed out and neatly stapled together. There was a list of organizations that offered this horse therapy in the Vancouver area, and a bunch of other therapists listed with their specialties.

"What do you think?" she asked me.

I looked up into her waiting eyes. "I'll look into it," I said, and put the papers carefully aside.

"Great. And if none of that is right for you, there'll be something else."

Yeah. Maybe.

I wasn't so sure about that, but I was truly moved by how much she cared.

She always did.

Silence fell, and I only realized I was tapping my fingers on the table when she looked at my hand.

I stopped.

"You know," I told her, "I felt this thing when we first met. It was the

depth of caring in you. I didn't know how to take it. And I'll admit, I really thought that *Gimme Shelter* tattoo on your arm was some kind of sign. Here was this girl showing up at my door, sent by my sister, and I knew Courteney didn't know about the importance of that song, what those two words meant to me. It felt like something I just couldn't ignore. 'Gimme Shelter' was Gabe's favorite Rolling Stones song, one of his favorite songs ever. I must've listened to it a thousand times when he died. I can still hear it in my head, so vividly, when I'm stressed out. It plays over and over in my dreams."

"I'm sorry, Cary," she said softly. "I didn't know that."

"We had this bet between us and I lost it. It was the stupidest thing. I can't even remember what the bet was. All I remember was that we decided to rehearse a Rolling Stones song with Alive and play it in our live show, and we couldn't agree on whether it would be 'Paint It Black' or 'Gimme Shelter.' He won the bet. So 'Gimme Shelter' was the song we were gonna play. We hadn't played it live with the band yet but we'd been practicing it in rehearsals, just two days before he died. And for five years, it's been echoing in the back of my mind."

"That finger tapping thing you do?"

"Yeah."

"You're playing 'Gimme Shelter'?"

"Usually. Sometimes it's bits of other songs that I've been working on or something else that's stuck in my head. But usually, it's that song. And there you were, at my door, with those words inked into your flesh."

Taylor's eyes sparkled with emotion, and she smiled. "What can I say? Clearly, I was sent from above."

"You know, Taylor, sometimes I think you were." My gaze traced the soft curves of her face. "I don't know how to tell you how much it wrecked me when I pushed you away. Knowing that I'd hurt you... It crushed me. I wanted to reach out and apologize. I wanted to make it better. But I didn't trust myself. I wouldn't allow myself to get close to you if I was just going to hurt you again. I can't even explain to you how scared I've been. What man wants to admit that his life has become ruled by fear?"

She held my hand and said, "It's okay to be vulnerable, Cary. It's okay to be afraid."

"Ever since Gabe died... I wanted to protect myself from going through that kind of pain, ever again. But I also felt all this guilt for letting him down. I couldn't stand to have someone I loved get hurt. I couldn't stand to lose

anyone like that again.”

“I’m right here, Cary. You don’t have to be afraid.”

I took a breath and forced the words out. “So, you might’ve figured it out by now... but Gabe died the day after my birthday.”

“Yeah, I kind of found that out the hard way,” she said. “I never would’ve thrown you that birthday party if I knew, Cary. I swear, I didn’t know. I never would’ve been so insensitive. And I can totally understand why your birthday isn’t a happy day for you. Everybody telling you ‘happy birthday’ while you just want them to shut the fuck up.”

“Yeah. That’s pretty much it.” I tried to smile, but fell short. “And I’m sorry that it sucks for everyone around me. I know my family wants to be able to celebrate *me* without having the black shadow of Gabe’s death on it, but it is. For me it is, forever. And finding my parents here like that... I used to be so afraid of letting them down. I had the worst stage fright at shows when I knew they were in the audience. They always just made things worse, somehow. My mom’s nervousness made it so much worse for me. And my dad’s tough love approach was no better. And the bigger Alive got as a band, the worse it got. I got afraid of letting the band down, letting Gabe down. Letting the fans down. The record company. Everyone. But on my birthday... standing there in front of you and all the food and the effort you’d put into it, for me... I couldn’t believe I was letting you down.” I hesitated before continuing. I didn’t want her to feel bad about what happened that day, but she deserved the whole truth. “When the panic hits... I get so scared of losing control that it just takes over. I went into the studio to hide because I knew it was coming and I couldn’t stop it. I hyperventilate, I shake, I can’t see straight. My bones feel like they’re made of jelly. I didn’t pass out that day, but I lay on the floor for a while because I was afraid I couldn’t get up.”

“That’s what you did, on your birthday?” she asked me quietly. “You locked yourself in the studio and had a panic attack, and lay on the floor all alone?”

“I’m not a normal guy, Taylor.

“I know that. And I love everything about you.”

I took a breath, and I told her the thing that scared me the most. “I don’t think I can be what you want.”

“And what is it you think I want you to be? The only thing I want you to be is *mine*.”

I didn’t even know what to say to that. A big part of me had a hard time

accepting that she wanted me—and everything that came with me.

“I’m here to tell you, Cary Clarke, we’re all abnormal. What matters is how you pick yourself up after you fall.”

I looked into her eyes. “What if I fail? I don’t want to let you down again.”

“Everyone fails, Cary. You will fail and you’ll pick yourself up and keep trying. And that’s okay. You just need to keep showing up for your life, even when it feels hard.” She leaned in and kissed me on the lips. “It could be a really beautiful life.”

“It’s been pretty dark for a long time. Maybe it’s hard to look into the light.”

“Yeah. But just imagine what you might find there.”

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We were up in my room, getting dressed, when Taylor said, “So, the release party is in a few weeks...”

“Yeah.”

I’d wondered at what point it would come up. I hadn’t expected it to happen with my pants down.

I yanked them up and turned to face her, zipping my fly. She smiled at me as she slipped her sweater over her head. It was fuzzy and pink and hung off one shoulder, and it looked like a hug. She looked like a kiss, like love, and her eyes shone at me with so much pride. It actually made me smile.

“You finished the album,” she said dreamily, standing there in her fuzzy sweater and panties and nothing else.

I almost laughed. “Yup.”

“Are you happy with it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you excited about it?”

“It’s kinda hard to be excited about anything without you here.”

Her smile faded a little. “Cary...”

“Have you seen the cover art yet?”

“No. Do I get to see the cover art??”

“Sure.” I pulled it up on my phone and handed it to her. The cover of the album was pretty simple. A clean white background that was basically



dominated by a big splotch of red paint—and a hand print that had been slapped into it, sending paint splatters flying. It didn't exactly look like blood, but it didn't not look like blood, either.

Taylor looked at it. "What are you calling the album?"

"Don't know yet."

"Is this your hand?"

"It's Ashley's. I think this came about one night after they'd helped themselves to some of those edibles you gave them."

A huge grin split her face. "Really?"

"Yeah. I guess that's your creative contribution to the album."

"Well, I love it." She studied the image. Her smile faded and she said softly, almost dreamily, "It's a lovely madness, isn't it."

"What is?"

She stared at the image a moment longer, then met my gaze, her eyes clearing. "Nothing. Just... falling in love with a rock star." She handed the phone back to me. "Ash and Danica, I mean. He's pretty cool. I'm glad she found a good guy." She looked away.

I was silent for a moment, just watching her pull on her shredded jeans. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and put on her socks.

Seriously, there was a hole in one of them.

"Are you kidding me?"

"What?" She followed my gaze to her feet.

"You've got a hole in your sock."

Her eyes met mine. She grinned.

"You know, I kept looking at your Instagram while we were apart," I told her. "Those song titles you post... I kept waiting to see what you were going to post next. Because I wanted to know how you were feeling. I guess I kept waiting for you to post a happy song."

Her smile faded again. "I guess I didn't."

"The other day you posted 'Apparitions,' and I wondered if you posted it because you knew it had meaning to me. I mean, if that song was for me."

"Cary," she said softly, "they're all for you."

I stood there, staring at her, unable to make the few step journey it would take to have her in my arms. "That's good, because there are three songs on the Players' album for you."

"What?"

"Actually, they're not just for you. They're about you. I wrote others, but

those were the best ones.”

Taylor just stared at me, her eyes gleaming.

“You want to hear them?”

“Uh...” Her eyes widened. “Yeah, I want to hear them.”

“Great. Come down to the studio. We can have a vodka and a pickle, and I’ll play the album for you.”

She jumped to her feet. “Okay.” She followed me out of the room, practically hopping like a bunny. “This feels huge, Cary. How many people get to listen to the album early?”

“Not many,” I said, heading down the stairs.

“I feel like a VIP,” she mused.

“Because you are.”

“I mean, most people have to wait for at least the release party, right?”

“Yeah.” I realized she wasn’t following me across the foyer. When I turned around, she was standing on the bottom stair, gazing at me. “What?”

“Don’t you think... you should go to the release party?” she said.

“Not really.”

“But it’s important.”

“It’s not mandatory.”

“I know. But I really don’t think it’ll be as bad as you think.”

I gave her a look. As usual, it didn’t stop her.

“You’ll know most of the people there,” she forged on. “You could just make a brief appearance. You know, go in the back door, with security, with Xander or whoever you feel most comfortable with...”

She faded off, and maybe she was waiting for me to say, *I’ll go with you.*

But I couldn’t say that.

“You can say hello, at least,” she went on. “We can make sure that there’s a seat saved for you at a table with the band and Brody. I’ve been to a bunch of Dirty parties now, and I know we can arrange it however works for you. Liam can be glued to your side. And with the amount of security Ronan’s gonna have at this thing, trust me, no one will even be able to get near you if you don’t want them to.”

“Then what’s the point?”

“Well... the point is, you get to go to the party. You worked just as hard on this album as everyone else. You deserve to be there. Plus, you get to feel the rush of being in that room as people hear the music for the first time. It’s going to be an incredible party. Summer’s planning this whole ridiculous

masquerade ball theme... It's gonna be off the hook. But... it just won't be the same without *you* there."

That was kind. But it was making my head hurt.

"Well, I'm not going."

"You won't even consider it? It's a masquerade. You can even wear a mask. You know, like Slash's top hat?"

"I have considered it."

There was a long silence before she said, "Have you?"

"I'm not going to the party, Taylor."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Is that true? Or are you just afraid to?"

"I don't feel comfortable going. So I'm not going."

She stood there on the bottom stair, not budging. It felt like we were in a standoff in my foyer.

How the hell did we get here?

This morning was incredible, until this. And it was her fucking birthday. Was I really getting into a fight with her on her birthday?

*Way to fucking go, asshole.*

"But how do you know how you'll feel if you haven't actually tried yet?" she pressed.

"Are you saying I don't know what I feel or what I want?"

"Of course not." She came closer, standing in front of me. "I just wonder if what you imagine the party will be like, in your head, isn't the same as reality."

"So, you've been to a few industry parties this summer and now you think you know the way it's going to be for me?"

"I'm just saying, the room will be filled with people who're looking forward to seeing you. Friends and colleagues. Wouldn't you go if this was a release party for Alive's new album?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I just mean," she said gently, "before what happened to Gabe, you'd go, right? Even if you were anxious about it? And it would turn out okay."

"Yeah, well some things didn't turn out okay, Taylor."

"I know. I didn't mean—"

"Is this you being supportive? Because if so, I can't wait to see you when you're giving me a hard time." I turned and headed for the studio doors.

I could hear her suck back a careful breath behind me. “I know you’re angry. You’re still angry about what happened and you’re probably angry with everyone for trying to push you—”

“I just don’t need to have this conversation every time I see you.” I stopped at the doors to the studio, my back to her.

“You haven’t seen me in months,” she said quietly.

“And why do you think I shut people out in the first place?” I turned to face her. “Because this is what it turns into. The same conversation, over and over. I said no. I’m not going to the party.”

“I heard you. I just wanted to know why. I was just trying to challenge you a little, if your only reason is that you’re scared.”

“As if that isn’t reason enough? You think my anxiety isn’t real and I can just pretend it away?”

“Of course not. It’s very real.”

“And you know that because you Googled anxiety disorders and now you think you’re an expert or something.”

She just stared at me for a long moment, her eyes looking a little pink. “I was just trying to get some information because I was hoping to understand and help. That’s all. I would love it if you’d share that information with me, but you don’t seem to want to. And I’m never sure when I should push or when I should back off. Maybe I shouldn’t have promised you I could be supportive when I’m not even sure what that means to you. What does that mean to you, Cary?”

“Maybe you should go home. I think I need to be alone for a while.” I turned my back on her again and reached for the studio door.

“Oh, don’t. Please don’t do that.” I heard her coming closer, and I hesitated on the threshold.

“I don’t know what you want from me,” I told her.

“I can go home, if you want me to. But however you want to look at it, Cary, you’re my home.”

I shook my head. “I need to be alone right now. I don’t need anyone pushing me—”

Her voice was small when she said, “Maybe I don’t push you enough.”

I didn’t say anything. My heart was beating way too fast. Adrenalin was kicking in. My fight or flight response. I was gonna ditch into the studio or upstairs or anywhere but here in a few seconds.

“I understand that you got upset when I tried to throw that surprise party

for you. Your parents...”

I turned to her. “I freaked out and embarrassed you.”

“You didn’t embarrass me.”

“Well, I embarrassed myself.”

“You’ve been doing great, Cary. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I am not doing great, Taylor. You don’t need to bullshit me. I’m not that fucking fragile.”

She put her hand on my arm. “I know you’re not. You’re incredibly strong.”

“I just told you to stop bullshitting me.”

Her eyes filled with tears and her hand dropped away. “Cary... if Danica died in a fire, I’d be *lost*. I’d be heartbroken. I don’t know how I’d ever get over—”

“Well, she didn’t.”

She took a breath. “Look. At the release party, no one’s going to be asking you about Gabe. It’s not like some TV interview or something. It’s just a party with friends. They like your music and they like your face. They just want to see *you*. You have the power to make people so happy. It’s such a gift. Can’t you see that?”

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

“You make *me* happy.”

“Yeah? How happy did it make you when I flipped out on you because you tried to throw me a birthday party, then broke up with you? You deserve better than a crazy person.”

“Yes, I do. And I believe you can heal yourself. With time and work. And love.”

“Well, it’s been five years. How much more time should I waste on trying to save myself?”

“Are you serious? How about every moment you’ve got, until you’re in your grave.” She took a step closer, and it killed me to see that determination on her face, those deep, all-seeing eyes. She wanted to help me and I was so sick of letting her down. “You need to face your fears, and get out from under this control they have over your life. You think you’re in control? You’re fucking lost, Cary Clarke. You’re still lost. The day I met you, I thought I was walking into a meeting with a crazy person. But you’re not crazy, Cary. You’re fucking broken and you refuse to try to fix yourself with everything you’ve got. I have never met someone as lost as you are, just standing in one

place. You need to find yourself again. Find that part of you that you put aside when Gabe died, that part of you that became a great musician and a rock star in the first place, and a great guy who so many people care about. That guy who wanted something out of life besides growing old alone inside his mansion. Open yourself up again so you can feel joy and dare to get close to people again, take risks again. That's why your loved ones keep pushing you to come out of your cave. *Love, Cary. They love you.*"

"No." I didn't want to hear it. I didn't deserve to hear it.

"I love you."

I barely heard her say it. I was turning to disappear through the door. "Not right now, okay?"

"Then *when*?" She grabbed my arm and turned me to face her again. "If you won't let me help you, please just let *someone* help you."

"I've *tried*, Taylor. Don't you think I've tried? I've tried therapy. Psychotherapy. Unconventional therapy. I've tried drugs. Fucking mushrooms. Hypnosis. Meditation. Self-help books. *Nothing works.*"

"That is not true. It can't be. You haven't tried everything yet. If you tried everything, if you'd done everything you could do, you would've found success by now. You haven't tried everything."

"What do you want me to do? You think I'm just gonna go hang out with a horse and it's gonna magically cure me?"

"Maybe not. But there has to be something."

"Maybe you need to accept that this is impossible."

She stood back like I'd slapped her or something.

"Do you think you don't deserve to be happy or something? Is that it?"

"It's my fault," I practically yelled in her face. "Don't you get that? *It's my fault.*"

She shook her head. But instead of asking me what I meant by that, or refuting it, she said, "Well, of course it's your fault. It has to be someone's fault, right? You need someone to blame. You could've blamed so many people, and I'm sure you did. I'm sure you blamed Gabe. And the rest of your band. And the crew. And the hotel staff. And the first responders who didn't get there in time. I'm sure you blamed the man who set the fire, but he's dead now. And dead men don't feel pain, right? You could've blamed so many people. But isn't it just more effective to blame yourself? Because that's what hurts the most, right? It's the best way to punish yourself for something you can't change. And besides, it's just easiest to blame yourself."

You're the closest target."

I said nothing. My whole body was shaking. I could feel the tears burning in my eyes, and I just stood there, frozen, trying not to break down in front of her.

"Can't you ever forgive yourself?" she said softly, studying my face. "Gabe would've forgiven you, long ago, if he were here to do it. You know he would."

I forced myself to turn and step into the studio. My joints were stiff. I was forgetting to breathe.

"Why won't you let anyone help you?" She practically begged from the doorway behind me. "Why do you have to suffer through this alone?"

I turned back to her. "That's what you want, to suffer with me? Why the fuck would you want that?"

She didn't say anything, just stood there, looking at me from the threshold.

*Out. In.*

We stared at each other for a long moment, while my heart thudded in my chest, so hard. I was still shaking as I drew a deep, slow breath. Then another. And another.

Four counts in. Hold four. Four counts out.

"No," I said, but my fight was fading. "No. I'll only drag you down."

"That's bullshit, Cary. If you push me away, you're not protecting me. You're not protecting yourself, either. You're just throwing it all away."

My gaze dragged over her. I didn't want to shut the door in her face. I didn't want to.

I was giving in. I could feel it. I tried with my last bit of fight to push her away, but I could feel myself losing the battle. I didn't want to win this fight. I didn't want to push her away.

*You promised her you wouldn't do this.*

"What are you still doing here?" I asked her, my voice small. "Go live your life, Taylor. It's waiting for you."

"Well," she said quietly, not going anywhere at all, "I'm waiting for you."

# Chapter Thirty

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**Taylor**



## Put a Flower in Your Pocket

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*December*

I'd never been so nervous walking into a party in my life.

It wasn't all the beautiful people in the place, or the famous people, or the amount of money that I knew had been spent on this thing. It was the heartrending anticipation of not knowing if Cary was going to show up.

I'd come to the Players' album release party at the Crystal hotel without him. In an effort to avoid another argument about it, I'd gone ahead with getting my party outfit ready and making plans. He'd asked me to go without him, with friends. So that was what I did.

I just had to trust that he'd get to the party himself, if that's what he chose to do. I couldn't force him.

I'd made it clear that I thought he should come.

But it was his decision.

Danica was coming in a limo with Ashley and a few other people, and while I'd originally planned to join them, I'd opted to come with Merritt when she called to ask if I was going. She didn't seem to have a date, so we paired up. She got a sitter for her kid, and we got ready at my apartment downtown before catching a cab to the hotel.

When we arrived, it was clear that a VIP event had taken over the premises. The hotel and restaurant were open to the public, of course, but the traffic loop in front of the hotel was dominated by limos, town cars and taxis, and security was everywhere. Well-dressed guests wearing everything from exquisite red carpet formal wear to outlandish masquerade ball attire to ripped jeans and leather drifted into the hotel, through the lobby and up the sweeping staircase to the ballroom on the second floor—every one of them wearing a mask.

The official invitations had said: *Anything with a mask goes.*

I'd heard that Zane Traynor had actually threatened to show up in nothing but a mask, but we'd just have to see how the night played out.

This was a music industry event, which meant there were a lot of creative people behind it, and Summer had really amped things up with the whole masquerade-party-meets-rocker-ball theme. I may have actually suggested the idea myself over a bottle of wine, late one night at a party at Summer and Ronan's house, because maybe I thought it might help Cary show up if he knew he could wear a mask.

Summer had fucking loved the idea, and along with the help of Brody's staff and Trey's people, they'd all made it happen. Maybe best of all, because Trey had such a knack for parting the wealthy with their money, he'd suggested we turn it into a charity event. So now we were raising money for my beloved animal shelter while we partied.

With its VIP guest list, this party had to be the hottest ticket of the year in Vancouver, and I almost had to pinch myself to believe I was part of it.

"Pinch me," I told Merritt as we sailed in through the open doors of the ballroom, which were flanked by so many impenetrable-looking security dudes I almost thought we were gonna get stopped. But all I had to do was spot Ronan. He gave us both a quick hug, and in we went. Because he was managing security for the event, he wasn't exactly in costume. He wore a black suit, but he did have a black mask pushed up on top of his head that maybe he was planning to slip on later.

Merritt dutifully pinched my arm. I'd already forgotten I asked her to.

"Ouch. Fuck. Okay, I guess I'm awake."

"You may be high, though," she said, gazing around. "I'm pretty sure I must be. That's the only explanation for what I'm seeing right now..."

The beautiful, old room with its high ceilings, mysterious alcoves and open archways to the Eden-like, romantic balconies had been decorated in black, gold, and of course red, the theme color of the Players' album. There was a massive banner with the album cover on it hanging along one wall, Ashley's handprint in all that paint/blood splatter at least a story high. A trio of glittering, gold disco balls hung over the dance floor, glitter was sprinkled all over the floor, and glittery curtains draped the entrances to the balconies. On the far wall, there was a screen where an image of the Players in the studio faded out, replaced by another image of the band; image after image faded into the next, on a loop.

And of all things, one of my faaaaavorite bands was playing as we made

our entrance. It was Our Last Night's heavy cover of "7 Rings," in an orgasmic mashup with the original Ariana Grande version *and* an incredible, panty-dropping dance beat, and I just about died and went to music heaven right on the spot.

It had DJ Summer written all over it.

The music was courtesy of a male DJ who was spinning over in a corner booth, but it was nice to hear that although Summer had officially left her deck behind and leveled up to rock star status, she hadn't totally abandoned her roots. She was actually one of the first people we saw when we entered the room; she seemed to be hanging out near the entrance, maybe partly to be close to Ronan, and definitely to greet every single guest as they walked in.

"Summer! You're *killing* me," I told her as soon as she spotted me, and her mouth dropped open in delight. "The music is so on point, I'm gonna walk out and walk right back in." I spun around and pretended to do just that. "The girls with tattoos are here," I announced, referring to the words in the song as I strut over to her in my high-heeled boots.

"And we *do* like getting in trouble..." Merritt mused thoughtfully.

"Ladies!! You look gorgeous," Summer exclaimed, yanking us both in for a hug. "Taylor, what do you think?" She swept her arm to indicate the room, but I couldn't peel my eyes away from her. She'd gone with a devilish theme for her masquerade outfit, and one that went nicely with the theme of the album—a red, patent leather bodysuit with a daring keyhole that exposed her cleavage, blood-red lipstick, a gorgeous, elaborate, red-and-gold eye mask, and little devil horns. She even had a forked tail.

"I think... you look incredible. And you did an incredible job."

"Sweetheart, you did an incredible job. This was all your idea, and don't think I've forgotten it. There's a bottle of pink bubbly with your name on it at the bar. And one for you too, Merritt."

We thanked her and headed deeper into the room, trying to find our way to the bar through all the bodies. Not all that easy with a mask on.

Merritt had worn a sexy, beaded, charcoal-silver cocktail dress, flapper-style, with long, charcoal satin cigarette gloves and a feathered and beaded black eye mask. *If you aren't getting laid in that get-up*, I'd told her as soon as I saw her, *there's no hope for mankind*.

I'd opted to blend a few of my favorite things in my costume choice: animals, rock 'n' roll, and the color black. I'd gone with a kind of Catwoman theme, wearing a sleeveless, black sheath dress that hugged me from chest to

ankle, with a long slit up the side. I had long black boots and black gloves, a black tail, ears and partial face mask, and of course, what was a kitty without a collar? I'd bedazzled my accessories with silver studs to rock them out. It only occurred to me when I actually saw myself in the entire thing that it had a very S&M vibe about it.

I'd briefly considered changing it or toning it down. But honestly, at an event like this, with this crowd... I didn't even stand out.

People were already dancing, and heavily into drinking, mingling and checking out all the incredible outfits and costumes, trying to figure out who was who, probably, just like we were.

Some people were a total mystery.

But others were obvious.

Like Elle Delacroix's sister, Angeline, and her boyfriend, Flynn, who was Elle's bodyguard. Flynn looked stiff and on-guard, as usual, but tonight he was the vision of cuteness dressed as the man in black from *The Princess Bride*, in black pants and a black pirate shirt, head scarf and eye mask. Angeline was, of course, the princess bride, complete with the bridal dress, crown, and a gold eye mask. I clocked them right away and mentally put them in the running for Most Adorable Couple Costume.

We really should've given out a prize for that, because that level of cuteness was award worthy.

Trey Jones stood out, too. That tall, athletic stature and the square jaw, the jagged, white half-mask against his dark skin—like if the Phantom of the Opera was a rock star. He wore a black tuxedo with long tails and glittering seams, and he pretty much stood in one spot at the edge of the dance floor, where people flocked around him.

Then we found Xander and Courteney. Also easy to spot.

Xander looked pretty much like Xander usually did, except for the full head mask. He wore red sequined sneakers, snug white jeans and a shredded white T-shirt that probably cost more than my entire outfit. It clung to his muscles, offering a peek at his tattoos through the rips. And on his head, he wore a red-and-white lucha libre mask. Courteney wore a long, turquoise skirt with sequins like scales and a long train like a mermaid tail, with a seashell bra over a see-through top. Miniature starfish decorated her long, blonde hair, and a glittery green mask that looked like kelp wrapped over her eyes.

After the ridiculous conversation Cary and I once had about mermaid sex,

I couldn't wait for him to see her in it.

I wondered, though, if he'd get to see her in it.

"I had no idea your man was a secret Mexican wrestler," I said, walking up to them.

Courteney turned, saw me, and evidently recognized me as easily as Ronan and Summer had. "Taylor! WHOA. You look *hot*."

"As do you, my friend. I didn't realize this was a fetish party. Kind of feels like one, wouldn't you say?"

She snickered.

"Seems to have given more than a few people permission to fly their freak flags a little higher than usual," Xander agreed.

"So, is your fetish the mermaid thing?" I asked Courteney. "Or the Mexican wrestler?" I wagged my eyebrows at her, but then realized she probably couldn't tell because of my mask.

"Well, mermaids are beautiful and magical," she mused. "But I am hoping he tries out some of his wrestling moves on me later."

"I've got this body slam I've been working on," he told her. Then he took a swig of his beer through his mouth hole.

"I guess the question is," I said to Courteney, "do you get him to leave the mask on...?"

"Hmm..." She considered. "I guess we'll see."

"I say leave it on," Merritt said beside me. "Let that freak flag fly."

"I think we should all leave our masks on and just live like this all the time," Courteney said.

"Hear, hear," I said, and realized I should really get myself a drink, so I had something to toast people with when they made fabulous suggestions like that.

Courteney smiled at me. "So... do you know if Cary's coming?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"Maybe the masks will help?"

"Maybe."

"Is that why you suggested the idea to Summer? Because you thought it might make it easier for him?"

"This was all your idea?" Xander cut in.

"I don't know. It was the wine," I admitted. "It just sort of fell out of my mouth. And yeah, I was hoping maybe it would help Cary walk in the door. But I guess we'll see, right?"

I was pretty sure I could see the emotion in Xander's eyes and in Courteney's, even through their masks. "You're so good for him," she gushed, and she gave me a big, squishy hug.

"Thank you. Uh, apparently, there are some bottles of bubbly with our names on them over at the bar. We should maybe go get started on getting loaded."

"Okay. We'll catch you later," Courteney said, and I headed off with Merritt before things got too emotional.

I really wished I had better answers for them. *Yes, Cary's coming. He'll be right along. Or better yet, He's right over there, didn't you know?*

But I really didn't know if he was coming.

After our argument about it last weekend, we'd reached a gentle stalemate. I didn't go home like he asked me to. He'd changed his mind about wanting me to leave, and good thing, because I didn't want to leave. I spent the rest of my birthday with him, at his place, and then that night I went out to celebrate with my friends while he stayed home.

The rest of the week pretty much rolled out the same way. He'd gone on with his life, inside his home, and I'd gone on with mine, both inside and out of his home. I'd stayed there each night. But now that the Players' album was done, he wasn't even going down to Little Black Hole. He was working in his home studio again, talking to Brick House and his lawyer and listening to music, considering offers from various bands who wanted to work with him.

I didn't press him about it. Whatever he wanted to do next with his career was up to him. I'd already asked him enough, and clearly the answer was no. No, he was not joining the Players and going on tour.

I wasn't sure I'd ever agree that that wasn't a total mistake, but it wasn't my decision.

It was Cary's life. And if he wasn't ready to move on with it... there was only so much I could do.

I was trying to be supportive, and as it turned out that was way fucking harder than I thought it would be. At least, to try to get it right. To balance his needs with my own, and do what I believed was best for him. Best for us. And best for me.

When we walked up to the bar, Merritt gave one of the bartenders our names, and he popped open our bubbly. Seconds later, we each had a sparkling glass of Bottega Rose Gold and Merritt proposed a toast. "To the hottest date I've had in a while," she quipped as we tapped our glasses

together.

“I’m honored. Thanks for inviting me to come with you. Can I say I’m glad you didn’t have a date?”

“Honestly, I probably could’ve scared one up. But... I was thinking about you. I wondered what would happen if Cary wasn’t coming to the party. I know you’ve got Danica and about a million friends in this room. But I just thought I should do my part as a friend and offer.”

“Merritt... That’s so sweet.” I gave her a hug. “Now let’s go mingle and play spot-the-rock-star. I don’t see Zane Traynor or Dylan Cope anywhere. I’m kinda scared Zane’s gonna make good on that mask-only threat, but if he does, I don’t wanna miss it.”

“Agreed.”

“And I’m not sure if that’s Matt over there, or just some other really hot dude...”

Merritt looked over that way. “Obviously, further inspection is needed,” she remarked, taking my hand and pulling me off into the crowd.

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As it turned out, the hot dude in the black leather pants and burgundy velvet blazer—with no shirt underneath—and the matching burgundy fox mask was Matt.

I made the requisite fox joke—*You look foxy tonight*. Luckily, he was enough of a gentleman not to return the favor with a pussy joke, despite my outfit practically begging for it. We chatted with him a bit, before we mingled on.

Then we found Dylan. Normally you really couldn’t miss him with his staggering height and the reddish hair, but it was the replica Iron Man costume with a full helmet that really threw it off. He flipped up the visor as we approached to say hi, but it was his girlfriend, Amber, dressed like his Pepper Potts that we recognized first. She wore a straight, strawberry-blond wig and a slim, white suit, buttoned at the breast with no blouse underneath, and a simple white eye mask.

I told them they looked fucking phenomenal, which they did. They returned the compliment. And when I casually asked them what was new, expecting either small talk or drunk talk—this was a party, after all—Amber

showed us her left hand.

There was a ring on her ring finger.

“*Fuck off,*” I gushed. “What!!” I grabbed her hand and Amber laughed.

“Iron Man proposed to me last night. We’re just sort of telling people as we run into them. No biggie.”

“What is that?” I asked her, studying the ring. It had a bunch of little stones in it instead of one large one.

“Natural topaz stones. I asked for them because they’re amber colored,” Amber said. “I didn’t want a traditional diamond and I just think they’re pretty.”

“It’s gorgeous. Congratulations, both of you.” I gave them each a big hug, genuinely excited for them. Thankfully, I’d gotten over feeling too sorry for myself to be happy for other people.

Fuck that noise. Life was too short. And too good, really.

“This shit needs to be celebrated,” Merritt announced, and I totally agreed. We waved down one of the catering staff and plucked a couple of glasses of champagne from her tray, handing one to Amber and one to Dylan, to go with whatever else they were already drinking; now they were double fisting.

“That looks much better,” I said.

“Much,” Merritt concurred.

We toasted, at which point we drew the attention of Katie and Jesse, who wandered over—and took home the motherfucking prize for Most Adorable Couple Costume In The History Of All Couple Costumes. They were dressed to the fucking nines as Cinderella and a badass Prince Charming, and while it wasn’t the most unique costume theme ever, seeing Katie and Jesse Mayes dressed like that made my ovaries contract.

“Can you two please make more babies?” I said in greeting. “Like, get on that shit right now. You’re doing the world a major disservice by not fucking bareback, right the fuck now.” Yeah, I’d gotten a *lot* closer to Katie in recent months. And her husband. So now I could say that shit when it was on my mind.

She just laughed.

Jesse grinned.

“You look gorgeous, Taylor,” Katie said, giving me a hug. Then she asked me a little more quietly, “Where’s your date?” She gazed at me with knowing, sympathetic eyes.



“She’s right here,” I said, looping my arm through Merritt’s. “Have you met Merritt? She’s been kicking ass and taking names down at Little Black Hole.”

“Of course,” Katie said. “Nice to see you, Merritt. I love your dress...”

And as my friends got chatting around me, I took a fortifying swallow of my rose gold bubbly and looked around.

Where was my date, indeed.

I didn’t mean to keep looking for him like a sad puppy. I just couldn’t help it. Hoping he’d appear, slipping up behind me in his mask and making my night.

No, making my fucking life.

We chatted for a while, our little crowd growing, shifting, faces and outfits changing as people came and went, and then Merritt and I headed back to the bar for a refill. Before we made it there, she decided to hit the ladies’ room, so I decided to go get some air.

I headed out of the ballroom and back down the sweeping stairs, and out the front entrance of the hotel. I looked around at the masked people still arriving for the party, unloading from cars.

Okay, so I was totally looking for Cary.

And then... I saw him.

*He was here.*

Goosebumps erupted across my skin.

He made it. He made it to the party.

Well... almost.

I saw the familiar cut of his shoulders. The black dress shirt, sleeves rolled up below the elbow. The black dress pants. His tall, lean form like a shadow, just beyond the traffic loop. I darted between the limos and taxis and up the little path between the sculpted shrubbery—and there he stood, at the top of a few stairs leading down to the public sidewalk. Just standing next to a giant stone plant pot with shrubbery growing out of it, like he was part of the stonework or something. A handsome gargoye.

He had his back to me, but I would know Cary Clarke anywhere. The soft waves of his blondish hair. That *butt*. He had his hands in the pockets of his pants and they were snug on his ass cheeks.

I smacked his ass as I came up beside him. “Where the hell have you been?”

He looked down at me from the shadowy eye slits of the coolest

masquerade mask I'd ever seen. It was completely silver, covered most of his face except his beautiful mouth and jaw, and he half-smiled at me. The mask had exaggerated, sculpted features, with dramatic eyebrows, sharp cheekbones, and a beautiful scrolling design that made up the lines of the forehead. Even though there was no mouth, there was so much expression around the eyes that I could tell one side was laughing and one side was crying, like the comedy / tragedy masks of ancient theater.

"Wait, never mind that," I amended in awe. "Where the hell did you get that mask?"

He shrugged. "Where do I get anything? Internet."

"You *came*," I gushed. "You look incredible. That is the coolest mask I've ever seen."

"Sorry I'm late," he said.

Before I could respond, I heard my best friend's voice. "Taylor!" I turned to find Danica climbing out of a limo, wearing a gorgeous, fluttery dress in pastel layers, with glittering, pastel butterfly wings and a matching mask. She was with Haz, Ashley's bodyguard. A man stepped out of the limo behind her... in black leather pants, no shirt, tattoos, and—

"I'm sorry, I have to take that back," I told Cary. "*That* is the coolest mask I've ever seen."

Ash's mask was big, black-and-gold, demonic, and featured a set of massive, twisted horns. He stuck his tongue out through the mouth hole and waggled it in our direction.

"You guys coming in?" Danica called over, but none of them headed our way. Obviously, they recognized Cary, too.

I realized he hadn't moved from his spot. He didn't even turn to face the hotel.

"In a minute!" I told them. They were rallying up with Zane, Maggie, Elle and Seth, who had climbed out of the limo behind them. Both thankfully and regrettably, Zane wasn't naked. He was fully dressed in a Viking get-up, including war paint and a bronze metal mask.

"We'll see you inside!" Danica called out as they all headed up the steps into the hotel.

I turned back to Cary. "Where were we? Oh, yeah. I was freaking out over the fact that you're here. And you look incredible."

"Taylor," he said, looking me over carefully, "you look fucking breathtaking."

“Purrrr-fect,” I said, playing up my cat theme in the cheesiest way possible, which won me a tiny smile. “Then you’ll come inside with me?”

“That was the idea. Actually... I wanted to walk in there alone. I wanted to surprise you.”

“Then what are you doing out here?” I asked him gently.

“Trying to find my balls?”

“Hmm.” I reached down and cupped his balls, giving them a gentle squeeze. Then I remembered what Dean had said about guys and their balls, and fondled them a little. “Well, I found them. Let’s go.” I hooked my arm through his.

But he didn’t budge.

“You’re not pissed that I’m late?”

“Nope.”

“You’re not pissed that you had to come alone?”

“I didn’t come alone. I came with friends.”

Actually, *he* seemed pissed. At himself. “You’re not pissed that I left you fucking dangling, wondering if I was coming at all?”

“Let me think.” I pretended to think about it. “Nope. Not mad about that.”

He sighed a little. Then he said, “I was afraid I’d be too late.”

“For what? The party’s just getting started.”

“For you.”

“Well, another hour or so and you would’ve been. This dress turns into rags at precisely midnight.”

“I’m serious. I feel like I let you down again.”

I considered that, along with the fact that he still wasn’t moving.

“How long have you been out here, Cary?”

“About forty minutes.” He took a breath and sighed again. “I really wanted to prove to myself that I could do it without leaning on you. But... I kinda got stuck.”

“Right here?”

“Yeah. Right here.”

I glanced around until I saw him; Liam. On the sidewalk, not far away. Waiting by. “It really doesn’t matter, Cary. Don’t you get that? What matters is you’re *here*.”

“But here isn’t *there*,” he said, finally turning a little to glance up at the hotel.

“Cary. Baby. You’re doing that thing. You’re stalling by cutting yourself

down. To try to make an excuse to not go in there. By telling yourself that you've already failed, when you haven't."

"Yeah. I am," he agreed. And I knew he was scared to walk into that party. How could he not be? It had been five years since he'd done anything like this.

And the last party he'd celebrated... basically ended with the death of his best friend.

"Look, I'm sure there would've come a time, eventually, when you would've been too late for me," I said. "I mean, maybe if you walked up to me in my rocking chair when I'm eighty and said, 'Hey babe, I'm ready. Let's give it a go,' I might be like, 'Fuck you, buddy. You had your chance.'" That won a small smirk. "But you know what? We're young. The night is young. And you're not too late." I laced my hand through his. "You made it this far. You can make it the rest of the way. There's no difference between here and there."

"There's a huge difference, Taylor. Here, it's just you and me. There, it's hundreds of people."

"But we're still just you and me." I squeezed his hand. "And nothing bad is going to happen. It's a party. Zane even showed up fully clothed. There's nothing to fear."

A reluctant smile crept over his face.

"Good things happen at parties, Cary. Especially parties hosted by Summer Sorensen and Trey Jones."

He looked up at the hotel behind me again. "I can imagine."

"You don't have to imagine. You can *live*."

He met my eyes.

"It's really dark in there," I assured him. "We'll find a dark corner and we can just sit down. And when a nice, slow song comes on, you can dance with me."

"Okay," he said, finally. His grip on my hand tightened. "Don't let go of me."

"I won't," I promised him. "Not ever."

# Chapter Thirty-One

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**Taylor**

## Stay in My Corner

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**T**his time when I walked into the party, I noticed how intense the whole scene was.

The noise. The crowd. The glitter.

The loud music.

The darkness.

I held Cary's hand, and just like I promised, I didn't let go of him.

He did amazingly well, considering. He stayed pretty glued to me, but I hardly minded. As long as it didn't involve him puking or passing out or turning and hightailing it out of here without me, I'd be happy with however this played out.

I took him straight over to Xander and Courteney, and when they laid eyes on us, I silently willed them not to flip out on him too exuberantly.

"Cary!" Courteney gushed, immediately giving him a hug.

When she stepped back, he took a look up and down her sexy mermaid outfit. I met his eyes and grinned.

"You look great, CC," he said.

"So glad you made it, brother," Xander said, and he and Cary exchanged a manly hug and back slap.

And that was that.

We were in the door. We were among friends. And Cary was doing well.

We said hello to everyone in the band. Brody. Trey. Eventually, we said hello to probably a few dozen other people that Cary knew. I asked him if he wanted to find a corner to hide out, but he just said, "I'm here. I can hide out at home."

He was calm, reserved, quiet. He was polite. He was warm, given that he was probably uncomfortable.

I was so proud of him I could've wept.

I kept wondering at what point I should whisk him out of here so as not to overdo it and ruin what we'd already achieved tonight.

The later into the night we got, I kept wondering if my time was running out.

But I didn't ask him if he wanted to leave. If he wanted to leave, I was pretty sure he'd make that clear.

He didn't say anything about it.

We were talking to Danica and Ash when the volume on the music lowered and Summer's voice came over the sound system. "Hey everyone. We're gonna slow things down for you for a couple of songs, so you can make out and stuff." People whistled as "Stay in My Corner" by The Arcs started playing. "At twelve o'clock sharp," she went on, "we're gonna drop the first single from the Players' debut album for your listening pleasure! Stay tuned!" Then the volume on the music went back up and people started coupling up on the dance floor.

"That's our cue to go make out," I told Cary, tugging him toward the disco balls.

He went with me, drew me into his arms in the middle of the dance floor, and we started dancing. I could've told him right there how proud I was of him. I could've gushed all over him about how much he was my hero and how amazing he was doing.

Instead, I decided to pretend like we did this all the time and just go with it.

"You know, your mask is very confusing," I told him. "When you look to the right, you look like you're crying, and when you look to the left, you look like you're laughing your ass off."

"Maybe I'm doing both."

"How many of these people do you think are gonna fuck with their masks on tonight?"

Cary glanced around. "Fifty-percent?"

"Is that fifty-percent of the people in this room, or fifty-percent of the people here who are actually going to have sex tonight?"

"Hmm. Sixty-five-percent of the people who are actually going to have sex tonight are gonna do it with their masks on."

"Damn. Now I really wish we could get data on that later, see how right we were."

"You're trying to distract me. It's working."

"Good."

He leaned in and kissed me, right there on the dance floor. I sighed with

relief as my stomach tingled with joy. We melted together, masks bumping awkwardly, and I finally pulled away, laughing a little.

“Okay, I’m thinking *one* of the people having sex leaves their mask on at a time,” he said. “To avoid the awkward mask-on-mask collision.”

“I’m thinking you’re right. And maybe they take turns?”

“Sounds fun.”

I pushed my mask up onto my head, wondering if maybe I could get him to do the same a little later. Like maybe we could take turns?

But then he did the same, revealing his face.

I could only imagine how much courage it took for him to do that right now, in the middle of this party... and I fell so crazy in love with him on the spot, I knew that if he let me, I’d never let this man go.

“What is it you want, Cary? What do you see when you picture yourself happy?”

“I want my life back,” he said. “And I can’t see any life without you.” He didn’t look away, and I didn’t either. We stared at each other for a while, and then I put my head on his shoulder because I was feeling a little teary-eyed. We kept dancing, until we’d danced all the way through three slow songs.

And then the lights flickered. People whistled and started clapping.

“Well, look at that,” I remarked. “We both made it to midnight, and no one even turned into a pumpkin.”

Cary smiled.

And just then, “Panic Room” started to play, loud. “*It’s live!*” Summer shouted over the sound system, and everyone cheered.

“Panic Room,” which was the first lead single off the Players’ album, was now live for purchase and download all over the world. It was one of two songs from the album that the party guests would get to hear tonight. I’d heard the entire album by now, loved every note, and couldn’t wait for the release. “Panic Room” was one of the songs Cary had written, about me; it was a fast, grinding, high-energy rock song with twisted, passionate lyrics—about feeling safe in a place with someone you loved while the world went to sheer madness outside.

Xander and Courteney found us and we stood with them in the midst of the crowd, just listening. Absorbing. I held Cary’s hand, and he closed his eyes as he listened to the song, and to the crowd’s reaction to it.

After “Panic Room,” the DJ put on another song from the album; the full album would release next week, but everyone at the party also got to hear



“Fuck Me Two Times,” which had already proved a crowd favorite—the crowd being the band and everyone who’d been privy to hearing the songs so far.

It went over just as well at the party.

After both songs played, Trey and Brody stepped up on the small stage at the far end of the room, beneath the screen showing the slideshow of band images. Trey thanked everyone for coming, for supporting the fundraiser, for supporting the Players, and for working so hard to make this album what it was. Brody led us in a toast to the Players and the album, and to Cary Clarke.

I put my arm around Cary and kissed his cheek, as people applauded him.

Then Trey took the mic again. “We have an announcement that’s mildly exciting,” he said, obviously understating, and people cheered in anticipation. “If you already went onto the internet to check out the songs or downloaded them, you might’ve noticed it, but the Players have decided on a name for the album.” At that, some people started scrambling for their phones to try to figure it out before he said it. But then Trey said, “Would you like to make the announcement, Cary? The idea was yours.” He took the mic off the stand and handed it to Talia, who was standing beside the stage, like he knew Cary would never come up there.

Talia walked it back to us, the crowd parting for her. She stood in front of Cary, offering the microphone to him.

I held his hand tight, trying to encourage him without embarrassing him. I had no idea what this was about, but clearly, he did. I didn’t know the album had a title.

No one had said anything about it to me. Not him. Not Danica or Ash.

To my amazement, Cary actually took the microphone. “Uh, actually,” he said into the mic, clearing his throat, “Taylor came up with it.”

I met his eyes. What the fucknuts was he talking about?

Now everyone was looking over—at both of us.

Cary held out the microphone, and for a terrifying minute I thought he was handing it to *me*. But then someone reached past me and took it.

“Well, why don’t we just show the fucking thing,” Ash said into the mic. He’d slid his giant demon mask around to the back of his head to expose his face. He held out his hand, redirecting everyone’s attention to the screen above Trey and Brody, which had gone mysteriously blank.

The lights all over the room dimmed smoothly, and when we were all in the dark, an image came up, bright on the screen. It was the Players’ album

cover... but one thing had changed.

Now, the title of the album was written in white script across the red paint/blood.

*Lovely Madness*

And I remembered.

*It's a lovely madness, isn't it.*

That was what I said to Cary, the day we had the argument about this party.

*What is?* he'd asked me. And I said, *Falling in love with a rock star.*

"A quick toast to the woman who inspired the title of our album and the theme for this party," Summer said into the mic, and as the lights came up around us again, she was standing next to Ash. "Thank you, Taylor."

Everyone applauded and Summer and Ash gave me hugs. Then more people gave me hugs.

I was in shock.

When the attention had died down and the music came back on, and everyone went back to drinking and dancing, I tugged Cary close. "I think I just had my fifteen seconds of fame."

"And how did that go for you?" he said dryly.

"It was terrifying."

He chuckled. "And maybe now she understands..."

"Oh, I understand. Maybe you should just retire and we'll call it a day."

He gave me a genuine smile and put his arm around me. "But you just gave me a speech about how young we are..."

Something bumped me and I turned—and just about screamed at the giant, demonic head in my face. Ash was standing with his back to me, and the mask on the back of his head had bumped me.

"*Shit*, Ash, that's creepy." He turned from the conversation he was having with Dylan and Amber and grinned at me. "That is very off-putting. You've got an ass where your dick should to be."

He turned around to face me. "Better?"

Dylan, who now got the mask-and-ass side, scowled. "Aw, shit. That is creepy." He shut his Iron Man visor and turned away.

"So," Ash said, sipping his beer. "I'm just gonna go ahead and say this." And since there was clearly no stopping him, despite what I feared he was about to say, I let him blurt, "We want you to join the band, Cary."

Cary didn't say anything, but he definitely tensed up. I was familiar with

the signs by now. Even in this loud, dimly-lit room, I barely had to look at him to know. I could feel his reaction.

“Here’s the deal,” Ash said. “We’re playing our first show in the New Year, with Dirty. Just discussed it with Brody. We’ll be opening up for them at the Pandora Ballroom, just a small, local club show to roll out the new songs, start ironing out the kinks, prepping for tour, and pumping ourselves up. We want you to come join us onstage. If that goes well, we want you to seriously think about coming on tour with us.”

“On tour,” Cary said carefully, like he was actually thinking it over, when I was pretty sure he wasn’t. “Really?” He sounded surprised that they seriously wanted him to do that.

“There’s a reason we haven’t hired another guitarist,” Ash said simply.

“Because you haven’t found the right person,” Cary said firmly.

“Because we found the right person. And we’re waiting for him to realize he wants us as much as we want him.”

I looked at Cary’s face. And I realized how close he already was to needing to get the fuck out of here. It was that fast, how quickly it overwhelmed him. His body was stiff. His jaw was tight. I could practically see the anxiety creeping up, slithering up through his veins like black tendrils of smoke to snuff out everything else.

“Um, hey,” I said. “Didn’t we need to go check that thing?”

When he didn’t respond, I gave his hand a sharp squeeze.

“Cary? That thing?” His eyes flicked to mine and I nodded my head toward the exit.

“Yeah,” he said stiffly. “Let’s go.”

He was already turning away when I said to Ash, “We’ll talk about this later, okay?”

Ash’s eyebrows twisted together as he realized what was happening. “*Shit*. Taylor. I didn’t mean to—”

I didn’t hear the rest. Cary was tugging me through the crowd. He slid his mask down over his face. I made sure to overtake him, take the lead, and burrow him out of there before anyone else tried to talk to him.

We found Liam just inside the door and he fell in step, escorting us out into the hall.

“Is there a back exit?” I asked him, looking around.

Liam held out his arm, showing me the way as I pulled Cary along—guiding us through the bodies, the lineup of security guys, and down the hall,

away from the stairs and the lobby. We pushed through a door into a back stairwell, headed down a flight of stairs and through another door, into a quiet corner of a hallway.

No one was around.

There was a little nook with two armchairs and a table, and I headed for it. We'd just reached it when Cary started shaking.

I raised my hand, gesturing for Liam to fall back. To give us a minute. To give Cary some privacy if he was about to have a panic attack.

"Do you want to sit down?" I asked him. He was hunched over, his hand in his face. "Cary?" I bent over to try to see his face. I slid my arm around his back, holding him close. "Are you okay...?"

He snorted into his hand.

Then he kind of wheezed and coughed, and I slid off his mask. I saw his eyes.

"What the fuck, Cary Clarke. Are you laughing?"

He kind of wheezed into his hand again. "I... can't..." he choked out.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I started to laugh. "Why are you laughing?"

He wheezed again. "Why are you laughing?"

"Because you're laughing."

Then he finally caught his breath and burst out laughing even harder.

I smacked him on the butt with his mask.

Then I fell into one of the armchairs with a shudder and dropped his mask on the table. He was still standing there, his hands on his thighs for support, peering up at me. His face was flushed and he was grinning.

"*Christ*. I feel like I almost had a panic attack." I blew out a breath. "Sorry. I don't mean to make light of it."

He flopped into the chair across from me and tapped my boot with his shoe to make me meet his eyes. They were kinda sparkling. He looked like he'd just run a marathon or something. He blew out a breath, too.

"Ah, shit," he said with a sigh.

"You're gonna kill me one day, Cary Clarke. I thought you were freaking out."

"I was. I don't know what happened."

We just sat there, silent for a moment, catching our breath.

"I just started laughing," he said. "That was maybe the most fucked-up panic response I've ever had."

“It was an explosion of emotion. But at least it was a good one.”

“Yeah.”

“Feels good to laugh, huh?”

“It felt good to be at that party with you,” he said seriously.

“Okay, if you’re trying to make me swoon, at least take me somewhere we can get naked first.”

He smirked and looked for Liam, who was just visible a little way up the hall, where he probably couldn’t hear us. Much.

Cary leaned forward on his knees and studied me. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll live. You?”

“Yeah.” He raked a hand through his hair. “That was fucking embarrassing. But yeah, I’ll live.”

“I dunno. I kinda liked it. If we have to make a dramatic exit every party we go to, or slip out of their like ninjas, so what? I’m sure plenty of famous people do that at parties anyway.”

“True.”

He was quiet for a moment. I smiled at him.

I wasn’t sure why we weren’t going home. I wasn’t sure if he wanted to go back into the party or what, so I just waited.

“I know I need someone in my life who can support me when I’m not strong,” he said.

“Good. Because you do.”

“Someone who can also be straight with me, tell me the things I don’t want to hear and challenge me when I need to be challenged. But not pressure me to the point that I fall apart. I know it’s a fucking tall order, Taylor.”

“But don’t we all need those things?”

“Maybe.” He looked away for a moment, then met my eyes again. “Gabe did all that for me. All those years. Ever since I was nine, I had that person in my life, and I didn’t even know how hard it would be to not have that person anymore. And now... you’re that person.”

“I am?”

“Yeah, dummy.”

I snorted with laughter, so surprised by that, and he smiled as I cracked up.

When I’d gotten a hold of myself again, he said, “I have no idea how you do it, but you give me everything I need in a relationship. I get blind-paralyzed when I think of losing you.”

My smile softened. “You’re not losing me, Cary.”

“You don’t know that. We don’t know what the future holds. But that’s life. We can’t have absolute control over that part. And that is the hardest part for me to accept. I have to make peace with it, Taylor, or I’ll never be able to function like a normal person. I’ll never be able to give you what you deserve. Which is a partner in life. I want to be that for you.”

“Then prove it,” I said simply.

“I’m trying to. I hope you’ll give me the chance.”

“I will give you the chance. I’ll give you the chance to ask me to come work with you again. I’ll give you the chance to ask me to move in with you, too.”

He did that smiling-with-his-eyes thing, and opened his mouth, but I kept talking.

“I’ll even give you the chance to propose to me, one day. If I don’t beat you to it first.” I reached out to take his hand, and his smile faded. Not because he wasn’t happy, but because he was taking this seriously. “You can spend the rest of your life proving it to me.”

“Okay... I don’t know what to say,” he said. I wondered if he thought I was expecting him to get down on one knee, right the fuck now.

“It’s simple, Cary. Just say you’re willing. I’m already in. Whatever happens, I’m yours. And no matter how much time we have together, we’ll be a team.”

His gorgeous, hazel eyes actually misted over at that, and I melted.

“Come on,” I pressed. “Whadya say?”

He took a deep breath. “I just... I don’t want to bring you along on this ride if you aren’t totally sure, because that’s a terrible thing to do to someone. Bring them into a relationship for a couple years that just completely drains them, and basically steals a couple years of their life. And then what? You break up and they wish they never met you and fell into this dark hole you live in.”

“What do you mean, a couple of years? I don’t want a couple of years. I *want* to be in this with you, and I’m sticking around until the end. And by that I mean *the end*.”

He took that in, nodding a little, like he was trying to digest it. “I guess that’s good, then. Because this thing, it’s gonna take a while to work through. It’s probably gonna take the rest of my life, honestly.”

“Then I’ll be there with you, working through it with you. Or just hanging

by and cheering you on, if that's what you need."

He was still shaking his head. "I don't understand you."

"Still?"

"Your willingness to put up with me is as frustrating as the holes in your socks."

"I'm not wearing socks right now," I said, and he glanced at my sexy boots.

When his eyes met mine again, I cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Come on, it'll be fun," I said. "We'll make babies. And we'll travel when you're ready, and we'll see the world. And you'll go out onstage again, if you want to, when you're ready."

"Taylor... it's not that I don't want those things. But I'm afraid of leaning on you too much. Needing you too much. *Taking* too much."

I sighed. "Then you need to go onstage, Cary. Because that's something I can't do for you. You have to walk out there yourself." I ran my thumb over the back of his hand, choosing my words carefully and saying it as gently but honestly as I could. "Gabe isn't coming back to help you. Only you can be Cary Clarke on a stage, doing what you do and giving people what you give them when you make music. But I'm here for you. Your sister is here for you. And Xander will be out there with you."

"Yeah," he said softly, like he was actually starting to believe it.

"The thing I think you just haven't figured out yet is that we'll always have your back, Cary Clarke."

"I'm getting that," he said.

I sat back, studying him in his black dress shirt and pants, all sleek and mysterious. I'd never seen him in anything but jeans and a T-shirt, sweats. He looked hot in those, too, but right now, he looked like a man ready to take on the world.

"*Lovely Madness*, huh?" I said.

"Yup."

"Do I get a credit on the album?"

"You get that and whatever else you want," he said seriously.

"Hmm. I'm partial to back rubs, cunnilingus, and happily-ever-afters, so." I got to my feet, picked up his mask and held it out to him. "Why don't you take me home and we'll get started on that?"

He got to his feet and took the mask from my hand.

I turned to start toward Liam. "And by the way," I said over my shoulder,

as I slipped my own mask back on, “you can leave your mask on first.” I gave him the dirtiest look I possibly could through a cat mask, and twitched my ass to shake my tail.



## Chapter Thirty-Two

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**Cary**

## Gimme Shelter

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*February*

**I**t was absolutely pissing cold rain as we ran for the backstage entrance, where a door was propped open for us. I held an umbrella over us as Taylor snuggled under my arm. Security was thick, the alley blocked off at both ends to traffic and pedestrians, and I could hear the throb of music emanating through concrete and steel as the opening band got the Pandora Ballroom rocking for us.

Somehow, we'd managed to get Johnny O's band, Breakneck, to open the show, warming up the home crowd before the Players took the stage—with me, joining them on guitar.

We'd be followed by Dirty.

As we ducked in through the door—me, Taylor and Liam—we were greeted by Talia and Brody. Talia had someone take our umbrella and coats. Then there was a lineup of musicians and VIPs waiting to shake my hand as I made my way through the halls toward the stage. They all hugged me and welcomed me back, and as we moved toward the noise, the beat of the music, I felt like I was returning to the heart of the scene that I helped shape into what it was right at this moment.

Dean was already there, beer in hand, wearing a guest pass.

“Never thought I'd see the day,” I said, tapping his pass.

“What can I say,” he said, throwing his arms out. “I'm a fan.” He gave me a huge hug and a pat on the back and told me, “Love you, brother. Gabe would be proud.”

After that, I greeted the members of the Players, who were already there with their partners and friends. Summer and her husband, Ronan, who was handling security along with Dirty's head of security, Jude. Xander and Courteney. Ash and Danica. Matt, who was flying solo, as far as I could tell.

Brody's wife, Jessa was there, along with all the members of Dirty and their partners. There was a whole bunch of us crammed into the hall that ran just behind and below the stage, drinking, talking, getting pumped up for the show.

In reality, I knew they were all here for me. They could've just as easily been up in the VIP room or wherever. But they'd all showed up to look me in the eye and wish me well.

This was a big night for the Players.

But it was an even bigger night for me, and everyone knew it.

Out front, there were a ton of people Brody had invited. Trey and his team from Brick House Records. Media. More VIPs, family and friends up in the VIP room.

And of course, fans.

I could hear them now, making a whole lot of noise for Breakneck as they finished their set. The band started to come offstage, and when they saw me, half of them did a double-take, like they couldn't believe I'd actually made it.

"Looking forward to the show, man," Johnny told me, and then they headed off to clean up.

I knew that meant the Players' set was coming, and the nerves started to hit.

"We knew this would happen," Taylor told me calmly. "Just breathe."

So I breathed.

Talia brought me a cold beer and I thanked her. I took a sip and did my best to relax, just trying to focus on one thing at a time. But relaxing in the middle of this chaos was impossible to do.

Security was tight every way I looked, and it put me more at ease. This was no joke. We were firmly entrenched in the big leagues, and we'd barely shot out of the gate.

*No going back now.*

That was what Gabe used to say whenever we hit some scary crossroads that would take us deeper into the unknown—and higher into the stratosphere of fame and fortune.

*No going back now, brother.*

The members of Dirty all came by to wish me a great show, and Zane said, "I hope this means we'll be seeing you around some more." I knew he was talking about the tour. The world tour that Dirty was headlining, with the Players opening up. It kicked off in mere weeks, and I'd basically agreed to

stay with the Players and come on the tour—as long as I could get through this night.

I'd told Brody and the band, *I just need to get up onstage again, and make sure.*

They'd agreed to those terms like a bunch of drunken fools.

I hadn't signed a contract yet, but no one seemed all that worried about it. Except me. So much was riding on this night, but in the end... I just wanted to enjoy it.

And decide about the tour tomorrow.

"I hope so," I told Zane and the rest of his band, who were crowded around.

"Like maybe we'll see you at our wedding next month?" Seth said casually, his arm around Elle.

"Yeah," I said. "I'll be there."

I wondered if I really meant it. I was pretty sure I did, but right now, I was just taking it one day at a time.

There were still good days, bad days, and worse days.

But there were also incredible days.

Tonight was the Players' first live show for an audience. This show had been put off a bit already, basically to accommodate me. And not because I was stalling. Because I was trying to get as much therapy in as I could before I stepped onstage.

Besides continuing on with my talk therapy, I'd been hanging out with a horse.

Taylor was loving it, even when I came home smelling like horse shit.

I was loving it, too. Who knew? I'd never really pictured myself as a cowboy or anything.

But when you looked into an animal's eyes and you couldn't bullshit it because it could *feel* when you were bullshitting it... it was fucking humbling. It kinda stripped everything else away and left you with nothing but to dig deep and do the work. I'd been enjoying it so much, I'd been considering getting a rescue dog. I wasn't sure how Freddy would feel about that, though. I'd also considered buying my own horse. It could be a therapy horse, so other people could also work with it and benefit from it. That was one of the things my therapist often harped on about: service to others was a way to get me off the insane merry-go-round of my own dark shit.

That wasn't exactly how he put it, but I got the gist.

The large strides forward I'd had in such a short amount of time with the horse therapy kind of made me feel like an idiot for thinking I'd tried everything and failed. That nothing could ever work to make me feel better. That was some massive ego talking. Like my problems were so big and special that no one could ever understand or help me fix myself?

I'd gotten past that hurdle by now.

At this point, I was hungry for change, growth, and just fucking grateful to be here, playing with a band again. We'd rehearsed ourselves to the bone and there was nothing left to do but step off the cliff into the unknown, with a heap of faith and trust.

The Players at my back.

And my woman at my side.

I stood back against the wall, right next to Taylor, enjoying the beer Talia had given me, and kept focusing on the small things. My breaths, deep and steady. The cold glass of the beer bottle, solid in my hand. The sound of Taylor's laughter next to me.

My heart beating steady in my chest.

I watched Zane and his wife, Maggie, for a moment, talking closely, his hand buried in her hair. I knew he was a recovered alcoholic; the whole world knew that. I also knew he was now many years sober. And if he could survive that, and he could still be here, fronting Dirty, and they could make it work together... it gave me hope for me and Taylor. It gave me hope for the show tonight.

If I could be present, get out of my own head and just take this one moment, one song at a time, I knew I could make it through.

When Zane noticed me staring, he raised his chin and I tipped my beer his way. Then he swaggered over. "Take a picture, it lasts longer," he said, flashing me his dazzling frontman grin.

"I was just thinking. Did we really make it this far?"

"Yeah. Fuck yeah, we did." He clapped me on the shoulder.

"So," I said, broaching the subject awkwardly, which was the only way I knew how, "Brody says you get stage fright?"

Zane's eyebrow cocked, like, *Say what?*

*Way to start a conversation.*

"He told me because I go through something similar," I added. "Hope that's okay. He was giving me one of his managerial pep talks."

"Fuck, I love those," he said with sarcasm, but I was pretty sure he meant

it. Then he smirked. “Lot of people have stage fright. It’s no big thing.”

“You still get it?”

“Not nearly as bad as I used to.” He tossed his arm around Maggie, who’d wandered over. “Life is good now.”

“Right.”

“How about you?” he said, his ice-blue eyes narrowing as he studied me.

“Uh, I’m working on it. Any tips for how you get yourself out there every time?”

He shrugged. “For me, the want of being out there, doing my thing, overshadows the fear, every time.”

“That’s good.”

He eyed me, considering. “Maybe you need to ask yourself if you want it enough to fight that fight, and win, every time you have to step out there.”

“You can do it,” Maggie said simply. “You’re a professional, Cary. Music is your gift. You were born to share it with the world. Just remember you belong out there.”

“Thanks, Maggie.”

Taylor slipped her arm around me, almost unconsciously, as she chatted with Danica, and Zane gave me a smirk. He tapped a knuckle to my beer in cheers before he turned away.

I realized, as I looked around, that *everyone* had been through something to be here. A lot of these musicians had come from broken homes, broken families. They came from little more than nothing, with a talent and a dream.

Zane and Seth had overcome addiction.

Xander had fought his way back after losing his band and one of his best friends.

Hell, he lost me, too, for a long while there.

And I knew that every one of us here had that same innate drive, the hunger I’d seen in every musician I’d ever known who made it big.

We wanted it. We wanted to be here more than anywhere else.

Zane was right. And I definitely wanted it enough to fight the fight and win.

I went over to Xander and gave him a hug. He was lingering a few feet away from me and Taylor, like he was on standby in case he was needed. I knew he was probably worried about me losing my shit. So I told him, “I’m glad we’re doing this together. I don’t know if I ever told you that.”

“I know, brother.”

My sister slipped her arm around Xander's waist and he put his arm around her shoulders. It was rare that I'd seen them together like this, maybe because I pretty much avoided it like I avoided everything else. But I could see how good they were together. They were at ease with each other. She was wearing her engagement ring, and I made a silent promise to myself that no matter what it took, no matter what kind of day I was having, I'd get myself to their wedding.

Tonight was just the first giant step off the cliff. If I could do this one thing... I could do anything.

*No going back now.*

*Let go of your ghosts.*

"How are you feeling?" my sister asked me.

"Fine," I said. Usually, that might've been shorthand for *I don't want to talk about it*. Courteney knew that. But this time, I meant it. "Just want to get out there already."

Just then, one of the crew darted past, handing me one of my guitars. "Two minutes," he said.

Courteney smiled at me as I strapped the Fender on. "Have I told you how cool it is having you for my big brother?"

"Even now that you've got your own rock star?" I gave Xander a little shove.

"Yeah, he's a rock star," she said. "But you're just... *cool*. Rock star or not."

"Thanks, babe," Xander muttered.

Courteney gave me a hug. "You're gonna do great."

"Thanks, cupcake," I said in her ear, and she smiled.

I let her go, and suddenly I could hear Trey out front, welcoming us to the stage.

I could feel the adrenalin mounting in all of us as the Players gathered around. They slapped me on the back. We gave each other hugs. "You've got this," Xander told me.

"You're my hero," my sister said.

Then I gave Taylor a final hug and a kiss. "This is it," she said, and her deep-sea eyes locked with mine. She smiled at me.

Then I let her go.

Because I had to walk out there alone.

Summer went out first, and the crowd lost it. Matt followed, then Xander.

Then me.

And when I stepped out onstage, I could hear Gabe somewhere in all the noise.

*This is my favorite day that I've ever been alive.*

He was just fourteen when he first said those words to me, but he'd repeated them often, right before we'd step out onstage together. Especially when I was having a bad day. When my anxiety was high, just standing there with me, while I struggled to keep control.

It was like he was telling me each time, *I love you, brother.*

I looked down at my wrist, where I wore the brown leather bracelet. The new one that Taylor had given me. She gave it to me at Christmas, and told me that she'd tried to give it to me on my birthday. On the inside, it said *Heart of Gold.*

It had taken me a while. Weeks. But today, I'd finally taken off Gabe's old bracelet and put the new one on.

When Ash came running out onstage, I didn't even have to look up to know it. The energy of the crowd and the band told me so. He had his mic in hand, but he didn't say a word.

I looked up, over the crowd.

Then we ripped into "Panic Room," and we blew the doors right off the house.



The venue was a blur of color and noise beyond the music. I focused on my guitar, and I hung out by Xander's drum kit as often as I could. But it was easy enough to let Ash dominate the front of the stage. With him and Matt up there, I could just disappear into my head and focus on the songs.

I couldn't believe how fast it was over. We played ten songs, not even the whole album, plus a cover of Panic! At the Disco's "Golden Days," a song from Danica's vortex playlist that we'd jammed on a lot, that showcased Ash's vocals to perfection. We finished up with our original, "Fuck Me Two Times," which had nothing to do with the Doors' song "Love Me Two Times" except the tongue-in-cheek title. It was our most hyper, high-energy party song and ended things on a high note.

We stumbled off the stage sweating and delirious with the high of victory



thudding through our veins, like we'd just conquered the fucking world.

It was just a small show. A small venue with a hot, local crowd.

But it was our first show. And it fucking rocked.

My body was so abuzz with adrenalin and joy, I was half-hard.

Unfortunately, Xander pulled me into one of Dirty's dressing rooms for Dirty's pre-show round of bourbon before Taylor even got backstage. She'd been watching the show from the VIP room upstairs. By the time she found us, we were on our second shot, and I passed one to her. Then Brody and Trey and about five hundred other people wanted to talk to me. So I missed the chance to screw Taylor in some dark corner before Dirty took the stage.

While Dirty played their set, I hung out with Taylor backstage. I didn't feel comfortable going out front or up to the VIP room, so we watched the show from the side of the stage. We stood with Maggie and Jesse's wife, Katie; neither of them ever seemed to leave their husband's sides unless they were onstage. Katie's best friend, Devi, was there too, chatting with Taylor. Taylor had been hanging out with the girls in the Dirty family a lot, ever since she went to work for the band, and they'd all gotten really close.

Even now, whenever I was too burnt out from rehearsals or therapy to socialize, Taylor was always game to go out, hang out with her friends.

I loved that she had that support while I was in my cave.

And of course, Brody was there. He never left his position, standing with his arms crossed over his chest, right next to Jude, the both of them watching the show like they'd never seen it before.

I could only hope that the Players would retain that kind of devotion from their team, over a decade down the road.

When Dirty finally came offstage after their encore, a few lights held onstage, cueing the crowd that the show wasn't over. The audience kept clapping and stomping and screaming, whistling, waiting for the band to come back out. Another encore? A final bow? Sounded like they'd happily take whatever they could get.

I'd forgotten this feeling.

This moment, when the show was done and the crowd was still hungry for more. The high of it. The satisfaction.

But this show wasn't really done.

Zane swaggered over to me, shirtless, looking like some vampire out of Twilight with all the sparkle and general aura of trouble he was emanating, plus, the masses chanting for his blood out there. "You ready for this?"

“Never. But let’s do it anyway.”

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder. Then he headed out to the stage and the crowd exploded with lust. The members of Dirty followed, one by one, until it was our turn.

I hugged Taylor. “See you in a bit, babe.”

“What’s happening?” She blinked at me. “You guys are going back out there?”

“Yup.” I kissed her, and someone slapped me on the back. I glanced back to find Xander.

“You good?” he asked me.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

He gave me a quick hug. And as the other members of my band gave their partners a final hug or kiss before heading back out onstage, my gaze snagged on Taylor’s best friend, hugging her husband... and then hugging Matt.

I turned to nudge Taylor, and nodded toward Danica and Matt. I leaned in to ask her, “Did you ask her about that yet?” Because we’d both agreed that there was a story there.

Taylor glanced over at them. “I didn’t have to ask. She tells me everything. You know... eventually.”

“And... you’re not gonna tell me?” I deduced.

She smiled at me. “It’s not my story to tell.”

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We all gathered onstage for the final song of the night. All the members of Dirty and the Players. And me.

Zane took the mic and introduced me. “Hey kids, this is Cary Clarke,” he said, and that was all it took. The place exploded in bloodlust, for Zane, or for me, I wasn’t even sure. Both of us? He gave me a hug and said in my ear, “Go kill this thing you’ve been dragging around.” Then he held the mic out to me.

His icy blue eyes held mine under the bright stage lights, and a shiver went through me.

*Let go of your ghosts.*

But before I could take the mic, Ash reached past me and grabbed it

himself. “Yo, I’ve just gotta say something quick.” The crowd screamed some more, and when they’d finally quieted down a bit, Ash said, “He didn’t want us to make any speeches in his honor or anything, but this just needs to be said. The Players wouldn’t be standing here right now without you, brother.” He turned to me and did a deep bow as the audience went nuts, then handed me the mic.

I took the mic and looked out over the crowd as they whistled and applauded. When I looked out there, my future looked so goddamn bright, it almost blinded me.

I promised myself right there that if I made it through this night, I was going on tour with the Players. I was joining the band.

And I was going to marry Taylor.

I felt like I could do anything, with her by my side.

I could see her over at the side of the stage, watching. Listening. Cheering me on.

“Thank you,” I said, and the crowd noise swelled again. When things had quieted down enough that people could hear me again, I said, “I literally couldn’t be here right now without all of you. And everyone on this stage. Everyone backstage. And all the beautiful people sitting up there.” I pointed and dragged my finger along the big windows on the VIP room, up at the back, overlooking the club.

I glanced side stage and I could see Taylor, standing with the other girls. She blew me a kiss.

I looked down at the line of monitors in front of me, the black of the speakers helping me to concentrate.

“I’d say the most important part of my job as a music producer is knowing how a song should sound. Knowing who should play what part, what instrument, and how they should play it. And being able to communicate what I hear in my head to the musicians I’m collaborating with. So, I’ve taken this special song and tried to reimagine it for the musicians on this stage. We’ve been rehearsing it in secret and I think we have a pretty good lineup to play it for you.”

The crowd kept applauding, whistling. I knew I had them on the edge of their seats for whatever was about to come.

I turned to hold up a hand in each musician’s direction as I spoke. “We’ve got Xander Rush on drums. Matt Brohmer is on bass. And Ashley Player is putting down his guitar on this one to kill it on lead vocals. I’m gonna play

lead guitar and do some backing vocals. And I want to welcome the members of Dirty, who're helping us out." More applause. More screams. "Jesse Mayes and Seth Brothers are gonna play some rhythm guitar for us. Zane Traynor is gonna play the shit out of his harmonica. And Dylan Cope is gonna absolutely slay this thing on maracas and the güiro. That's this scraper instrument..." People laughed as Dylan scraped the güiro in his mic with focus.

I looked at Taylor again. I could see her clearly. Her hand went to her face, and I knew she knew what song it was. Wasn't every day a güiro made an appearance at a rock concert.

"But maybe most important of all," I said, "to pull this off right, we've got the absolutely stunning Elle Delacroix up here to grace us with some killer vocals. We've got some big shoes to fill on the vocal harmony here. Mick Jagger and Merry Clayton sang on the original track, and we're gonna do our own thing tonight. Elle's gonna blow you away. I hope you enjoy it."

"You forgot Summer," Ash said into his mic.

"Oh, shit," I said, and people kinda laughed and whistled for Summer. "The beautiful Summer Sorensen is gonna play piano."

Summer waved at the crowd.

"I didn't forget you," I told her. "I'm just nervous. And you're so quiet back there."

"No one's ever accused me of being quiet," she said, and the crowd laughed. "But this is your moment, sweetheart."

The crowd exploded with noise again, for me. Then a hush spread through the room as I stood at the mic in silence. I took a deep breath. A few people started saying my name.

*Cary... Cary... Cary...*

It spread, growing into a chant that resounded through the room, then broke apart in applause and whistles and screams.

"I just have one more thing to say," I said. "This night would not be possible for me without one special person who came into my life recently. When my best friend, Gabe, died..." The whole room quieted down to hear me, and I took another deep breath before going on. "It really felt like I'd fallen into a black hole. We'd just bought a recording studio together, and I thought when we got home from tour we'd hang out there and record our next album, so we could produce it ourselves and have creative control over it. Make it the album we most wanted to make together. But that didn't

happen. We never got to make that album. So I called the studio Little Black Hole.” I paused to take another breath as the crowd waited, listening. “I couldn’t even walk in the door there. But then this beautiful woman walked into my life. And she brought light into the dark. She made some things possible for me that I thought might never be possible again. So right now, I want to play this special song for a special girl named Taylor. This was Gabe Romanko’s favorite Rolling Stones song, and it’s her favorite, too.” I looked over at her. “I love you, Taylor.”

I started into “Gimme Shelter” on my Gibson, and Elle came in with that haunting falsetto that kicked off the song. Then Ash started accompanying her. The song built and it was fucking magical. Goosebumps broke out all over my body. Cold sweat ran down my spine.

By the time it was done, I could feel the whole room beating like one giant heart to the rhythm of the song.

I could feel the strange emptiness of Gabe not being there on the stage with me.

But I could feel the love and the energy of everyone around me, too.

As the lights went down and the roar of the crowd went up, the musicians all swarmed me. I hugged them all, quickly, and made my way to the side of the stage, where Taylor was waiting. Her eyes shone with tears as I pulled her into my arms.

“I love you so much,” she said.

“I’m shaking with adrenalin,” I said, burying my face in her hair. “I can’t believe I did it.”

“You did it, baby.” She hugged me tight.

“I love you,” I told her, kissing her neck. “How soon can we get naked?”

Taylor laughed as my hands wandered down to her ass. “Are you always this handsy after you come offstage?”

“Maybe? Do you like it?”

“Yes...” She groaned a little, clinging to me as I nipped her ear with my teeth.

“Bonus, people will leave us alone if we’re making out...”

“Then let’s make out,” she said breathlessly.

I kissed her, steering her back into the shadows and up against a wall. I could hear people all around us, but no one came close.

“Baby,” she said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Proud enough to take a ride on my cock back in the dressing room?”

She laughed again, and she took my face in her hands so she could look in my eyes. “Proud enough to be your woman for the rest of my life.” Then her smile faded as I took her face in my hands and the mood grew serious.

“Then you should marry me,” I told her.

“Then you should propose.”

I kissed her again. “Maybe I will. If you promise to show up at every show wearing a low-cut dress like this.” Then I kissed my way down between her breasts, and hooked a finger into her dress—and her bra. I tugged, exposing one taut pink nipple, and swiped my tongue over it.

“Oh—that’s dirty.” She wrapped her arms around my neck, trying to hide what I was doing, as I sucked her nipple into my mouth. “Everyone’s here...”

I swept my tongue around her nipple, then kissed my way back up to her lips. “Welcome to rock ‘n’ roll, sweetheart,” I said. “It’s a dirty business.”

She grinned and I kissed her, delving my tongue into her sweet mouth. My heart was thudding, steady and strong in my chest—the high of having her here, in my corner, in my arms, fueling me. I slid a hand up between us to cup her breast, teasing the bared nipple with my thumb.

“Let me inside you,” I murmured, kissing my way along her jaw to her ear. “I want to be inside you for the rest of the night.”

“Literally?”

“As long as we can both handle it.” I sucked her earlobe into my mouth and squeezed her nipple, rolling it in my fingers. I could feel her tremble, her body hot against mine. “Actually... I want to be inside you for the rest of my life.”

Her eyes locked with mine.

“But that part’s more symbolically speaking,” I clarified.

“Uh-huh.” She sighed as I kissed her neck again. She fixed her dress, covering her breast. Then she took my hand. “Let’s go get started, then.”

“On which part? The physical or the symbolic...?”

“Both?” she suggested with a grin.

“Lead the way,” I said, and she tugged me along with her, down the stairs and behind the stage. Through the organized chaos of the crew at work. The band members scattered around with friends, talking, drinking. Security and management standing by, overseeing everything.

Everyone drifting past me like I was a ship, passing through. There was a certain rhythm to it. A flow. Like a current, deep underwater.

An undertow, drawing us down.

For the first time in a very long time, I flowed right along with it, carried on the stream.

It didn't sweep me under.

"You know what?" I said, and Taylor turned back to hear me. "This is my favorite day that I've ever been alive."

She smiled. "Me, too."

# Epilogue

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**Cary**



## Wake Me Up

---

*August*

“**W**here is she?” I asked Talia, as Liam guided me through backstage.

“Dressing room.”

She pointed us in the right direction and we headed straight there. I’d been on the road with the Players and Dirty for months, and tonight, my band was opening a hometown arena show in Vancouver, on the eve of a scheduled tour break. Which meant the vibe was different than at an away show—the backstage area thick with VIPs: friends, family and people from the local industry who’d been invited to party with us.

I brushed past them all. All I wanted was to get into that room with Taylor.

I really should’ve been with her all day. But nominations for the MTV Video Music Awards had come out a couple of weeks ago, the Players were nominated for several, and since this was the first time we were back in Vancouver since then, Brody had lined up a bunch of media interviews for us. My business partner—Taylor—had approved of my schedule for today even though she knew it conflicted with the ultrasound appointment.

That was how much she wanted me to do the interviews. She’d convinced me to do them, somehow, but all the way here in the car I was going nuts. I hated that I’d missed the ultrasound for a work thing. But I was still figuring out how to balance everything. My work life and my home life, without going overboard on one or the other.

Often, I took my cues from her. Taylor just seemed to navigate both so effortlessly, like she was born for this life.

We found the door with the handmade sign taped to it; it had a picture of the *Lovely Madness* album cover and said *Cary’s Dressing Room*. I threw the

door open and found Taylor waiting for me. She hopped to her feet, her belly bulging in her black dress. She had an undeniable glow about her. With her natural, dirty-blond hair—now featuring a few pink streaks underneath—worn down around her shoulders and the sparkle in her eyes when she saw me, she was a fucking vision.

I'd gotten her pregnant accidentally, right at the beginning of the tour. Somehow, the pill had failed us.

Fate?

But neither of us was exactly upset about it.

“Holy fuck, I missed you.”

I heard Liam close the door for us, leaving us alone, as I swept her into my arms. I laid a kiss on her, dipping her back a bit.

“Wow,” she gushed. “We had breakfast together this morning. You can't possibly miss me that much.”

“I missed everything,” I said.

“It's all good,” she assured me. “How were the interviews?”

“Good.”

“I'm so glad. It's important for you to do these things. Without me always holding your hand.”

“I know.”

The band had divided and conquered, and I'd done three interviews with Xander and Summer today. Ash and Matt did the other ones. I still didn't love interviews, but I could get through them as long as Xander was with me. I still needed that, either him or Taylor by my side.

We'd been living a normal-ish life; I was no longer so racked with fear every time I left the house. There were good days and bad days, but thanks to my woman, a horse, some incredible therapists, and a lot of hard work and dedication, I'd gotten control of my anxiety and almost eliminated it completely from my life.

Taylor was a huge part of that. She took care of my schedule, made sure I had all the support I needed on the road and at home, and made sure that the demands of band life didn't overwhelm me.

Before we went on tour, I'd made her my business partner, because she was so much more to me than an assistant. She was my life partner. Now she was my partner in my production company, in Little Black Hole, everything I had. That way, she'd reap half the rewards of everything I did, and carry half the responsibility, too. We were in this together. And she'd stepped right up,

been amazing in every way.

Because of her, touring was not only possible, it was enjoyable.

I really wasn't sure how I'd get through it if she had to stop touring at some point in the pregnancy. But I'd promised her I wouldn't freak out about it in advance. And I'd promised the band that if that day came, we'd sit down and talk about it, figure it out together.

That I wouldn't give up on any of them.

"It's okay to miss one or two things because you're working," she reminded me. "You've come to every other thing that you possibly can. And you came to the other ultrasound."

"Yeah. But—"

"The important thing is... you got everything done and you didn't stress out. I'm proud of you." She looked me deep in the eyes. "No panic?"

"No panic." I squeezed her. "But I'm definitely gonna lose it if you don't cough it up soon. Did you get it?"

"Yes. I got it." She grinned, pulling an envelope from her purse.

Because I wasn't with her at the appointment, we'd agreed that she'd ask the doctor not to tell her or show her the gender of our baby. Instead, she had it written down, so the two of us could find out together if we were having a boy or a girl.

"They let me hear the heartbeat, too," she said. "And all I could think was, if Cary was here, he'd hear music in it."

"You're killing me. I don't ever want to miss something this important again."

"I know. But you didn't miss it. It's right here. And anyway, life happens. We can't always control it."

She was right. I still hated that part; letting go of control. It wasn't comfortable for me.

But at least there were still some things I could control. Or try to.

And I had one of them in my back pocket right now.

"You're here now," she said, reaching up to kiss me. "And you're happy, and that's all that matters to me." She waved the envelope in the air. "Well... and this."

"You sure you didn't see anything?"

"Nope. I was very good. I looked away when she told me to. I didn't want to see it without you there. It's impossible to see much, anyway, without them telling you exactly what you're looking at. It's all very blobby and

wiggling around... I definitely saw the head, though. And an arm. Either that or a very large penis, but I don't think so. It was on the wrong end of the body. I think."

I wrapped my arms around her. "Maybe it was a giant penis and he takes after his daddy."

"Nope. Sorry, babe. This was freakishly big. Had to be an arm. Or maybe it was a foot? I'm telling you. It's a mystery blob." She pulled something else from her purse. "Look, they got this amazing picture, though."

She handed me a strip of images they'd printed out for us. And she was right, it was pretty much a blobby thing. But one of the images was amazing. It was a closeup of our baby's head. I could see the profile, the teeny, tiny little nose, and a little fist held up in front of its face.

"Meet your baby, Cary," Taylor said softly, slipping her arm around my waist. "I know we saw it before, but it was more of a jellybean situation. Now it's got a face."

It totally did. I couldn't stop staring at it.

"And look," she said, "it's doing a fist pump, like, 'Hells yeah!'"

"Wow." I studied it, my eyes misting up with tears. "Okay, we have to stop calling our baby *it*. Open that envelope."

"Okay." She poked her finger under the flap dramatically, then paused. "But before we do... I just want to tell you. I know we haven't talked about picking a name yet, and I know you've been thinking about it but not saying anything, because I know I've been thinking about it. And I think if it's a boy we should name him Gabriel."

I stared at her. The tears were creeping up and I just wanted to keep it together long enough to process all of this.

"You know," she prompted, when I said nothing, "after Gabe?"

"Yeah. That's a good idea." I poked at the corner of my eye, trying to force back the tears. "But what if it's a girl?"

She shrugged. "Then Gabrielle. Or Gabriella. Whatever you like. They're both pretty."

"Okay, open it before I fall apart."

Taylor grinned, tears sparkling in her eyes, and we squished together to look as she ripped open the envelop.

"Careful, you'll rip it," I said, both of us craning our necks to glue our eyes to the paper as she unfolded it. Three words had been written on the paper for us.

*It's a boy.*

"Baby Gabe," Taylor said, her voice catching, and I got shivers all through my body. "Oh my God," she whispered, and she buried her face in my shirt as I buried my face in her hair. "Tell me you're happy."

"I'm so, so happy," I said, my throat scratchy. *Shit.* I had to hold it together here. I had a show to play in like half an hour. Plus, I wanted this moment to be perfect for Taylor.

*Four in. Hold four. Four out...*

"You okay?" she asked, smiling a little.

I laughed nervously. "I'm good. Just need to breathe so I don't pass out." I was kidding, thankfully. I hadn't had a full-on panic attack since my birthday last year.

She held up the photo again. "Look at him. He's a little rock star already." Then she looked at the paper again. "Our little boy. I can't believe it."

I looked, but then I had to look away before I started crying. He wasn't even here yet and I was a mess. I took another deep belly breath and cleared my throat.

"That's weird, though," I said, pulling an envelope of my own out of my back pocket. "Because the doctor sent me this."

"What?" She grabbed it, tearing into it. "You didn't open it?"

"We're supposed to open it together," I reminded her.

She pulled out the paper, unfolded it and read it. She was angling it toward me so I could read it with her, but I didn't need to look. I'd written the words myself.

*Will you marry me?*

When she turned to me, I was already down on one knee. Her mouth fell open.

"How dare you!" she said. "I thought this one was gonna say we were having triplets or something, and I was TRIPPING." Then the words on the paper seemed to hit her and she started to cry.

I lifted the ring toward her. "Will you be my wife, Taylor Lawson/Lawczynski?"

"Yes! But can I please take your last name? Clarke is so much easier."

"Of course."

"Shit, I can't even see the ring." She swiped tears from her eyes. I slid it onto her finger and she yanked me to my feet.

“Don’t you want to inspect the ring before you say yes?” I teased.

“Shut up,” she said, and kissed me.

I got completely lost in tongue-screwing her face as she moaned and pressed against me. Then someone knocked on the door.

“Ignore it,” I muttered, diving back in.

Taylor moaned again, her hands sliding down to my ass.

Then the knock came again. And the door opened.

“Hey—Ohhh, I’ll come back.” We looked up to find Katie Mayes’ best friend, Devi, poking her head into the room.

“It’s okay, Devi,” Taylor said, pulling away from me. “What’s up?”

Devi opened the door a little wider. “I’m just rounding everyone up. Jesse wants to do the cake for Katie before Dirty hits the stage.”

“We’re coming,” Taylor said. She looked up at me. “It’s Katie’s birthday today, if you didn’t know.”

“I didn’t.”

“There you are!” Danica said, popping into the doorway. She grinned when she saw me. “Are you guys coming?”

“We’re thinking about it,” Taylor teased her best friend. “Do we get to smush cake in Katie’s face, though?”

“Of course,” Devi said, just as Merritt popped her head in. “Then we’ll eat cake while the bands rock out. And drink, of course.”

“I brought something non-alcoholic for you,” Merritt informed Taylor. She was wearing the same goofy smile as the other two.

“What’s going on?” I said.

Taylor smiled up at me. “I told the girls they had to wait to find out the baby’s gender after we opened the envelope together.”

“The envelope?” Talia said, popping her head in. “Did I hear something about the envelope?”

“What!” Katie appeared, squeezing into the pile of women in the doorway. “Did they open the envelope?”

“I’m seeing torn envelopes and papers all over the damn place,” Devi said.

“Can I tell them?” Taylor asked me.

“Sure.”

“We just found out we’re having a boy and we named him and everything,” she gushed. “We’re calling him Gabe. Also, we just got engaged.”

That news resulted in a pile of women falling through the door to swarm Taylor, lavish her with hugs and check out her ring. They all probably got a better look at it than she had so far.

I got a few hugs, too.

“Congrats, Cary,” Merritt said as she hugged me. “Couldn’t happen to a better guy.”

“I’m expecting parenting tips,” I told her, and she snickered.

“I’ll let you know when I figure some out.”

As we all headed out and over to the green room, I caught glimpses of so many friendly faces. The whole place buzzed with the general bustle of activity and excitement before a show. The dull roar of the crowd could be heard as the arena filled up. The crew was hard at work, getting everything in place for us.

In the green room, my band was waiting. The members of Dirty were all there, too, families in tow; as usual, they were here early to catch the Players’ set and support us. They didn’t have to do that. They could’ve just rolled in to play their own set, but they were true friends.

Family.

Kids were toddling around, too. Brody and Jessa’s boy, Nicky, was almost three now, and they’d just had a baby girl, Ava, not three months ago, around the same time Elle and Seth’s daughter, Emma, turned two. And Jesse and Katie’s boy, Madsen, was almost a year and a half.

We went to chat with Katie and basically distract her as Jesse and Devi got out the cake. Then we all sang “Happy Birthday” to the birthday girl. Katie got to cut the first piece. Then Devi, accompanied by several other girls, including my fiancée, smushed it in Katie’s face.

Jesse laughed, so Katie grabbed him and laid a long, deep kiss on him, and he got cake all over his face, too.

Then Talia told everyone, “Hey guys, I think Taylor has some news to share.”

Taylor reached for me and I took her hand, as everyone turned to look our way. “Do you wanna do the honors?” she asked me.

“No. You do it.” I gave her a kiss on the forehead.

She patted her hand on her stomach. “We’re having a boy. And we’re getting married.” She held up her ring.

Everyone started yelling and piling onto us for hugs, and booze was rolled out. Champagne popped loudly, and Merritt brought Taylor a non-

alcoholic cider.

We tapped our glasses together. “Cheers to you and another incredible show,” she said.

“And a break,” I said.

“I’ll drink to that.”

“Hey, Taylor.” Zane sauntered over to us. “We wanted to invite your husband onstage with us tonight, to play some guitar on ‘Road Back Home.’ This being a home show and all. And him being such a superstar. I mean, if you think he can learn the song in time.” He smirked at me.

“What about Jesse and Seth?” Taylor asked.

“Jesse’s gonna sit this one out.”

“Okay, then,” she said. “He’ll learn the song.”

“Cool.”

“I do enjoy being discussed as if I’m not here,” I said dryly.

Zane shrugged. “Seemed like a decision for management.”

Uh-huh. And that was obviously a little dig. Because I’d basically stolen Taylor from Dirty.

But hey, she was mine first.

Finders keepers, right?

“Maggie, can we get a copy of Dirty’s setlist?” Taylor asked Zane’s wife as she joined us, all business now. “I want to see how much time we have.” She pulled out her phone to check the time.

“For sure.” Maggie took her husband’s hand and gave me a grin before tugging him off into the crowd.

“The women behind the men, huh?” I said. “There seem to be a hell of a lot of you back here these days. You’ve multiplied since the last tour I was on.”

“You can blame Katie and Jesse for that,” Taylor said. “I think they started it.”

“Actually, I think Zane and Maggie got married first.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s true.”

“Now it’s our turn...” I slipped my hands around her hips, tugging her against me.

“Well, we haven’t exactly set a date. We have Dylan and Amber’s wedding to go to first. And your sister’s.”

“I guess that’s true.” I kissed her neck. “You’re gonna be the world’s sexiest bride, though.”



“Quit stalling.” She checked the time on her phone again. “You’re onstage with your band in fifteen. That gives you a few minutes to get started on that song. When you guys come offstage, I expect to see you practicing until you’re called back out to join Dirty onstage.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I kissed her again. “You know, I really kinda like it when you’re bossy.”

She gazed up at me, softening. “I just want to make sure you nail it. It’ll make you happy.”

“Uh-huh. You’re like, the Sharon to my Ozzy,” I mused.

“Oh, God. Don’t you have a better example?”

“Hey, it’s worked for Ozzy’s crazy ass for a hell of a long time.”

“Hmm. Can we have our own reality show, please?”

“Not a chance.”

She laughed.

“You’re everything to me, Taylor,” I told her, growing serious. “Everything.”

“I know, babe. But that’s just because you’re such a hardcore romantic.”

“I am?” I said, feigning innocence.

It was true, I’d really cranked up the wining and dining, so to speak, over the last several months. Trying to make up for how... unconventional... the early days of our relationship had been, maybe.

Taylor was studying me, a soft, dreamy smile on her face. “You know, when I met you, I thought you were strange.”

“I think we’ve established that.”

“I thought you were a little crazy, actually.”

“I know.”

“I thought I might be crazy agreeing to work with you...”

“You probably were.”

“It was the best decision I ever made.”

“Who’s the romantic now?”

She smirked and I gave her a kiss. Then I looked around at the backstage party. There were like sixty people crowded, loudly, into this room. “You know, I used to feel so lost in a crowd like this.”

“And now?” Taylor gazed up at me.

“Better,” I told her. “Much better.” I looked into her deep-sea eyes, wondering aloud, “How did life get this good?”

“I found you,” she said.

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### **Players Series**

(spin-off from the Dirty series)

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[Sweet Temptation \(Players #3\)](#)

[Lovely Madness \(Players #4\)](#)

### **Dirty Series**

[Dirty Like Me \(Dirty #1\)](#)

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[Dirty Like Brody \(Dirty #2\)](#)

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[Dirty Like Seth \(Dirty #3\)](#)

[Dirty Like Dylan \(Dirty #4\)](#)

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THANK YOU so much for reading *Lovely Madness*!

As a reader, your voice has power, and I deeply appreciate your help in spreading the word about my books.

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The link below will take you directly to this book's Amazon review page in your region:

**[Lovely Madness on Amazon](#)**

With enormous gratitude,  
Jaine

## Acknowledgments

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*Lovely Madness* is the twelfth book I've written in this world (!), and you may have to pinch me so I can fully absorb that. Every book has its challenges; I never seem to make it easy on myself with simple storylines! This one is no exception at a massive 158,000 words and featuring one of the toughest characters and storylines I've ever written.

I have a ton of empathy for Cary... but how to write a romantic hero who lives in fear and still make him swoon-worthy? How to tell his story, a story of pain and loss, grieving and mental illness, with honesty and integrity, while keeping the beating heart of the love story alive? I hope I've accomplished just that, and even if this book broke your heart a little, I hope you fell madly in love with Cary like Taylor and I have.

A huge thank you goes out to everyone who's supported this book and this series, and supported me while writing it. My amazing readers. My vibrant readers group, the VIPs. My passionate ARC Team. The bloggers and release blitzers who've helped spread the word. My author friends, and my friends and family, who continue to champion me, cheer me on, and send love, even if it's often been virtual during this strange pandemic year. What a time to be writing the story of a recluse; I'm sure there were times in 2020 when we all felt Cary's isolation.

Dad, thank you for letting me bounce all things police, from bomb threats to

break-ins, off of you to make sure I got it right.

Mr. Diamond, all the thank yous for all the things. You are the best partner a writer girl could have. I promise I'm already hard at work on the next book. But I can hear you doing your online workout in the next room, and is it wrong that I'm enjoying the manly grunting noises? It's been fourteen years and I love you like that first date when we missed the movie because we couldn't stop talking to each other and time ceased to matter. We were who we were the day we met. It doesn't change; it just gets better.

Much love,  
Jaine

## Playlists

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As always, some of the songs on the *Lovely Madness* playlists are mentioned in this book; others are songs that captured the feel of a certain scene or that I listened to while writing the book.

The playlists feature rock music, of course, but they also include a lot of other genres that I, and the characters in the book, enjoy as well.

The *Lovely Madness* playlist is especially close to my heart, as it includes so many incredible Vancouver-based and Canadian musical artists, in an homage to the characters and the “world” of this book. (Canadian artists are in **bold**, in case you’re interested in knowing which artists on the playlists are part of the “real” Canadian music scene.)

*You’ll find the links to the full playlists on Spotify and Apple Music [here](#).*

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### **The *Lovely Madness* Playlist**

*Indestructible* — **Matthew Good Band**

*The Day I Tried to Live* — Soundgarden

*Madhouse* — **Allan Rayman**

*Sparks* — Coldplay

*Paint It Black (feat. Ranya) [Epic Trailer Version]* — Hidden Citizens  
*Hello To Me* — **Allan Rayman**  
*Maybe Tomorrow* — Stereophonics  
*Heaven Coming Down* — **The Tea Party**  
*See Through* — Beck  
*I'm with You* — **Avril Lavigne**  
*The Middle* — Our Last Night  
*Heavydirtysoul* — Twenty One Pilots  
*Stuck In a Rut* — Stereophonics  
*Excuse Me Mr.* — No Doubt  
*Be Yourself* — Audioslave  
*Sparkle and Shine* — **Econoline Crush**  
*Dream a Little Dream* — Eddie Vedder  
*Running Up That Hill* — Matthew Young  
*Rock N' Roll Is a Vicious Game* — **April Wine**  
*Blue Orchid* — The White Stripes  
*Capsized* — **You+Me**  
*Love the Way You Are* — **Yukon Blonde**  
*Rock and Roll Is Dead* — Lenny Kravitz  
*Load Me Up* — **Matthew Good Band**  
*Everlong* — Foo Fighters  
*Heart of Gold* — **Neil Young**  
*Got Me Wrong* — Alice In Chains  
*Strange Days* — **Matthew Good Band**  
*Afraid of Heights* — **Billy Talent**  
*I'm Shakin'* — Jack White  
*Rescue Me* — Thirty Seconds to Mars  
*Lonely Lonely (Frisbee'd Mix)* — **Feist**  
*Save Your Tears* — **The Weeknd**  
*Saturday Night* — **Yukon Blonde**  
*Van Horn* — Saint Motel  
*This World* — Selah Sue  
*Everything Is Automatic* — **Matthew Good Band**  
*Famous* — **Tom MacDonald**  
*Ten More Days* — Avicii  
*Way Down We Go (Stripped)* — KALEO  
*Everywhere* — Bootstraps



*My Blood* — Twenty One Pilots  
*Look Alive, Stay Alive* — Highly Suspect  
*Days Gone By* — **Bob Moses**  
*I'm a Stranger* — Restless Modern  
*No Ordinary Love* — **You+Me**  
*Fool for Waiting* — **Dan Mangan**  
*Things Ain't Like They Used to Be* — The Black Keys  
*Since I Told You It's Over* — Stereophonics  
*Hey Hey, My My* — Battleme  
*Apparitions* — **Matthew Good Band**  
*Do Me a Favour* — Arctic Monkeys  
*Live Wire* — Meghan Kabir  
*Birds* — Imagine Dragons  
*Brother (Unplugged)* — Alice In Chains  
*Low* — Coldplay  
*Mister Asylum* — Highly Suspect  
*Put a Flower in Your Pocket* — The Arcs  
*Alone* — Kayzo & Our Last Night  
*Stay in My Corner* — The Arcs  
*Paint It Black* — **The Tea Party**  
*Knocking At the Door* — **Arkells**  
*Gimme Shelter* — The Rolling Stones  
*Highway Tune* — Greta Van Fleet  
*Wake Me Up* — Avicii

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### **Cary's Vortex Playlist**

*Load Me Up* — **Matthew Good Band**  
*Come Together* — The Beatles  
*White Room* — Cream  
*And It Stoned Me* — Van Morrison  
*I'm Not the One* — The Black Keys  
*Don't Think Twice, It's All Right* — Bob Dylan  
*Paint It Black* — The Rolling Stones

*Riders On the Storm* — The Doors  
*Fell On Black Days* — Soundgarden  
*Icky Thump* — The White Stripes  
*Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)* — **Neil Young**  
*Don't Let Me Down* — The Beatles  
*Nutshell* — Alice In Chains  
*Have You Ever Seen the Rain* — Creedence Clearwater Revival  
*Trampled Under Foot* — Led Zeppelin  
*Heart of Gold* — **Neil Young**  
*Knockin' On Heaven's Door* — Bob Dylan  
*Everlong* — Foo Fighters  
*Layla* — Derek & The Dominos  
*Brother (Unplugged)* — Alice In Chains

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### **Taylor's Vortex Playlist**

*immortal* — Elley Duhé  
*Heathens* — Twenty One Pilots  
*Humble.* — Our Last Night  
*Master of Puppets* — Metallica  
*Money* — Of Mice & Men  
*Believer* — Imagine Dragons  
*Snow White* — Dennis Lloyd  
*She Hates Me* — Puddle of Mudd  
*Jamie's Cryin'* — Van Halen  
*Afraid (feat. Attitude)* — **Nelly Furtado**  
*Jolene* — Dolly Parton  
*Crazy On You* — Heart  
*Raise Your Weapon* — **Deadmau5**  
*I'm with You* — **Avril Lavigne**  
*The Middle* — Our Last Night  
*I Feel Like I'm Drowning* — Two Feet  
*Girl With One Eye* — Florence + the Machine  
*Jumpsuit* — Twenty One Pilots

*Sail (Unlimited Gravity Remix)* — Awolnation  
*bad guy* — Billie Eilish

# About the Author

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Jaine Diamond is a contemporary romance author, fond of writing the love stories of built and badass men endowed with massive hearts, and strong, complex women she'd love to have a cocktail with.

She lives in beautiful Vancouver, Canada with her real-life romantic hero (Mr. Diamond) and their daughter, where she reads, writes, and drinks copious amounts of tea.

**Find all of Jaine's books on Amazon:**

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**BookBub**

<https://www.bookbub.com/authors/jaine-diamond>

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<https://twitter.com/JaineDiamondXO>

## Preview of Hot Mess

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New to the Players series? Be sure to read the first book, ***Hot Mess***—Ash and Danica’s story!

**[Get \*Hot Mess\* \(Players #1\)](#)**

**Fate. Destiny. Karma... She’s mine.**

It all started with a broken heart.  
And a breakup party.  
Rock stars. Circus freaks. And a bachelorette party.  
Too. Much. Booze.  
An embarrassing tattoo.  
And a twist of fate.

Her name was Danny.

I thought she was The One.  
But then I lost her.  
And I never thought I’d see her again.  
Now... I’m a mess.  
I’ve had my heart broken—more than once.  
And my band’s broken up.  
I’ve sworn to myself that I’ll never fall in love again.

Time to focus on new music and my new band.

As soon as I sober up from my latest breakup party...

But then *there she is*.

Standing in the rain, looking at me.

My dream girl.

My destiny...

*Danny*.

I missed my chance with her once.

Maybe this time... I'll get it right.

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## PROLOGUE

### **Ash**

I'd never believed there was any kind of grand purpose to my life, or to the relationships that came and went from it.

I'd never believed in fate, or karma, or any of that shit.

With all the bullshit I'd been through, why would I?

I definitely wasn't feeling any kind of manifest destiny that day.

I couldn't feel much at all.

Then I got off the chairlift at the top of the mountain, the edge of my snowboard caught in the ice and I went down, hard, twisting the shit out of my knee.

It had been three days since I'd broken up with my girlfriend, Summer. Three days since I'd had my heart smashed.

Three days since I'd started partying.

It was a gorgeous, clear morning. Bluebird day; fresh powder, perfect conditions. I'd planned to spend all fucking day on my board, sweating out the alcohol.

Then, you know, start drinking again.

But then I fell getting off the fucking chairlift.

I was barely able to crawl out of the way in time before the guys getting

off the chair behind me ended up on top of me. It was two of my bandmates, Pepper and Janner, who pretty much pissed themselves laughing at me. Zero sympathy.

I could've boarded circles around either of these guys, hungover or not, but in that moment, they weren't the ones on their asses in the snow.

At least Johnny, who'd been on my chair with me, gave me a hand up.

It was our first run of the day. The four of us had just dragged our asses out of the hotel, and my day of boarding was already done. Couldn't put much weight on my knee, couldn't even coast my ass down the hill. Had to sit down in the snow and wait for help, while Janner sat with me—and laughed at me.

Guess that's what you get after staying up most of the night, drinking way too much tequila with a bunch of rock stars.

And circus freaks.

And a bachelorette party.

Long story.

The medics had to collect me and give me a ride down the hill on a snowmobile. They took a look at my knee and wrapped it up, told me to go easy on it for a few days. I passed when they asked for photos; I wasn't in the mood to play rock star. But I signed their skis before I limped on my way.

By the time I got back to the hotel, it was a ghost town. Everyone was on the slopes. So I got changed and did the only thing there was to do: start drinking. I hit up the empty lounge, sat at the bar, ordered a beer and chatted a bit with the bartender.

Johnny came back to the hotel not long after I did.

I was alone at the bar when he found me. Said he was too hungover to board and ordered himself a drink.

“Shot of bourbon,” he told the bartender. “And one for my wounded friend here.”

I looked at Johnny then. Really looked.

I didn't know Johnny O'Reilly well. I didn't know we were friends.

I'd only met him a few times before. We were both rock stars on the rise, both from Vancouver, spent a lot of time in L.A.. Ran in the same circles, hit the same parties.

Two days before, he'd come to my breakup party in L.A., and here we were.

In Alaska.

Alone in some bar.

And he'd sat down pretty damn close to me.

Johnny had that striking combo of a deep tan, bleach-blond hair and blue-green eyes. The tattoo over his shoulder climbed out of his thermal shirt and up one side of his neck—the shirt that clung to his sculpted chest and arms. He had a guitarist's calloused fingers and clean, square fingernails. Nice hands, white teeth, slow to smile.

And dark, serious eyebrows that made it look like he was always thinking, like he cared about something, about you, even when he didn't.

... And that air of fucking calculated recklessness. The one that told you he was always in control.

Thing was, I kinda had a weakness for guys like Johnny O.

Bad boys.

Not exactly my type, but... tempting.

The shots came and he slid one over to me.

And that was it.

I clinked my shot glass to Johnny's, and when I looked into his eyes, my fate was sealed.

Granted, I sealed it myself.

Maybe I was still kinda drunk from the night before and just getting drunker, but I knew what I was doing. No one forced that shot down my throat.

If I hadn't done that first shot with Johnny that day, no fucking doubt, things would've gone down differently than they did that night.

But then maybe, just maybe, I never would've met *her*.

[Get Hot Mess](#)