



LOVE KILLS BOOK ONE

BRIANNA JEAN

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Acknowledgments

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DEDICATION

This one goes out to Bee.

For being my backbone, my fierce protector.

P, Judah, and I wouldn't have made it without you.

You held us up when we broke down, you told us to breathe when it all became tew much. You listened to our fears and understood that we needed to fumble our way through this journey while leaning heavily on your shoulder. From the first song (version) to the last, you believed in us.

Thank you.

We love you.

But I love you most.

P.S. Buckle up, we ain't done yet;)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Before you start this journey, there are a few things you should know.

Why Are You Here? isn't your traditional love story. This is just the beginning of a story that will take many words, many chapters, and quite a few breakdowns to complete. These characters are the very definition of broken, but this type of damage isn't necessarily fiction.

The traumas that both Judah and Phoenix have experienced altered the way that they think, the way they act, and how they process emotions. Normally I wouldn't bother putting a trigger warning up front like this, so loud and proud, but their story should come with a warning because this won't be for everyone.

This trigger warning will blanket **the whole series**. Don't say I didn't warn you.

Judah and Phoenix will not always be faithful to each other. There will be extremely toxic arguments, drug use, and suicide references all over the place. Both of them have experienced severe emotional trauma and you will feel it as you read. If you are not a fan of turbulent rides, then I suggest you stop here.

These things may not happen in this book, but rather in book two or even three, but I couldn't let you start this journey without knowing upfront what you'll face.

However, with all of that said, you will (hopefully) understand the choices that Judah and Phoenix—along with

the rest of the cast—make because that is the entire point of this series. To give you a behind the scenes look into the life of someone who doesn't want to die but doesn't know how to live, either. Every character is fucked in one way or another. Each person has four or five demons whispering at all times, and this series (and beyond) is about getting them healthy, happy, and coping in a way that will keep them breathing.

Speaking from experience, this process takes time, patience, and a whole lot of mistakes. Can't learn a lesson without fucking up, right?

Right.

In exchange for all the heartache, I can promise you that when you reach book three, you can anticipate and happy fucking ending. One way or another, these two will find happiness. Together.

OFFICIAL TRIGGER WARNING: This is a work of fiction with mature themes such as emotional trauma, drug use, strong language, infidelity, and suicide references. It is not recommended for anyone under the age of 18.

PLAYLIST

Mansion - NF & Fleurie Hot - Young Thug ft. Gunna Beach House - The Chainsmokers Dear Society - Madison Beer There's No Way - Lauv ft. Julia Michaels wonderful - Travis Scott Chernobyl - Oliver Francis The Reaper - The Chainsmokers & Amy Shark My Stress - NF THE SCOTSS - Travis Scott & Kid Cudi Jump - Julia Michaels & Trippie Redd Glow Up - NAV Say You Love Me - Chris Brown & Young Thug What A Time - Julia Michaels & Niall Horan Waterfalls - LVNDVN Pretty Little Fears - 6LACK & J. Cole CAN'T SAY - Travis Scott OTW - Khalid, 6LACK & Ty Dolla \$ign Issues - Julia Michaels

Nobody Else - Eli Sostre

2 Souls on Fire - Bebe Rexha & Quavo Nothing from Me - Norman Perry

Keep You Mine - NOTD & SHY Martin

Creeping - Lil Skies ft. Rich the Kid

ANGELS - Chase Atlantic

Everybody Hates Me - The Chainsmokers

SKYBOX - Gunna

She Goin' Up - Chris Brown & Tyga

Peer Pressure - James Bay & Julia Michaels

Steady - Bebe Rexha ft. Tory Lanez

Mean It - Lauv & LANY

are you sure? - Loote

No Cap - 83 Babies ft. Rich the Kid

Hope You Do - Chris Brown

Emotionally Scarred - Lil Baby

Pull Up - Chris Brown

Stay - David Guetta ft. Raye

Girl You Loud - Chris Brown & Tyga

Make Up Sex - SoMo

Light It Up - Marshmello, Tyga & Chris Brown

WOW - Zara Larsson

Toxic - Kehlani

ADHD - Joyner Lucas

Missing You - PRETTY YOUNG & Victoria Voss

Breathe - Mako & Syris

Listen to the playlist here: https://spoti.fi/3iXfd2n



February

STANDING AT THE CURB, just outside the doors of Jet Blue's arrival terminal at the Los Angeles International Airport, I gripped the handle of my suitcase and took a deep, fortifying breath.

"Do you feel like Miley Cyrus getting off the plane at LAX with a dream and..." my best friend, Frankie, started as she ran her denim blue eyes over my tired frame from tip to toe. Her pretty face scrunched up as she tilted her head and continued with, "Well, no cardigan, but you get the point. Ah! Are you glad to be back?"

There was my Frankie girl, giving me her million-dollar smile over the hood of her white Porsche 911 as cars whizzed by in the background, even at the late hour.

But the question she asked was a loaded one—one I wasn't sure she'd like the answer to, but still, I plastered on my practiced and perfected, fake as fuck smile and confirmed, "Yeah, Franks, I'm glad to be back."

Except, I wasn't sure that was true.

I left California four years ago in favor of moving to New York City to attend college instead of enrolling at the University of California, Los Angeles with Franks. I had my pick, we both had trust funds, and her parents even bought us a nice little home in West Hollywood as a high school graduation present.

At the time, they thought I would stick around after high school, so I felt like a total asshole when I informed them of my plans to move to the East Coast. My worries were irrelevant though, because Douglas and Ruth Skyes were not the most...observant people on the planet. Frankie's parents didn't think twice about the move. They accepted my wish to leave without even a pause in thought.

"Good, get in," Frankie responded, winking at me before pulling open the door and slipping in the car. I followed her lead, getting in on the passenger side, tucking my carry-on in between my legs, and trying to get as comfortable as possible with the insignificant amount of room I had to work with. The luxury car was beautiful, but too fucking small.

"Jesus, Franks, if I had known you'd traded in the SUV for this fucking thing, I wouldn't have bothered with the carryon." I pulled the seatbelt across my body, wiggling back in the seat and sitting up straight to create room on my lap for my tote bag.

"Shhhh." Frankie held a perfectly tan pointer finger to her lips. "Wait 'til you hear her purr, it'll be worth it."

Will it? I didn't think so.

Still, I smiled and glanced over at her, taking notice that even after eleven PM on a Monday night, she looked everything like the model she was. Beautiful.

"All right, let's do this," she said, shaking her hips a little in the seat as she turned the car on. "The 405 has been a real slut at this hour lately, so we might be in for a longer drive than normal."

"Figures. We're coming up on spring break, aren't we? People are vacationing," I offered, looking out the window at the too-familiar sights as she lit up her blinker and pulled into airport traffic.

The palm trees, the Hollywood Hills in the distance, hell, California even had a unique smell. It was all specific to the reason I rarely came home over the last few years. I stopped loving California the day I stopped loving everything, and I was just now, ten years later, trying to turn it all back on.

"Yeah, I'm already over it," Frankie supplied with a lazy roll of her eyes as she fucked around with her phone, trying to drive and hook up the music all at the same time.

"Give me this." I tossed an affectionate smirk her way, grabbing the phone from her hand.

"Thanks, play anything," she said distractedly, not looking away from the road. "So, how long before you start working under Kenji?"

Nerves got tangled in my stomach at the mention of starting work. "I'm not sure. I have to call him and double check when he wants me to start. I told him I'd reach out to him about a week after I got back. I want to unpack and all that."

In other words, I wanted to spend time alone for a week before I was slammed back to reality and was forced to talk to people. That would take some serious getting used to after four years of the exact opposite.

"Perfect, I didn't take any events this week and told Julia I'm off, so it'll be just us." Julia was Frankie's agent, and my best friend's tone was only cautiously excited, like she wasn't sure how I'd feel about spending so much time with her, so she didn't want to appear overly enthusiastic.

She was a smart girl. Too smart for her own good sometimes. I didn't want to hurt her.

"Sounds good, Franks." I smiled as best I could in her direction before returning my attention to the music. After a minute of scrolling, I gave up on her songs and searched TheColt instead, pressing play on his *You've Been Uninvited* album once it came up.

Immediately, that deep as fuck, pained as hell voice swooped through the car and began to settle my anxiety.

Closing my eyes, I tried my best to get lost in the sounds, the lyrics, the dirty bass, and visceral emotions. My flight from the East Coast was long, over five hours—and the three-hour time difference always kicked my ass the first few days, but I couldn't pretend like my internal mood was only because of travel exhaustion.

I was simply...numb.

By moving to NYC right after high school, I isolated myself. Ran the fuck away from everyone who loved me because love wasn't something I could afford, and at the transformative age of eighteen, I didn't understand it, didn't want to try to figure it out.

I saw a plane ticket and a cross-country move as the only way to address the wounds I couldn't figure out how to close. Except, moving locations changed nothing. In fact, everything got worse.

New York allowed me to turn up the volume on my numb. The city and the people within it were not always kind—you're expected to be an asshole on a mission if you're a true local—and I was down with that. For the first three years, at least. In that time, I stopped seeing reason, stopped setting goals—even sealed my fate immediately by seeking out the party scene as soon as I made it to campus my freshman year. It wasn't hard to find other miserable people, so from that moment on, I did it all—took every drug offered, fucked in every and all positions, I was one hundred percent *that* girl. So fucking broken, she couldn't see she was driving herself into an early grave all on her own, without the help of everything she had trapped in her head.

But that was the point, wasn't it?

Yeah, well, my senior year was when everything got *really* fucked.

I was graduating early, after the winter semester instead of spring, and somewhere along the way, I couldn't handle even the most basic of emotions. My peers were too excited for the upcoming graduation, for Christmas right around the corner, and I couldn't escape the taste of hope that constantly lingered in the air around campus.

It was all too much for me—the jealousy, the back and forth with my demons. Rather than trying to go after the happiness I felt in the quad, in the cafeteria and dorm room hallways, I did the opposite. I tried to make it all go away.

Right before I was set to graduate, just two months ago, all the hiding, burying, and rushing to forget led me to nearly take my own life. I wanted it to stop—the overthinking, over analyzing, dissecting every decision I made, being wary of every person I met. I wanted to clear my head of all the bullshit and just cease to be.

There's a saying that's been repeatedly overused, but for people like me, it's our truth... I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. Fucking dead inside. And I couldn't help but relate my fucking issues back to the incident that started it all. I never spoke of it, and neither did the Skyes family—or anyone for that matter. Pretty sure my father's law firm covered the entire thing up.

But obviously, I didn't go through with it.

A lot of things went into my decision to flush the pills down the toilet instead of swallowing them. Mainly, I couldn't stop thinking about what it would feel like to die.

Would I be in pain? Would my lungs stop working first? Or would my throat close up? Would I be able to *feel* the drugs in my system? Or would I just...black out?

Over and over again, I ran the scenarios around in my mind, unable to figure out if I was just being too much of a pussy about the pain, or maybe I didn't like that I had no control. Either way, it didn't matter, because it wasn't the questions that stopped me. It was a song.

A song that changed my mind in under five minutes. A song that told me it was time to come home.

To my best friend, to California sunshine and sunsets, the beach, the dreams, the lifestyle.

So here I was, stuck in traffic on the 405, like no time had passed at all. I was back and determined to find happiness again, but I wasn't naïve enough to believe it'd be easy. I spent

the last ten years trapped in a tragedy with the box taped shut, and while I may not know how long I had before what killed my father killed me, I was determined to stop living in a nightmare, waiting for the day I snapped like he did.

Little by little, moment by moment, the plan was to get myself to a place where my smiles weren't fake and my mind wasn't stunted by fear of the unknown.

For the first time in ten years, I wanted to dream. I wanted to set a goal and achieve it. I wanted to...love. Or learn to love. Or get *ready* for love, or whatever the fuck—I just wanted peace.

I wanted to feel safe from my own mind.

???

April

I WAS LYING IN BED, scrolling through my phone, when Frankie's voice hit my ears in a shouted, "Girl, you better get your ass in here before I bring the party to you."

She was already in the living room, and I could hear her clear as day since our little West Hollywood home wasn't very big. She finished with, "I come get you, or you come out willingly. Either way, we partyin'."

It was girls' night.

Call me sheltered, but I'd never done this whole *self-care* thing, which wasn't surprising, since all of the people I hung out with in the city were just as miserable as me and no one actually talked. We all just hung out, drank, and hid from our individual bullshit. Didn't sound like genuine friendship, and it wasn't. We just happened to be trying to escape reality, all in the same room, at the same time, while pretending we could stand one another. It was sad as hell the more I thought about it, but it was also the only way to lose myself, to shut it all off.

For so long, I was living in survival mode, and Frankie Skyes was doing everything in her power to undo what had

been done, even though she didn't really know how. Neither of us did.

But she was trying, so I got up from my unmade bed and headed to my closet so I could change into something more appropriate than my thong and bralette. I pulled on a pair of soft pink shorts and a matching tank top, before slowly glancing around at the boxes that still needed to be unpacked and the laundry that needed to be done. I was stalling, big time, and I could tell Frankie was starting to question if something was wrong with me.

I didn't have an answer for her. All I knew was my anxiety spiked whenever I thought about making this place a home. I needed to get over it, though, because this place *was* my home until...well, until it wasn't anymore, I guessed. Until Frankie got married and moved out, when I'd most likely buy the place off of her parents and get another roommate.

My plans weren't extensive, but everyone was lucky I had any plans at all.

"I'll be right there," I called out, scanning the white carpet for my fuzzy pink slippers. After locating them near the door leading into our shared bathroom, I slipped my feet in as I passed, padding into the hallway and hoping to god I didn't fuck this up or ruin it with my sour attitude.

Rounding the corner, the living room was all ready to go.

The place was gorgeous and so fucking cozy, with a massive gray L-shaped couch and at least eight pink, black, and white fur covered throw pillows. Fairy lights were strung along the ceiling, a massive white glossed coffee table sat in the center of the room with two love seats for more seating. The flooring was made of white tile, but Frankie picked out a gorgeous dark purple shag rug that took up most of the space. A massive TV, candles, fuzzy blankets were placed on every surface.

It was every girl's Pinterest inspired paradise.

I'd done pretty well faking it around Frankie, I thought at least, so the goal was to make tonight as fun as she wanted it

to be, even if I had to put my acting skills to the test.

"Finally!" Frankie jumped from the couch with an enthusiastic expression, looking so beautiful I just wanted to hug her. That was the thing about Frankie—she was absolutely everything I aspired to be. Sassy, loud, witty, and she had no filter. My girl had long highlighted blonde hair, deep and angry ocean blue eyes, with a smart mouth and a devil-may-care attitude. She was *always* the life of the party.

"I'm sorry." I laughed a little, feeling awkward. "I was, uh...stalling, honestly."

"I know you were." She smirked before it faded into a more serious expression as she lifted her small shoulders. "Why though? We're just hanging out."

That was the other thing about Frankie.

She always knew more than I gave her credit for.

She was observant, intuitive, dominant, and smart as hell. She believed in self-care and being exactly who you are, but Frankie wasn't just someone who said those things, she lived them. As a social media influencer with over two million followers on Instagram, her rise to paid ads and modeling gigs started when she became a UCLA cheerleader during her freshman year of college. With just a few photos taken during the first week of school, her life took off.

Now she had an agent and permanent gigs with all different kinds of companies. She was even looking into starting her own clothing line. I was proud as fuck of my best friend and wanted to experience it all with her, the way I should have been doing from the start.

I just...didn't really know how.

This was one of the many reasons I couldn't stand being in my own head. I spent the last ten years stuck, stilted, and missing the fuck out on normal, fun experiences, because I couldn't fucking hang. Shoving my shit aside, turning my brain off, it was all too hard for me to do alone, and I was suffering in more ways than one. Sheltering myself was just easier.

But the difference between me *now* and me a few months ago was I *wanted* to change my circumstances. I *wanted* to get better, feel better.

But it had been two months since I moved in, and Franks and I had done nothing but pretend like everything was fine when it wasn't. There was *no way* she wasn't mad at me for leaving her alone for four years after basically growing up together, only visiting when I couldn't avoid it somehow. Yet, here she was, wanting to paint each other's nails? She was worried, and it showed. If I was going to get better, find my happy, it started at home. I needed her on my side, to understand, even if I really didn't want to dig up this shit and throw it all over our girls' night.

"You want the truth?" I huffed, falling into our worn gray couch.

"Always." She nodded, her expression morphing into one of blatant concern.

"I don't know what to do with...all this." I waved a hand around the coffee table, which was full of snacks, magazines, face masks, bath bombs, a new pair of slippers for both of us, and even a gel nail kit. "I've never taken active steps to relax, so this is just awkward for me."

Internally, I wanted to run away and never come back. *Humiliated* didn't even begin to cover how I felt, but along with that, I was just fucking sad. My *life* was sad.

"Well," Frankie drawled, lowering herself to sit next to me. "That's the point, P. You need self-care to relax. It's necessary for us girls to take time away from the everyday shit we deal with. I hate social media sometimes, you know? I'm not ashamed about wanting to go back to when we all had sleepovers and spent the night gossiping about celebrities and listening to boy bands. I miss when things were easier. Now we live in the heart of LA and everyone is miserable, and I need nights like this. We're just giving ourselves time to unwind and letting our brains breathe. Watch mindless TV, eat some snacks, put a face mask on, and make your skin feel good. It's all necessary."

"I know," I agreed, letting my head fall back to the cushions behind me. "I'm not saying it isn't, and I don't want you to think I don't want to do this with you. I'm just sucking down my pride right now, because I feel like I'm asking for help and it's fucking sad." After taking a solid breath, I lifted my head to meet her eyes.

She watched me for just a second before blowing out a breath and leaning back into the cushions next to me. "I don't think you asking for help is what's sad. I think you not knowing what self-care is at twenty-three is sad."

"I know what it is." I rolled my eyes, falling back again. "I've just never done it."

"Well, then, let's do it, babe." Frankie's small hand smacked my naked thigh gently. "Up you go, we're getting this night started."

Just give it a shot.

Maybe this would make me feel better.

???

FOUR HOURS LATER, Frankie and I were lying on the living room floor, high as fuck, drunk off one too many Truly's, and flipping through an actual print version of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The clay face mask she put on me was rapidly drying on my skin, making it difficult to talk as we scanned the pages. My nails were done—painted a soft pink to accentuate my tan skin—my belly was full of gummy worms and Junior Mints, and I was actually having a good time.

"You know," Frankie started, not bothering to look up from the article she was skimming—something about new tips and tricks to keep your man interested in a long-term sexual relationship. "We used to be the shit."

I barked out a laugh. "Where the hell did that come from?"

She moved quickly to sit up, facing me completely with almost too much energy. She was about to make a point. I settled in

She paused for just a moment before blurting out, "You're a buzz kill."

...Jesus.

The smile slipped from my face. "Damn, how do you really feel?"

Just like that, anger creeped its way up my spine. The words, "you can fuck right off" were *right there* on the tip of my tongue. But this was my best fucking friend, the only person who stuck around while I ignored everything and everyone, and she was trying to tell me something. Her soft, angelic features were pinched, even a little nervous, which was unlike her.

As much as I knew I needed to listen, hear her out, take responsibility, it wasn't fucking easy.

"I don't want to be an asshole, Phoenix," Frankie sighed, looking down at her hands in her lap before shaking off her melancholy and pinning me with a concerned stare. "But I think you forgot that you were my best friend just as much as I was yours. We did all that shit in high school—we rebelled, snuck out, fucked up, we did our thing, and that's just what it was. It was ours. Then you left and..." She trailed off, looking toward the TV with an angry tick in her jaw. When she brought her blue gaze back to mine, I understood just based on the rage in her eyes. "I'm angry at you, Phoenix, but I don't want to be, because what you went through wouldn't be easy on anyone. It would destroy people stronger than you, and I know that, but did you have to leave me too? Why couldn't you have done whatever it is you did in New York, here? I would have been there for you. I would have done it with you. We were supposed to be a fucking team."

She didn't even realize that high school was just the beginning for me. I wasn't happy back then, and neither was she, if she were honest with herself, so my leaving only helped her. I was on a dangerous path, headed straight for destruction, and I decided to leave, not only for me, but for her as well.

Except, in moments like this, my trauma spoke for me. I struggled to properly sift through everything I was feeling in

order to have a mature conversation. All I could see was she cornered me. She was *just now* bringing all this up, when she had four years to do so before.

"That's the point," I snapped, hating my life, my father, my grief. "If I stuck around, I would have dragged you straight to hell with me, Frankie, and I *refused* to do that. Why would I? Look at your life right now. You make bomb ass money from a social media platform because you're gorgeous as hell, you rock the no-filter lifestyle, and that kind of real wouldn't have fit in the world I got lost in. You have the balls to run shit, to make a difference. It's working out. But if I had stayed, that would *not* have been the case. You wouldn't be where you are right now."

For a good minute, she simply watched me. Her pretty eyes locked on mine, reading everything my stare told her. I stayed open, letting her see what she wanted—my soul, my intentions, my heart. It was never about leaving her. I didn't want to leave her, I wanted to save her from my shit storm.

Finally, she asked, "You needed to leave so you could, what? Get it out of your system?" It was clear she didn't fully understand, but she was trying to.

"No," I replied with a bitter laugh, wishing there was someone in the world whom I didn't have to explain this to. Someone who would just fucking get it. So far, music had been the closest thing I had to that someone. "This isn't something I can just fuck out of my system, and *poof*, it goes away. It doesn't work like that. What my father did?" I swallowed, hating the ball of sticky resentment in my throat. "It's something I have to learn to cope with, and I haven't figured out how yet. Me moving back here is my first step toward figuring that out."

Her eyes widened a little. "So that's why you came back? Because you want to figure out how to live happily?" She seemed genuinely confused, which made me feel even worse because, really, how did we get here? We grew up together, for fuck's sake. Puberty, boys, sisterly fights, sharing clothes—she was my partner, my soulmate.

"More like I want to figure out how to live, period," I admitted, hating the tears forming in my eyes, the lump in my throat that continued to grow to the point of nearly choking me. Out of nowhere, the walls of our living room started closing in. I could suddenly smell gunfire in the air as the memories came back to haunt me. I pushed through. "I haven't been living at all since that day, Frankie. I was so fucking young and it...I don't know...shaped the way I think, I guess. I've been trying to figure out how to live ever since it happened, but if I'm going to stay on this Earth, then I need more than what I've been feeling for the last ten years. I need life, joy, good memories to cloud the bad, even if it's not always my own life that's exciting."

"You mean me?" Frankie asked, sitting straighter. "You mean you want to live vicariously through me?"

"No." I shook my head, trying to figure out how to explain myself better. "It's more like I want to live your life with you and see what parts of your life make mine better. I don't even know what makes me happy, Frankie. I don't know what life is without the constant reminder that I could lose hold of my sanity at any point."

Sadness lined her blue eyes, and in turn, my gut twisted with anxiety. I hated talking about this, I really didn't want to fucking deal at the moment, but I was too determined to fix what was broken to walk away.

With eyebrows pulled together in confused frustration, Frankie protested a little. "We all could snap at any point, Phoenix. You can't live your life worrying that you'll end up like your father."

Aaaaand, there it is. My least favorite statement.

It sent me to a hundred and five on the emotional scale, instantly.

"Tell me how *not to* then, Frankie. Tell me how to forget what he did, what I saw," I sneered. "Do you have a magical erase button I can press? A vegan smoothie I can drink? Something new on the market that I don't know about?"

My anger was *right* there, bubbling over because I fucking hated when people pulled this shit when talking to victims.

Everyone liked to tell the broken souls what they *couldn't* do with their damage—or let their damage do to them, but no one told us what we could do instead. No one had a viable solution that *actually worked*, not some bullshit about "write your feelings in a journal" or "eat healthier, exercise more." All seven of my journals would show that all they did was give people like me an excuse to bitch and moan about our lives. And running? I ran every day. It helped the anger for about two hours. And while I learned that those two hours are necessary for my sanity, it wasn't a permanent solution to make me feel any better inside.

Writing in journals, going for a run in the morning, eating hard-boiled eggs for breakfast and a salad for lunch—none of it actually worked to help my anxiety or numb my pain.

Nothing could erase what happened, and that was the problem.

"No, of course not! But I don't know, okay?" she shouted, frustrated. "All I know is that I got the best deal in the world. At thirteen years old, my best friend on the planet moved in, became my permanent sister, and we fell into this routine that probably wasn't good for us, but it was still good enough, right? We had fun, yeah? But then you left, P! You fucking left me, and you've been shutting me out ever since."

"I just..." I stood from the couch as my chest started feeling like it might crack in half. The living room was beginning to resemble the one in the house I grew up in—the white home on the corner of the street in the suburbs of Orange County. The one I tried to forget ever existed since the memory of it became splattered in blood. "I relive that day, every day. I see it every time I close my eyes. I haven't figured out how to turn it off yet and spend hours a day wondering why everyone else gets to live their lives without questions while I struggle to find answers to even my simplest ones."

No one could tell me shit, not a single person. Not a doctor, therapist, psychologist, neurologist. No one could tell

me why my father did what he did, and when they suggested that I spend years sitting on uncomfortable couches talking to strangers about what I witnessed, I took that opportunity to dig further, ask more questions in different ways. But still, no one had answers for me, so I got stuck living in the dark.

I got used to it there.

I got comfortable in the stony silence of misery—it almost felt good to drown because treading water took up too much energy. I didn't have any to spare.

"So, what do we do now?" Frankie whispered, looking away from me. "How do I get Nix back? How do I get my best friend back?"

Her words were shaped like a blade. I choked out, "Time."

"How much time?" she pushed.

I paused, making sure she met my eyes. I needed her to understand that while she wanted this to be a quick fix, she had no idea the kind of dedication it took to do what I was trying to do. I needed more than just time, I needed someone to help me, someone who understood what it was like to be so lost inside fear that you couldn't see the other side, but there was no one. Not anyone I could touch at least.

All I had was music.

The sounds, the lyrics, the stories that were told through words and instruments, soothed my soul and set it on fire all at once. Music was the only thing that made me *feel* things when I didn't want to.

I had twenty-something playlists full of artists my age or born in my generation that were crying out for help and fighting through their damage just like I was. These artists were struggling to survive through the breakups, the pressure of the industry, the need to be perfect, feel perfect, fuck perfect, and still stay sane.

It wasn't the radio hits that told the entire truth, it was track eight on a twenty-track album that did. Those overlooked and underappreciated songs were almost too honest. Drugs to numb, sex to feel, alcohol to blind, hate and evil to make themselves feel better. These artists didn't hold back, and I respected the fuck out of that because I understood it. New York was so full of mistakes, I was almost too ashamed to admit it.

But what was I supposed to do? My parents loved each other, they were beacons of light in my life—as parents should be—until out of nowhere, they weren't anymore. Until they couldn't be anymore. Until they were no longer even breathing. Then I was thrown in with another family—one I knew well and was lucky to be a part of—and was told that everything would be okay.

Except it wasn't, it wouldn't be.

They still didn't know that I lived every day for the last ten years scared of my own mind.

Looking to Frankie, I finally responded with, "I'll let you know when I figure that out."



June

"HONEY, I'M HOME!" I called, walking through the front door carrying three bags full of groceries into the kitchen. As I placed them on the counter, I listened for her voice to echo back, but got nothing in return. "Frankie?"

Faintly, I heard her yell, "Hold on!" from somewhere in the back of the house, so I went about my business. Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I walked across the kitchen to one of the four Bluetooth speakers we had lying around and pressed play on the song I was listening to on the way home.

"Hurt People" by GOLDN wafted from the tiny speaker in a wave of tranquil sounds, settling a little piece of my soul.

It had been four months since I moved into Frankie's beautifully remodeled Spanish styled bungalow, and I was doing better. After our conversation a couple months back, she seemed to give me the time I needed without pushing me too far, too fast.

That weekend, we unpacked my boxes together and made my room a sanctuary. We hung tapestries, printed out dope Pinterest photos that matched the vibe, and strung lights along the ceiling, sort of like the living room. Having done this before to her own room, Frankie ran to Target and came home with a bunch of fuzzy pink shit to put all over the place, saying that I needed a little extra help in the mood department and that pink was my color.

Turned out, she was right. My room was now my favorite place in the house. I could let the sunlight in if I opened the blackout curtains that covered the French doors leading out on to the patio, or I could keep them closed, making the room dark enough to turn on my fairy lights. Whenever they were on, my room was like a comfortable cave filled with only the things that made me feel relaxed.

Since I moved back, I was overstimulated a lot, and my room was my space to unwind. Let go. Uncurl my fists and close my eyes.

I was feeling better than I ever had, thanks to my own determination, and those good feelings manifested into my friendship with Frankie.

As I continued to wait for her, I started unpacking the grocery bags and got to work, singing along out loud as I did it.

The kitchen was my second favorite room in the house. With white marble countertops, dark wood cabinets and flooring, the space was bright, thanks to the many wide windows throughout the open floor plan. Frankie and I spent a lot of time seated at the island, talking and drinking wine, making dinner, or having coffee in the mornings.

One of the things I'd done to help myself was explain to Frankie how music typically helped me work through things or even just helped me zone out when I needed to. Getting high and putting on headphones? Nothing beat it.

I shouldn't have been surprised when Frankie was quick to jump on board, coming up with the brilliant idea to take it a step further, but I was. She was so invested in helping me, it warmed my heart, thawed out a broken piece.

Franks wanted to get to know and fall in love with the artists I listened to, so we created a master playlist and added new songs to it whenever we found them. So now, unless we were watching TV or hanging out in our separate rooms, we

had our current seasonally themed playlist on shuffle, playing through whatever Bluetooth speaker was around.

She didn't know everything about where I was mentally, but I was pretty sure she was giving me space on purpose, waiting for me to come to her. I wasn't sure if I'd ever be comfortable enough to tell her about my near suicide attempt, or the fact that TheColt, a hip-hop artist we both loved, saved my life. She knew I loved him, that I fell asleep listening to his music every night, but that was it and that was fine with me.

She didn't question it.

And I didn't question her, even though I had a few reasons to.

As soon as we started using the playlist, I learned that Frankie had an edge of darkness in her too. My being back had unlocked something inside of her, as if my honesty triggered hers, and every day, she was harder, stronger, bolder than she was the day before. Growing up, I knew she resented her parents for focusing on their careers rather than her, but it was something that became more obvious as the years passed. They had a fuck ton of money, the big house in Orange County like my parents had, plenty of years full of photographed family vacations, but I always figured me moving in helped Frankie to not feel so alone. But...apparently not. One night last week, I discovered that she was ignoring phone calls from her parents, avoiding them all together, and whenever I asked, she brushed me off.

Fine by me. It was her right.

Somehow, our conversation during girls' night had shifted our friendship into a territory I wasn't expecting it to go, but couldn't be more grateful for. All of a sudden, at the start of summer, we were two angry girls who covered their feelings with sarcasm and flirting, keeping everyone but each other at a distance, not willing to risk our trust with anyone else.

With friends, we were funny and sassy, loud, and attached at the hip. But when we were home, just the two of us, we'd tell the truth and not fake our feelings. It wasn't until after that first girls' night that I learned about what Frankie's life was really like. As an influencer, she was expected to be kind when people were vicious. If her makeup wasn't perfect and she went live on Instagram, people would comment with assumptions about why.

"She must be sick, poor girl."

"See, without the makeup, she's fucking ugly."

"Damn, can't even do her own makeup when she can't afford to hire someone to do it for her."

She couldn't win, not when there were people in the world who got off on being assholes to strangers. When followers forgot that she was a person too—a person with genuine feelings who read every comment, every tweet, and came face to face with every negative thing said about her...daily, Frankie was forced to wake up every morning expecting to be criticized for something, anything, or for no reason at all.

At first, I questioned her, wondering why she would deal with all that when she could just delete her social media all together? Her response was, "I'd rather show my face every day and let people see what I'm willing to show them, than have them go looking for lies in places they don't exist. Otherwise, someone will just make them up."

From there on out, I did whatever I could to support her, to be her backbone, and it felt nice to have a purpose, able to help in some way.

"I swear to fuck, this bitch is asking for it." Speak of the devil. Frankie's voice got louder and louder the closer she got to the kitchen. When she made it in, she stopped on the other side of the island and slammed her phone down on the granite, glaring in my direction. "RayLynn just announced her new partnership with the same fucking company I signed on with last week. She did it again! Last time she did this was when that athletic company sent me a pair of their leggings and I did the unboxing before actually trying them on." She cringed, asking, "Remember that?"

I chuckled, pausing my task for a moment to give her my attention. I leaned down on my elbows. "Yeah, you hated them, didn't you?"

"Mhm." She nodded, her smile fading. "But I didn't know what to say to my followers because the leggings sucked monkey balls when I tried them on. Sooooo, I just avoided the internet all together. Well, in those two days I was missing, RayLynn posted a screenshot of the tracking notification from the same fucking company, saying her box shipped to her. Which means she contacted them *after* I posted it."

Admittedly a little confused, I asked, "Why does that matter, Franks? I see cast-offs from *The Bachelor* franchise repping the same brands all the time. Same with most reality TV stars."

I knew very little about RayLynn's career, but at some point, Frankie had told me she was on a new show MTV had just come out with. Some competition dating show where the end goal is to find your *perfect match*.

She rolled her big blue eyes. "Yes, duh, because they're from the same show or whatever the case may be. I'm independent, I don't have a backing. And RayLynn didn't get picked up by the same agent as the rest of the actors on her show, so she had to hire her own agent. Now we're both free game for a lot of these companies, and by doing this—signing herself up to rep the same company as me—she's making it look like we're still friends, and we're fucking *not*."

Hold on. I pinned her with a hard stare. "Is *that* why she's doing it? So she gains a fucking following from your fans, hoping people don't hate her anymore?"

"Yes, Phoenix," she sighed, waving an exasperated hand in my direction. "That's what I've been trying to tell you."

I'm an asshole. I winced. "Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't put two and two together. Start from the beginning."

"Okay, but pay attention for fuck's sake." She gave me a stern look, but ended it with a grin, continuing, "So, when she was filming that show—that I can't remember the name of—

she fucked over her housemates and created a bunch of drama in the house, so when it aired, the viewers hated her. Now she doesn't have the following that everyone else on the show has, and she's getting fewer opportunities because of it. Not making as much money, blah blah. Well, when we met, I knew nothing about her. I didn't watch the show. Had too much going on at the time." She paused as her head fell straight into her hands. She spoke through her fingers. "When she approached me, I didn't think twice."

Wait. "I knew you met her and started hanging out with her, but how come you didn't tell me she had such a bad reputation from the beginning?" I asked, feeling a little pissed off. Frankie didn't tell me everything about her life—we both kept a few secrets—but this was about someone who ruined her fucking relationship. How did I not know the whole story?

"Because I didn't want to look like a moron, P. There were red flags everywhere!" Her voice came out scratchy and raw as she looked up at me, clearly really upset about this. "She played me. We became friends easily, that's who I was hanging out with before you came back."

"Fuck, Frankie, seriously?" I asked, sighing. Recently, I'd begun attending networking events with her. She didn't like going alone, which I now completely understood, and I was happy to experience life through the eyes of LA's influencer pool.

It had become normal for me, being her plus one, doing my job as the supportive friend she could trust in a fishbowl full of people she couldn't. I even gained a small following on Instagram myself—nothing like her two point two million, more like a few hundred thousand—but on rare occasions, I would get asked to do photoshoots with her for brands geared toward women in their twenties. Both of us were fortunate enough to make money from our looks, but I was more focused on my job at Death's Door Ink. I didn't want to worry about posting on social media every day, at least not until I got my tattooing license and had photos of my artwork to post.

"Yeah, I know." She rolled her eyes again as she straightened her spine and headed to the fridge. She dug

around for a second before pulling out a can of Truly, popping the top and chugging it like soda. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand before starting up again, "And there I was for *months*, friends with the girl that was secretly fucking my boyfriend behind my back." Shaking her head, she lifted the can to her mouth and tipped it back, swallowing until it was gone. She slammed the empty can on the counter with a sarcastic smile. "Apparently, that was her MO on the show."

I considered her words, knowing that when she found out about Jordan cheating on her, she was more upset about being humiliated than losing her boyfriend of six months. She'd been with him before I came back, but apparently, it was never a love match. Still, having sex with someone regularly when you lived your life in the spotlight was hard to keep quiet. It didn't help that he was also an influencer and their relationship formed out of the pressure they both felt from their fans, when in reality, they were fuck buddies at best. In love or not, they were still exclusive.

I moved around the counter to get her another can, knowing she would want to drink her way through her feelings on this specific topic. "All right, so how does that lead into now?" I dug through the bin of drinks we stored in the fridge until I found the grapefruit flavored kind, her favorite. "Here."

"Thanks." She popped the tab and took another huge sip. "So now my followers think we're besties, and since I refuse to air the story about the whole Jordan debacle, they don't know shit went south. We aren't hanging out anymore, but she's going for the same companies as me to make it look like we're still in contact."

"Well, fuck." I frowned, hating that she was in this position. "What now?"

"I have no fucking idea. Because I can't come clean. I'm waiting until Lake invites me on the podcast again. When she does, she'll ask about Jordan and I'll tell the soft, fake breakup story, and then I won't have to field questions on an Instagram post. Lake can deal with it in *her* comments, and I just won't read them."

Yeah, but when you don't answer, they'll head straight into your DM's.

I wanted to say it out loud but didn't. This was her life, and at the end of the day, when it was all said and done, she was doing the best thing for her sanity. Sometimes telling the truth wasn't an option, not when you wanted to be able to breathe through the humiliation and self-hate that comes with being betrayed. She didn't need the added stress.

"I'm sorry, Franks," I said, meaning every word.

I walked over to where she was standing and moved behind her, slipping my arms around her waist and squeezing her small body to my chest. We were the same height, both just above the five-foot-two mark, so it was easy for her to drop her head back on my shoulder as she sighed. I tightened my arms, hating that she was frustrated.

Frankie and I were back to what we were before I left, but somehow even stronger. She was my sister in some ways, my absolute best friend in others, but there were times when we needed affection, attention, and love that was genuine and real. Sometimes, when life kicked you in the teeth, physical touch was the only thing capable of driving away the pain, and we weren't shy about telling each other when we needed a different kind of support.

I was the sun kissed brunette next her bombshell blonde, and it just worked. Slowly but surely, the old Frankie and Nix where making a comeback. This time though, we were four years older, now legal, voting adults with opinions and more life experience. Freedom was visible, I was starting to hope for it, and the more I did, the brighter the light shone at the end of my tunnel.

"So, what's the move tonight?" I asked in a quiet tone, my mouth at her ear. It was just past three in the afternoon on a Tuesday, the one day a week that Kenji closed the shop, and I had no plans for the night. "We ordering dinner in?"

Frankie unlocked her phone and looked down at it, saying, "I haven't heard about anything going on tonight, but it's been hours since I checked my email. Let me look." Her mood was

sullen and somber in my arms, until all of a sudden, she jerked, whipping around and out of my arms. Her hand flew to her mouth as she sucked in a surprised breath.

"What's wrong?" I asked, immediately concerned. When she didn't answer, my heart sped up, so I repeated the question with more urgency. "Franks, what's wrong?"

"Uh..." she said absently, bringing her phone closer to her face and continuing to read.

I fucking hated when she did this, "Oh my god, just read it out—"

"Shut up for a second," she snapped, holding up an index finger in my direction. I stared for a full two minutes before she looked up at me with both fear and hesitant excitement swimming in her denim blue eyes. "Okay, I just got an email from Julia about a music video being filmed tonight at a house in the Hills."

My stomach dropped. Music video.

"Okaaaay?" I drew out, feeling sick with anxious excitement buzzing in my veins. I laughed out a confused question, gripping her shoulders as I asked, "Why do you look so scared, Frankie?"

She didn't even blink as we locked eyes, her voice a level, even tone as she said, "It's Silas Madigan's music video."

The room started spinning a little.

"Hold up for juuuuust a second," I whispered, trying not to freak out. "Repeat that."

Slowly, a blinding, wicked, sexy as fuck smile grew on my best friend's face. "Silas motherfucking Madigan is filming a music video at his house tonight. And we—you and fucking me—just got invited."

I kept staring as her words bounced from my brain, down my throat, and into my chest, as lyrics flew through my mind and the sound of his raspy, deep voice played clearly in my mind.

Silas Madigan?

Acid bubbled in my stomach, instantly making me dizzy, nauseous, nervous. "Oh my god."

"Uh, yeah!" She nodded with a little squeak before cooling her features into sassy determination. "We have to go."

"Go to a party at Silas Madigan's house," I repeated, just to clarify.

"Yup." She wiggled her brows with a grin. "This is what we've been talking about for months now, P! We need something fresh and new to get us *out* there. No idea where exactly 'out there' leads, but I don't know, P. Something about this feels *good*."

Good? It felt crazy as fuck is what it felt like. Silas was on the come up—a rap artist that came out the gate swinging about a year before. His rise to fame was fast tracked somehow, and now he was everywhere. Getting to go to a party for him—with him—it was almost too terrifying to think about.

Silas was one of *those* musicians—the ones who rapped facts, truths about living with a broken wire in your brain. Whether you were born with it clipped, or someone took scissors and clipped it for you, the damage looked the same, and Silas wasn't afraid to talk about it.

I couldn't let her go alone, and I was doing what I planned —following her lead, experiencing life through her adventures. Half of me wanted to say fuck all this, hop in my car, and never return, but the other half was giddy, excited, fucking terrified. "I'm in."

Frankie's perfectly shaped eyebrows hit her hairline. "You're serious?"

I shouldn't be. The drugs, the drinks, the sex. Parties were an infestation of unhealthy coping mechanisms that I couldn't afford to get lost in again.

But still...

"No way in hell you're going to see him without me." I winked, feeling sick to my stomach. Just to put it out in the universe, I repeated, "You're right, this will be good."

Frankie jumped a little and ran at me full force, grabbed the sides of my face, and kissed me right on the lips. Soft as hell, sexy enough to make my knees weak. She pulled back, her eyes latching to mine. "You, my little darling Nixxy baby, are going to have fun tonight. You're going to thank me, and it's going to be a *damn* good time."

"I only believe it because you do." I laughed, unable to deny her charm, wanting to please her, learn from her. "How long do we have to get ready?"

It was almost dinner time, so it was starting to look like we'd be scarfing down something fast before an evening full of primping, priming, and pre-gaming.

Franks checked her phone again, confirming, "We should leave here around eleven, because the invite just said that the party itself would be filmed for the video. We can show up whenever. It's an ongoing thing."

A full-blown Hollywood party? No wonder they were inviting influencers. Silas would get viewers from all over to get a glimpse of the various famous faces in the video.

"Well, I guess we better get to work then." I tried to smile, I swear I did, but as the reality started to sink in, so did the feeling that I was pushing this too fast, too soon.



SLIDING into the driver's seat of Pharaoh's Mercedes G-Class SUV, I tried to shake off the weight on my shoulders but fucking failed. Another show, another meet and greet, another pissed off, entitled asshole sitting pretty in the VIP lounge, talking shit with his punk ass buddies. They always tried to rile me up, and they won every goddamn time.

"I don't get why they have to show up at my shit," I spat, slamming the door behind me as the blue light illuminated the interior. "They buy a motherfucking ticket just so they can tell me they hate me in person?"

"Yeah, man." Pharaoh sighed, pulling his seatbelt on and leaning the seat back. "That's exactly what the fuck they do. It's their only chance. You can pretend you didn't see their comments on Instagram, but you *can't* pretend you didn't hear them when they're standing right next to you."

"Mhm," was all I said, too angry to talk further.

Instead, I got my shit sorted while scrolling through the notifications I missed on the walk from the venue to the car as quickly as I could, making sure there was nothing important while I waited for the Bluetooth to connect. Except, it connected to Pharaoh's phone instead of mine, and one of my songs came blaring through the speakers instead of the song I had queued up. I was immediately grateful that we weren't already on the highway, because I was overcome with an

intense urge to say "fuck it all" and drive us both into oncoming traffic. All from the sound of my own voice.

It was like nails on a chalkboard nowadays. Had been ever since I took a risk and it bit me so hard in the ass that it's almost like I had scars in the shape of teeth.

"You did good tonight," Pharaoh said, getting comfortable in the passenger seat. He pulled out a cigarette and his lighter, lighting up quickly before rolling down the window to blow the smoke out.

"Yeah," was all I said as I pulled out my own cig and stuck it in my mouth, ready to unwind from the gig I just left while getting ready to do it all over again in less than an hour.

Walking off stage after a show was equally the best and worst thing about being an entertainer.

The best consisted of the roar of the crowd at my back, the adrenaline rush from performing still buzzing like a hornet in my ear. It never failed. I descended the stairs on the side of the stage feeling like King of the Underworld every. Fucking. Time.

The worst part though, came as soon as my custom pink and black Converse hit the bottom step. Suddenly, everything I hated about this life showed up to slap me in the face. The snakes were always ready and waiting, slithering in the grass with their cameras on, their ears open. All to try and find the story, the picture, the lie that would turn my career into a nightmare, simply because my nightmare paid cash.

Then there were the girls.

Sure, every man with a nine-inch dick loved his life—he fucked whenever, wherever, and however he wanted. But somewhere in the process of meeting them, fucking them, and letting them go, the claws came out, and the hot as fuck piece of ass you were about to bury your worries in showed her real self.

That's when you found yourself looking a rotten whore in the face

Only to find out later, that whore stole cash from your nightstand and took pictures of you when you slept. I've had girls sell my cell phone number to tabloids, they've read my text messages and bragged about it to see if I'd start a fight.

Why would anyone want to fight with TheColt?

To get me angry enough to resort to physical violence, that's why. Because violence meant a lawsuit, and a lawsuit meant a *TMZ* article, a nice vacation to Bora Bora, and a few thousand new Instagram followers.

The critics were the best though.

They were the ones who never failed to teach me a lesson. They showed up at every show just to slam my words, my lyrics, and how I performed them. They ripped my shit to shreds, not giving a fuck that I spent *hours* bleeding over the pages—literally. My songs got written with black eyes and busted knuckles, in the middle of the night when my demons were awake, my thoughts were too loud, and the bottle of pills on the dresser became more and more appealing.

It was when the hours seemed to drag on and fucking on that TheColt wrote his life, got his aggression out, and talked through the shit in his head.

Only for my work to get chewed up and spit out by people who didn't know shit about fuck.

But I was an easy target, and that wasn't news to anyone.

Once I fixed the Bluetooth, I pressed play on "Chernobyl" by Oliver Francis and lit my cigarette, getting comfortable in my seat. We had a long drive from Orange County back to Silas' place in the hills.

"Can you roll a blunt?" I asked Pharaoh, pointing to the glove compartment.

I needed it.

A show and shoot in one night weren't uncommon, though the normalcy didn't make it any easier. Especially since I was just featured on this song and it wasn't a video for me. I had no creative control, just had to do whatever Silas' director told me to do, but when he'd mentioned the setting being a party at his house, I held in my bitching. I could get down with a party. In fact, the louder the better.

Anything to drown out the asshole from tonight. I couldn't get his awful fucking voice out of my head. "He won't be able to get any further than he is right now. Give it a few years, he'll give up and kill himself, no way he'll survive all this."

I tried *so hard* not to laugh, almost as hard as I tried not to slam my fist in his face.

The best part was his stupid ass wasn't even the only problem tonight. My actual fans were nearly as bad. It's funny how they paid all this money to see their favorite artists perform live—they showed up wanting merchandise, claiming they love you more than anyone else, *they'd kill for just one night with you*—except if you don't get on stage and perform *exactly* like the monkey they expected you to be, then you're the dirt under their entitled feet.

If they actually took the time to *listen* to the music, they'd hear, see, feel that I was *fucking drowning*.

But that wasn't why people listened to music, they didn't actually give a shit about the voice behind the sound or what it took to create the track. Not unless the voice was rich as fuck, hot as hell, and willing to follow every industry rule down to the lies. I didn't fuck around like that.

That was where I differed from other entertainers.

I vowed early on in my career that the musicians I spent my time with would hustle just as hard as me, they'd write their own shit, even write for other, more mainstream artists. They wouldn't phone it in just to save face. I didn't expect to find the group I found though.

The guys and I were tight—our love and dedication to our individual craft was what bonded us all together. Each of them, no matter what type of artist they were, used music as the outlet that it was intended to be—an expression, a different way of telling a story, or for some of us...a diary of sorts. But there were other artists who didn't think like that—people who

coasted through their fame as songs written by someone else were handed to them on a silver fucking platter.

Silas Madigan wasn't one of those artists. He was a close friend of mine, and saying yes to a feature on his latest track was a no-brainer, even better when it ended up being a solid fucking hit.

Taking a drag of my cigarette, I turned onto the 405, and was once again hit with a sinking feeling in my stomach. I was no longer in love with LA, done chasing the dream, now that I had seemed to have failed. The people were awful, the food was only good if it cost over a hundred dollars a plate—which was fine, I was good for it, but *really*?

Los Angeles was where I worked. Between club appearances, the label being in North Hollywood, doing impromptu shows, networking events, movie premieres, on top of owning a house in the Hills myself, the city was my playground. My place of work was fucking beautiful on the outside, but most of us knew how rotten it all was in the middle. It was especially obvious at night, when everything slowed down and the haunted souls of Sunset Boulevard came out to play. That was when us locals looked past the silhouetted palm trees, the deep purple skyline, and saw the truth.

"Here," Pharaoh said through the smoke he held in his lungs, extending the freshly lit blunt in my direction. I threw the remainder of the cigarette out the window in favor of grabbing it, immediately sticking it between my lips and looking over my shoulder to make sure the next lane was clear to move. The asshole in front of me was driving too slowly—this was already going to be a late night, the sooner we got started the better. Pharaoh spoke up as he scrolled through his social media, "You brought a change of clothes, right?"

I glanced down at my outfit and blew out smoke. "Fuck, we should have gone to the buses. It's all in my trailer."

My best friend and drummer shook his head. "You never learn. You change like four times a day. You need to start

bringing your shit into venues with you. Or leave a bag in the trunk, dude."

"You make me sound like a fucking diva." I rolled my eyes, seeing his stupid grin from the corner of my eye. "I would have brought a bag inside, but I'm protesting. Hendrix has been up my ass about wardrobe. Says I have a *brand*."

"A fuckin' brand." He chuckled sarcastically, as if he couldn't believe it. He ran a hand down his face, asking, "How in the hell did we manage to get *here*, bro?"

I had no idea, but it wasn't something I was particularly fond of. Who gave a flying shit what I wore on stage? Hendrix, the label, my agent. Even Holly was on my ass more than I'd like.

I didn't reply to Phar, angry all over again that my life had been turned into packed days full of press and perfection.

Fame offered me an outlet, but that outlet came with shit like *branding*, a mostly demanding and entitled fanbase, television interviews, and a highly anticipated tour coming up in a handful of months that I wasn't even close to ready for.

Thing was, I was missing the one thing every person dealing with the power of fame desperately needed...someone to actually *listen*.

If I didn't want to be alone, if I wanted someone outside of my group to hang out with, I could have it in ten minutes or less, but none of it was real. None of it was from the soul, no real connections were being made. Everyone wanted something from each other, a way to further our careers.

All that *plus* the industry bunnies? I was done. Quickly approaching my limit.

My phone rang in the center console, cutting off errant thoughts. My assistant's pretty face popped up on my screen, so I kept her connected via Bluetooth and answered the call from the steering wheel. "What's up, Holly?"

"Hey," she answered, sounding a little out of breath. "Are you on your way?"

Holly was hired by my label and had been my assistant for just under six months. At first, I bitched about the prospect of an assistant, not liking the idea of someone all up in my space, but Hendrix, my manager, insisted that my schedule was going to fill up with the new album set to drop next year on top of the European leg of my *Uninvited* tour, and because of it, things would start to fall through the cracks.

I gave in eventually and ended up loving Holly, but the reason I initially rejected the idea was still a problem for me.

The life I lived was the dream for someone who *enjoyed* shaking hands with judgmental television hosts who spent the whole interview asking passive aggressive questions. Best part was when they clearly couldn't give a fuck about what I had to say in return. All of it was for ticket sales, reputation, and streams, so that everyone—including myself—could get paid. It all seemed like a waste of goddamn time, but if I wanted to keep doing this, to keep working with real equipment and big boy producers, then I had to suck it up, because this was the name of the game.

I sold my soul to the devil for a chance to make music. Now he held me by the throat and choked me while I failed.

"Yeah," I confirmed, returning to my conversation with Holly as I switched lanes again. "You all right? Why are you winded?"

"This party is crazy," she groaned. "You know I hate this shit without you guys here. I'm too fucking short to navigate the crowds without getting thrown around like a beach ball."

Pharaoh snickered in the passenger seat, but tried to cover it up.

I couldn't hide the anger in my voice as I said, "You're the one who insists on showing up before us. This is on you, girl."

"Whatever," she said, brushing off my comment. "Just hurry up."

After the call went dead and the music started back up, Pharaoh turned it down to a reasonable level so he could ask, "What's the plan for this video? Do you know?" Shrugging I replied, "I think Silas wanted to do the opposite of what the song described. Feeling 'Empty at Midnight' but in a full house of people."

I hated knowing that I'd have to be so vulnerable in front of strangers, but that was what made good music.

Truth. Honesty. Pain.

Pharaoh nodded, his brown hair staying perfectly still where it was styled *just right* on his head—fucked up and messy. His jaw was set into an exhausted line as he turned the music up again before going back to his phone.

He was my best fucking friend, down for anything and everything, ready to show up for me and my career as well as his own. I hired him to play guitar for me at shows, but he dabbled in everything from drums to production. He was the only one on my team that I truly trusted, but only because he had been with me for the last twenty years.

The two of us grew up in the same shitty town, in the same shitty trailer park, with equally shitty parents, who royally fucked us up before we even had the chance to start normal lives. He proved long ago that if I wanted him gone, I'd have to shoot him dead myself. He was the very fucking definition of ride or die.

To this day, he was one of the only few guys who stayed loyal when shit went down with other entertainers. Which happened often because we'd kill each other for headlines.

Bad publicity was still publicity. My haters see my busted ass face all over Instagram and turn around to listen to my music. Just to find reasons to talk shit about it.

Joke was on them.

I still get paid motherfuckers.

Looking down, I noticed my phone lighting up with notifications. Picking it up while keeping an eye on the road, I scrolled half-heartedly, seeing they were all from Instagram as I got tagged in stories by the people waiting for me at the party.

It was going to be a long ass night.



"RED OR BLACK?" Frankie asked as she walked into our shared bathroom holding up one pair of denim in each hand.

"Are you one hundred percent sold on the bustier?" I questioned before picking one. Frankie looked amazing in the black lace number, but she changed her mind more than any girl I'd ever met.

She nodded, her blonde straight hair flowing in a curtain over her naked shoulders. She looked down at herself, tugging on the hem of the expensive garment. "Yup, this fucker is perfect."

I chuckled, "All right, then red. The color is hot. With black heels."

"Which ones?" She popped a hip, tilting her head.

"The Tom Ford ones, with the little gold clasp." I loved those stupid shoes.

"Oh shit, I forgot about those." Her mouth twisted into a grin as she made a stupid ass face and headed back through her side of the room, naked ass swaying on the way.

You would never know it due to the remodeling, but the house we lived in was old as hell. With just three bedrooms and two bathrooms, Frankie ended up turning the spare room into her office. Her parents let her redecorate the smaller things, but knocking out walls wasn't an option, so while our

visitors used the bathroom in the main part of the house, Frankie and I shared the second bathroom that lived smack dab between her room and mine with an entrance on each side and one from the hallway.

Thank god Frankie assumed I'd move back in eventually, because she'd done the bathroom perfectly, with enough room to store all of our girly shit and a mirror big enough for both of us to use it at the same time. The countertops were white and gray marble with thick gray cabinetry around the room. White tiled flooring, a nice sized, black tiled shower and tub combination with a linen closet and plenty of storage space.

The only time I ever complained about sharing a bathroom was when I was getting ready for something and the steam from the shower fucked up my whole vibe. Kind of hard to do your mascara in a fogged-up mirror, but other than that, sharing with Frankie was no big deal.

Finishing up the last of my makeup with a little Chapstick, I headed back into my room to get dressed, going straight for my walk-in closet. One thing that Frankie had made sure I bought with my trust fund money was a new wardrobe. I turned twenty-one two years ago and still hadn't touched the new wave of money. That ended not long after I moved home. Frankie and I spent weeks ordering online when we couldn't find whatever we were looking for at the Beverly Center, The Grove, or Third Street Promenade.

I had a closet full of new shit, shoes too, but I didn't go overboard. I got what I needed and a few extra things to please Frankie, but I didn't want to blow through my money before I even had the chance to figure out if tattooing would pay for my lifestyle in the long run. I had the raw talent, but I was still a couple months away from picking up a machine.

Truth was, I didn't flaunt my money because it wasn't actually mine. I wouldn't even have had access to half of it if my dad hadn't lost his fucking mind.

But I was left all the family wealth, and I'd spent all four years of college pretending that wasn't true.

Now, however, I was grateful for the baby pink haltered crop top, black jeans, and brand-new pink Vans I threw on. The outfit was casual, until paired with dainty silver jewelry and the right sparkling black clutch.

"Do we think this party is going to be rowdy?" I yelled out, hoping Franks could hear me.

"I fucking hope so!" she called back.

I don't. "I'm not wearing anything fancy!"

"No one will care!"

All right then. "I'm calling an Uber."

"Wait!" she shouted, halting my steps toward my phone on the charger next to the bed. I could hear her running from her room into the bathroom before she made an appearance in my doorway. Slowing her steps as she walked toward me, I noticed the bottle of Tito's she held by the neck. "We can't go anywhere yet, silly." Her face was all lit up, happiness and excitement radiating through the room. It soured my stomach. She didn't notice, but instead, tipped the bottle toward me with a quirked eyebrow. "Shot first."

Here we go.

???

ONE HOUR and three shots later, I was feeling it.

Frankie and I had spent the whole twenty-minute drive taking photos and trying to figure out who would be at this party. Turned out, a lot of people Frankie knew were going. We were almost there, driving through the winding roads of the Hollywood Hills.

"Damn, y'all are going to Silas Madigan's house?" The Uber driver—a younger kid with dark brown hair and glasses—commented from the front seat. "That's cool as fuck."

Frankie and I glanced at each other with confused expressions. She mouthed, "How did he know that?"

I shrugged, figuring maybe he'd been up this way before or was one of those tour guides who knew everything there was to know about the Hills and who lived in them.

"Yeah, we are." Frankie nodded, suspicion lacing her tone.

The driver didn't say anything back, leaving Frankie and I to talk amongst ourselves in the back. A few moments later, we turned into what looked like an entrance to a gated community. There were paparazzi everywhere, cameras trying to figure out who was in the car, but since we were in the back seat, I doubted they could see us.

"Jesus," I whispered, seeing the guard—who was completely unfazed—lazily make his way to the tiny door. He opened it as our driver rolled down the window to tell him where we were going.

As he spoke, she faced me with challenge written all over her stare, "How much do you wanna bet that Judah Colt is there tonight?"

My heart stopped dead in my chest.

No fucking way.

"Get out of here." I waved her off.

"I bet he is!" Uber driver called out, unhelpfully, driving the car forward. The crowd parted like the Red Sea.

"Shut up." I met his eyes in the mirror, unable to help the harsh sound of my tone. She mentioned that name, and I panicked. Covering it up, I joked, "Don't encourage her."

"Don't encourage me? Please, bitch. I know you're freaking the fuck out right now."

I was. "I'm not."

"Phoenix." She clicked her tongue, narrowing her eyes on me.

Damnit. "What?!"

Her eyebrows inched up in excitement. "Judah. Fucking. Colt."

"I know who he is, Frankie." *Better than anyone else*. Okay, maybe that wasn't entirely true, but it certainly felt like it sometimes.

"I know you know who he is." She wagged her brows at me

"Enough—" I started.

"We're here, you two!" the boy called, interrupting me.

I had no idea when we passed through the gates of the community, too focused on Frankie—and Judah Colt—but it didn't matter, because we were parked.

I took a deep breath before looking out the window...

"Holy fuck," Frankie breathed.

Groups of people made their way up the winding driveway, laughing and talking, some wearing glow sticks, others riding on hover boards.

Frankie started laughing low and laced with bad intentions. "What a fucking Tuesday." She smirked before turning to look at me with mischief in her eyes. "You ready?"

Nope. "Let's do this."

The sound of "Hot" by Gunna and YoungThug floated toward me as I stepped out of the car and onto the curb. I heard the driver say goodbye but wasn't focused on him, especially as two other cars had stopped behind us, one of them being a goddamn limo.

"Jesus," Frankie said as she got out on the other side. Glancing briefly her way, I needed to make sure she was talking about the same thing I was looking at. Sure enough, she was staring wide-eyed at the winding driveway in front of us.

"P, are you seeing this place?" she asked, already knowing the answer as she stared down the driveway toward where the music was coming from. "Are you kidding me?"

We couldn't even see the house properly. There were massive cement walls on either side of the driveway, covered

in and surrounded by fresh green foliage. Clearly, Silas Madigan had some sort of watering service, since there was no way the trees and plants around us would have survived the drought without a wealthy owner. This kind of wealth had my stomach curling with nerves.

"Sure as fuck not in Kansas anymore," I said under my breath, questioning my decision to attend this party with her.

Yet, here I was. Standing in front of Silas Madigan's home in the Hollywood Hills.

Silas fucking Madigan.

Was I ready to go in? No.

Did I need to get ready? Yes.

Tonight was my first real shot at getting out there again, the true test of my ability to let go and have fun without losing myself in a blackout because it all became too much.

I wanted to remember tonight, make a few new memories to cloud the bad.

Leaving California for New York was my way of running as far away from my problems as possible, because I was ashamed that I couldn't get my shit together. I spent my time desperately seeking rebellion and wanted to cause trouble just to feel something *else*, but after losing myself and my joy along the way, I was ready to fight for myself, for my happiness.

Tonight was the beginning.

"We doin' this?" Franks asked, turning her head to look at me. I met her blue eyes as excitement swirled deep within them. I wouldn't let her down.

"Yeah, we're doin' it." I gave her my best smile, doing what I could to shove my shit to the bottom. All I could think about was Judah Colt. Why did she have to mention him?

"Leggo!" She linked her arm through mine, and together, we made our way up the driveway as the music pumped around us, people filtered in on both sides, and we passed what looked like the parking lot of a luxury car dealership. Three

Mercedes, a Bentley, two Porsches, a G-Class, two Lamborghinis, two Aston Martins. All different colors, some most definitely custom.

Turning to Frankie with new doubt and anxious nerves swirling in my gut, I asked, "Do you know who Silas hangs out with?"

I followed him on Instagram, but I never paid attention to his friends, and now, for the life of me, I couldn't think of a single person I'd seen him photographed with. Probably because getting star struck was a real thing, and I was starting to feel it.

If the cars in the driveway were any indication, we were walking into a studded party packed with industry buffs.

As we walked, the SoCal summer heat was starting to suffocate me, still on full tilt, even at nearly midnight. It was beautiful, albeit a little sticky, but the closer we got to the house, the more real it felt. Especially as the song changed, sending vibrations along my shoulders and goosebumps down my arms.

Excited nerves stirred in my gut as the house came into view, and like a siren coming out of the water, the vibe of the home—the people, the noise, sound, smells...all of it had the blood heating in my veins.

There was something about a deep baseline, the raspy, angry, borderline obnoxious voices that fed a side of myself that I kept locked away. I guess you could say it was the "Nix" in me. The girl who wanted to live in lethal chaos—where anger ruled and wars started for no reason, other than to see who could spill blood faster. Rap, hip-hop, trap, all of it hit different when walking into a party or gearing up for a big night out. For me, it was confidence boosting, a spark in just the right place at just the right time.

"Okay," Frankie started, pulling me to a stop as we passed the last car. We stood a few feet from a set of caramel colored wooden steps, staring up at the massive house. "This is a bigger deal than I thought." "Uh..." I laughed, a little speechless. "I'll say."

She wasn't kidding.

The place was fucking *packed*.

Tucked into a small corner around a bend, there was a three-story white and tan house that looked to be built *into* the wooded area surrounding it. The first floor was made up of four muddy colored garage doors, and the second floor—the main level—had no glass in sight. There was nothing but open air obstructing the view of the people inside as they hung around holding red Solo cups, dancing in what looked to be blacklight.

The place must have been practically made of retracting windows, allowing for open spaces on the main level and the third floor. Each was surrounded by a thick, wide, spacious balcony, where people sat on the couches and chairs scattered throughout, talking and drinking, taking pictures with friends.

"This is dope as fuck, right?" Frankie whispered next to me as she bounced a little on her toes. "I don't really know what I'm looking at, but I'm pretty sure I'm freaking out."

"Why are there bouncers?" I asked, noticing two massive guys standing on either side of the stairs leading up to the main level's balcony entrance. They were actually wearing security outfits with the fancy belts and everything.

"I'm not sure..." Frankie trailed off as we started moving toward them.

One was giving off police officer vibes, with the sides of his head shaved perfectly to give the hair on top just the right look. The other guy was *gorgeous*, with amber colored skin and clear brown eyes, almost the same as mine. He still managed to look scary as hell though, and suddenly, I felt like we might be trespassing.

Franks slapped on her *Frankie* smile—the one that melted the underwear off everyone in a four-mile radius. Me included. Radiating angelic beauty with just a hint of *you'll never figure me out*, she cooed, "Hello, boys."

"What's up, ladies?" The brown eyed guy spoke up first. The small smile on his face indicated that he appreciated her attempt at seduction, but wasn't interested in what she had to offer. He was ready to get down to business. Confirming my suspicion, he pulled out a recording device. "We need the two of you to consent to being in the music video before you can go in. Just say yes or no and then state your full name."

"Okay." Frankie shrugged. "Do we get paid?"

"No," the other guy said bluntly. "But it's open bar."

Franks and I locked eyes, her way of asking me one last time if I was sure I wanted to do this.

I stole a few precious seconds to think it over—the music was too loud to talk, the attention wouldn't be on me, and to top it all off, this being a music video meant none of it was real. I was acting, playing a part, and I had plenty of practice in that department. My heart rate calmed a little.

Finally, I nodded.

"Cool, let's do it," Frankie said, lifting her chin in the direction of the recording devices.

"All right good, come on over, and we'll get this done quickly." Brown eyes waved us a little closer. "The crew has already started filming and the cameras will roll all night, so don't be alarmed. Spreading the word is key. The featured artist isn't here yet, so it'll be a long night if you decide to stay for the whole thing."

She looked from me back to him, lifting her shoulders. "We'll see, we planned on staying late, anyway."

"Don't forget I have to be at the shop at noon tomorrow, so we're only good until like four," I warned her, knowing I needed at least three hours of sleep in order to be considered human. Franks would get so caught up in the party that she'd forget I had to leave, and then I'd show up to work tomorrow looking like a mess with a bad attitude.

Nobody wanted that.

"It's fine." She shook her blonde head and waved me off. "We'll figure it out later. I want to get in there."

The guys both chuckled a little under their breaths, but the closer we got to getting inside, the more I wanted to turn the fuck around and go home.



"OH, COME ON," Pharaoh bitched as he took in the group of paparazzi standing right at the entrance. "Here too? Fuck that, run one of them over."

I stayed silent, gripping the steering wheel tighter, wishing that I could.

They were everywhere.

The security guy sitting in the little office before the gate looked annoyed as hell, until he saw who it was. He perked right up, fumbling with the door he needed to open in order to talk to me.

I rolled down my window, placing my elbow on the edge as I absently traced my bottom lip with the pad of my thumb, waiting for him to get his shit together. Flustered, he spit out, "Hey, hi, sorry. Go right on in, I'll open the gate. But make it quick, or they'll follow."

I ignored him. "Get more security. We don't need this turning into a shit show."

"Right." He nodded as if he should have known. "Yes, sir."

We waited there for a few minutes, until two black security cars pulled up on either side of the gate.

After dipping my chin in his direction, I inched the car toward the crowd, making sure all the windows were shut and locked, trying to see through the flashing lights as we waited for the automatic door to open. When it did, I pulled through as fast as I could, watching in the rearview mirror as the same two security cars parked right in front of the closing gate, keeping everyone back far enough to allow it to close without crushing anyone.

"Jesus," Pharaoh said, looking back at the mob. "Did someone leak this to the press?"

"Not a fuckin' clue," I answered. "Maybe Silas wanted them here."

Wouldn't make much sense because he, like me, hated the bullshit that came with the job.

"Guess we'll find out soon enough," Pharaoh responded, pulling down the sun visor to mess with his hair.

I wasn't paying close enough attention as I pulled up to the house and nearly totaled a little blue Prius as it backed out of Madigan's driveway. I slammed on the breaks just in time. "Fuck, those things are microscopic."

"Good gas mileage though," Phar commented absently, not giving a shit.

I shook my head, heading down the street a little to try and find a spot to park. Normally, I'd pull into the garage, but since I'd shown up so late, there was no room left.

People walked between the cars parked along the street—girls wearing practically nothing, guys sporting thick chains and snapbacks. Some riding on hover boards, screwing around with their friends as they made their way up the driveway.

Everyone looked so fucking carefree. Their excitement had curls of unwanted jealousy forming in my gut as I wondered if I was that good at faking it too, or if all these people were genuinely happy. I struggled to believe they were, especially if they were any form of famous. Knowing what it's like to be in the spotlight had me leaning toward everyone being an actor. After all, this was Hollywood.

Thank god the community had security, because I ended up having to park all the way down the street, and I definitely would have been taken out by the paparazzi mob if I had to walk through them to get to the house.

Once I parked, got out, and slammed the door being me, I glanced down and sighed. "I really need to change."

"I bet Holly has something for you to wear. She probably brings you an extra outfit *just in case* something like this happened." There was laughter in his voice, like he was mocking me for being waited on hand and foot.

I couldn't blame him. It was the world's largest step up from what we grew up with.

But... "That's a good idea actually." I smirked. "She probably does. That girl thinks of everything."

Pulling out my phone, I ignored all the people who wanted my attention in favor of texting Holly. She replied almost instantly, telling me that she had Colt merch with her and to meet her in Silas' studio.

"She's got some extra shit in my size, I guess." I doubted whatever she had would be appropriate for the music video, but this was too casual for makeup artists and wardrobe. Silas didn't want any of that extra shit, and that was fine by me. Tour merchandise was better than the sweaty as fuck muscle tank I had on right now.

By the time we saw the hired security guys at the front near the stairs, I was ready to get this over with.

Mike WiLL Made-it could be heard from the street, and from the looks of it, the party was in full swing. I nodded to the guy on the right. "What's up?"

"Silas is in the studio," was all he said back.

Unsurprised at his business-like attitude, Pharaoh and I made our way up the stairs and right away, heads started to turn. Groups of friends started whispering excitedly in each other's ears, others sneered with their noses up.

Then a single male voice sounded louder than all the rest as he said, "Pussy ass bitch wants equality in the industry. Too bad he ain't even any good." Male laughter erupted, sounding a whole lot like a bunch of circus monkeys who would fold like a fucking taco under the pressure I felt every day. The awful noise was enough to light a fire in my veins.

Turning just slightly, I found my target, narrowing my eyes to sharp points.

I moved, walking slowly in his direction, tilting my head as I did, letting a smirk bubble to the surface as I demanded, "Say it again."

He was shorter than me by a foot.

When he didn't answer, I sneered, "Go on, mole rat." I kept moving, lessening the distance inch by inch. "You got somethin' you wanna say?"

The fucker blanched, his eyes widening for a moment before his buddies started bumping his shoulders, letting him know they had his back.

I laughed outright, not bothering to mask my insanity. "Aww, what do we have here?" My eyes roamed their faces, each one uglier than the last. But the one who started it all was my victim for the moment. I bent at the waist, getting right in the motherfucker's face, yelling out, "Hey look, everybody, I found the cast of *Mickey Mouse Club House*!"

He tried to hide his fear, lifting his gross hands to my chest as he attempted to back me up a step. He touched me first—that's all I needed.

I slammed my fist into his face so hard, his teeth cut a line across my knuckles. Blood sprayed before I felt the return hit —in the form of a glass bottle. On impact, the bottle exploded against my forehead, slicing a nice line near my hairline.

Turning to see who the fuck managed *that*, I saw the crowd gathered with their phones in the air.

Aw, hell.

"Better go out with a bang, J," Pharaoh called, loving this. "Do the fuckin' thing!"

I smiled, pretending I didn't know what he wanted by asking, "What thing?" I grabbed the back of bitch baby's neck, forced him to lean down and confirmed "This?" just before I slammed my knee into his face. The sound of his nose shattering against the bones in my kneecap had my skin crawling in delicious waves. The bastard howled, clutching his hand over his nose, trying to catch the blood, but it was a lost cause. He was busted.

"That felt nice," I yelled out, dropping the bleeding bastard to the deck beneath our feet. I lifted my hands toward the crowd. "Anyone else got anything to say, or can we get this motherfucker on the road?"

"Judah!" I heard a tiny female voice call from around the corner. Turning, I saw Holly standing there with a confused, but not shocked expression. She moved toward me quickly, standing on her tippy toes to inspect my head. Blood was leaking down my face, into my mouth. "You're kidding, right? We need to get you cleaned up before this—"

"Nah," I cut her off. "We're leaving it. I just need to change."

"Judah, you can't film this video with—"

"Leave it, Holly," Pharaoh warned.

Thank the devil for him, because I was shaking, worked the fuck up and pissed the fuck off. They were lucky I didn't turn the fuck around and go home.

Actually...

That didn't sound like such a bad idea.

"I heard Krista is here," Pharaoh murmured so only I could hear. "Go home after she sucks your dick. You need it."

See? The guy could read my mind.

Ride or fucking die right there.



WALKING into the house was like something straight out of...well, a music video.

Frankie and I stood stunned by the wall just inside the entrance of the room, watching the scene play out in front of us with slightly wide eyes. This was dangerous for someone like me. A party like this was both a lesson in restraint as well as a glimpse into how to take it one step further.

Money was everywhere in the room. Literally.

Actual cash was being thrown as women of all shapes and sizes shook their asses to "STOOPID" by 6ix9ine and Bobby Shmurda. They were all basically naked, wearing nothing but thongs or bikinis as they did their thing. Guys stood around taking Snapchat videos, posing for photos with friends, laughing louder than they normally would to compete with the music level. The bass was blaring so loud, the house was fucking shaking.

Earlier tonight, while Franks and I were getting ready, I tried to imagine what a party like this would look like. That's when I learned that my imagination was fucking garbage. This was not like I pictured in ways I never could have guessed. This was the real deal. A luxury home packed full of rappers, mostly naked girls, some dressed to the nines with flashy jewelry and walking around with weed pens. Others were casual and already obviously drunk, stumbling over each other

and laughing, putting their hands all over the women who willingly threw themselves in their path.

Seriously. I tried not to let my jaw hit the floor as a pretty girl with curly red hair started pawing at some dude's belt like a fucking cat. "Franks, are you seein' this?" I had to shout in her ear, but no one around us could hear anyway.

"I can't decide if I want to join in or go get tested for STDs just because I *looked* at whatever the hell is happening over there," she answered, yelling at the same volume I did.

A giggle snort was my only response as I tore my eyes away from the girl who had now succeeded in doing exactly what she intended. The little red head had his balls in the palm of her hand. Pun not intended.

The main level was a completely open floor plan, but I was struggling to see the true detail of the place through the black light. Everything was distorted, not quite normal, as drones flew throughout the party, no doubt holding cameras to get a real footage of the crowd.

From what I could tell, everything looked sleek, modern, clean.

I figured there was a DJ somewhere in the house, but I couldn't see one anywhere, and the music came from various massive speakers spread throughout the space. Right as I finished my thought, the song changed, and Nav's voice filtered through the room. As soon as the lyrics to "Turks" started up, I felt the energy so deep in my bones, I thought I might be floating.

Wow.

"I'm a little wet," Frankie screamed from my left.

Me fucking too.

It was too loud to respond, but we were also standing right next to one of the previously mentioned speakers, and if we kept it up, both of us would be deaf by the end of the night.

"Come on," I called, grabbing her wrist and dragging her through the crowd.

We'd only just started moving when some shit must have gone down behind us, because faster than I could anticipate, bodies were shoved into each other, and Frankie smashed into my back hard enough that we tripped into the corner of the room. The confused people around us started pushing forward again, so I followed their lead, having no idea what was going on. Once I gained my footing, I reached back for Frankie's hand and pulled her with me, walking in line with the wall. We got as close as possible, so we didn't have to deal with going through the mass in the middle.

"Whoa, whoa, wait." Frankie pulled on my shoulder and jumped.

"Jesus, Frankie!" I shouted, trying to maintain my balance. Her weight hit my body before I could prepare myself, forcing me to grip her thigh as hard as I could, afraid I was going to drop her. Luckily, she locked her ankles around my waist before she extended her body in the air to try and see what was going on. Suddenly she jerked, causing me to turn my head at a weird angle to see what happened.

Pinching her thigh, I yelled, "What is it?"

"Nothing!" She wiggled, waving a hand in my direction as she lowered her body to the ground. I let go, keeping my palms on her until I knew she had regained her footing. She huffed a frustrated sound. "I couldn't fucking see anything, dude."

"Whatever." I shrugged, ready to get out of this giant group of people. "Let's find Sutton and Lake, have they texted you yet?"

"Good idea, I'll check." Frankie pulled her phone from her back pocket and pressed the side button, lighting up the screen. Her eyes scanned the many notifications before she nodded and said, "Yeah, Sutton texted me. She's out back by the pool."

I suggested her two friends because I knew the girls would be a good distraction, a way for me to zone out, block out the noise if I needed to. I was okay for the moment, but it was *almost* too much—the sights, the sounds—but I was trying.

I refused to fuck this up.

As Frankie pulled me through the party, I tried to distract myself, taking in the lights that were strung along all the walls, in all different colors. My crop top was glowing right along with the matching Vans on my feet, my hands became ridiculously tan in the black light, making me wonder how my hair looked, if my makeup was weird. We passed groups of people, some I recognized from reality TV shows, some were other music artists, but most I'd never seen before.

We headed through the pristine white kitchen and straight into the backyard, leading out to the infinity pool.

"Thank god the music isn't as fucking loud out here," Frankie called over her shoulder, not even flinching at what we walked into. Meanwhile, all I could do was nod. I was officially distracted.

Holy shit. The view.

Out past the pool, where the water disappeared off the ledge, Los Angeles sparkled in the distance, the stars above twinkled, the air was like a warm blanket, and instantly, my anxiety smoothed, my fears lost a little bit of their hold on me.

"Frankie!" A female voice came from our left, causing both of us to turn at the same time, coming face to face with Sutton and Lake, two of Frankie's friends. Lake was the one who spoke first, sighing with an exhausted, "Finally!" as she approached.

Both girls were dressed to perfection, both wearing short black dresses and tall heels. Lake's stick straight black hair was pulled back into a sleek pony, while Sutton's brunette bob swayed around her shoulders.

Both girls carried designer clutches, much like Frankie and I, but I could smell the scent of pompous asshole already. While I wanted to use them as a distraction, I never understood how Frankie tolerated these girls. Something about the two of them rubbed me the wrong fucking way, but they were like any bad coworkers. There wasn't anything an employee could do to get rid of them, aside from tell their boss

or the human resources department about the things they'd seen, and unfortunately for Frankie, Instagram didn't have one of those. They'd be around no matter what, and I guessed she just got used to them.

Still, I secretly started counting how long it would take before one of them said something to piss me off.

"Holy shit, did you see Judah Colt beating up some guy?" Sutton asked, licking her bottom lip like a cat in heat. There was that desperate look in her eye, the one that clued us all in on her plans to find a way into...

Wait. I repeated her question in my head. Judah Colt. The commotion by the entrance. The crowd. It was *him*?

"I'm sorry," I interrupted my own thought, narrowing my eyes on her bright green ones with my heart in my throat. "Did you say Judah Colt?"

It all happened so fast. One minute, I was listening to what she was saying, the next…everything just *stopped*.

Six months.

That's how long I'd been falling asleep to the sound of his voice. Six months since I found his soul within the lyrics of his music.

Sutton nodded, completely fucking oblivious. "I swear to you. I never noticed him until tonight!"

Of course you didn't.

The thought of Sutton getting to Judah before me made my blood boil. The fact that Judah was *here* set my skin on fire. Goosebumps flew down my arms. The tiny hairs at the back of my neck were standing on end.

"I need to take a walk or something," I said to the group, needing a bathroom, time alone, or just to go home.

"What?" Frankie asked, confused. "P, Judah fucking Colt is here! He's your favorite!"

I know.

I plastered on the best grin I could come up with, trying to play it cool. "We're at a party, Franks. I'm not going to go searching him out."

Her eyes bounced between mine for a moment, no doubt trying to decide whether or not my little lie was fact or fiction. I must have been a better actor than I thought, because she just shrugged and said, "I'm sure we'll find another dick to ride tonight, yeah?" Lake and I laughed—me less enthusiastically so—but Sutton wasn't so sure about that comment. Frankie gave in, not even realizing that I was about to have a mental breakdown right here by Silas Madigan's infinity pool. She ended the conversation with, "Let me know if you find the bathroom, 'K? I gotta pee, but I don't want to search through the house and waste a bunch of fucking time. So while you're in there, find it and let me know."

Lucky for me, that was the perfect excuse to get lost for a while.

"Sounds good, I'll text you."

???

ON AUTOPILOT, I walked through the party at my own pace, taking it all in, pretending that I wasn't looking for signs of Judah.

There were none, by the way. I didn't see him anywhere.

But I did find the bar within the first five minutes, pushed up against the back wall of the house, just off the kitchen. There were pink and blue neon colors everywhere—so much so, that it seemed to be the theme. The whole place was bathed in the unnatural colors. In a daze, I ordered a beer from a bartender with gel spiked hair. Or something like that. I wasn't really paying any attention.

Once I had my beer, I kept going, moving through the first floor like a ghost as the music blared, girls wearing basically nothing shook their asses, guys spilled beer and huddled around with their friends to watch the show. I recognized a few rappers taking body shots, some snorting lines of coke off random glass surfaces throughout the house. Cameras were everywhere, controlled by both drones as well as actual humans.

I didn't know how to feel, wasn't even sure I was thinking about what I was doing. Almost like I was outside my body, all I wanted was to crawl into my bed at home and forget about tonight. Which sucked because nothing happened, but all it took was one mention of Judah's name and I was pissed off. Sutton mentioning him, talking about him like she could actually have a chance, made me want to claw her eyes out. Because Judah Colt was mine. In my heart, in my fucking head. He was mine. He saved me.

Except, he isn't yours and he doesn't even know you.

He didn't know me, but that didn't stop me from continuing my search. It paid off too, because ten minutes and one more walk through later, I found him.

But *really* fucking wished I hadn't.

It was too late, my eyes were glued to the scene in front of me.

My breath got tangled on its way up my throat as all the blood drained from my face.

Because Judah Colt was *right there*, about six feet away, standing in between two chicks. Hot as fuck. Both of them.

I couldn't look away, but I knew I'd stopped somewhere in the middle of the living room. In a matter of ten minutes, they'd set up a sort of VIP lounge in the center of the room and were already surrounded by onlookers.

He couldn't see me, didn't even look at the crowd watching him. Instead, he looked back and forth between both girls, his eyes landing on the full shot glasses that were shoved in between their tits, just waiting for him to dig them out with his fucking teeth.

I studied him, even though I wanted to look away, walk away, not watch whatever was about to happen here. But I couldn't see past the blood that fell like a river down his face and into his mouth. He wasn't even looking directly at me, but his icy blue eyes shone in the blacklight as he charmed the girls with a dark smile plastered on his face. His dirty blond hair was messily styled on top of his head, his outfit looked worn, now stained with blood. He wasn't drunk yet—at least, I didn't think he was—but it was clear to anyone paying attention that he had plans to change that.

The girl on the left had platinum blonde hair and bubblegum pink lips, making her cocoa skin look good enough to eat, while the one on the right was rocking long curly pink locks, her ab muscles on display in her skimpy ass...gym outfit? Spandex shorts and a sports bra was all she wore. I couldn't see her feet, but I was willing to bet she rocked running sneakers.

Unable to stop myself, my gaze slid back to Judah, zeroing in on the lower half of his body. Specifically, where he held a blunt in between his fingers, casually at his side.

There went my breath again.

Fucking vanished as I took in the thick trail of blood starting from his busted fist, leading down his fingers, where it landed on the paper, soaking the blunt crimson as the cherry burned orange.

God...damn...that's so hot.

My chest burned without reason as Judah did what was expected of him and the camera flashes went live. People screamed, laughed, cheered as they recorded Judah's tall frame bending in half in order to shove his face right into the fake as fuck, mouthwateringly unrealistic tits that held the little glass of clear liquor. He chose the dark-skinned babe first.

Jealous, I tried to get a little closer, just to watch his mouth curl around the edges of the shot glass, but he stood to his full height before I could get a good look. Instead, I watched, fascinated, as he brought the tiny glass with him and tipped his head back. The liquid fell down his throat, and rather than setting the shot glass down on the table in front of them, he chucked it, sending it flying through the crowd behind me.

I figured it would drop, crack, send glass all over the floor, but someone snatched it out of the air and yelled out, "Got it, Colt!"

That's when I noticed that Empty at Midnight was playing through the speakers and I'd missed it somehow, lost in the way he...lived? Breathed? Existed?

Judah paid no attention, turning with purpose toward the athletic looking female and repeating the same process, but this girl grabbed the back of his head and kept his face up against her chest, moving side to side just to make sure he suffocated to death in between her triple Ds.

I couldn't take it anymore, spinning and pissing off the people standing behind me by deciding the sight of him wasn't worth the pain, especially because it would do me no good to care. He was famous as fuck, and I was an unhappy, unsatisfied little nobody and...

I peeked back over my shoulder, unable to resist.

Only to find Judah Colt staring straight at me.

We locked eyes.

And there it was.

The connection I both feared and hoped would be there. The feeling I had when I first heard his music come to life in a symphony of sound, feelings, fears, and comfort, was back in full force.

Yes, there was something about Judah Colt's energy that gave me...comfort.

I had never met him before, never spoken to him a day in my life, and yet, he felt familiar.

Like he was a torn-to-shreds, put-through-the-washer-too-many-times, kind of security blanket. One that looked like a mess to anyone who'd never experienced the silken softness before the years destroyed it. But for those who knew what the package came like unopened and brand new, it was still just as beautiful now, all dirty and ripped, as it was with the tag still on.

There, in the middle of the crowd, I saw the truth in his eyes as he bared his soul to me without even realizing it. He was hurting, big time. He was scared, more than he had been before. He was doubting himself to the point where giving up was becoming an option—I could see it, because I knew how it felt.

In under a few seconds, I read all that on his face. Was it accurate? I didn't think I'd ever find out, but as I dropped my guard and returned the favor, showing him all I had inside me, neither of us moved. His eyes left mine for a moment, only to travel a little lower to my chest, then lower still to my stomach, my legs, before sliding up again, just before the connection was dropped when some guy with crazy wild hair and eyeliner smacked him on the back, congratulating him on the titty shots.

This is not what I need right now.

All the reasons I wanted to be alone, away from everyone with a bottle of tequila, some weed, and a cigarette or two were crawling their way up my spine. Tonight was supposed to be about doing *better* than that, *being* better than that.

The drugs, the alcohol, those things weren't the problem. It was the constant overthinking, overanalyzing, preventing myself from experiencing any real joy—those things would kill me before my time was up.

I walked away, actually searching for the bathroom this time.

I'd gotten what I wanted, found him in his natural habitat. We made eye contact. Now it was done. Probably for the better too, because I wasn't sure what the fuck I would have said to him if he'd approached me anyway.



SHE WAS TORTURED BY SOMETHING.

"You got a little blood on your face, my dude." Sage slapped my back, shocking the shit out of me, forcing me to look at him. He continued with, "What a fuckin' show *that* was. I'm hoping one of those girls are down to get a lil' freaky—you don't mind, do ya, brother?"

I didn't give a single fuck.

All I cared about was the fact that his interruption slammed the door on the intense moment I was having with a...

Girl who is no longer there.

She was just standing right there. She was...watching me. She knew me. Or maybe I was crazy.

Still, I glanced left and right, even squinted a little to try and catch her brunette waves in the crowd, but she was gone. I turned to Sage with murder in my eyes, "Fucking hell, man!"

He had the decency to look confused, "What did I do?"

He won't get it. "Never mind." I waved a hand, lifting the sticky blunt to my mouth and taking a thick hit. I talked through the smoke, "Where the fuck is Silas?"

I wanted to see that girl again. There was...something about her. I didn't know what, couldn't figure it out with all

the noise, the cameras, the fact that I was supposed to be looking like I was having fun.

"He's upstairs setting up beer bong," Sage distractedly told me, leaning over the table to flash a lust filled smile to one of the many girls looking for attention from us. "He bought a set of Solo cups with fucking diamonds on them. Wants them in the video."

Diamond studded red Solo cups.

Classic symptom of having too much money.

"Amazing. Well, guess I'll just keep drinking." I shrugged, lifting another shot from the small round tray at the corner of the table, throwing it back without so much as flinching. "Actually, I'm going to grab a bottle."

Rounding the corner, I pushed my way through the grabby hands and ignored the people calling out my name. It had been a long as fuck day, and it wasn't even close to over. I had another two hours of shooting left to endure, and Silas and I still had a set to perform for the end of the video.

As I made my way to the bar, I found myself searching for her again. I wanted to see her without the blacklight, somewhere I could ask her if the pain in her eyes was as real as it seemed to be.



SO FAR, in the nearly three hours we'd been there, Frankie and I explored both the main level of the house and the third floor. The main one held the kitchen and extended straight into the lengthy living room which held the biggest TV I'd ever seen in my life, and I grew up wealthy. The space was made up of six couches, the lit-up gas fireplace, and flashy chairs spread out in the room.

We ended up on the third floor, where we were currently hanging out with two guys Sutton managed to find. Before introductions were even made, the two guys invited us to play a round of beer pong.

I was shocked to see the number of people walking around drinking out of red Solo cups. Until, of course, I realized some of the cups were studded with red diamonds. I hoped to god they were fake, but couldn't be sure based on the crowd. Every person that walked around this house either was somebody or knew somebody, and despite not being able to wipe Judah's face from my mind, I was finally having a great time. The open area on this floor was smaller than the one below, but it also held four or five guest rooms and two bathrooms. All the doors were closed, but the loft-like space was where the tournament was taking place.

We agreed to play, and an hour later, it was down to two cups each. The opposing team—Ricco and Kavan—were both losing to the amount of liquor they'd been drinking, but they

knew how to handle themselves. Kavan had beautiful bright green eyes, sexy chocolate mousse-like skin, and a wild, crazy personality that captured and held my attention, while his best friend, Ricco, was light-skinned with hazel eyes and a warm, welcoming, hilarious energy. Both guys were taller than Frankie and me, just under the six-foot mark, with fancy fades and gold chains around their necks.

I'd assumed they were rap artists, until Ricco busted some crazy as hell dance moves after landing a ball in one of our cups. Shortly after, when Kavan managed to do the same thing, he joined in, and the two of them got distracted by the music and the hype of the crowd. Everyone watching seemed to forget all about the game as the guys dropped everything to bust out a freestyle performance—somehow managing to play off of each other, making art out of their bodies, becoming one with the bass, the lyrics. They even mixed in witty comedy—not to mention swoon worthy heat—and then did that thing with their hips.

As far as I was concerned, the impromptu performance would have won them a *World of Dance* championship trophy if it was performed on stage. Frankie squeezed my arm the whole time, while I did nothing but smile in awe, laughing out loud, because *holy shit*. These guys were a blast. Talented. Sexy. Flirty.

"All right, babe," Frankie yelled over the sounds of Lil Baby coming through the speakers set up around the room, bringing my focus back to the game. "We got two of these bastards left. You get one, I'll get one, and we win this biznitch."

The crowd standing around us cheered, the sound fueling my excitement. They had already fallen for Frankie's crazy ass after she spent the whole game shouting curse words and handing out threats every time Ricco or Kavan landed a ball in one of our cups. It had become a game of "what will Frankie say next?" and everyone watching was eating it the fuck up.

"We got this." I nodded, spinning the little white ball in my hand and focusing on the target. I really wanted to win this game. "Remember," Kavan taunted from the other side of the table, pointing at us with a grin. "You lose, and you two have to suck face."

"Who the hell says 'suck face' anymore?" Frankie sassed, curling her hand around the corner of the table and leaning in a little with a saucy smile. "I won't be sucking her face, but I'm totally ready to stick my tongue down her throat." She nodded her head toward me. There was real heat in her eyes as she asked, "Have you seen the ass on that one?"

A smirk graced my face as a burst of noise came from the crowd all at once in a wave of hoots and hollers, high fives and clapping. There were two drones overhead, no doubt getting all of this on film.

"I think the important thing here," I started, following her lead as everyone calmed down. "Is that *you two*," I pointed at the guys, "didn't consider that us kissing wouldn't be something out of the ordinary." I looked over at Frankie with a secretive smile. Taking my time, I studied the rich golden hue of her skin from hours of lying out by the pool, the shape of her neck, her lips, her eyelashes, before looking back at the boys. "This isn't even a challenge."

There went the wall of people around us, again, but Ricco was too excited to wait for them to die down. Yelling out, "Oh y'all swing..." He paused, looking back and forth between us. "Both ways?"

This was the moment we lived for back when I was around permanently, when I went by Nix and not Phoenix. Frankie and I were sexual creatures, and we weren't shy about it. Not even a little. That was one of the things that hadn't changed about us in the last four years. Here, now, we were even more honest about what we needed and when.

Here's the thing about us... "We'll swing just about any way if the company is right." I winked, throwing the little white ball and watching as it sunk gracefully into the cup, hitting the water with a solid splash.

Clapping, yelling, booing—it all burst through the room, the collective sound giving the wild spirit within me

permission to uncurl her wings and do some damage.

Grinning the whole way, I stepped behind Frankie as she set up to take her shot. More excited than I should have been, I slid a confident hand around her waist, feeling the lace of her bustier against the palm of my hand, savoring the heat of her body. She backed into me, giving me control, letting me know she was down for whatever I had planned.

Using my free hand, I gathered her thick blonde hair and moved it all to one side, making room for myself on the left side of her body. She smelled like bubblegum, which was odd, since we wore the same perfume, but pheromones were a thing and I was suddenly horny.

Turning my head just slightly, I whispered in her ear, "Sink the ball, Franks."

Her eyes fluttered closed for just a second, before she smiled and tossed our fate.

Right into the cup.

"Dammit!" Kavan yelled, slamming his fist on the table hard enough to cause the ball to bounce right back out. "You two are fucking awful!"

Frankie let out a sweet laugh, still cuddled into me. "You're the ones who didn't listen. We told you we'd hand you your asses. Now pay up!"

We just won five grand.

Both guys grumbled but wore smiles while they did it, pulling out thick wads of cash and counting out hundred-dollar bills with fingers covered in diamond rings.

"They're done filming." Sutton's voice came from behind us, wobbly with alcohol.

What?

My stomach dropped as I turned around and let go of Frankie. Sutton stood with Lake in the circle, both of her arms crossed over her chest, and her hazel eyes trained right on Kavan. Her gaze was practically screaming "fuck me harder," and she definitely didn't care that we all could see it.

"And that's my cue," I mumbled to Frankie, not wanting to deal with Sutton at the moment. "I'm going to go find a place to smoke."

"Did you bring your own pack?" she asked, knowing I didn't.

"Nah, I'm just gonna hope there are other smokers congregated somewhere," I responded, starting to look around for places to seek out nicotine. "I'll bum one."

"All right, but let me know where you are so I don't worry." Her blue eyes met mine with humor shining bright within them. She wiggled her eyebrows. "We don't know where these people have been."

"You're ridiculous." I smiled, shaking my head and starting to walk away. I called out, "I'll be back soon."

She nodded, waving Sutton and Lake forward and turning around to talk to Ricco and Kavan, no doubt ready to make introductions. Sutton was about to go in for the kill. If you could get her VIP tickets to Coachella, it didn't matter that you had crabs. She'd cross that bridge when she came to it.

Feeling slightly buzzed from the three shots Frankie got for us, but not nearly as drunk as I wanted to be, I headed back downstairs toward the bar. Passing through the rooms, avoiding getting in the way as much as possible, I stood at the end of a short line as groups of people walked away with bottles of champagne, hard liquor, buckets of beer, even a blunt or two.

This lifestyle was intimidating and a little scary.

It kind of made my skin crawl, and that was saying a lot because I hadn't been exactly *innocent* in college. I'd done all this before, but never all at once, never more than once every few weeks, and never at this level.

It seemed like the distractions were paid for in full and supplied in abundance on a night like tonight. I couldn't help but wonder if this happened all the time, thinking back to Instagram and the stories my timeline was always full of. When it came to the celebrities I followed, most of them

posted photos or streamed live from parties like this all the time. Looking around, it made me a little sick to my stomach, thinking about the number of drugs I'd seen tonight alone. The guys in groups mixing some syrupy liquid into soda, lines of coke on every surface, people walking around holding pills and offering one to anyone looking to lose themselves.

Money talked as I glanced around. Diamonds around nearly every throat or at least one finger, watches more expensive than our house, designer everything. It was...sadder than I expected it to be.

None of these people seemed happy. In fact, they all looked how I felt.

"Hey!" the bartender called, trying to get my attention with an impatient glint in her eye. She was stunning, wearing a sparkly rainbow body con dress and rocking wavy lavender hair. "Order?"

"Can I get a bottle of Tito's?" I asked, leaning over the bar a little.

I planned to pay for it, but when I handed over the fifty-dollar bill, she ignored me completely.

"Easy enough," she nodded, bending down to the cabinets underneath the bar, searching until she pulled out a bottle of my chosen liquor.

After she handed me the bottle with a blank, careless expression and moved on to the next person, I realized she was done with me and made my way to the outskirts of the house, in hopes of finding someone smoking on the patio. I opened the bottle on my walk and took a healthy swig, wishing I had asked for a blunt too. I should have brought one with me from home, along with my cigarettes, but I was too nervous to think about everything as we got ready.

Once I made it outside, I studied the light gray outdoor couches with teal throw pillows and tall heaters evenly spaced on the wooden deck. Not knowing where to go and deciding to explore what was around the corner, I walked the length of the balcony and did just that when I reached the end. I turned, taking another sip at the same time.

No one was out there, it was just me, and as I got lost in my curiosity, I walked right into the bottom step of another set of stairs. Except these stairs were made of fucking iron. "Ouch! Jesus Christ, fuck me."

Stinging, burning pain raced up my shins. *Goddamn that hurts*.

Bouncing a little, I bit down on my bottom lip and tried not to whimper, but after another handful of seconds, the sharp stabbing sensation became a dull ache that I could handle without acting like a baby, so I focused my attention on the stair that caused this mess. Looking up, I was standing in front of what looked kind of like a fire escape, tucked into the back of the house, out of view.

My heart beat faster at the thought of going up them, knowing that this wasn't my house and the stairs themselves were hidden in the back underneath tall palm trees, and probably for good reason.

But at the same time...

"Eh, fuck it." I headed up the stairs, but cringed every time the metal creaked beneath my feet.

When I reached the top, there was a four-foot glass gate that was unlocked and available for me to just push open. Placing my hands on the glass, I ignored the warning bells in my mind and walked on to the roof of the house, looking straight into the *incredible* view it provided.

"Holy..." I breathed, unable to keep my thought inside but unable to finish the statement.

The masterpiece in front of me was stunning, captivating, surely an edited picture from photoshop. It was a twinkling Los Angeles at two-thirty in the morning.

The lights were bright, the air was warm and just a little bit sticky, the dense smog was gone for the moment, leaving me with a deliciously clear view. Looking left, right, down, my face was etched in shock. With weather resistant wood

flooring, the space was vast, and the only thing that kept you from falling over the sides was the four-foot glass walls that surrounded the rooftop patio.

"Makes you forget how shitty this city really is," a voice called from behind me.

"Fuck!" I gasped, whipping around. My hand came up to cover my mouth as his voice knocked my blood pressure up a few notches. I searched in the dark, but there was no one I could see.

A sad, throaty, chuckle sounded in the night air, lighting goosebumps along my flesh. "Look down."

I know that voice. Doing as I was told, I let my eyes focus until they landed on a figure seated up against a glass panel, a few feet away from me.

Dirty blond hair, bright as hell blue eyes, a tall frame lazily hanging out alone.

Oh my fucking god.

How... But he... And I...

Panic, adrenaline, terror—they all hit me at once, forcing me to hold my breath. My heart rate had already skyrocketed to a dangerous level, ready to burst through my flesh and swallow him whole. The past six months came back to me, slowly, achingly intense, as reality settled in. All the nights I wondered, all the times I wished I could just...say hello. It sounded lame, stupid, obsessive. I knew that, but...that didn't make it any less true.

Standing there, on the rooftop patio of a multi-million-dollar home in the Hollywood Hills, I was alone with Judah Colt.

Unable to form words, forgetting what he even said to me, I started from scratch and drank in the sight of him in person. His presence alone was another entity standing between us. His damage, his anxiety, his sadness, it was a living thing.

But still, everything about him was different than it was on online. His blue eyes were actually like the sky after a blizzard —icy, cold, and bright as fuck, though still red and gloomy around the edges, indicating that not everyone survived his storm. His dirty blond hair was the same as it was in the blacklight, but somehow sexier under the natural moonlight.

Continuing my perusal, I was thankful that we were outside, even if it was dark, because *goddamn*, my eyes nearly burst into flames as I took in his outfit. He'd changed at some point, now wearing ripped to shit black jeans with his signature pink and black Chucks, showing off the tattoos on his legs. His equally inked chest was covered in a bright yellow short-sleeved button down with "THECOLT" written in red paint splatter along the pocket, where a pack of...

Ha! Cigarettes, rested.

The exact kind I smoked.

Motherfucker.

"Guess I'm the only one here who thinks that."

Fuck me, his voice.

Raspy, rough around every edge. Sad, cracked, broken.

Get it together, Phoenix. He's talking to you.

Shit, he was talking to me.

What did he say?

Going back in my memory, I focused harder, trying to remember what it was he said that got my attention in the first place, but then he turned his head just slightly and met my eyes. Officially.

I swear, my heart actually cried out. Pretty sure I heard its screams far off in the distance.

All the evidence I needed was *right there*, but I knew long before tonight that—based on his music alone and what I'd picked up in his lyrics—if I ever got to meet him in person, he'd be intense. I imagined that I'd be able to feel all the emotions, all the negative shit I pictured living under his skin, but I honestly never thought I'd get the chance to find out for sure.

And fantasy sure as shit didn't live up to reality.

Intense didn't even cover half of it. Looking at him was like a physical blow to the chest, it actually hurt. Sad? Sure. True? Absolutely.

It hurt because I couldn't have him, because he was out of my league, because he was him and I was me, and I just... wanted him to see me the way I saw him.

Which is nuts. I'm aware.

"I'm sorry," I said in a daze, totally slayed by whatever the fuck lived in his eyes. "I'm a little..."

Just like that, he dropped his head back on a sigh, and the spell activated as soon as we locked eyes was broken.

"You're a fan," he groaned, the sound making me want to crawl in a hole and die.

Of course, he groaned, because I was acting *like a star* struck idiot.

Which I wasn't. Truly. I wasn't star struck—I was *struck*, period.

His entire presence was more than I could have ever imagined it to be. And trust me, I imagined it. How could I not? Judah Colt's pain was the only noise loud enough to quiet the memories, the feelings, the smells, sounds of gunfire. Every night, I lost myself in his damage, took it as my own, understood it, nurtured it in my mind, and attempted to make myself feel better but now...

He was here, and he was real.

I needed to fix this awkward vibe and fucking talk.

This was my chance to make an impression, even just for the night. I was supposed to be actively seeking happiness, and while I wasn't sure what this conversation would bring, I didn't care. Because if I was ever truly happy, it was when I got lost in his music.

Go for it, Phoenix.

Letting my emotional baggage drop at my feet, I did what I came to do and lifted my chin toward his pocket.

"Can I bum a cig?"



I WAS STILL STARING at the sky, head against the glass wall behind me.

She was a fan.

The girl I made eye contact with in the crowd—the girl whose soul ripped right through my own—was a goddamn fucking fan. She couldn't even speak, for fuck's sake.

Until, of course, "Can I bum a cig?" fell out of her mouth and into the quiet air around us.

I lifted my head, surprised...wanting to take another look...

Fucking hell.

Up close, in natural lighting, this girl was a honeyed bombshell.

As she stood in front of me, I noticed three things immediately.

The first was that she was short as hell, at least a foot shorter than me...plus a couple inches. The second was her outfit, how it accentuated her deliciously perfect, all-natural tan. She wore a baby pink crop-top that showed off the sleeve of tattoos on her left arm, with ripped black jeans and cute little baby pink Vans tied around her feet. But it was the white bracelets that caught and held my attention. Around her delicate wrists, the thin bands matched the white paint on her

fingernails. The color made her fingers look dainty, breakable, but the girl herself?

She was... *perfect*. Standing there with a bottle of vodka in her hand, she captured all of my attention. Not too hard, not too soft, but somewhere in the middle. And her *voice*? I only heard her say a few words but, *fuck me*—not quite husky, just past feminine and seated perfectly in the realm of sensual. I wanted to hear it louder, closer to my ears.

That led me to the third thing I noticed right away.

I wanted to know more.

"So, she smokes," I said by way of answering, meeting her eyes. I couldn't tell the color from my seat on the ground and the lack of sunlight, but I wanted to know what they looked like.

"She does." She nodded with a pretty smirk on her face. "Care to share?"

Bold, bold girl.

The way she was looking at me had me breathing funny. I noticed the same thing earlier, like she was trying to tell me something, but what I picked up from her gaze wasn't possible. She didn't know me—I was positive we'd never met before—and yet she seemed to view me like I was familiar, someone she knew intimately.

Testing her, I lifted my chin toward the empty space beside me, reaching in the front pocket of my shirt for my pack of cigarettes. She hesitated for a moment before lifting the bottle of Tito's to her lips and sucking back a few swallows.

Then she sat down.

Suddenly, I couldn't wait to see what she'd do, how she'd act around me. Fans were tricky. They were a loose cannon if you didn't set boundaries, lay out the law from the jump. But this girl didn't seem like the typical fan. For example, she was completely silent as I pulled two out—not trying to start up a conversation or even moving too close to me as she sat down. Nope, she sat a good foot away, a nice amount of space between us as she stretched her legs out in front of her.

She was tiny, I had to look down if I wanted to make eye contact—which I did—even while sitting. My head was spinning a little, because it was almost as if I could physically *feel* her energy, though I couldn't place my finger on what exactly it was about her that had me so interested, but I think I liked it.

Sticking the ends of two cigarettes between my lips, I flicked the lighter and took a deep drag, ensuring they were sufficiently lit before blowing the smoke through my nose and handing her one. I said nothing.

"Thanks," was all *she* said, before falling into silence again, right along with me. But I didn't miss it. I didn't miss the eye contact, the way the stars lit up her face as she turned to me.

I'd come up here to think about everything that went down tonight, but all I could focus on was wondering if she had fake contacts in because holy mother of god, her eyes.

Coffee.

Her eyes were the color of light roast coffee, and the two of us just...sat there, on the roof.

She was looking out toward the view with an expression I couldn't read, while I was trying not to watch her do it. But she had a face I felt the need to memorize.

As I sat there, I went back and forth between finishing my cigarette and brushing her off—going back inside and taking Krista up on her offer to find an empty room and fuck the shit from my system—or sitting up here until she finally broke the silence and spoke first. The more I thought about our encounter downstairs, the more I thought I might have made up the pain I thought I saw in her eyes, but at the same time, there was no way I could make that up. It didn't make sense.

I was overthinking it. My desperate wish to be understood was working its way into this moment, trying to turn it into something it wasn't.

I flicked the ash in the little glass tray that was shaped like a weed plant. When I came up here about forty-five minutes ago, I stole it from one of the tables at the corner of the roof. I was almost halfway done already, and worry had settled in my stomach. Suddenly, I wished that cigarettes lasted longer—more like blunts did. Would she get up and leave after she finished hers? Did I *want* her to?

I peeked at her from the corner of my eyes, and just as I did, she lifted the filter to her mouth and inhaled a deep drag before breathing it out like only a seasoned smoker could. With relief—like she was grateful for the quick high, the temporary distraction, but mainly for something to do with her hands before she reached for something sharper to play with.

Seeing—and somehow feeling—her relaxed state, I settled in, planning to sit here until she opened her mouth. I was too interested, too ready to hear her voice again, feeling both jammed up and oddly at ease. When I'd come up here, the plan was to smoke alone with my thoughts, my anger, my passion, because I wanted to let my shit simmer before I went home and tried to write it all down, but now I was losing all the thoughts I previously had.

They were quickly being replaced by questions I wanted to ask her.

Where was she from? She didn't look like someone who was in the industry. Who did she know? How did she get invited to this party? This rooftop?

Why are you here?

But still, we smoked in continued, heavy silence, until I couldn't keep it in anymore.

I stared down at her, saying the first thing that popped into my mind. "You smell like some kind of red berry."

Fucking crickets.

Nothing. The roof remained noiseless.

Then a sputtered laugh fell from her mouth as she turned her head toward me. Slowly, she emphasized her need to look *up* at me by running her eyes from my inked hands folded in my lap all the way up to the top of my head. Out of her mouth came the accusation, "Well, you're a fucking skyscraper."

Her voice. "That's a new one." I tripped over a laugh, forgetting all about my bullshit.

She shrugged, looking back out toward the city views. "It's true, though."

"Yeah, it is," I stated, watching her openly now, having a seriously hard time looking away.

"I agree with you," she said out of nowhere, meeting my eyes and nodding her head toward the city. "The view makes you forget."

Ah, the comment I made when she walked onto the roof.

There was a different kind of confidence riding on the undertone of her voice. The sight of it, the feel of her energy was unique to only her, not something I'd ever experienced before. I had, however, noticed how she crossed her legs but still bounced her foot—like she was anxious but...used to it? As if her anxiety had nothing to do with me sitting here, but rather the weight of her world on her shoulders. The load she carried was clearly heavy, heavier than what she'd ever admit, but to me, her demons upped her sex appeal.

"Who are you?" I asked, wanting a name to call her.

A small pause before a secretive smile pulled at her lips. "Nix."

I shot the side her face a glare. "That's a nickname."

"It is," she agreed, still with that fucking smile.

"Full name, Nix."

She clicked her tongue. "Ask nicely."

"You're funny," I scoffed.

"Phoenix."

My heart stopped. Baby Bird.

"Last name?" Voice too rough.

"Not telling." Voice whispered.

I nudged her shoulder with mine.

Like she couldn't help it, she relented, "Royal."

Phoenix Royal. Baby Bird.

I named everything—every important thing in my life had a name that only I called it. My guitar was Hotley, even Pharaoh's G-Class was called G-Dog. And now, this girl was, "Baby Bird."

"What?" she asked, turning her head to show me the confused look on her face.

"Your nickname," I stated, sitting up a little and letting my head fall back against the building behind me. "I'm calling you Baby Bird."

I expected her to laugh, but nothing happened. She made no noise. Lowering my head to check on her, she was already watching me with an odd as fuck expression.

"What?" I asked, deadpan.

"Why would you give me a nickname?" She was serious. She wanted a reason.

"Uh..." I laughed a little. "I nickname my things all the time."

That broke the spell. She scoffed. "I'm not one of your things."

No, she wasn't, but...

Slow down, Colt, we don't know this girl. She could be crazy.

I almost laughed out loud at my own thought, because the truth was, the shift in her tone had me thinking she was capable of acting crazy. But not the kind you filed retraining orders against. No, she was the kind of insane you kept close, beat the fuck out of other people for touching. She felt like the type of madness that deserved to be protected.

I shrugged. "The nickname stays."

Her perky nose scrunched up, "Baby Bird? For real?"

"Your name is Phoenix," I stated in a dry tone. "And you're the size of a toddler."

Clearly caught off guard, she couldn't hold in her laugh as her mouth dropped open. "Well excuse the fuck outta me."

"What? You are." I chuckled, actually enjoying myself for the first time in what felt like centuries. "When you're sitting down, you're like the size of my forearm."

Surprising us both, I reached out and put my hand on the top of her head, letting my arm hang down her face. "See? My elbow is almost touching the ground."

She shoved me off, laughing harder. "Get off me, Judah."

The smile slipped from my face, my heart sped up, but everything else remained suspended in air.

Fuck, the way she said my name.

My eyebrows just about met in the middle as I studied her closer. Scanning the lines of her face, taking in the smooth skin, the slightly downturned eyes...

I searched for a clue, any hint toward a previous connection to her. "Do I know you?"

The little bird sobered quickly, no longer laughing, but instead, retreating. "No."

"Are you sure?" I searched for the lie, but couldn't find one.

"Positive," she whispered, holding my eyes the whole time.

Still, there was something I was missing. "Who are you?"

A relatively thick pause. "Who do you want me to be?"

She tried to smile, but it didn't land as intended. Instead, the response clued me in on something I hadn't noticed before but was obvious as hell now. Especially since her body language had shifted into protective mode. She was shutting down, guarding a part of herself she wasn't ready to share. But I caught it all the same. Bitter, damaged, suffocating alone—she was just like me.

If someone asked me how I figured that out, I wouldn't have been able to give them an answer, but as I studied her—closer than I normally did when talking to a perfect stranger—I saw it. She knew it too. She bit her lip and glanced away, but still asked, "Why are you looking at me like that?"

I couldn't tell her. Not now, at least. She was skittish, flighty.

"No reason," I responded, noting the lethal innocence in her voice. She was...a total fucking mystery, and I wasn't sure if it was a good thing. "How long have you lived in LA?"

She pressed the butt of her cigarette in the ashtray and took a deep breath, pulling her legs underneath her to sit crosslegged. She tapped her white painted fingernails on the ground a couple times before saying, "I grew up in Orange County, left four years ago for college, and just moved back to California permanently in February."

"Where did you go to school?" I asked, not used to having normal conversation about everyday things. The people I surrounded myself with weren't exactly into small talk about regular people shit.

"Pratt University in New York." She wasn't looking at me.

"What did you study?" For some reason, I felt stupid, which wasn't helping my already shitty headspace, but the more she didn't want to share, the more desperate I became to know.

Phoenix turned her head, gaping at me a little, clearly surprised I was asking.

"Uh..." She fake coughed through her rapidly building uncertainty as I continued to surprise her. "I—uh, I went for drawing."

"Seriously?" Color me fucking shocked.

Her brown eyes narrowed in my direction, causing me to wipe the laugh from my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Yes, *seriously*," she sassed. "What did you think I went for?"

Time for truth. "I don't know, but I sure as shit wouldn't have pegged you for an art major."

"Why the fuck not?"

Her clothes were designer, her hands were dainty with thin, pretty fingers, no evidence of any art medium anywhere. Photographer, maybe. But I didn't want to say that, I wanted to rile her up, see what she'd do.

I chuckled and pointed to her lips. "That mouth right there."

Invisible feathers ruffled, she rolled her eyes. "That doesn't even make sense."

"Every art major I've met is either shy as fuck or has green hair."

This time, my judgement earned a laugh from deep within her chest. I wasn't serious, but she didn't know that. She fired back, "Yeah, well, every rapper I've met only cares about money, pussy, and coke."

"I mean..." I shrugged with a smirk. "Add weed to that list, and you've got yourself a deal."

"Oh my god." She shook her head, laughing softly. And like a fucking sap, I couldn't help but smile down at her as a foreign, warm feeling spread in my chest.

Her energy scared the shit out of me with how addictive it was. She felt unreal, like a mirage. Maybe I drank too much and blacked out.

"So, what are you doing now that you're finished?" I asked, keeping the conversation casual, sensing that she would bolt if I pushed her too far. It was harder and harder to hold in what I wanted to say, but I wasn't ready for this to be over yet.

"For work?" she asked. When I nodded, she cleared her throat, adjusting again. "I'm currently on my third month as an apprentice at Death's Door Ink in Santa Monica."

Motherfucker. "You want to be a tattoo artist?"

Another small laugh. "Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Not one fucking bit." I was serious, my dick was hard. "Can I be the first person you tattoo?"

She whipped her head to mine, eyes narrowed with only a tiny amount of hope swimming in brown depths. "You don't want my first tattoo."

I frowned. "Why the hell not?"

"Because the first tattoo is gonna suck."

Waving her off, I lit another cigarette and spoke around the butt in my mouth, "Says you."

"It's true," she said, picking up the pack I put on the ground between us and taking one for herself. That little moment of confidence had me twisted. I wanted to keep her. "I'll be practicing on fake skin for the next few months, but fake skin is definitely not the real stuff."

"Uh..." I put a hand up. "Fake skin sounds nasty as hell."

She nodded. "Yup. And the texture is fucking awful."

"I need to stop trying to picture it in my head." I groaned, closing my eyes and running two fingers over my eyelids. "It's just getting worse."

"Puppies, rainbows, strippers with fat as fuck asses," Phoenix chanted like a smart ass. "Helping?"

"Talk about asses just a little more," I joked, smiling, not opening my eyes. "Actually, it would be better if I could just study yours. I didn't get a long enough look earlier."

"Get out of here," she scoffed.

I lifted my head. "Fine, you'll tattoo nasty ass fake skin, but you won't tattoo me."

She gave me a scolding look. "I never said I wouldn't tattoo you, I said I wouldn't tattoo you first."

"If I'm not *first*," I started, leaning down a little further into her space and dropping my voice. "I don't want one at

Any other girl would have lost her breath or stuttered through her next sentence, but not this girl. She lifted her hand to pat my fucking cheek. *Twice*. "Aww, spoiled baby boy."

I grabbed her wrist, loving the strange sort of whiplash that her attitude was giving me. "You're damn fuckin' right I'm spoiled. I'll pay your ass ten grand."

"Oh my god!" she repeated, smiling bright enough to blind, change, and remold me forever. Still laughing she said, "It just gets worse! Keep your money, I'll do the damn tattoo...but don't say I didn't warn you. It's gonna suck."

"I'm covered." I shrugged, knowing I'd won. "Yours will be hidden in the sea of ink on my body. I'm not concerned."

Both of us fell silent, knowing that in order for her to actually tattoo me, we'd have to be friends, exchange numbers, make this official, but she fell back into herself so quickly, I wasn't sure what to do next.

When she didn't say anything for another few minutes, I wondered what she could be thinking about. There was a good chance that she would leave this party and I'd never see her again, but for some reason, I didn't want that. I wanted more time, needed to make an impression.

She was the perfect distraction, something that was fresh, new. Something, *someone*, only I knew about. At least...I was pretty sure no one else knew about her. She was alone downstairs and up here.

Fuck it.

I went for it, breaking the silence with, "Are you offended easily?"

"No." She shook her head, still staring off into the distance.

"Can I tell you something?"

"About?" The question was slow, drawn out.

"You."

She looked at me then. "You want to tell me something about myself?"

"Yeah." I nodded.

She narrowed her eyes. "You don't know me."

"No, I don't."

"But you want to tell me something about myself that you, what—believe to be true?" she asked, wanting to know the full story before saying yes or no.

Smart girl.

"You gonna let me tell you, or are you just gonna continue to ask lead up questions until the party ends and everyone goes home?" I was smirking at her. She tried not to smile in return.

"Fine." She pulled her knees up to her chest, almost like she was trying to shield herself from what I might say.

"Look at me," I requested. I wasn't used to talking to women in a normal setting, without the plan to fuck as soon as humanly possible, and I was almost nervous to show her what lived inside of me without sex as the cover up. I didn't want to scare her off.

Would she listen? Would she give me those eyes?

She did.

A second later, her clear brown irises met mine, and I saw, for the first time, that they were surrounded by thick black lashes so beautiful, I wanted to reach forward and run my thumb along them—just to see if they felt as silky as they looked.

But underneath the light, natural makeup she wore, the truth was laid bare.

"You have stifled freedom in your eyes," I stated, prepared for the worst. She simply scoffed and tried to look away, but I caught her chin between my inked fingers and brought those eyes back to mine. "You're free as in unattached to anything, any one, but your head has you trapped."

There was an intimidating pause. Thick. Full of denial.

Then she glared. "What makes you think I'm unattached? You don't even fucking know me."

Oh, she bites too.

Despite knowing it was too soon to point this out, knowing this was my fault, her anger still managed to kick mine into high gear. I dropped a bitter laugh. "Tell me I'm wrong then. Got friends you can't live without? Anyone actually know you? The *real* you, Phoenix? Not just the pieces you're willing to give away?"

I had no idea how I knew all of this, but it was clear as day, written all over her. She was going to keep a far as fuck distance from anything that required emotional attachment to avoid disappointment.

She screamed daddy issues, but something told me mommy fucked up too.

"Yes, I do," she spat. "I care a helluva lot about Frankie."

Frankie?

As in...Frank?

Instantly I let go over her jaw and stood.

She has a boyfriend?

I couldn't look at her, hating myself for thinking I found someone who understood what it was like to be forever struggling. Embarrassed that I read her wrong.

"Guess I'm not so good at this game," I said, shoving my hands in my pockets, turning for the stairs. "Have a good night, Phoenix."



STOP HIM.

I still had time before he reached the stairs, but I needed to be one hundred percent sure I was ready for what came next, because he hit the nail on the fucking head. The *exact* thing I was trying to change about myself, he saw clearly enough to say it out loud.

Judah fucking Colt.

I felt everything, pretty sure my hands were shaking. I couldn't get my thoughts in order, he was asking questions, trying to get to know me and I was...confused, terrified. So, I gave him Frankie's name.

I wanted him off my back.

But also, because the sick bitch in me wanted him to believe I loved someone, a guy, a boyfriend.

I wanted to see what he'd say to *that*.

Granted, I might have taken it too far—seeing as how he was about to walk away from me, but really, how could he read me like that?

Probably the same reason you can read him like that.

Still, Frankie *knew* me. She did. Even after years of being separated, we still had it, and I loved the fuck out of that girl. But was I *attached*? No. Well, I didn't know.

She was my home, my safety, but because Frankie herself was familiar to me. God forbid something happened and she died, I'd be devastated, but I would just make sure that I didn't get as close to the next person to befriend me. I'd shut down. Just like Judah insinuated. I was trapped in a tragedy, too scared to love.

That didn't mean I wanted to be see-through to Judah fucking Colt, and the fact that I was made my skin both itch and burn. How did he recognize it? Because he felt the same way? Because he was scared as fuck of everything that could cause pain?

Not knowing what I wanted, I tested myself and stayed quiet as he walked away, needing to know for sure if I could live with never telling him that he was correct. Did I even care? Sure, I'd daydreamed about meeting him, I was obsessed with the *idea* of him, of what his music told me, but now that he was standing right there, I was in over my head.

Still, I couldn't ignore what I felt in my blood—Judah was barely holding on.

I could taste it, see it, feel it along my skin as we sat in silence earlier.

Holding my tongue, letting the words I wanted to say cut the back of my throat as the space between us lengthened, I stayed silent. Until the feeling of his near departure started burning in my chest, until it began to leak real panic into my stomach, and I knew I wasn't going to make it.

When I couldn't take it anymore, when I knew I was fucked for good, I called out, "Frankie is a girl."

He stopped dead, his tall, solid body going stone still. My throat was bleeding from the words I couldn't take back.

I waited and waited as he stood there, probably trying to decide if my answer was good enough to accept, since I didn't admit that he was right, just clarified that Frankie wasn't a guy so he'd come back. There was no way I was going to admit out loud that I could live without her, that I could live without anyone.

Still, I didn't want him to leave.

Eventually, his voice hit my ears with reluctant acceptance as he asked, "Vodka or gin?"

He was coming back.

"A blunt," I called back, going with my gut.

He lifted a dirty blond eyebrow in surprise for only a moment, then quickly schooled his features back to normal. He seemed to get lost in his head for a moment, his jaw ticking in frustration before he finally blurted, "You fucking this Frankie girl?"

Was that jealousy?

The realization had my inner Nix crawling from her shell, coming to joining the party with a smirk. "Don't you mean, do I *love* her? I don't think it matters if I'm fucking her. We both know fucking doesn't equal attachment."

Not impressed, he glared at me. "That's a bullshit answer, but I'll take it for now. Sit your ass there and don't move."

Pretty sure my panties just flooded. "Did you hear that, stars above? Judah Colt thinks he can order me around."

"He can," the devil spoke through him. "Don't fucking move or—"

"You'll stalk your way through the party? How very cave ___"

"No, I'll just forget you ever existed," he cut me off like I did him, but in this case, he won. He was dead serious. "Prove me right about you, Phoenix. *Sit there* and wait for me. Don't pussy out, don't phone a friend and let them ruin this, just... stay there."

I sobered, my heart in my throat. He was subtly begging me not to give up on whatever we started here. Giving in, too curious not to, I nodded. "I won't move."

Just like that, he softened before hardening to the perfect mystery again and disappearing down the stairs.

As soon as he was gone, I pulled out my phone.

Fuck you, I'm phoning a friend.

Nix: Longest story ever in the shortest way possible—I'm sitting on the roof of this house, waiting for Judah Colt to come back with liquor and a blunt. I bummed a cigarette.

Franks: I'm too drunk, took free more shots. Not any of that made cents.

Damnit Frankie.

Nix: Fucking buzzkill, bye.

Franks: SORRY BI.

So, I was on my own.

This was the strangest night I'd had in a while, but I said I wanted risk and recklessness, I wanted to enjoy life while I still could. And this—this felt like fate giving me exactly what I asked for.

Except, it wasn't at all how I pictured it.



SHE FUCKING PLAYED ME.

That girl straight up played me.

She knew what she was doing when she gave me the name Frankie without any further explanation. She tested me, let me believe Frankie was a guy, just to see if I'd react.

And react, I did.

"Motherfucker," I grumbled, walking back inside, now pissed off but also even more territorial. *She* played *me*. She didn't give a fuck who I was. I overstepped in her head, and she bit back, made me show my cards too early in the game. Now she knew I was a jealous, possessive asshole, and we'd talked for less than an hour. But...she'd also tested me less than an hour after we met. At least we were playing on even ground. "Way to go, Colt. You found the craziest bitch in the party to claim."

"Talking to yourself?" Silas' voice came from my right, letting me know I'd hit the main level without even realizing it. He joined me on my fast walk to alone time. "You get a bad line or something?"

Bad cocaine was the literal worst. "No."

"Uh oh," Silas started, laughing a little. The fucker was huge, dark skinned, and about my height but with more muscle mass since I didn't work out. I spent most of last year on the road, didn't need anything besides the blood, sweat, and tears I left on stage every night to keep me fit. "What crawled up your pasty ass and died?"

"Don't fucking start," I grumbled, heading straight for the studio hidden down a small hallway off the kitchen. "I need a blunt and silence, so fuck off."

"No can do, homie." My friend shook his head, pulling his phone from his back pocket. "I'm avoiding Maleah. Bitch won't leave me alone."

"So you come bother me?" I asked, giving him a look that said everything he needed to know. "Where are Ricco and Kavan? Sage? Pierce? Keon? Pharaoh? Anyone?"

"Ric and Kav were playing beer pong with a couple of girls—hot as all fuck kind of girls—but I haven't been up to check since the shoot ended. Sage and Phar were with you last I checked, and who knows where Pierce and Keon are."

"You should go find them!" I picked up the pace as he slowed his down, distracted by something on his phone.

He called after me, "You're an awful fuckin' friend."

"I know!" I yelled back, already aware that he didn't actually give a shit about my attitude.

I had a dope ass group of friends, but only Pharaoh knew the extent of what it was like to be in my head. Only he was able to understand that all it took was one little thing...

Like Phoenix mentioning this Frankie person.

I needed a blunt to myself before I went up to see her again, or I'd be a loose cannon, not responsible for whatever came after I inevitably exploded.

She'd be there when I came back. She'd spend the whole time worried I might never come back...

Good. The little bird could sit and fucking twist while I smoked her lie out of my system.



AFTER FIVE MINUTES WENT BY, I started drinking my vodka. When *twenty* minutes went by and Judah wasn't back yet, I started to get nervous. Unable to sit anymore, I got up and started walking around the rooftop, looking over each edge, calculating the amount of time it would take for my body to hit the ground below.

Fucked up? Yes. Was it a common train of thought? Bet your ass it was.

I didn't learn much from the years I spent fucking around, but I did take a few valuable lessons with me. One of them being—everyone had shit. Everyone had fucking problems, but some liked to pretend they didn't, others liked to use their shit as an excuse, and the rest counted on hobbies, drugs, sex, whatever they could to distract themselves from seeing it.

I was jealous of those people. Nothing worked for me. I tried them all.

That was one of the reasons I connected to Judah's music in the first place. He openly rapped about what it was like to never be fast enough, strong enough, to outrun the memories. I didn't know what haunted him, but now that I'd looked into his eyes for real...

My soul knew his. Not just recognized, wasn't just *interested* in, no—my soul knew his on a level that was nearly impossible to understand. I guessed that's what made it so

nerve racking as I waited for him, as the minutes ticked on and he didn't return.

That's when I started to wonder if he decided to ditch me altogether. It would have been understandable, given that I was a total fucking stranger, and this was his friend's party. He had no reason to spend his time hanging on a rooftop with me. Especially after I fucked with his head to get him off my back.

Talking to him was too easy. I answered his questions because I wanted to *please* him, and that, right there, was a problem for me. Would I have given him my last name if he were just a mere mortal on this rooftop? Probably not.

I walked back to the spot we were sitting, looking at the empty space like a fucking loser.

Then a noise sounded to my right, and instantly, my stomach dropped.

He was here. Walking back up the stairs.

My hope bloomed into relief nearly instantaneously.

Closing my eyes, I shut off the doubts and tried to instill in my brain that this was good. This was a *good thing*. I could try talking to him, just relaxing for once. Only problem was he was able to read me. But...I could let him, right? Wouldn't be so bad to talk to someone about my shit...

I wasn't even fooling myself.

As every step brought him closer, my throat threatened to close.

He kicked the gate open, searching for me immediately.

I ignored the urge to hide and stepped forward, the movement giving me away. His icy blue eyes latched to mine, and time whirled, slowed, and stirred around us. I wanted to guard my gaze so badly, but I was too scared of him turning the fuck around, so I remained open, letting him see everything I was feeling. I held my breath as he assessed me from a cautious distance, the ice in his eyes melting away as he realized I was giving him a fucking gift.

I was shaking, too vulnerable.

It was physical work to be this open, causing me to cross my arms so I could squeeze my biceps and relieve the numbness in my fingers. My legs burned, my feet wishing to bounce through the anxiety, but the look on his face made me push through. He seemed to be just as hesitantly hopeful as I felt. Only difference between him and I was that he wasn't trying to hide it. He wasn't ashamed. In fact, he looked sort of...in awe of me.

I fought against the tears that started to form at the back of my eyelids for no good reason at all, grateful when he finally moved, giving me an excuse to turn a little and pull some fucking air in my lungs.

By the time I looked back, he was making his way toward me with so much swag, my clit started aching. The air between us crackled as the silence became a third party in our rooftop hang.

Once he was standing within reaching distance, I glanced up. He looked down.

There was a challenge in his stare, as if he knew how hard it was for me to be in this position. Out of place, uncomfortable,

I hadn't been this worked up in a long fucking time.

Finally, he spoke, but it was a short and simple. "Sit."

I wanted to push back, tell him no, but I had no reason to do that and didn't need to be an asshole, so I sat in the same place as before. Judah's pink and black Chucks passed me on the ground as he moved to sit down beside me.

Fortunately, his scent came with him, giving me something more permanent to hold on to. I hadn't noticed it before, probably because I was too busy freaking out about sitting next to him in the first place, but now there was nothing more interesting to me. I took a breath, trying to memorize the scent.

Cigarettes, delicious male, and a hint of sour gummy worms.

Time to bring Nix back.

"You smell like some kind of gummy bear," I commented, starting the conversation.

"A gummy bear?" he asked distractedly, shifting on the fake wood beneath us, trying to get comfortable. He had lifted his hips to pull a phone out of his back pocket. Without shame, I started to scan his frame, taking him in again, but I got distracted by the blunt tucked behind his ear.

Okay, well, that's sexy.

Effortlessly badass, everything he did came naturally. He wasn't even fucking trying.

"Sour gummy bears," I told him, letting my eyes continue to wash over his profile. Straight cheekbones, hard jawline, gorgeous pale pink lips. I cleared my throat. "No. Gummy worms. Sour gummy worms."

"Love those little fuckers," he admitted with a smirk, checking something on his phone.

While he did that, I reached up and snatched the blunt from behind his ear, expecting him to bitch at me for the bold move, but to my surprise, he said nothing. Just put his phone down and handed me a lighter from inside his pack of Marlboros before his head fell back to the glass wall behind us.

"You all right?" I asked on autopilot.

"Truth?" He didn't look at me, just stared up at the stars while I drank in the column of his throat.

Surprised and a little desperate, I said, "Always."

After letting out a frustrated sigh, he explained, "I had a show tonight, which went fine, but the meet and greets after are always fucking awful. People will buy tickets to meet me, just for the chance to tell me how they feel about me up close and fucking personal."

We both knew what they thought of him. It wasn't good.

"Why do you think they hate you so much?" I asked, already having an idea of what he might say.

"I'll tell you what I think if you tell me the fan perspective first," he challenged with a glint of flirt in his tone.

Dangerous territory. "What do you mean?"

This time, he let his head roll to face me. "I want to know what my fans think about the people who hate me. Why don't you agree with them?"

Suddenly nervous, I ran my hands down my jeans as I mentally reminded myself that he knew I was a fan already, I didn't need to tell him anything else. "I can't speak for all your fans, but I can tell you what I see," I agreed.

"Deal." He nodded. "Vodka first though. And light that fucker up."

I chuckled as he snatched the bottle off my lap and immediately twisted the top, taking a healthy sip. Smirking, I put the end of the blunt to my lips and lit her up, taking a deep hit...

...and was immediately slapped by the difference between regular people weed and weed for the rich. I coughed through the burn. "Jesus fuck."

A small chuckle escaped his chest. "I forgot to warn you. This shit is no joke."

"You aren't kidding," I choked out, once I could breathe again. Shit, that hurt.

"Hit it again, you'll be good," he instructed, watching me more intently than mere curiosity.

His stare boosted my confidence as I did as he told me, taking another hit and holding it in my lungs for a few seconds, getting used to the strength, the taste. Through an exhale, my eyebrows inched up in surprise. "This shit is good as fuck."

I was already feeling it, and after nearly nine years of smoking, that was a fucking record. My tolerance was thick as hell, meaning I usually needed a full blunt to myself to actually feel anything, but two hits from his, and I was near flying.

Passing it over, my eyes tangled with his. There was a thought on his face that I couldn't decode.

"Why do you keep looking at me like that?" I asked, not immune to the color of his lips—light pink, probably soft, and so distracting, I found it hard to keep my eyes to myself.

"You feel familiar," he stated, leaning closer. "I'm not sure what it is, but it's something. I know you. From somewhere."

"Another life, probably," I threw out there, believing it. Not religious, I was spiritual. Believed in soulmates, the power of truth, connections deeper than we were able to comprehend with the little knowledge we had about the world and how it—and we as humans—were created. "I'd know it if we met before today."

"Oh?" He smirked, but it quickly died when he saw I was serious.

Not ready to admit just how familiar he was to me, I reminded him, "You wanted to know why I think so many people hate you."

"Ha," he barked. "There's no filter on you, is there?"

I laughed. "You think *I'm* bad? Wait 'til you meet Frankie."

Assuming he was going to want to meet my friends was risky, a little clingy, and an absolute slip of the tongue, but instead of running as fast as he could away from me, he was back to pissed off. "There's that name again."

I sighed. "She's my best friend. Why do you even care?"

"I don't," he said with a little too much power, running a hand down his face. "Never mind. Tell me why I'm hated, Baby Bird."

There's that nickname again.

Knowing this would expose me as an obvious fan of his, I prepared for the worst as I said, "People hate you, Judah, because you're too honest for them to handle—in every possible way. When you get in the studio, you talk only truth." I felt my passion for his music leaking into my tone, but didn't

care. I relaxed, got a little more comfortable, and continued, "You telling your story, your personal struggles, your truth, means you wake up every day and look yourself in the mirror. You see the things no one wants to look at, and you own it. You recognize your flaws, because when someone is as broken as you are, you'll see them anyway. Facing your shit head-on gives you power, takes away the intensity of each emotion." I paused, thinking over the next thing I wanted to say. "Coming from a fan, when you drop a new song or release an album, we know that we'll be able to relate to what you give us, and we need it. We need to feel heard, seen, but the rest of the industry—with the exception of a few, of course—isn't ready for that type of truth. Yet, you want it, you hunt it, chase after it, and figured out how to make living a little easier by talking about it. And, well, they fucking hate it."

I couldn't look at him or I'd lose my confidence, because the more I talked, the more dedicated I knew I sounded, and he had no idea how real music—especially his—was to me. How loudly I heard his pain and how badly I wanted him to know that we were one and the same, but I wouldn't risk coming off as a stalker, a crazy fan that needed to be dealt with.

On instinct, I held my breath as the crickets played a tune for us, not knowing how he'd feel about my thoughts on the situation. I wasn't prepared for what I got.

Suddenly, somehow, there was a massive wall between us, one that wasn't there before. "You're just here to kiss my ass, Phoenix. You can tell *Frankie* all about our little chat, and you'll forever be the girl who spent the night on a rooftop talking to Judah Colt."

Wait...what?

Fists clenched on his thigh, jaw set, refusing to look at me.

He was fucking serious. "Are you mad about what I said?"

"Let it go, Phoenix." His voice was a low growl.

"No." I shook my head, confused and sliding straight into irritated. I was right, and what I said wasn't even offensive! It was the truth. "Is this your way of shoving me away before I

hurt you? Because if so, as you pointed out earlier, I know how to play that game better than anyone. You're the one who asked."

"Yeah, before I knew you had up close and personal experience in judging me."

My voice kicked up a couple notches, I couldn't help it. "Judging you? Where in all that did you hear *judgement* coming from me?"

"It doesn't matter."

A bitter laugh. "Oh, now we're shutting down. Fantastic."

"And she's a bitch," he muttered before shifting around. "I'm out of here."

What the fuck just happened?

He was standing up, ready to walk the fuck away. Over what? The truth? That wasn't fair, and it certainly wasn't my fault, but still...I didn't want him to leave over it.

My desperation had me standing too. There was no plan, no grand thing I wanted to say, but I needed to stop him from walking away or I'd lose my opportunity to keep this going. I wasn't ready to end the night.

Do it, Phoenix. "Do you write all your lyrics?" The question tumbled from my mouth, stopping him in his tracks with his back still turned.

With a popped eyebrow and fire in his eyes, he looked at me over his shoulder. "You fucking kidding me?"

"Answer the question!" I exclaimed, just as angry as he was, but for a reason I couldn't explain. I forced it back, tried to calm, knowing my attitude would set him off even more. It was difficult, but I managed. "I'm not accusing you of anything, Judah, just answer the questions and you'll understand why I'm asking them, okay?"

"Not loving your tone, but sure."

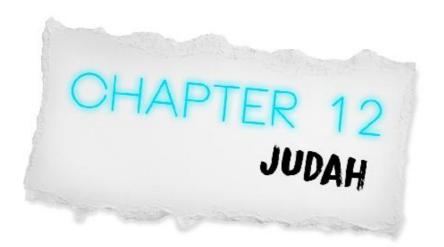
I kept my eye roll to myself. "Is everything you write the truth? Things you've lived? Felt?"

"Phoenix," he growled. His jaw was working overtime, his anger right at the surface, but he was doing his best to hold it in.

"I'll take that as a yes." I needed to rip the band-aid off, unable to keep the conversation going the way it was. I wasn't just someone who liked the beat of his songs, or listened to only his radio hits, I wasn't like everyone else. Knowing he was about to walk made me *want* to be different, important, needed. After all, sad guys were my catnip, and the one standing before me was as damaged as they came. "If your songs are your words, your life, then we *do* know each other. Or at least...I know you."

A brief, curious pause, before he ground out, "How?"

I took a deep breath, making sure his eyes held mine, before I said, "Because I heard every word."



JUST LIKE THAT, my anger fizzled away, settling into a foreign feeling of admiration, fascination.

I heard every word.

The statement was more than it looked like on paper. It was heavier, more meaningful. If I were to write this conversation down or tell Pharaoh about it or try to turn it into lyrics, it would never be as potent as it was in the moment.

All I knew for sure was God fucked up.

From head to toe, I took in the tiny little mystery standing before me, realizing that the big man upstairs left one his most precious creatures on Earth. Now the poor girl was on this rooftop with the likes of me, looking for everything like a sunbathed angel with dope as hell coffee colored eyes and pillowed pink lips.

Phoenix Royal was sweet, dangerous candy, and there wasn't a single doubt in my mind that she was the only drug addictive enough to kill me. In one statement, I knew I'd found a girl capable of seeing through my bullshit, someone who wasn't too scared to tell me to sit down and listen to what the fuck she had to say, because to *her*, it was important.

In any other situation, on any other night, with any other person, I'd be running for the hills. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts, my doubt, but she was here. She showed up, and now...

It felt a lot like she was saying she wasn't done with me yet.

My last album was one giant cry for fucking help, and here was this girl, telling me that she heard me, she knew me, she understood. I just couldn't figure out why she gave a damn. Especially because it was obvious to anyone paying attention that I fucked up...a lot. Whenever my world crashed around me and I couldn't see a way out of the pain, the insecurities, the doubts, I did whatever I could to numb the noise. Was she capable of handling that?

"What is this?" I asked, suddenly nervous that I was reading too much into what she said. The thought scared me more than it should. I wanted this more than I should. "Why are you here?"

I meant right now, at two am, on a rooftop, alone with me, and she knew it too. "Does it matter?"

"Yes!" I tried not to shout, but I was on edge, shaky. "Of course it fucking matters. You're a fan, how did you even get to this party?"

My tone was too sharp. I'm doing this all wrong.

"Oh, now you're going to fact check me?" She laughed, another bitter sound. I tilted my head as she crossed her arms, looked off to the side, and whispered, "Screw this."

I was about to lose her—she was standing right on the edge of walking away.

Perfect opportunity. "Which one fucked you up—Mommy or Daddy?"

Her head slowly turned, as if she was trying to stay calm. Her eyes were two daggers as she drawled, "Wow. You're something else."

It was my turn to laugh. "So, you can know all about me, but I can't know shit about you?"

A challenge.

"You put your shit out for the world to know," she accused, taking a step forward with hate in her eyes. Lust hummed

between us, making me wonder, crave, what that passion turned into if I kept pushing her. She finished with a venomous, "I have no interest in telling random people about the ins and outs of what fucked me up."

"Random people." *That* tore the smile clean off my face. I narrowed my eyes. "That sounds an awful lot like judgement, Phoenix."

It also sounded a whole lot like a one-sided relationship that wasn't going to work for me.

Except, there is no relationship to even worry about, since we just met.

"I'm not judging you!" Her voiced pitched higher as she thrust two frustrated hands into her hair, pulling a little before letting them fall to her sides again. Her shoulders dropped. "Fine. I'm envious of your ability to let it out, but I don't want to trade places with you. The fame, the money, the lack of privacy—"

"Fucking sucks," I finished for her with a sarcastic jab. "Yeah, I know."

She let her head fall back and took a deep breath, while my eyes zoned in on the delicious view I had of her tits. Not too small, not too big. Perfection.

She lifted her head a few seconds later and met my eyes. "I don't think I can win this conversation, so what would you like me to do here, Judah?"

Why she hadn't walked the fuck away yet was beyond me, but it did prove her loyalty.

Everything she said about my music, the fans, the industry, it was all correct. I *did* look myself in the mirror every day and see all the shit I needed to fix in order to stay sane. But what she was missing was some days, insane was just easier. It was fucking *easier* to give in to the agony and let it guide me through shady situations with the wrong people, trying things I shouldn't at the wrong time, just in case it was my time to leave this Earth. Kind of hoping it was.

I wanted to know if she could handle it, so I ignored her statement and stepped forward, closer to her. "My turn to ask a question."

Like a brat, she rolled her eyes. "Go for it."

"You sure?" I asked, voice low. "You're probably not going to like this one."

I was encroaching in on her space, making myself too big to ignore, and lust had plans to pull us both into its sticky trap. She swallowed. "Just ask."

Hmm, she has balls. I made sure her eyes held mine before hitting her with the juicy one. "Ever try and kill yourself?" She locked up instantly, and her brown eyes turned so hard, I felt it in my groin. The pure fucking rage wafting from her had me fighting not to roll my eyes in ecstasy. "I'll take that as a yes. One point for you. Done drugs? Hard ones?"

"What is this?" she asked as her emotional walls climbed around us.

"Another yes, two points. Final one. You fuck for feelings or escape?"

"Feelings?" She laughed, the tone dark, rich. "Who fucks for feelings anymore?"

"Three points," I whispered, my chest brushing hers. "You win."

"I don't think I like this game." She looked up at me with zero trace of fear in her eyes, still too mad to see that I'd consumed her. "But I'm too curious not to ask. What did I win?"

I smirked, brushing a piece of hair off her forehead. "Why, you win *me*, Baby Bird."

She quirked a brown eyebrow, trying not to smile. "You're kidding, right? The qualifications for being your friend are trying to kill myself and experience with taking hard drugs?"

"Absolutely." I nodded, meaning it.

"Why?" she asked, confused.

"Because that kind of pain can't be understood by just anyone," I stated firmly. "And if I'm going to bring you into my shit, I needed to make sure you could handle it."

There was a *really* thick pause. She blinked, blinked again, and then said, "Who said I *wanted* to be in your shit?"

I scoffed, breaking our tension by pulling a cig from my pack and moving past her, toward the wall of glass.

The little bird couldn't pretend she didn't want to be here, because broken screamed to broken, and the worse your damage was, the harder you searched for someone who understood. Someone who could handle your demons, tame them, face them head on in the moments before they took over and fucked it all worse than it already was.

She ticked all the boxes. This girl had been through it. She was strong enough to handle me.

Which was a good thing, because I was keeping her.

She'd fight me the whole way, but that sounded like too much fun for me to pass up.

Proving me correct, she stepped up beside me and placed her forearms on the glass ledge, holding a hand out for a cig. I handed her one and held up my lighter, flicking the flame to life. She cupped her fingers around the light and inhaled, turning back toward the view to breathe out the smoke.

I forced myself to memorize her in *this* moment—the last time we would be just Judah Colt and Phoenix Royal. We knew so little about each other right then, our skeletons were still locked in their closets, the darkness we buried inside still felt alluring and mysterious, even as it suffocated us individually.

This would be the last moment we looked at each other with innocent awe and curiosity. Because truth was, I didn't know where the fuck she came from or if it made me a shitty person to bring her into my mess. But none of that mattered anymore. She was there, and how she got to the party, how she wandered to the roof, was irrelevant.

This girl was a California native with seemingly no connections to anyone in the industry, and yet, she knew me. She didn't seem afraid of my shit storm and now looked like a pretty little thing for me to keep and ruin.

"We've known each other for less than two hours and we already got into an argument," Phoenix stated, taking another drag and flicking the ash.

"Please." I bumped her shoulder with my arm. "That wasn't an argument, that was just a heated conversation. When we argue, it'll be a whole lot worse than that."

She chuckled. "This is a horrible idea."

"Sure is," I agreed.

"But we're gonna do it anyway, aren't we?"

"Absolutely."

PHOENIX



AFTER THROWING the butt of my cigarette over the edge, I laced my fingers together and tried not to look at Judah. Somehow, in a matter of hours, we were still here, even after a mini argument—one that succeeded in spinning my head in circles—and we'd become...friends?

Except, he was famous, and I was starting to question it.

This was a big step, a huge fucking leap into the unknown, and baby steps were my plan. Short, small, once a month kind of steps. This didn't seem like something that would help me, but entirely resembled heartbreak. Judah meant too much to me, way down in a locked corner of my soul, for me to not consider every avenue.

If this ends badly, how will I sleep?

It was that bad. I was that attached. Already so dependent on him that I truly wasn't sure what I would do if this went bad and it ruined him for me. If I couldn't stand the sound of his voice? Did I really want to add another problem to my already steaming pile of bullshit?

At the same time...he was here. The guy that successfully quieted my nightmares was right fucking next to me. And how the hell was I supposed to not take advantage of that? Try and wiggle myself into a space in his life?

I'm a mess.

I was about to ask another question, anything to get rid of the odd as fuck tension between us, when my phone started ringing back where we were sitting before.

"Shit," I muttered, running across the roof quickly enough to catch it. Picking it up, Frankie's face was front and center, wanting to FaceTime. But Judah Colt was right behind me...

She's going to freak the fuck out.

I turned around, pointing at Judah. "If you don't want my best friend to know you're with me, keep your mouth shut."

He smiled, walking closer with lazy confidence, "Why? Is she gonna come up here?"

"Oh, she won't just come up here," I stated, hating how contagious his smiles were. "If I don't call her back right now, she'll start yelling my name through the whole house, and since I'm not down there to respond, she'll most likely flirt until she has a whole search party pulled together."

Judah's mega-watt grin said it all.

"Better call her back then." He snatched my phone and held it up in front of my face. I was too slow to realize he was unlocking it with Face ID and...pressing the call back button.

"Judah, what the fuck?" I reached for the phone, but he held it above his head. There was no way I was reaching that. "Come on, that's not fair. Give it back."

Oh my god, this isn't happening.

I jumped in the air, trying to catch it like a fucking idiot. "I'm serious, you think *I'm* bad?" I asked again, trying to warn him that Frankie was coming for me, and if she saw his face on my phone, the entire fucking party would know that Judah Colt was hanging out with her best friend. "Frankie is four hundred times worse. She likes you a whole lot."

"A whole lot, huh?" He was trying to hold in a laugh, but failing miserably.

Meanwhile, I was trying not to stomp my foot like a fucking child.

"Judah, I don't want to explain—"

"Phoenix?" My name came from high up in the air, way above my head. Looking up, there she was—my Frankie girl—staring at her phone screen, confused as hell. "Why the hell are you upside down?"

I jammed my elbow into Judah's stomach, forcing him to fold in half, bringing the phone right where I needed it. Snatching the device from his fingers quicker than he expected, I ran toward the other side of the rooftop, hoping she didn't see him.

"Hi," I said, out of breath, putting a hand on my hip and trying to regulate my breath. "What's up?"

"Who answered the phone?" she asked immediately.

I dropped my head. Fuck. "No one, just some guy."

"Phoenix Royal," Judah boomed from two feet away, making sure his voice was heard loud and clear. "Try that again, yeah?"

"P, who is that?" Frankie asked again, looking closer at the phone, as if she could make him appear out of sheer will.

"She calls you P?" Judah asked, halting in his tracks. "Huh, I like it." He nodded his chin with wiggling eyebrows. "Tell her what I call you."

"Stop it," I hissed, now trying not to laugh.

"Who is that, Phoenix?!" Frankie yelled, getting excited. "Why does your face look like that? Are you trying not to smile? What are you hiding?"

Quicker than I could respond, Judah reached forward and yanked the phone out of my hand, holding it up to his face... which was *once again*, way above my head. I was ready to climb him like a fucking tree to get it back when he lifted an inked arm and curled it around my shoulders, pulling me into the front of his chest and lowering the phone so Frankie could see us both.

All at once, the color drained from Frankie's face, Judah's finger brushed the skin on my collarbone, and he did the one thing I didn't want him to.

"Don't—" I tried to stop him.

"Hi, Frankie. I'm Judah." He smirked, cutting me off and lowering his head so it fit perfectly next to mine.

"Ohhh." She giggled, clearly drunk. "Oh, Phoenix, you have *so* much explaining to do."

She was...happy. Fucking delighted. I could see it radiating off her face through the phone, which meant it was ten times worse in person. I turned my head just slightly so Judah could hear me. "You have no idea what the hell you just did."

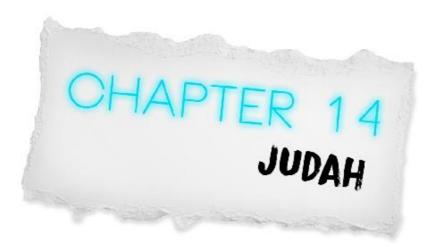
His body shook behind me as he tried not to laugh and whispered back, "Pretty sure I just took away your only chance at hiding me from your friends. That's one point for me, Baby Bird. You gonna start playin' any time soon?" After a heated look in my direction, he straightened to his full height, but he wasn't done. "Frankie, where are you? We're coming down."

"I have no idea, friend, I'm drunk as hell." She giggled again before sighing a deep dramatic sound. "Fuck, you've got those bad boy, sad boy eyes."

I expected him to be offended, but he laughed it off, almost a little...embarrassed? "So I've heard. We'll see you in a minute." Stepping back, he tossed me the phone. "Hang up, I know where she is."

Doing as he said, I relented, "Fine, but I warned you."

I guess it's time to meet Frankie.



I HAD no idea what I was doing, but I was all in now.

Reaching back to grab her hand, she pulled it away. "I'm fine, I'm a big girl."

"Yeah, I know." I rolled my eyes and snatched her hand back. "But I'm bigger, so get over here or you'll get lost in whatever the hell is going on down there."

Getting a head start on her bitching, I tugged her toward the stairs, opening the glass gate and trying to figure out how I was going to explain this little problem to my group of friends.

Phoenix was fresh meat, and that sure as fuck wasn't going to work for me. A girl like her would get chewed up and spit out around here, then passed around for years on end, forever an industry slut.

"Hold up," she said from behind me, yanking her hand out of my hold and placing it on my shoulder instead. "This is a bad idea, but if we're doing this, we're goin' all the way."

Then she jumped on my back.

"Jesus." I caught her thighs, grateful as fuck that my reflexes were as fast as they were. "You good?"

"Giddy up," she confirmed in my ear, squeezing my waist between her thighs, nearly causing my knees to buckle underneath me. This girl was something else.

Descending the stairs with my hands firmly holding the thickness of her thighs, I started questioning my ability to keep this in the friend zone. For a short girl, she was perfectly proportioned with an ass models would kill to have, clean, perfect skin, delicate features, and a smart mouth. I doubted she worked for it either. Seemed to me like it was all in her blood.

When I hit the bottom step, I braced myself, knowing that if the right person saw us, her face would be all over social media tomorrow and without her consent. But I was banking on the people who were still here being too fucked up to remember the pretty brunette strapped to my back like a backpack.

"I could get used to this," Phoenix muttered casually, swinging her legs back and forth on either side of my body. "You're like the perfect height so I don't feel like I'm crushing you. And the *view*."

"The *view*?" I couldn't wipe the stupid grin off my face, shaking my head at her sarcasm, and taking the opportunity to see what she was made of. "I heard the view from down below is usually pretty good too."

"Oh, you mean on my knees?" she asked in the same tone she used previously, as if she didn't just confirm she wasn't shy about her sexually. As if she didn't just become four billion times more tempting. "Eh, up here I get to actually *be* you. If only I had a dick for one of these girls to suck. I'd get the full experience."

"The mouth on you!" I accused, enjoying the hell out of this version of her. She was carefree, wasn't all up in her head. "I don't particularly like the vision in my head of you sporting a dick, so can we not?"

She chuckled but said nothing else. I assumed she was taking in the party, now that we'd been lost for two hours.

We bypassed the second floor, heading straight down to the main level, where I knew Frankie was standing in front of the infinity pool out back. I noticed her surroundings on the video chat. "Bartier Cardi" by Cardi B and 21 Savage set the vibe in the house as groups of people lost themselves in all that was *Hollywood* after the sun went down.

"Judah!" a female voice called from somewhere in the room, causing me to speed up, hiking Phoenix higher up on my back.

It was Krista, no doubt wondering if I had plans to fuck her brains out tonight. I did *before* but...

Yeah, that's not happening.

I kept moving, ignoring her and hoping Phoenix didn't pick up on the whiny tone of her voice. It was loud as hell as we entered the kitchen, bypassing dirty, sweaty, and drunk groups of people. I noted Sage standing on an end table telling a story to someone, another guy—who was standing on the ground, looking up at him. It was a weird sight, but I wasn't about to judge.

"Are you serious right now!?" Krista yelled. *Fuck*. See? This was an awful idea already. Phoenix was going to think I was a fuckboy—which I was—but still. "Judah!"

"Skyscraper," Phoenix said slowly, like she was talking to a child. "Did you fuck that poor girl and leave her high and dry?"

"Nah, I only *promised* to fuck her. Then I met *you* and left her high and dry." I smirked, looking back at her as best I could. "Got a problem with that?"

"Me, personally? Nah, what do I care?" She sounded genuine. "Her on the other hand? She's got a pretty big problem."

Krista was also one of Silas' castaway side chicks. I fucked her last weekend because we were the only two left awake at five AM when he had a similar party with different people. He was done with her, so she was free game. And now I was letting her loose.

"She'll be alright," I decided. "Plenty of rich prick around here for her to choose from."

"There she is." Phoenix ignored my statement and lifted her arm, pointing toward the back of the house, where there were a handful of people hanging out around the pool. I followed her finger, seeing the back of a blonde head standing with a few girls and a couple guys. I recognized Kavan and Ricco immediately.

What in the hell is all this?

Walking up to the group, I let go of one of P's thighs to reach out a hand to Kavan. "What's good?"

He clapped his hand to mine twice with a wide smile on his face, showing off the silver, diamond studded grills on his lower teeth.

Phoenix managed to wiggle down without too much of my help, heading straight for her friend, who was watching us with suspicious eyes. She also looked drunk, so she might have been squinting.

"Oh my god!" I heard her yell, and from the corner of my eye, saw her pointing in my direction but looking at Phoenix. I tried so hard not to laugh but couldn't help it.

"I see you've met the other champion of the night," Kav said, watching Phoenix with lust filled eyes. He licked his bottom lip.

Instantly aware, all the fun stopped. What the fuck was all *that*?

Narrowing my eyes in his direction I agreed, "I have."

As I looked back and forth between them, I tried to figure out how they could be connected. But it wasn't until I remembered Silas telling me how the guys spent their night that it clicked.

"Ric and Kav were playing beer pong with a couple of girls—hot as all fuck kind of girls—"

Fuck me. She'd made friends with my friends before I even found her. It was a coincidence, for sure. It was also now obvious as hell that I wasn't the only one who noticed

something about Phoenix. Something that drew people—guys like me—in.

Everything shifted as I realized how easily I could lose her. I trusted my friends, but with Phoenix? Clearly, I wasn't the only one who'd picked up on how...

I didn't know if there was one word to describe her. Hard, soft, sassy, sexy, and sweet, she seemed to be a little bit of everything, and that was a dangerous fucking mix.

She'd been here *one night* around my friends, and she could have been snatched up.

I couldn't help it.

I spiraled.

What if she hadn't found the rooftop? Why did she leave Kavan and Ricco in the first place? Would she have said something to me if we ran into each other downstairs instead? Would she even care about me if it had been Kavan up on the roof? Or Silas? Pharaoh?

This is what I did—how my brain computed this type of paranoia. I was aware of it. How could I not be? I found myself in a situation with more than one possible outcome, I lost control, and it was fucking torture to know that if *one* thing had gone wrong tonight, I wouldn't have gotten the opportunity to talk to her. It made me want to pull her close, let everyone know she was mine, I found her first, I claimed her. I'd piss all over her if I needed to.

"Judah?" Phoenix called, snapping my panic in half with just the sound of her voice.

Breathe, Colt, you can't do this so fucking soon.

I opened my eyes to find her watching me with a concerned look.

Covering for myself I called out, "Heard you were the beer pong champion earlier."

She narrowed her eyes as if wondering why the hell I cared about a beer pong game. I didn't. She knew it too, eyeing me

while she whispered something into Frankie's ear. A wicked smirk bloomed on her best friend's face.

"All right, all right." Frankie stepped forward, coming to a stop in front of me. I looked down, noticing she was the same height, weight, and build as Phoenix, aside from her hair and eye color. Except, Frankie's eyes lacked the pain Phoenix held in her stare. And because of it, she wasn't nearly as alluring. She stuck out a hand. "Hi, I'm Frankie. I come with the territory."

My eyebrows hit my hairline as I glanced at Phoenix, who was half smiling, half cringing.

Did she think her friend would actually scare me off?

She was delusional.

I stepped forward into Frankie's space and slid my hand around hers but kept an eye on Phoenix at the same time. "Two for the price of one?" I winked. "It must be my lucky day."

Shock fell over her features for only a minute before it morphed into pure heat. Placing a hand on the center of my chest, she looked over her shoulder, saying to Phoenix, "Oh, he's good."

"Yeah, I know," P agreed, meeting my eyes. There was a hint of pride in her voice that had my chest warming.

Frankie looked back up at me. "No one is going to believe this, so pics or it didn't happen. Care for a photo, Mr. Colt?"

My answer was to raise an eyebrow in challenge at Phoenix. Was *she* up for a photo?

She all but freaked out about me meeting Frankie. I wondered what taking a photo would mean in her head. I figured she'd say no, but instead of bitching, she met the challenge and moved toward me.

"I could use a photo with a celebrity," she commented with that silky sass, glancing up at me and back at Frankie, shrugging her exposed shoulders with a smile. "You know, for the 'gram." I paused, letting her words sink in.

Was she playing me? Was this all just for show? A bucket list kind of thing?

I met her eyes with fear racing up my spine. She must have seen it, because her face softened, a look settling over her features that told me I should know better.

"Stop overthinking," she whispered.

"Whatever." I rolled my eyes. Overthinking, overanalyzing—it had saved me more times than I could count, but the more I stared at her, the more I relaxed. Bending so only she could hear I ground out, "You're lucky you're hot."

"Oooo," she murmured with a smile. "Judah Colt thinks I'm hot."

This girl. "Just turn around and smile for the camera, Baby Bird"

"Sir, yes, sir."



SURPRISINGLY, the picture was my idea. Judah, Ricco, and Kavan knew each other, and it didn't take much to clue me in on Judah's paranoid reaction. I needed an excuse to get as close as possible, though I could admit to taking advantage of the situation. I didn't give a fuck about the picture. I wouldn't actually do anything with it. All I gave a shit about was that his hands were on me.

The party was coming to a close. I was going to leave, and so was he. We'd say goodbye, and that would be that. I wanted to memorialize the feel of his hands on my skin.

"Bring it in you two," Frankie said, holding up the phone with a wicked smile on her face.

Judah was a brick wall behind me, the heat of his body settling something deep within me that I didn't even know was restless. His tall frame loomed over my short one, giving off a specific energy I couldn't quite figure out. It was so fucking hard to nail him down.

One minute, he wasn't sure he could trust me, the next, he decided he didn't care and that the risk was worth it. He got angry at the drop of a hat—at me, at seemingly everyone, if his music was to be believed—but he was still glued to my side. Whatever lived between us was already unhealthy, already confusing, already addicting. I didn't need to add this mess to my own, but I wanted to. I wanted his chaos.

"Ready, Baby Bird?" Judah whispered huskily, leaning down in my space and proving my thoughts correct as excitement zinged down my spine. It was all there, our connection was loud—spinning, turning, twisting his energy with mine.

"Better make it good, Skyscraper," I answered with a smirk, feeling my body respond, unable to deny that his presence was dizzying this close.

When I glanced up, his eyes crashed with mine and burned hotter as I felt his hands wrap around my throat. One at the front, with his fingertips spread out across my jawline, the other spanned across the back of my neck as he moved to stand beside me, his chest brushing my arm. His hold was dominant, possessive. My oxygen vanished.

"Fuck yeah, that's hot," Frankie called. "P, look at me."

I did.

Screw the fear, the doubts.

I curled my lip, stuck out my tongue, and titled my head, making it look like he had total control and effectively letting the camera know just how much I liked it.

The flash went off, his hands tightened, my pussy screamed.

But as soon as Franks lowered the phone, as soon as it was over, reality dawned, letting me know that this night was coming to an end and I had no idea what to expect.

I wasn't naïve enough to think that Judah had room for me in his life. Sure, I could stay here, take full advantage, and fuck him stupid for the rest of the night, but why bother? Either way, I was headed right for disappointment. I'd probably end up in worse condition than I was right now if I tried to keep this going.

"Look what the fuckin' cat dragged in!" Judah's voice cut off my thoughts as he stepped away from me.

Turning around, I saw a guy walking up to our little group by the pool.

Pharaoh Roman.

Judah's drummer made his way toward our group with swag leaking all over the grass around him. Dark eyes, dark hair, perfect fade, straight jawline, at least six feet tall—these guys were going to be the end of my underwear drawer.

I didn't realize I was staring at him until Judah called my name and held a hand out to me. "Phoenix, come here."

Mindful of my expression, hoping to at least do a decent job covering up the fact that I was getting cold feet, I looked to Franks, whose eyes were wide as fucking saucers for only a split second before she grinned at me and hustled to my side. She linked her arm in mine as I smiled politely at Judah's friend. "Hey, I'm Phoenix. This is my best friend, Frankie."

Franks spoke up right away, a knowing lilt to her voice, "Fuck me. You're Pharaoh Roman, and you're Judah's drummer." She was so excited, her hand squeezed forearm in a death grip.

"Among other things." He smiled a clean, bright smile. "Yes, I'm Pharaoh. And I'm low-key hoping that offer to fuck you is a real one."

He fucking winked.

Charming too.

He reached out a tan, inked hand toward Frankie while pushing his nearly black hair off his forehead with the other. He had the whole bad-boy motorcycle look going on, with his black jeans, steel-toed boots, and a worn leather jacket. With him and Judah standing side by side, you could practically see the violence, the damage, the two of them were capable of.

"Trust me when I say, that offer will *never* be off the table." Frankie winked, shaking his hand. She looked between Judah and me. "So, do you know how *your* best friend found *my* best friend? Because these two walked in here acting like they were old buddies."

I wanted to roll my eyes so badly, but the comment was too big to ignore. She was right, we did act like that, except... it didn't feel like acting.

"Nope." Pharaoh popped the p at the end of the word, looking at me. "Who are you, princess?"

"She just told you, her name is Phoenix," Judah interjected with a firm tone. "Don't be a prick."

There was tension in the air between the two guys, so intense that I glanced up at Judah, wondering what his problem was. When he looked down at me, there was fear in his eyes, somehow able to communicate with one look that he was struggling.

Except I had no idea what to do with that. I certainly couldn't comfort him, could I? There was absolutely no reason for him to be pulling an attitude with his best friend like this unless they had beef. Which was fine, but was it my place to interject and calm Judah down? I wanted to, badly, but how could I? We met like three hours ago, and I had zero idea what was appropriate to say and what wasn't. Was there a line between us? Hell yeah, I saw it. I just needed to keep that boundary.

The music video served as an excuse—tonight I was acting, tomorrow it would be over.

Breaking eye contact, I took a deep breath. I was approaching my limit—needing air, sleep, time.

I avoided eye contact with everyone but Frankie as the guys mindlessly chatted about the "crazy shit" going on inside the house, but after a few minutes of listening, I couldn't take it anymore. I turned toward Frankie, whispering, "Hey, you ready to head out?"

"Wait, what?" Judah immediately asked, his voice both shocked and annoyed coming from my left. "Why are you leaving? It's not even four-thirty yet. We haven't even had a real drink, Baby Bird."

I couldn't look at him. He sounded so genuine.

"I have work in the morning, and I can't be hungover," I explained, avoiding eye contact again. Gathering the rest of my strength, I shot Frankie a look that begged her not to

question me yet, just follow my lead. She dipped her head with the kind of subtly only girls were capable of.

"I have a Zoom call with a photographer at ten am, so we really should go." Frankie nodded, squeezing my arm with her own.

Pharaoh was watching Judah, but I wasn't brave enough to do the same.

I wasn't running away exactly, I was...walking away. For space. Sanity. Protection.

"Hold the fuck up, little one." I felt a strong hand wrap around my bicep and closed my eyes.

This was the last conversation I wanted to have.

The whole fucking reason I was leaving in the first place.

It was time to say goodbye, and not goodbye to a real friend, someone I could call tomorrow and make a date to grab coffee with. No, this was *Judah Colt*. He could be flying to fucking Africa tomorrow, he was as untouchable as they came, and I was *just a fucking fan*. Pretending like that wasn't the case would only lead me back into a mental space that wasn't healthy, wasn't productive toward my cause.

Why I was only checking myself now, I wasn't sure, but I was certainly glad I caught it before it was too late.

I lifted my head, meeting his wild eyes. "Judah, let me go."

"Not a chance in hell, come're," he said as he tugged on my arm a little. I turned to Frankie, who just lifted a helpless shoulder as Pharaoh walked away and the party played on as usual around us.

"I'll be over here when you're ready, just text me." She pointed to Ricco and Kavan standing off to the side sharing a joint. She didn't even seem upset that I'd found someone to spend half the night with as she headed back over to them.

Knowing I had to see this through, I nodded and turned back to Judah. He let go of my arm in favor of grabbing my hand and pulled me over to the side of the pool. The view from here was just as fucking beautiful, but after seeing it

from up top, where there was nothing in the way...this view was nice, but definitely wasn't as special.

When he turned to face me, his blue eyes were narrowed. "What the fuck just happened?"

"Nothing." I shrugged, hoping I could just get him to believe everything was fine. *Just let me go.* "I have work in the morning."

He scoffed. "Try again."

Giving up, I threw my hands out to the side. "What do you want me to say? I have to leave!"

"Yeah, and? Am I going to see you again?" It came out sounding like an accusation, like he knew I was planning on running without looking back. He was right.

"This isn't my world, Judah." I sighed. "I need time to think, to clear my head."

"You mean time to get rid of me," he accused, nodding as if he should have guessed. "Got it. By all means, you're free to go."

He sounded...pissed as fuck.

And I was ruining this. "No, not to get rid of you, but I need to check myself. If you think I'm going to leave this party believing that we're actually friends, you're crazy. I'm trying not to read into this."

"Why the fuck not?" He glared.

"Why *not*?" I repeated with a bitter laugh. "Pull out your phone."

The glare was replaced with confusion. "What? Why?"

"Just do it."

I didn't actually want to see this, already knowing what was coming, so I raced to build the wall around my heart as he did as I asked and held the phone out to me. "Here. What is this? What's your point?"

I didn't take it. "I don't want to hold it, I'm going to take a wild guess and I want you to have it handy as proof, because what I'm about to say is the number one reason why I can't walk into this friendship blind." He tried to say something, but I cut him off, continuing with my guess. "You have hundreds of unread text messages, at least eighty percent of them are females inviting you to the next best thing, using their tits to get your attention. Not to mention the DM's on Instagram from fans, press, career driving opportunities. Your Gmail app is probably loaded with over a thousand unopened emails because your assistant is cc'd on all of them—so why would you need to look? You wouldn't. But it still proves that your life and mine look very different." I was talking with my hands as my chest heaved, my heart cracking in my chest over the loss of a relationship I couldn't have. "You're busy, you have a full schedule, you're an artist. Entering into a friendship with you means competing for your attention every time we're together, and that just comes with the fucking territory, Judah."

"No, it doesn't," he started desperately, taking a step closer. "I think you're overestimating my fame a little bit. Yes, I'm busy, yes, my email looks and sounds exactly like that. Except you were wrong—I have more than just *hundreds* of unread texts, and my DM's are actually a little scary." His voice was serious, his blue eyes screamed at me to understand. "But I'm as alone as it gets, and you already know that, Phoenix. You can't pretend that you don't. Not now."

He was right. "I do know, but that doesn't mean I should just dive right in! We don't know each other."

He went cold as fuck, right before my eyes. "Okay, so everything that was said tonight was a lie then?"

"What? No! Judah, you're not hearing me."

"No, I'm hearing you pretty fucking clearly, P." He laughed without humor. "You're freaking out right now because you're not sure you can handle my lifestyle and everything that comes with it. That's fine. But you're not 'figuring things out,' you're *reconsidering*. So, while you claim to understand me, while you can apparently see through

my bullshit, you're choosing to ignore all of that because you're fucking *scared*."

I couldn't respond.

He continued, "Now that the opportunity is here, you realize you'll have to get close to me. You'll become *attached*. And just like I said before, you're not about that." He smirked, pure evil burning up the space between us. "You know what? Fine, just get the fuck out and let me know when you decide if I'm worth it."

His words rang in the air around me, mixing with the sounds of music, laughter, drunken slurs, and the joy of other people.

Then he walked away.

And this time...I let him.

???

YOU KNOW the intense relief that comes with canceling plans you were nervous for? Or even standing up a Tinder match in a bar at the last minute because you didn't know the person you were meeting and the risk became more obvious, more terrifying as you got closer and closer to leaving? You know the sick as fuck feeling that the nerves gave you? Sort of made you feel like you needed to take a shit?

Then out of nowhere, when you made the decision or your Tinder date cancels, it's as if a bucket of soothing relief crashes over you, and you smile. You run as fast as possible into the kitchen and grab your wine, text an update to your best friend, and then your remote leads you to your Netflix account and all your pretty makeup gets wasted on the fucking television screen instead of the guy you were trying to impress. But it was better than risking your heart on a stranger, right?

Yeah, I felt that as Judah walked away from me—relief...

for about ten minutes.

Then I wanted to punch myself in the goddamn throat.

"Um, what are we doing, and why aren't you filthy fucking Judah Colt, right now?" Frankie asked, following my speeding steps down the stairs, past security, and into the driveway.

"Don't," I pleaded, out of breath and frustrated. "Later, okay?"

"Later, she says," Frankie huffed but otherwise stayed quiet, and I thanked my lucky stars that she wasn't pissed at me for putting an end to her fun, choosing instead to be angry about the fact that I lost my chance at riding Judah's dick. She was the ultimate best friend.

As we passed the luxury cars this time, the rock in my chest cavity seemed to grow bigger. I shouldn't have left, shouldn't have let him walk away—I *should've* turned right around and run back, told him I was a mess, totally fucked up, but so was he.

I could feel it, hell, I could *prove* it. Google could tell me all kinds of crazy, fucked up shit he'd done in the past, and I bet I could've made a solid argument in my favor, but I didn't.

"Did you even call an Uber?" Frankie asked, breathing hard, sounding confused. "Why are we moving so fast?"

"No," I admitted, ignoring her second question and pulling my phone out. "I'll do it right now, but can we walk while we wait? Like toward the gate at the front of the community? I can't just stand here."

She looked at me with a blank expression on her pretty face. "You want to walk to our Uber?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Come on, I'll tell you what happened."

It was a bribe I was willing to make, knowing that if I didn't, she'd need a whole lot more convincing to walk the street alone like weirdos at nearly five am.

"Fine, but only because I'm confused as hell and not loving it."

"I'll explain," I promised. "Just let me take care of this."

Scrolling through my phone to find the app, I ordered the car and tried to center my thoughts. My time was up. Frankie deserved an explanation, and I needed to talk this out.

"Ready?" I asked, starting to move toward the sidewalk without waiting for her.

"Uh yeah, sure," she said with a frustrated sigh. Catching up to me, she grabbed my arm. "P, what happened? How did you meet him? Why are you so upset?"

Why was I upset? I didn't know if I had an answer for that, so I settled on telling her how we met, giving her the short version. "When I walked away to find the bathroom, I saw him filming the video in the living room. He was taking shots with two girls. We made eye contact. It was..." I couldn't explain it to her, not without sounding like I was making it up just because I wanted to make my encounter with a celebrity seem more important than it was. "I don't know. It doesn't matter. So, after we played beer pong with those guys and I went to find someone to bum a cig from, I found a set of stairs at the back of the house. My dumb ass walked up them, and boom, there was Judah Colt, already smoking. So, I sat down."

"You sat down," she repeated.

"I sure did," I confirmed, hating myself.

"You just...sat down...next to Judah Colt. And what? Asked to bum a cigarette?" When I didn't answer right away, she groaned, "Oh my god, Phoenix, you didn't."

"I did."

She ran a hand down her face, somehow managing not to fuck up her makeup, which was a win as far as I was concerned. "All right, I'm going to ignore that, because you came downstairs wrapped around him like a tree, so obviously, he didn't mind. But please tell me that the little piggyback ride was at least *his* idea."

I wanted to laugh, even though there was absolutely nothing funny about how embarrassing it was to hear Frankie repeat tonight's events back to me. *How in the fuck did I get here?*

"Not quite," was all I said.

"So, you just...what? Jumped on his back?" This time, she laughed a little. "Phoenix, you're kidding, right?"

"I wish I was." I also wished I could explain to her what it was like to be around him, but I wasn't sure even she would understand that Judah somehow felt comfortable, familiar. But after a few moments debating it, I decided to just go for it. Clearing my throat a little and turning just slightly, I said in a low voice, "I'm going to tell you everything that happened, but don't judge me, Franks. It's the last thing I need right now."

"I'd never judge your crazy ass, P." She sounded almost annoyed, fed up, as she pulled me to a stop with a hand on my arm again. Stepping closer, she put both hands on either side of my face. "This is why I'm so pissed off that you left. You think I don't know what you did while you were in New York? You fucked shit up. Without me. You were in pain. Without me. You walked away and tried to get it all out of your fucking system. Without me. And look what happened?" She moved back, waving a hand toward me. "Nothing is solved, you're still broken, but now I'm here and you're home, stop pretending like what happened to you didn't fuck me up too. I understand why you left, I do. I did even back then, but it doesn't mean I didn't want to go with you."

Stunned and on the verge of tears, I whispered, "I'm sorry, Frankie."

Especially after I mentally admitted to not being attached to her just hours ago.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

She had no idea that I was apologizing for being so much worse than she thought I was, because that's the part she missed. Sure, I ran away so that I could fuck up, forget everything, but her version of fucking up and mine were two very different things. I was chasing death, and she would have been chasing distraction like everyone else. One was normal, one was not.

She didn't need to know the extent of my damage though, because it wouldn't change a damn thing and she didn't deserve to feel like she didn't know her best friend, even after all these years. However, what happened when I was thirteen happened to *me*, not to her, so there's no possible way that our damage, our reactions, our brains, would respond in the same way.

"It's fine, P, really," Frankie reassured me, pulling my forehead to hers. Her voice was a liquid gold threat as she demanded, "But you better trust me with this shit from now on, so get to talking."

Then she let go, linked our fingers and resumed our walk.

"Okay," I breathed, trying to categorize my feelings in a way I could better articulate. I updated her on what happened, how I got to the roof, what happened when I sat down, and how we stayed silent until we couldn't anymore, and then somehow, we ended up fighting. Like we'd been together for years. I told her everything I could without telling her the real reason I was so attached.

She interrupted me before I could get to the last part. "Wait, hold on. Jesus Christ. Okay so..." she dragged out. "Why didn't we fuck him then? I feel like this kind of tension can only be fucked from the system."

"Because it wasn't like that." I shook my head, trying to explain. "I'm serious when I say this was friendship."

Now, that wasn't exactly true, because it probably *could've* been like that, but fucking Judah Colt was simply not an option, no matter how hot our chemistry was.

"So, you became friends with Judah Colt," she stated, staring ahead of us at the street lined with massive homes on each side, custom luxury cars parked in every driveway.

"I think so." I nodded.

"Well damn, okay," she said, getting used to the idea. "So, then what happened? Why did we leave?"

I glanced to the side, ashamed. "Take a wild guess."

A brief pause before, "You didn't."

I nodded. "I did."

"That's why you wanted to leave so fast? You got fucking scared?"

Ugh. "Yes."

"And you left that fucking party without his number?" She was getting louder, more worked up.

"Yes."

"Phoenix!" she shouted, slapping me in the arm with her free hand. "You couldn't have pulled the cut and run *after* you got his number? Now what? How did you leave it? Will I get to hang out with Pharaoh? What does this mean?"

Truthfully, I had no idea what it meant, but I went with, "The last thing he said to me was 'let me know when I'm worth it.' I'm not sure."

Silence. Then, "You really fucked this up, didn't you?"

"Definitely," I confirmed, seeing headlights up ahead and hoping it was our Uber.

"Okay then," she breathed, sounding unsure and disappointed. "Well, we weren't friends with Judah Colt before the party tonight, so we'll be okay with not being his friend after the party. Right?"

I couldn't respond, because I wasn't sure it was true.

As the Uber pulled up next to us, I looked back down the street toward Silas' house, knowing that this week would be hell and I was far from okay.



I WENT BACK UPSTAIRS after Phoenix left, all the way up to the roof, but rather than sitting down, I walked to the very far edge. The one that gave me a perfect view of the driveway.

She was down there, standing with Frankie and fucking around on her phone—probably calling a cab, since you know, she was fucking *leaving*.

"Shit," I whispered, glancing down at my hands curled around the edge of the glass wall.

How did that happen? How did I manage to walk straight into a girl like Phoenix Royal, somehow convince her to befriend me, and then lose her all in the same night?

Because that's what happened, wasn't it? I lost her?

Looking back up, she was still there, but must have finished whatever she was doing because she and Frankie began...walking?

Where are they going?

My heart rate was already through the roof, but seeing her physically lengthening the space between us was affecting me on a molecular level—it was in my brain.

Fucking livid, I couldn't figure out how the hell she could walk away from this. From me.

I got being scared, I understood being unsure about my lifestyle, but I was *not* my lifestyle. I was a desperate as fuck guy in his late twenties, who had no idea how to form healthy, complete sentences when talking to other humans. I yelled out of nowhere, every tiny thing pissed me off—and not because I was offended, but because I felt *too* much, *too* loud, all the fucking time.

Bitter liquid, laced joints, bad coke, it didn't matter what I was on, nothing took away the anger.

It didn't matter what I was feeling—scared, excited, unsure, hesitant—it all translated in the only way my brain knew how to compute it. And Phoenix handled it, stepped up against me, gave it back to me. And even though tonight was only the beginning, I could see our future arguments already, the ones that would happen at the same time—three am—when both of us were too fucked up to see reason and all we knew was that looking at the other person *physically hurt*.

We would feel so intensely, so loudly, that our arguments would bring the house down.

If tonight was any indication, arguing with her would feel like I'd died and gone straight to purgatory. Trapped with a burning bird.

I think that's how I want it to be.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, one right after the other, telling me someone was actually calling. I thought about just leaving it, but remembered that I told Pharaoh I'd be back down soon and hadn't even lit my cigarette yet.

Pulling it out, I was right, it was him. "Sup?"

"Where the fuck are you?" he yelled in my ear. The music from the floor below was much easier to hear through the phone.

"I'm smoking, I'll be down soon."

Ending the call, I tried to find Phoenix again, but she and Frankie had disappeared around a bend in the road.

Briefly, I wondered what excuses she was giving her friend. Was she lying? Did she feel the same way I did? Like she was being a *fucking idiot*?

It didn't matter either way. It wasn't like I was going to chase her ass around Los Angeles, and we didn't even get a chance to exchange numbers before she lost her mind and left, so it was a lost fucking cause anyway.

Pulling out a cigarette, I lit it and stepped away from the wall, holding the smoke in my lungs longer than necessary before breathing it out. "Goddammit." I ran a frustrated hand down my face, feeling twisted the fuck up.

But she was gone, for good, and if there was a bright side to all this, maybe meeting her gave me new material, would inspire new lyrics. Devil knew how bad I needed them if I was going to get this album done anytime soon.

With the European tour coming up, I was supposed to be done writing already, should have been spending every night in the studio and finished by the end of next month. But that wasn't going to happen, not unless meeting Phoenix managed to uncork my brain and somehow filter out all my insecurities.

It didn't help that summers were hard for me, and July was the worst. The hot seasonal months consisted of the sun mocking me for hours on end, asking me why I couldn't be like everyone else in California and soak up the rays, let the vitamin D soothe my soul.

Ha, fuck that. The last time my soul had been *soothed* was when I took the very first hit from my very first blunt. I was a rebellious thirteen-year-old seeking attention, hoping someone would step in and be a parent, and the only other time I came close to feeling like that was when Phoenix told me—through her own eyes—how my fans saw me, how *she* saw me. Even though that conversation ended up in ruin, even though I didn't express it properly, her words pieced a part of my confidence back where it belonged. Because she was right. They just weren't ready for me.

Still, the summer sun made me feel like a failure. Like my brain was truly wired incorrectly and even a doctor couldn't fix all that had been fucked. The light changed nothing for me. How could it, when everything else was so dark?

My phone rang again, this time it was Krista. Her pretty pale face lit up my screen, displaying her light blonde hair and pearly white smile. The woman had a thick ass, a solid set of tits, and she was available to do it right now.

I answered, "Get your ass in the guest room. Naked. Don't fuck around. I'll be down in a minute."

"Finally. God, I love it when you tell me what to do," she cooed into the phone.

Gross. "Whatever. Just be there."

I hung up, shaking my head and pinching the bridge my nose. With a pounding headache, a new butterfly bandage on my forehead—courtesy of Holly—and not nearly enough liquor in my system, I squeezed my eyes shut. For the first time, after years of smoking, I hoped to god that the amount of weed I'd consumed hadn't totally obliterated my memory, because you best believe that while I was nine inches deep in Krista's snatch, I'd be picturing Phoenix Royal the whole fucking time.



WAKING up the next morning was brutal.

Sick to my stomach with regret, it took everything in my fucking power not to hyper stalk Judah on Instagram as soon as I got home—not even four hours ago—but I didn't. I shut my phone off and tried to sleep.

Only ended up getting like an hour, max.

Waking up angry was the fucking worst, but what made it worse was I didn't even know who I was more mad at—Judah for taking over my head space, or myself for letting him walk away.

Now there I was—standing in the bathroom, scowling at myself in the mirror. I'd finished getting ready for work five minutes prior, but I wasn't ready to start the day. My reflection wasn't pretty. Even with my tan, the bags under my eyes were obvious and hideous, making me look sad, worn out. Kenji was going to ask questions, but I wasn't sure I had any answers

After another solid minute of assessing my flaws, I kicked it into high gear and started getting all my things together for work. Having already changed into a pair of dark blue denim jeans and a plain black tee that was ripped in multiple places, I threw on a pair of bright red Vans and headed into the kitchen to make coffee. Only to find that Frankie must have set the timer on the coffee maker before heading to bed last night,

because there was a fresh pot waiting for me. What a fucking angel.

I made a mental note to shoot her a thank you text as I grabbed my to-go cup and filled it, working fast to stuff my purse with snacks for the day. I was a troll when I got hungry, so keeping snacks on me was a lesson I learned early in life.

Once I had all my shit sorted, I double checked that my sketchbook, iPad, and both chargers were in my oversized Saint Laurent bag, and I was out the door.

You'd think that leaving for work *after* the morning rush hour meant beating traffic. Nope, not in LA. Here, the bumper to bumper bullshit started from the moment the sun rose in the sky and lasted well until after it set. Some areas were better than others, of course, but unfortunately for me, my route to and from the tattoo shop meant dealing with it more than I liked.

When the Bluetooth connected, "It Won't Kill Ya" by The Chainsmokers resumed playing, reminding me of everything I felt with Judah the night before. I couldn't escape it—the godawful regret that was burning a hole in my head, my stomach, my heart. The song just made it worse, bringing back the feeling of flirtatious banter laced with undeniable chemistry and fluid curiosity. We both felt it. I had no doubt about that.

"Let me know when I'm worth it." His voice was still loud, even hours later.

I couldn't stop thinking about it. The sentence had been knocking around in my brain like a bad headache since it fell from his mouth. Worth *what*? What was I really even running from? On the one hand, I felt like there was no fucking way Judah Colt, TheColt, wanted a real friendship from me, but on the other, I knew that way of thinking was just *my* way of ignoring something that could hurt me. Something unknown and completely out of my control. I didn't want another thing I couldn't control. I had enough of those already but...I couldn't deny there was potential in what we started last night, potential in whatever connection we shared.

But that didn't mean I wanted to plant the seeds, water it, and watch it grow.

A friendship, relationship, any kind of *ship* with Judah would be too much of a risk, and he was too important. Not only to me, but the...rest of his fans, as well. Even though I hated admitting that I was just a fan, I knew it was the truth. And if Judah managed to influence me the way he did, I was willing to bet there were others out there too, and I just couldn't stomach the thought of risking his life on the fragile state of my unknowns.

And that's what I thought about over and over again, the entire hour drive it took me to pull into the employee parking lot behind Death's Door Ink.

Two of Judah's songs had started playing on the way, and both times, I switched them off faster than I ran away last night. Couldn't do it. Couldn't hear his voice.

Sighing, I grabbed my shit from the passenger seat and mentally prepped myself for the day ahead. Kenji and I went way back, as he had been my tattoo artist since I turned eighteen and got my first one. I'd never forget the day I walked into Death's Door with money to burn and a small dream of starting to tell my story on my skin. Right away, he gave me his portfolio—a binder full of his drawings and flash sheets—and in the middle of flipping through, I stumbled upon the traditional style heart with a bullet hole in the center of a heart made of shattered glass. From that moment on, I knew that Kenji was my guy.

When I planned to move back, he was my second phone call, right after Frankie. I told him I graduated and was moving back, and in turn, he told me to purchase my tattoo machine and get ready to work, because he finally had an opening for an apprentice. I jumped on the opportunity, and I'd been working with him for about three months.

Walking around the side of the building, I kicked a crushed Red Bull can out of the way and tried to let the weather soak up all my issues. The air was warm, the temperature already deep into the seventies, with a completely cloudless sky. That alone lifted some of the anxiety.

That was the thing I loved most about California—the weather was fucking spectacular. Not too hot, not too cold, with just enough of a winter break so you could wear big fluffy sweaters and not feel robbed of a chilly season. Everything was mild, even the rain...which wasn't particularly a good thing when the sun was shining most of the year and the lack of precipitation led to record breaking droughts.

When I rounded the corner and came to a stop in front of Death's Door Ink, time seemed to slow. I'd spent the last four years unsure of what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I didn't have goals or dreams, I was just existing in the land of survival mode. It wasn't until I decided to take life by the nut sack that I put two and two together.

I needed an outlet, somewhere to channel my extra energy, and since getting tattooed was a form of therapy for me, I figured it was time to discover if being the one *behind* the machine had the same affect. I'd always been an artist, drawing was another form of expressing, but nothing I ever did was good enough in my eyes. Permanent enough. Loud enough. Ink brought the drawing to life, made it last forever.

Kenji was the perfect teacher—a true artist with the ability to make black and grey ink breathe, no matter what you asked him to draw. Animals, flowers, skulls, portraits, abstract designs, full sleeves or tiny script, it didn't matter. He could do it all, and each piece was unique to him, his style stood all on its own. I found his shop by chance, having been shopping in Santa Monica for the day with Frankie. We'd wandered too far past Third Street and ended up on a corner, staring up at the giant mural of a skull and crossbones, but Kenji's version was meaner, with blood dripping from the sharpened teeth, a jagged crack diagonally down the center of the face. The bones were broken and scratched.

Smiling up at that very same mural, I came back to the present and dug around in my bag for the key to the sticker covered door. When I successfully unlocked it, a little bell

chimed loudly and I walked through, making my presence known, but Kenji wasn't anywhere to be seen.

The shop was empty, since we didn't open until noon, and I could hear Kenji wiggling things around behind the accordion wall that separate the piercing section from the rest of the room. This building was small, the space Kenji owned was even smaller, but he made it work using the glass case full of body jewelry and tattoo after-care as the reception desk, and only hired one other tattoo artist at a time, so there wasn't anyone fighting over square footage.

"There she is," a voice said from behind me. I turned, seeing Kenji walking around the wall. His short brown hair was styled perfectly atop his head, and his familiar, clean, white smile was on full display as he greeted me. "You look like shit, my girl."

I scowled. "I was just thinking about how magical I thought this place was when I tripped through your front door all those years ago. Now I'm reconsidering."

"Please," he scoffed. "You don't get to reconsider. Too late now."

I smiled, liking that he wanted me around, even though I didn't fully understand why. We hit it off from the very first time we spoke, and it's been a dream working for him. I expected to feel differently, knowing that I wasn't exactly the easiest person to understand, but somehow, he made the process fluid and fun as hell.

He got to work, setting up the music and checking over his schedule for the day, while I settled into my station, which was set up in the far corner of the room. I was still in the early phases of my apprenticeship, so I spent most of my days drawing and getting feedback from Kenji, talking about techniques and how to apply what I learned in college to the art of tattooing. Some people complained about the amount of time you spent just drawing, but I was never one to complain about that because, why? Isn't that what tattooing is all about? Bringing art to life? I'm sure most apprentices knew that, but

there were the few who wanted to get right to tattooing skin and just skip the rest of the process.

Not me. I was cool with molding my craft into my career at a slower pace to ensure that I learned everything I could possibly learn. Pulling out my iPad, I got to work on the last piece I was drawing...

...until of course, I got so lost in my head that I couldn't keep going. I shaded and erased over and over and over again, until two hours later, I finally busted out with, "I can't do this." Kenji was working on a stencil for his client coming in this afternoon, so he just turned to look at me over his shoulder, eyebrow quirked. I continued, "I need you to give me some sort of prompt to work with. My creativity is shit today."

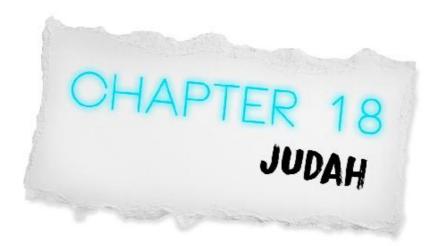
He grinned, brown eyes sparkling. This was his favorite thing to do. "Hell yes. I'm giving you a circle, a rose, and a triangle. Make it into a tattoo. Come up with script. We'll talk about it after my next client."

I nodded. Cool. That would do.

A circle, a rose, and a triangle.

Two unidentical and impossibly unalike shapes, one layered over the other with the rose in the center. Add two hands making a fist around the thorny stem, bleeding through their fingers with a quote that says, "Your thorns don't scare me." And, ladies and gentlemen, you had yourself a motherfucking tattoo.

I just didn't like how much it reminded me of Judah.



SITTING IN MY LIVING ROOM, scrolling through my phone, I was a fucking grump. Kavan and Ricco were still asleep somewhere in the house. Silas got sick of my bullshit and left an hour ago. Pierce walked through the front door and looked over the railing of the loft, saw my face, and turned right the hell around. Now, the only two brave souls left were Keon and Pharaoh.

The latter was not handling my mood very well.

"For fuck's sake, say something to her!" Pharaoh bitched from his place sprawled out on my black leather couch next to Keon. "You have her first *and* last name. It's been two days, and you're *still* a miserable sonofabitch. Save us all and just message her."

"No," I spat.

Fuck Phoenix Royal. Fuck her right up the fucking ass.

"Bro," Pharaoh sighed, annoyed with me.

I was annoyed at myself too, but it was Phoenix that I had a real bone to pick with. I told her to let me know when I was worth it, that didn't mean take your time and fucking think about it. It meant realize, right fucking now, that you're being an idiot and fucking fix it.

She didn't.

She left.

And she *still* hadn't fucking messaged me. I was starting to believe she wasn't going to, and that right there was unacceptable.

"Who is this chick?" Keon asked, not bothering to look up from his phone. He was barely listening, pulling from a weed pen as his curly light brown hair fell over his eyes.

"No one," I growled, even as I typed her name into the search bar on Instagram.

I found her right away. Almost as soon as I was done hate-fucking Krista the other night. Now I stalked her hourly. How could I not? The girl was stunning. Except, she had an Instagram feed full of fake as fuck, shiny as hell, sparkly little lies. Photos of her face, her drinks, her...friends? They didn't look like her friends, they looked like people she knew and stood for a picture with. Everything was off, and I knew immediately that she was lying through her pearly white teeth in every goddamn photo.

The blue button under her profile picture said "Follow Back" which meant she was already following me, but I knew that was from long before Tuesday night. Long before I ever knew she existed. She was a real fan, there was no doubt about that, but what I didn't understand was why it felt like there was more. More than just her love for my music hidden under her black lashes. She was hiding something the other night, and I wanted to know what it was.

I spent the last two days trying to turn the other night into a song, but it lacked the female presence. It also lacked sincerity, since I was too scared to admit the magnitude of my feelings without her doing the same. But she was a flight risk, that one, and it was looking more and more like I wouldn't be hearing from her again.

To my surprise—that wasn't okay with me.

"She's a fan Judah met at the video shoot Tuesday night," Pharaoh said, bringing Keon up to speed and getting up to grab the Xbox controller from the shiny black coffee table sitting in the middle of my living room. "Hot little thing."

"No shit?" Keon's eyes remained glued to his screen. Fucker really didn't care.

Truth was, he was already desensitized to the females we encountered every day. Most of my friends were. Pussy was in abundance, sure, but the act of fucking meant nothing in this industry, and most of the time, you were left to question if you said or did something that could bite you in the ass the next day. It was hard to get excited over a new girl. They were all the fucking same.

Except for Phoenix.

That girl wanted nothing to do with me, and it had me itchy and uncomfortable, leaving me desperately thinking of ways to gain her attention.

Over the forty-eight hours since I saw her last, I played the age-old game where I posted something on my Instagram story, just to see if she viewed it. Sure as shit, I forced Holly to look through every one of my viewers and see if *NixRoyal* had seen them.

She had. All fifteen Instagram stories, she viewed.

Which meant she had fifteen opportunities to simply type "hi" into the goddamn message bar. It was *right there*, she could have done it at any time. So she either didn't want to or she was being a fucking pussy, and I had absolutely no idea which one it was.

Knowing I was perfectly capable of messaging her first, I thought about it, but then remembered *she* was the one who wanted to bail the other night. If she wanted to talk to me again, she could reach the fuck out.

Serves that little bitch right.

"The girl walked out on him, and now he's all bent out of shape," Pharaoh continued, not bothering to keep my shit private. "I just told him to fucking *message her*, because if he doesn't fuck this girl soon, we're all going to suffer the consequences."

That's where he had it wrong.

It wasn't about fucking her—not even close.

But I couldn't explain that to them, because then I'd really sound insane. I truly didn't give a flying fuck what Phoenix was to me. Didn't care if she didn't let me fuck her. I just wanted to keep her. Own her. Make her mine in whatever way she'd allow.

That way of thinking wasn't uncommon for me. I tended to fixate on anything good, anything too pretty for my hands to hold. Because there was something about watching beautiful things crumble that I found fascinating. I almost needed it—that kind of dedication. I needed someone who could look past all my bullshit and love me so hard they couldn't walk away, because I wasn't easy to be with. Unstable, unhealthy, sad, angry, confused—I was everything that you wanted to avoid in a relationship, and finding someone down for that was nearly impossible.

Phoenix, however, she was just the same. Just the fucking same.

Except, she was working her way out of it, I could tell. She was trying to save herself, and I couldn't help but think I was helping her. Or she wanted me to help her. I didn't know which it was, but helping would be the last thing I did. Hurting? Fucking up? Ruining? Those were things I did in my sleep.

So here I was, holding on to hope that she was the same way. That she wasn't dedicated to getting healthy and staying there, because I wasn't done fucking up yet and I kind of wanted her to do it with me.

That wasn't sex. That wasn't about fucking—though I hoped to hell that it would come with the arrangement eventually.

Still, they wouldn't get it.

"With the amount of tits we have to choose from, you're hung up on just one pair?" Keon asked, looking at me for a second before going back to what he was doing. "Fuckin' stupid."

I rolled my eyes but said nothing else.

Standing from my favorite corner of the couch, I made my way to the kitchen, grabbing a pre-rolled blunt from the bowl in the center of the island on my way to the pantry. Opening the matte black door, I pulled a lighter from the pocket of my sweats and lit up, puffing smoke out through my nose as I stared at the contents of my snack stash.

As I did, I considered showing up at Death's Door Ink.

She'd told me where she worked, it would be easy to have Holly get me an appointment for a tattoo—not that I had a ton of room left on my body, but I was sure there was something I could get done. But that was a dumb as fuck idea, because I would look insane. If she wasn't reaching out, there was a reason, but I was having a hard time standing by when I had a way of contacting her, a way to see her in person again.

The only thing that kept me from making that phone call was the sick and needy part of me that wanted her to make the first move, send the first message, because *she* was the one willing to walk away. Why should I have to fight for a friendship with her, when she clearly didn't want it? Why risk being embarrassed and heartbroken?

"Grab me the Cheetos, will ya?" Pharaoh called, interrupting my thoughts and reminding me that I was standing with the door open. "And bring another blunt."

I pulled out the Cheetos and a bag of barbecue chips, making my way across the white tiled flooring and into the living room with the blunt hanging from my mouth. I dropped the bag into his lap. "Get off your lazy ass and get one yourself. I'm going outside."

It was four in the afternoon, and I'd just woken up after a night of drinking alone. I wanted privacy and silence for a while.

As soon as I opened my eyes, she was there. Writing songs until two am, she was there. Trying to fall asleep last night, she was there. Smoking blunts, cigs, eating, scrolling through social media, all of it led me right back to thoughts of her.

She is just a fucking fan.

I didn't care. It didn't feel like it. None of that mattered.

I wanted to see the little bird again, and I was obsessed. I wouldn't relax until I got what I wanted.

So I'd give her another day to reach out to me, but then I wouldn't give her a motherfucking choice.

???

"HER TIME'S UP," I said to Pharaoh, standing in the doorway of the room he occupied in my house. "We're going to get them tonight."

"We? Them?" he questioned from the middle of his bed, not even bothering to sit up. When I first bought the place two years ago, he'd claimed this room like he lived here, but I wasn't going to complain. It was a huge house, and I fucking hated being alone.

"It's Friday night, and we have no plans. Get your shit straight. We're going to pick up Phoenix and Frankie at eleven." I tapped the doorframe twice.

"Do they know that?" Pharaoh asked, dark brown eyebrow quirked.

"They're about to find out." I smirked.

The timer on this bullshit had gone off.

Phoenix Royal needed to face the fucking music.



WHEN FRIDAY NIGHT ROLLED AROUND, I was holed up in my room, lying in bed and wasting time. My laptop was open, Pinterest was pulled up, but I couldn't focus on shit. Judah had spent the last four days blowing up his Instagram, showing off his life, generally making himself too loud to ignore. Maybe it was naïve of me, but I was pretty sure he was doing it on purpose. Everything he posted felt subliminal, like he was trying to say something to a specific person.

Like he was baiting them.

Like he was baiting me.

But how was I supposed to know for sure? He could have a whole line up of girls he wanted attention from, and I was just the asshole who thought she was good enough to receive his affection. Even that sounded dumb.

But I had been following Judah for six months now and he never posted as many stories as he had over the last four days. I was a twenty-three-year-old girl, I knew how social media games worked. Post stories to see who views them. That just seemed insane to me because I knew his follower count was fucking insane, his story views would be in the millions. How the hell would he even sift through that many?

I chucked that theory into the trash and instead focused on the exact content he was posting, trying to figure out if he was saying something with all of his videos and photos of random shit.

Every time he was on camera, his eyes were sad. He was drunk both Wednesday and Thursday night, making sure all of his followers knew that he was attending parties, getting fucked up, escaping from...everything, I guessed?

Basically, he was hard to ignore.

But he hadn't won yet—I still hadn't messaged him.

When I wasn't playing the refresh game on my phone, I was at the tattoo shop working with Kenji on my technique. The days had gone by fast as hell, but the evenings dragged on horribly.

At Death's Door, I let go of everything else and got lost in the never ending well of knowledge that Kenji had for me. Every fucking second of it was interesting. I was spending my time drawing, learning my style as an artist, the history of tattooing, and the new resources available to artists like me. I was grateful for the distraction, but my good mood only lasted up until eight PM, when I left the shop to come home. Then it all came flooding back. Every night, I went back and forth on messaging him, hearing his last words to me repeated over and over in my head.

After I saw a video of him hanging out in a room full of friends with a blonde girl perched on his lap, I considered unfollowing him all together.

Which was ridiculous.

So here I was, doing the same shit I did last night, except I was getting annoyed with myself for letting it go on this long. If I just bit the bullet and messaged him, the worst that would happen would be him not messaging me back.

But if I messaged him and he did respond...I couldn't run away twice. Not if I wanted something real.

If I was going to message him first, I needed to be sure I was ready for a friendship with him, for him to be in my life, otherwise I would be fucking around with drama I didn't need. But in my quest for happiness, I couldn't help but think being

his friend might be biting off more than I could chew. His Instagram stories this week alone proved that I was in way over my head.

He may have been the black sheep of the industry at the moment, but that didn't mean everyone was against him. The people he hung out with, the things they did together...he was knee deep in the world of luxury, even if he didn't treat it the way everyone else did. He posted a photo on Wednesday night of him, Silas Madigan, and two other girls eating at one of Malibu's most exclusive sushi restaurants. The females were fucking stunning—models, no doubt—but while Silas wore his usual white gold chain around his neck and dressed up for the occasion, Judah went for ripped black jeans and baby pink silky shirt.

The same color as my top from the night we met.

My hands were shaking as I picked up my phone to go back to the photo on his feed, wanting to look at it again.

It was getting bad, my obsession. I was addicted to staring at the way his eyes screamed, the way they were pleading with me, and the Asian model on his lap had no fucking idea.

Was it all in my fucking head? Did I just make this shit up because I wanted it to be true?

I had no idea and that, right there, was the problem.

Because if I made it up, fine, it would hurt, but if I didn't and those eyes really were begging me to give this a shot, then he was more intense than I had anticipated. The feeling in my chest, the ache in my heart, I wasn't ready for it. For him.

"Fuck my life," I groaned, running a hand down my face as I flopped back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. The fairy lights normally made my room feel cozy and safe, but right now, I simply felt trapped in my own head. I moved back for fun, a taste of recklessness, like Judah had taught me, but now that I had the opportunity, it felt like too much. Like this opportunity was too big. Too real.

Just as I closed my eyes, my phone vibrated next to me. Peeking one eye open, I grabbed it and held it up in front of my face, waiting for it to unlock. Instagram was the last app I used but I didn't see a change so I swiped down, revealing my notifications.

TheColt sent a message.

"Holy fuck." I sat up as my hand flew to my throat. Like a bucket of ice water had just been dumped over my head, my heart crashed in my chest and I felt all the blood drain from my face. My stomach bottomed out.

He sent me a message.

Judah Colt sent me a message.

Right there in my DM's.

TheColt: Wow, you're more stubborn than me.

I couldn't fucking help it, I smiled. I fucking grinned even.

It might have made me a shitty person, but I was filled with pure satisfaction as I stared at the message, because it meant he caved first. Of course, that feeling was short lived once I realized I had to respond.

Sitting there for a minute, I went back and forth on my options, round and round.

There were so many reasons not to, so many things I could have done instead.

But...curiosity was going to kill this cat because I went for it, too curious not too.

NixRoyal: What do you want, Judah?

I didn't need to be an asshole, but I was fucking terrified of what this meant. He spent the time to look me up, and the fact that he had an attitude said he felt strongly enough about me to get worked up in the first place. We were headed straight for dangerous waters, and I was playing with fire by getting my hopes up. Three nights ago, I was going to end it for this very reason, and yet here I was, ready to say "fuck it" and go all in again.

Probably because I genuinely wasn't sure how long I could go on ignoring all the thoughts in my head. He was everywhere. I couldn't get rid of him.

My phone vibrated as another message came through.

TheColt: You're a frigid bitch, you know that?

I know.

NixRoyal: ...what do you want, Judah?

TheColt: Your daddy. I'm pullin' up in an hour, bring your friend.

He's fucking kidding.

NixRoyal: Not to be cliché or anything but, do I get a choice?

Like a fucking fool, I was hoping he'd say no. I needed him to be the one to take away my choice, force me to risk it all, give me an excuse. I needed him to let me blame him for my eventual heartbreak and not my own stupidity.

TheColt: Address, Baby Bird.

Fuck. Did I want to do it?

NixRoyal: Why?

TheColt: You know what? Never mind. I found your Instagram, but I also found your Snapchat. You're not private and your location is active. I see your curvy little animated body on the map, so I'll just use that. Pharaoh and I will be there in an hour. Pack a bag, you're staying at my place tonight.

What the fuck? Can he do that?

I was pretty sure he couldn't but still, I couldn't type fast enough.

NixRoyal: Judah, no!

I waited for the little "seen" notification to pop up...waited and waited and fucking waited. Nothing.

I bet he wasn't even online anymore.

Motherfucker. "Frankie!" I yelled toward the living room, jumping out of bed and cursing my lack of privacy settings on

social media. Why in the world did I need to share my location on that stupid app anyway?

"What?" I heard her call back lazily. Her mouth was full.

Not that I could blame her, she told me this morning that she planned to chill tonight because her event was cancelled, but that was no longer in the cards. And once I told her why, she was going to freak the fuck out.

Running into the living room as quickly as I could manage, I tried to think of a way to tell Frankie what we were about to do without catapulting her into asking too many questions before I could finish the story. We simply didn't have that kind of time.

If I wasn't in such a rush, I would have stopped to laugh at how comfortable she looked surrounded by fried snacks with her hair piled high on her head with glasses on and a clay looking face mask drying on her skin. She was adorable.

But again, we were short on time, so I stopped in front of the couch and blocked her view of the TV instead.

"Move, P, what are you doing?" she bitched, trying to look around my body.

"We have a problem," I stated, causing her confused and slightly offended eyes to meet mine. I went with the short version. "Judah found me on Instagram, then found me on Snapchat, used that stupid fucking map to find out where we lived, and is now on his way over here to pick us up. Told me to pack a bag. We have," I pulled my phone from the waistband of my booty shorts and the screen lit up, displaying the time, "fifty-eight minutes before they're supposed to get here."

She blinked once, twice, before throwing our fuzzy white blanket off her lap and shooting to her feet. She glared at me. "I have less than an hour to get ready for a night out with Judah Colt?"

"Yup." I nodded, pointing toward the bathroom door. "You're wasting precious time. Bitch at me and walk all at once."

She spun around, moving at warp speed toward her destination, but called over her shoulder, "You know he can't find out our actual address, right? Snapchat doesn't hand out addresses like that, Phoenix. He's probably bluffing because he knows you'll figure it out and be forced to send it to him willingly." She hummed a little. "I'm getting it now. If you send him your address, then it proves you wanted to see him in the first place. Smart game." I heard the shower turn on while I followed in a shocked daze. "Put the both of you out of your misery and send it to him. Oh, and please, for the love of god, tell him to jerk off for thirty minutes or something so I can salvage this mess. I need more than an hour."

Shit. *Is she right?*

He seemed like the type to manipulate to get his way, but would he really do that to me? Was I worth that type of forethought?

I shook my head, saying to Frankie, "There's no way he's really thinking that hard about it."

"Ha!" She barked a laugh, the sound echoing through the bathroom. "You're fucking blind, babe. Based on the way he looked at you, I'd say you're wrong. That boy got stung by Cupid."

"Cupid doesn't sting," I deadpanned, hating that she was probably right. I didn't need to see his face to know how he looked at me. I felt it. Still, days later. His stare managed to leave a permanent mark on my skin, like a fresh tattoo that hadn't healed yet. "Whatever, I'll text him."

Aaaaaand just like that, I caved.

He was famous and completely out of my league—spoiled, broken, and angry.

I was broken as hell—flighty, bitter, and trapped in a tragedy.

And this? This was a horrible fucking idea.

"ALL RIGHT, HOW DO I LOOK?" Frankie asked, walking into the bathroom sporting faded mom jeans and a plain white knit crop top. The outfit showed off her toned, tan stomach with a thin gold belt around her waist. The whole thing screamed chill California girl.

"Fucking hot," I whistled through my teeth, meaning it. "What shoes are you going with?"

Looking back to the mirror, I tried not to get mascara all over my eyelids by leaning over the counter to get as close as I could. It was nearly eleven at night, so I was going with a natural look, very basic makeup, expecting our little hang out session to be casual. Unless... I paused what I was doing and turned to Frankie, "You don't think he's taking us to a club or anything, right?"

She gave me a blank look. "Uh, I don't know Phoenix. He's *your friend*, not mine. Ask him. And I'm wearing my Keds, I think."

I snagged my phone from the counter and pulled up my Instagram, opening our thread. I typed out another message.

NixRoyal: Should we be dressing up?

TheColt: Absolutely not. But underwear isn't allowed.

Rolling my eyes, I tried not to smile.

NixRoyal: Original. Are you on your way?

TheColt: Can't tell you. That would confirm that I was texting and driving.

NixRoyal: So you're on your way, then.

TheColt: Guess you'll find out soon enough. Don't forget to pack a bag. I won't be bringing you back home tonight, so if you're stubborn and leave it at home, that's on you.

NixRoyal: You're fucking bossy.

TheColt: Cuz I'm a fuckin' boss, Baby Bird. See you soon.

I sighed, putting my phone back down. "No need to dress up, but they are on their way, and I'm assuming you need a bag too since he's picking both of us up."

"Fine by me," she said, turning for her room. "We'll take a cab back home tomorrow morning. I wonder if his beds are comfy. You know how I feel about my mattress."

Her mattress was a fucking cloud. Seriously. I had no idea how she found one so spectacular, but I couldn't even blame her for not wanting to sleep on shitty beds now. She had the best mattress this world had to offer, right in the comfort of her own home.

That was dramatic, but...it also wasn't.

The bed was fantastic.

"He's rich, I'm sure it's fine."

"I'm rich, Phoenix, that means nothing to me."

True. I was *also* considered rich, but my mattress wasn't nearly as good as hers.

"Then take a cab home tonight instead, Franks, I don't know what to tell you," I sassed, running my fingers through my freshly waved brown hair.

"Save the attitude, thank you very much." She entered the bathroom again with purpose, heading straight for the little bottle of setting spray on the counter. "Do you think Pharaoh is hot?"

"Is that even a question?" He was fucking gorgeous.

I slowed my movements, looking at our reflection in the mirror. I wasn't dressed yet, still in my lace bra and thong, so next to Frankie, I looked like her not-so-innocent seductress.

"Word. Just checking, since he'll be there tonight. Can't decide if I want to go for that or not."

I loved that she assumed she could get it no matter what. That attitude was what usually made the statement true. Frankie and I were both comfortable with our sexuality, because we kind of had to be when we spent a solid four years hanging around guys who were older and expected us to be mature in order to keep our spot within their group. They talked about fucking girls just to get off and laughed about it. We weren't about to defend ourselves against a room full of

guys, so on the way home one night, we talked about it and decided to say fuck it. If guys thought that way about girls, then why couldn't girls think that way about them in return? They could fuck us just to get off.

We could fuck them for the exact same reason.

Then, a few nights later, both of us lost our virginity at the same party, in the same dirty apartment, on the same bed but with two different guys. We were fourteen then, and we laughed about it now but knew if anyone had ever heard that story, it might have sounded sad as hell. It was, in a small way. But for us? It was our way of convincing ourselves that we had control of something when everything else fell apart around us.

From that moment on, we fucked who we wanted, when we wanted, and how we wanted.

"What's the hang-up?" I asked, propping my hip against the counter to look at her. "He'd be a definite yes for me."

"I don't know," she said with a shrug, not meeting my eyes. "Just haven't decided yet."

That was weird. "You okay?" I asked her.

"What?" She laughed a genuine sound, making me wonder if I'd made up the uncertainty in her tone just now. "I'm fine, girl. Go get that ass dressed."

Watching her for another couple of seconds, she held my eyes, knowing I was trying to find the lie, but she seemed fine, so I went about my business. If she needed me, she'd tell me.

My outfit was sexy but simple on purpose, not wanting to go overboard. Light wash ripped jeans and a pink graphic tee with "not in the mood" scrawled across the front, all I needed were my Converse and we were good to go.

"You ready?" Frankie asked, standing in my doorway with a Louis Vuitton overnight bag hanging from her arm.

"No, not even a little," I said honestly, taking a deep breath as I walked to the mirror and checked myself out one more time.

"Stop. You look beautiful, babe," she stated from behind me. Finding her eyes in the mirror, she smiled. "But do me a favor and don't fuck it up this time, okay? He's proven he's serious about getting to know you, so have some fucking fun."

I heard my best friend loud and clear—I needed to bring Nix back.

Permanently.



"THEY'RE HERE," Frankie whispered from the front hallway, where she was posted up in her dark office on the right-hand side, peeking through the sheer black curtains and acting as if the guys would care if we saw them.

"Okay." I blew out a breath, feeling like I was going to throw up. I shook my hands. "This is fine, I'm fine."

It was not fine.

I was a goddamn train wreck. Something about tonight made the whole thing more real than it was on Tuesday. Probably because I had done a stellar job convincing myself that I really was acting at that party and the rest was just a dream. But now, he was here, in the fucking driveway, and I was a mess.

I grabbed my gym bag by the door and paused, catching my breath.

"It is fine," Frankie agreed. "Although, I feel like I'm gonna shit my pants, so I can't even imagine how you feel right now."

"You are *not* helping," I growled in her direction.

A horn honked, making both of us jump.

Shit.

"Come on." I nodded toward the door, grabbing my keys from the bowl by the entrance. "Just rip the fucking band-aid off—"

"Phoenix!" My name sounded muffled through the door, but that was most definitely Judah Colt screaming my name from the driveway. "Get that ass out here, right this—"

I flung open the door, cutting him off by whisper shouting, "It's almost fucking midnight, will you *shut up*?"

He might have responded, but I was too busy taking in the sight of him, coming to a complete stop on the porch, because I couldn't seem to walk forward.

Jesus Christ.

There he was, leaning up against a matte black Mercedes G-Class with his arms crossed over his chest, his stance casual, and his lips formed into a sexy as fuck grin. Our driveway was short, so he really wasn't far, but he was blocking the end, parked sideways right in front.

It was darker than I expected it to be after hanging out in my room all night, but we had a streetlight at the end of our property line that seemed to be shining directly on him and Pharaoh.

Judah's blond hair was hidden under a black snapback, placed backwards on his head, those bright as fuck icy blue eyes were full of mischief, and the tattoos creeping up the back of his neck made him look for everything like the beautiful risk that he was. He wore a white hoodie with "THE GOOD PARISH FIRST" written in small red, block font across the front. The clean color made his features even more striking than normal, while his black joggers gave him a relaxed vibe.

Old worn Vans were tied around his feet, making my thighs clench.

"Worried about wakin' the neighbors, Baby Bird?" Judah called into the night, his voice like a wisp of delicious smoke headed straight for my lungs.

Doing my best not to lose all my cool, I headed down the wooden steps and made my way toward him and Pharaoh. Frankie was close behind, smiling like she knew something everybody else didn't.

When we were within reaching distance, Frankie and I stopped, noticing that Pharaoh was also smirking like he had a secret, which meant Judah must have updated him on our little night together. He wore all black, jeans and a supreme hoodie, but the look on his face had me questioning their presence here. This was looking more and more like a trap.

Setting my bag down on the driveway, I swallowed the harsh beat of my heart and narrowed my eyes. "What is this?"

"Hello to you too, Phoenix," Pharaoh nodded in my direction with laughter in his tone. "How've you been?"

Trying to distract me with straight teeth and dimples? He was hot, but he wasn't *that* hot. I rolled my eyes and turned to my favorite rapper, leveling him with a serious, exhausted expression. "What are you doing here, Judah?"

Instead of answering right away, he bumped Pharaoh's shoulder with his own and nodded for me to head back to the porch. When I didn't move, he sighed like he was done with me already. "I'll explain. No need to be a brat."

"I'm not being a brat. I'm confused as hell."

"Then, come on." He waved a frustrated hand toward the front of our house.

I relented, spinning around and leading us toward a little more privacy. He clearly didn't want Frankie or Pharaoh to hear what he had to say, and it didn't make me feel good. My head spun with possibilities as we climbed the stairs to the porch and turned the small corner where a large green hedge would block us from view. Judah immediately stepped into my space, looking down at me with barely restrained anger. "Why didn't you message me?"

Jesus, that didn't take long.

Not wanting to fight, I lifted my chin and met his eyes. Instantly, my skin broke out in goosebumps, the walls of my pussy clenched. He was pissed. It was fucking hot.

I went with honesty. "Because I spent all three days convincing myself not to."

A little of his anger melted away at my confession. "Why?"

"Because you scare me."

"Why?"

I scoffed. "Why did you trick me into giving you my address?"

No hesitation. "Because I wanted to see you."

"Exactly. There's your answer."

He frowned. "So you stayed away because you *didn't* want to stay away?"

"Well, when you say it like that, it makes no sense."

He huffed out a breath. "That's exactly what you just said."

I sighed, breaking eye contact. "I know, I know, I'm just ___"

"Not ready for whatever this is, I get it." There wasn't a single trace of defeat in his voice. Instead, he sounded like he had a plan to change my mind. "Hear me out, okay?"

Fuck, he was going to convince me to keep this going.

Did I want that? I must have, because I said, "Go ahead."

If he had an idea about how we could be friends despite his fame, both of our issues, and all the reasons we shouldn't do this...then I was all ears.

"Okay, hold on." He grabbed my waist and reversed our positions so that he was up against the railing, seated on the very edge with his legs open. He pulled me closer, until I was eye level with him. Once I was standing where he wanted me, he let go and leaned back a little. "All right listen, I haven't talked to anyone the way I talked to you the other night, in fucking *years*, and as much as I hate knowing you could change your mind whenever you wanted...I'm willing to take

what I can get. We'll be friends. Just friends." When I tried to say something, he put a finger over my lips. "I'm not done, keep it shut." Fuck, that *tone*. "I know myself, and I know I'll want you to come to shows and hang out at my place. And also, I know you'll bitch about it because *yes*, there are always people around, P. I'm rarely ever alone, but my friends won't make you feel weird—if anything, I'll spend the next two weeks beating the fuck out of each one of them, as they all try and take a pass at you." The hope in his eyes was intense as he finished with, "Friends. That's it for now, and I promise, everything is on your terms."

I didn't miss the *for now*, he threw in there. I heard it loud and clear, but still, I considered his offer, trying to ignore how fucking sexy he was when he was relaxed, confident.

Taking a breath, I stepped away from him to get a little space, explaining, "I can't get caught up in your world, Judah. I have my own. I'm trying to build a career here, do something good for myself."

Truth was, I didn't know all the reasons I was so scared to agree to this, but I knew that there were a ton. His fame was a big one, because his money, his status, it all gave him access to distractions I was trying to give up. Drugs harder than weed, parties five nights a week, I did it all already, and I was honestly afraid that his lifestyle would push me back into that shit again. He'd travel, tour, have gigs at nightclubs surrounded by those very same coping mechanisms, and I'd have to live with knowing he was out there while I was here.

On top of that, there was no way we would be just friends. It was too much. This felt *bigger*. Too big to be casual. We could call it whatever we wanted, but it was already a little too close to the unknown for me.

I wasn't ready for love, and it would slap me square in the face if I started anything with Judah, I could feel it already. But I wasn't sure I knew *how* to love anymore.

Even as a fucking friend.

Hell, I was barely getting used to getting up every morning and having to function normally.

"I know that, and I'm not asking you to drop everything and follow me around, but I don't want to hear a bunch of bullshit about us being from two different worlds. I know that, you know that, all of my friends will know that, but it doesn't mean shit. It doesn't have to be weird."

I shook my head. "I'm not worried about it being weird, I'm worried about it *not* being weird. I need to focus, and I have no idea what it means to be your friend."

"I don't either, honestly, but I do know that it means you answer the phone when I call," he said earnestly, crowding my space with his sincerity, his dedication to this. Just like that, I was back in it, sucked into his sticky web of near desperation. "You give me attention when you can, and I'll give the same to you. I'll piss you off, it won't be easy, but I won't ever be the one to walk away again." He said it like a promise, like it was a selling point to me. It wasn't. He was making himself permanent before I could even catch my breath. Then he tacked on, "It's one of my issues."

"Issues?" I asked, overwhelmed, only now understanding how self-aware he had to be to write the songs he did. "One of your issues?"

He scoffed, "Is this where you pretend like you're not a fucking psycho?"

I'm...sorry?

"What the fuck?" My voice was too loud. "You just—"

"Called you a fucking psycho. Yes, Phoenix, I did." He stood then, rising to his full height to no doubt maximize the effectiveness of his next statement by leaking his dominance all over me. "Wanna know why? Because I can see it in your eyes, recognized it right away. Wanna know how?" His voice dropped to a whisper as he leaned further into my space. "Because, Baby Bird, I'm crazier than you are. We're a match made in hell."

One night. He figured out in one night, in a matter of hours, that I walked a fine line between mature adult and

insecure teenager with more baggage than room to store it. I was a glittery pink mess of epic proportions.

"So let me get this straight..." I cleared my throat, trying not to let his proximity get to my head, but his scent was a physical thing I wanted to drown in. "You're proposing that we become friends, real friends, but I don't have to be a part of your world if I don't want to. I can just be your—"

"No need to label it. You're just mine," he interrupted. I was pretty sure my heart was shaking. My hands sure as hell were.

Mine.

He wanted me to be his friend. His *best friend*?

Slow down, Phoenix.

It was hard to when I wanted everything from him. If I was going to do this...I wouldn't be satisfied with a small, meaningless friendship. I wanted it all. Everything he had to give. But that wasn't what I needed. A friendship like this would accomplish nothing in the grand scheme of things, but it didn't matter...

I was already a goner.

Might as well tell him now. "I'm actually super clingy."

He scoffed. "So am I."

"I'm emotional."

"Already aware."

"I lash out."

"Oh." He chuckled darkly. "You have no idea."

We'd had this conversation before. Here we were again.

I peeked at his lips and my cunt cried out. *Fuck*. "This is a fucking terrible idea."

He grinned. "Sure is."

"We're gonna do it anyway, aren't we?" I asked, knowing the answer.

He threw an arm over my shoulder, steering me back toward Frankie and Pharaoh. "We sure are."

I sighed. "At least we know it's going to end terribly."

He looked down at me with determination. "Fuck that."

"What?"

"There won't be an end. We'll just do this until one of us kills the other."

My stomach dropped, ached, screamed against his words.

He had no idea how right he could be.

???

"ALL RIGHT LADIES," Judah addressed the two of us, standing by the driver side door with his fingers wrapped around the handle. "Before we kick this night off, we should probably tell you what we're doing."

"That would be nice," Frankie threw in, smiling as she put her hands in her back pockets.

She'd given me a look just now, letting me know she heard a little bit of that conversation and she had thoughts to share. I looked away.

Judah and Pharaoh had already taken our bags and put them in the trunk, leaving us both with just our phones, saying we wouldn't need anything else until we got back to Judah's later tonight.

"We," Judah started, "are taking the two of *you*, on a little adventure."

"Who picks the music in the car?" I asked, slowly packing away my fears and taping the box shut.

I needed this, I wanted to have fun. Here it was—fun.

"Why is that always the first question you ask?" Frankie shook her head back and forth. "The real question is who sits shotgun?"

"Both of your questions are weird as hell, seeing as how we're basically kidnapping you," Pharaoh added, still smirking. He was just as fucking perfect as Judah but on the opposite side of the spectrum, almost like Frankie and me. Where he was dark, Judah was light.

"It's not kidnapping if we're willing." Frankie shrugged. "Phoenix may have hesitated, but I had a long night of nothing to do ahead of me. Whatever you assholes have planned is better than that."

"So glad you dropped everything to be here." Judah rolled his eyes and looked at me. "Alright. P, you get shotty. Everyone else get the fuck in."

"Of course, she gets 'shotty," Frankie bitched under her breath, but winked at me as she passed.

I looked back at the house and down the street, letting my eyes take in my surroundings as I walked around the car. Everything looked different tonight. Back in New York, I would have been on my way to a party of some sort, ready to get fucked up and forget everything. But right now, I was hoping I could memorize how I felt, even the bad stuff.

But the part I never wanted to let go of was Judah knew that I was difficult, capable of ruining this relationship in more ways than one, and yet my flaws, my problems, didn't scare him away. If anything, they seemed to make him more interested. Which I knew was another red flag, because that type of relationship wasn't healthy, but it didn't seem like either of us actually cared.



I FUCKING DID IT.

I got Phoenix Royal in the front seat of my car. Well, Pharaoh's car, but I was driving it.

That right there felt like I won the damn lottery, but the feeling spread all the way to my toes when I saw how fucking hot she looked. There was no way she could deny wanting to see me when it was clear she took the time to make herself look presentable. The timing of all this was another one of my tests.

By sending the message as late as I did, it ensured that she wouldn't be dressed and ready to leave the house. She was most likely hanging out in casual clothes doing girly shit with Frankie, but not only did she get ready, she packed the bag like I told her to.

She could have fought it, could have locked the door when I arrived. Hell, she could have realized I couldn't actually get her address from Snapchat and decided to leave me hanging. But she didn't.

She texted me her address, I showed up, and she got in the fucking car.

I smiled.

"So where are we actually going?" Frankie asked from the back, shifting around to get comfortable.

"To eat," Pharaoh explained, reaching between Phoenix and I to grab the energy drink he bought on the way here. "Jude, you got a blunt up there?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "P, reach in the glove compartment and grab two. They're in a baggie."

She did as instructed while I turned the car on and waited for my Bluetooth to sync.

By the time we hit the road, the windows were down, the blunts were lit, and "Creepin" by Lil Skies and Rich The Kid was blaring through the car. Phoenix took a few hits before passing it to me, already prepared for the strength of my weed versus what she was used to smoking.

I couldn't speak for Pharaoh, but I'd spent a lot of time around a lot of females in my lifetime, and never had I met two girls with such powerful energy. Both Frankie and Phoenix were the type of girls you rarely found in this industry. Down to earth and sarcastic, their laid-back nature made them sexier than any random fuck, no matter the price of the pussy.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Phoenix bobbing her head to the music, right on time with the beat. As if the lyrics were speaking to her and she didn't want to miss a word, like she was laser focused on the sounds. For the first time since we met, it didn't feel like she was avoiding my eyes, but rather, just too lost in the high, in the music, to bother. It had me relaxing, sitting back further in my seat and stretching my left leg out a little.

The drive from West Hollywood to Santa Monica wasn't long, especially at night, but with the warm wind whipping around us, along with the fact that I avoided the highway, it felt like an eternity before we entered tourism territory.

As if she knew that this area of LA meant something to me, Phoenix looked my way as we passed the Pier. There were questions simmering in her brown eyes, innocent ones, like she wanted to get to know the side of me that was built before the fame. Too bad for her, I buried that side of myself a long time ago.

That guy didn't fit in with the locals, couldn't handle the pressure, but something about her made me want to pull him back out just for her. I knew that wasn't an option though, not yet. Not until I had her for real, because while Phoenix was here right in this moment, that didn't mean she wouldn't have a fucking breakdown in an hour and demand that I take her back home. Or, knowing her, she'd take off and walk until her Uber slid up next to her.

I wanted her to give this a shot, which is why I hoped the next part of my plan would go just as smoothly as the first part.

Sure enough, as soon we turned into the parking lot of my favorite In-N-Out, she scrunched up her little nose and addressed me, "We are not eating here."

"Yes, we are." I didn't bother looking at her, too busy pulling into a parking spot.

The less interested I was in arguing about it, the more likely I would get what I wanted out of this.

"In-N-Out is disgusting," she complained, saying exactly what I hoped she would. "Their fries taste like fucking cardboard, and don't ask me if I've ever tried them animal style, because I have and they're still nasty."

"Excuse her," Frankie said from the back. "She gets like this about food."

"Quiet." Phoenix pointed to her friend in the back. "If I'm going to spend time and money on a meal, it better be good as fuck. Sue me for it."

"I'll make you a bet," I spoke up, turning off the car and gluing on my poker face. "Try this my way. Let me order for you, and if you don't like it, I'll do whatever you want me to do. But if you admit it's good, then you have to stay with me the whole weekend."

She was interested, up until the last part.

"This *is* a trap," she commented, seeing right through me. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Are you scared?" I asked, letting my smile loose, hoping I'd win this with my charm alone.

"Of In-N-Out actually tasting good? No." She shook her head as a slow smile of her own started to spread along her lips. "But I'm figuring you out, and I know you had this bet planned. So, why?"

"Pretty sure he wants you to stay the weekend with him, but that's just me," Frankie mumbled.

I had to bite down on my laugh.

"Yeah, what she said." I tilted my head in the direction of her best friend.

"And you're *that* confident I'll love this burger?" she asked.

"Can we just go find out?" Frankie sighed. "I'm starving, and now I'm high, which means I'm hungry enough to eat this guy," she said as she pointed at Pharaoh. "So let's move this bet inside." She looked between me and her best friend, and when neither of us said a word, she groaned, "Really, P? Fine, she agrees, Judah. If you can make her like this experience, then she'll stay the weekend. Even if we have to tie her to a chair in your basement."

"He doesn't have a basement," Pharaoh threw in.

"Fine, tie her little ass to the bed. Who cares? Can we go in?"

Phoenix crumpled. "Fuck me. Fine, let's go."

Knowing the bet was already basically won, I got out of the car and headed in without waiting for anyone. I had Holly call this location earlier today, letting them know we were coming and paying for it to be shut down for just the four of us.

Pulling both doors open, I breezed into the fast food joint with a bounce in my step.

"Why are we the only ones here?" I heard Frankie ask from behind me.

"He probably paid to have it shut down for him," Phoenix suggested, her tone salty.

Good girl. "See?" I called over my shoulder. "You know me so well already, Little Bird."

Money well spent, too. This meal was going to get me alone in my bedroom with her for two nights in a row. I'd pay more if I had to.

Making my way to the front counter, two employees stood awkwardly behind it, shell-shocked and nervous, even though they knew I was coming.

"What's up, guys?" I addressed the pair. Both the guy and the girl—Jared and Lacy, according to their name tags—looked to be in their late teens, but based on the late hour, they had to be at least legal adults. "I've got a bit of a tall order. You ready?"

"Uh..." Lacy started but fell flat. I briefly studied her—fingernails covered in chipped black paint, pink hair pulled back into a messy bun, no tattoos to be seen, but a piercing through her eyebrow—and decided she was most likely a fan of my music. Confirmed when she tried to speak again. "Yeah, Colt...I mean—uh—"

"Girl, you can just call him Judah." Phoenix smiled, coming up to stand next to me, placing a hand on my back as she did it. "He's not that special."

"Watch your tongue," I replied, looking down at her. The feel of her fingers on my body lit me up, had me higher than the weed did. I turned back to the fumbling girl. "She's not supposed to spill my secrets, but she's right. I'm just an asshole with a few songs."

"I'm sure that's not true." The girl laughed a nervous sound, her cheeks pinking. "But okay, I'm ready for you."

Phoenix stepped back, ready to walk away, but she broke the seal and touched me first, so it was game on now. I grabbed her arm and pulled her back into my chest, fitting her right up against me. She was short enough that I just wrapped both of my arms around her neck and spoke to the girl helping us over her head. "All right, so I need two four by fours with onions and extra spread and then two doubles with the same __"

"Sorry, I hate onions," P piped up.

I nodded. "One without onions then."

"Okay," the girl nodded as her fingers flew around the touch screen register. "Fries? Drinks?"

"This is where I get high maintenance," I warned her with a smile. She blushed again, smiling back at me in a bit of a daze. Ignoring it, I continued, "Can you throw four orders of fries in the fryer for us? We're gonna wait here for them and eat those first."

"Ugh, their fries are gross," P mumbled against my arm, reiterating the point she made earlier. I pinched her shoulder, causing her to jerk under my arms. "Ow! Judah!"

"Shut up then," I said into her hair. Looking back, our new pink haired friend was watching Phoenix with an odd look. Pretty sure it was jealousy, but I didn't want to deal with *that* mess, so I went straight in with the drink orders. "Also, two chocolate milkshakes and two large Dr. Peppers."

More tapping on the screen. "Yes, I can do all that. Let me throw the fries in for you real fast."

I nodded, letting go of Phoenix now that the cashier had left, ready to spin her around, but she moved too fast.

"I'll go get us a table," P said, about to walk away.

I snagged her arm again. "Nope. You're staying here." Turning over my shoulder, I nodded for Pharaoh to do that job with Frankie, and turned back to Phoenix. "You, sweet cheeks, have a bet to lose."

"What is it with you and nicknames?" she smirked, shaking me off in favor of leaning up against the counter and watching me with unsolved mysteries locked in her pretty brown eyes.

"Makes me feel closer to the things I enjoy." I shrugged.

"Hmm." Her smirk dropped as she considered that. Kicking my foot once she agreed, "Not a bad way to look at it."

"Gotta do what you can, right?" I asked, being completely serious. "If naming Pharaoh's G-Class, G-Dog, makes me laugh, then what's the problem? Other than it's not a 'normal' thing to do? I don't know, it's normal as fuck to me, so..." I lifted my shoulders for emphasis.

"The G-Class isn't yours?" she asked, starting to bite on her thumb nail absently.

The question didn't even register, I was too busy staring at the pretty tongue in her mouth and how it lightly touched the tip of her finger.

"Here you go!" an all too cheery male voice said from behind me, holding out four orders of steaming hot fries on a single tray. He scared the shit out of me, but I recovered quickly, taking the tray from him only to set it down on the counter right away. I picked up a scalding hot fry and popped it in my mouth.

"Come're." I reached for Phoenix, trying to talk around the heat.

"No!" She laughed, crossing her arms while I struggled. "Look at you! They're too hot to eat right now."

"Yeah, I know," I said, still juggling the stupid thing around in my mouth. "But it's when they taste the best. Just come here."

"I'm good." She shook her head from side to side and tried to back away.

"Come here!" I repeated, having finished the fry. I grabbed another, throwing it in my mouth.

"Nope." She tried to get around me, except my arms were long as hell and she wasn't fast enough. I stuck my hand through the curtain of her hair and gripped the back of her neck, dragging her laughing body into mine.

"You're gonna eat this damn fry and you're going to like it, yeah?" With her chin against my chest and my nose inches from hers, she was actually giggling a little, which had my heart warming to a degree I wasn't used to.

"Okay, okay, fuck, fine!" She laughed, standing right up against me.

I picked up a fresh one and held it between us. Seeing the steam wafting from it had me trying not to laugh again as I instructed, "Open up."

She rolled her eyes but popped her mouth open anyway.

Rather than sitting there imagining the other things I could fill that mouth with, I broke the fry in half and placed it on her tongue. When she bit down, I bopped the tip of her nose and said, "Now tell me that ain't a good fry."

As she chewed, her face scrunched up little by little. "Judah..."

"What?" I laughed, holding up two hands.

"These—" she started.

"Fucking suck, I know." I finished for her, giving up the charade. I'd agreed with her this whole time.

Then, everything changed on me again. I agreed to friends, I knew I did. But...

If I had known that my cheesy as fuck joke would earn me the response it did, I would have made this happen so much sooner. Shocked as hell that I'd been able to play her like that, she threw her head back, letting out the most beautiful fucking sound.

Her. Laugh.

I wasted these last few days not knowing that her fully belly laugh was capable of ending wars.

The sound lit up the entire restaurant, made me feel like I was on a tropical island somewhere with just her, the two of us drinking champagne and fucking every chance we could. It was familiar, it obliterated my heart, it fucking *owned* me.

"You are..." she started, wiping under her eyes with a big ass smile on her face. "...fucking ridiculous."

"Guilty as charged," I replied, head in the clouds.

I nearly forgot about the rest of the food, but Lacy was back, watching me stare at Phoenix like a lovesick puppy dog. But who wouldn't?

Lacy smiled at us. "You're all set for now, we'll call you when the burgers are done."

"Thanks," Phoenix said with a smile before turning in my direction looking a helluva lot more comfortable than she did when we walked in. But something had me pausing, looking harder, realizing a little piece of her guard had broken off at some point. It was right there on the ground between us, invisible and useless now that she placed a little more of her trust in me. I calmed, settled, breathed a little easier as she asked, "You ready?"

I couldn't stop the hope if I tried, couldn't stop the visions that assaulted me, the plans that were already starting to form in my head.

This girl was mine. She fit. She had a place. I just needed to keep her there.

"Yeah, Baby Bird, I'm ready."

Permanently.



I WAS HAVING FUN.

For the first time in a long ass motherfucking time, I was genuinely enjoying myself. Frankie, Pharaoh, Judah, and I were at a booth in the very back corner of the restaurant while all the other white tables were empty. Generic radio music was playing softly in the background, and I couldn't keep the fucking smile off my face.

Judah had taken me by surprise more than once tonight, simply by being exactly who he was. One minute, he was forcing fries down my throat, telling me it was all a part of the "experience," and the next, he was resting his hand along the back of the booth, his fingers grazing my hair. It was a friendly move, not anything to read into, but my stomach was still in knots as he and Pharaoh bitched about something Judah did to the *G-Dog* last weekend.

When the conversation ended and I was one bite from done with my burger, Judah turned to me with raised eyebrows and a smirk plastered on his smug face. My time was up. I sighed dramatically and sat back in my seat, putting a hand on my belly as I admitted, "All right, you win."

"Fuck yeah!" he shouted, not bothering to keep his voice down as he reached across the table to high five Pharaoh, who looked just as excited as his best friend. "I knew I had it in the bag—you're a total fast food slut." "Hey now!" I held up a hand. "I'm a convenience slut, those are two very different things. If it's on the way home and I'm too fuckin' tired, then guess what? McDonalds for the third night, it is."

"What I want to know," Frankie interrupted after taking a sip of her chocolate milkshake and handing it over to Pharaoh, "is how the fuck P and I have lived in California all this time and neither of us knew about the whole 'spread' thing. What is that even made of? Where is the secret club that tells you this shit? Let me guess, there's a Facebook group."

I nearly choked on my own spit, laughing at her comment.

She was talking about this ranch style, thousand-island dressing kind of sauce they put on the burger. We'd never heard of it until Judah ordered it for us tonight, therefore changing the game and winning him the bet. I liked the goddamn burger so much, I saw myself making late night trips in the near future.

"I don't even remember where I learned it," Pharaoh admitted, reaching across the table to steal a fry from the pile still sitting in the little cardboard dish in front of me.

Before he even landed a finger on one, Judah smacked his hand away and grabbed the whole thing for himself, leaning back into the corner of the booth with a satisfied grin. "Me neither, but we're stoners, so that's no surprise."

"Word," Pharaoh agreed, nodding, not even bothered by Judah's grabby hands.

"Okay, so Phoenix is stuck with you two all weekend, but you've only got me for tonight." Frankie wiggled her eyebrows at the boys. "What are we getting into now?"

"Liquor store," Judah said, throwing the fries back on the table and putting his phone in his pocket. Then, shocking the hell out of me, I felt his hand curl around the back of my neck just before he used the leverage to pull me into his chest. His voice was a loaded whisper as he asked, "Ready, Baby Bird?"

Yikes, instantly wet.

He was...different from Tuesday night, something about the way he held himself, the confidence in his movements. It didn't seem like he was overthinking or stressed, or even focused on anything but here and now. It was a surprising but welcome change that helped me relax, made me trust that I didn't have to...worry, I guess.

He had a plan, and all I had to do was follow along. It was nice.

Meeting his eyes and seeing the liquid excitement in them, I couldn't help but grin. "Yeah, I'm ready."

If he kept making me smile like that, I'd be a stranger to myself by morning.

And yet, something still felt off—too good to be true. Because while he was happy, I was waiting for the shoe to drop. The shit to start.

We all moved to clean up our mess before collectively waving to the staff and heading out the front doors, back into the night. It was past midnight now, nearly one AM, and the air was thick with dewy moisture, clinging to my skin in an almost uncomfortable way.

Frankie and Pharaoh walked ahead of us, the former practically skipping her way to the SUV, giving Pharaoh sassy responses to whatever they were talking about. I could tell just from the way she tilted her head, the way she smiled. She was flirting with him.

"At least they get along." Judah's voice came first, hitting my ears with enough force to take my breath away. His body came second as he dropped his arm over my shoulders lazily, continuing to walk me in the direction of G-Dog. "That would suck if they didn't."

"Yeah," I said in a bit of a rough voice. I couldn't get my heart to slow down. "We'd spend more time entertaining them than actually getting to know each other."

"Is that what we're doing?" he asked as his fingers paid attention to the skin on my bicep. "Getting to know each other?"

I shrugged. "Yeah?"

"I don't know," he said, slowing his pace down a little. "It seems to me like we skipped over the get-to-know-you part and slid right into month two or three. I still know virtually nothing about you, aside from the fact that you hate onions."

He was right. Everything felt...comfortable, natural. He was clearly a touchy-feely guy, and even though I wasn't used to it, the way he handled me left no room for awkwardness. Probably because the possessive dominance was in his blood. I liked it. More than I should. Still... "We should probably fix that."

"Yeah, probably. But also, fuck it." He shrugged. It would have sounded douchey if he didn't follow it up with, "We can learn all the little things as we go, right?"

I wanted to know every little thing—all of his quirks, preferences, the things that made him smile, what made him angry. Probably too much. "I mean, that could work. But how will I know what to get you for your birthday if I don't know what kind of things you like?"

He clicked his tongue. "You don't even know when my birthday is."

I gave him a dry look. "Exactly."

"Huh..." He paused, considering. "Right, okay. Well then we should play a get-to-know-you game."

I cringed. "That sounds awful."

"Oh, hell yeah," he agreed. "It sounds horrible, but now I want to know when your birthday is."

"You could just ask..." We were nearing the SUV.

"Or we could play a game," he pushed, squeezing me against him hard enough that I met his eyes. He winked and loosened the pressure. "I have an idea, but you're definitely going to hate it."

I rolled my eyes. "This'll be good."

"Don't be a Debbie Downer, Little Bird. Hear me out." He stopped just before we reached our friends with two hands on my shoulders. "We're going to the liquor store. We're going to get a bottle of something to share, and then we'll walk the beach and play twenty questions."

I barked out a laugh. "Oh come on, we can do better than twenty questions."

"What?" He threw his arms out to the side, his white teeth on full display as his blue eyes shone so bright, I struggled to stay focused. He looked so fucking happy. "What's better than twenty questions?"

"Ten questions!" Frankie called, overhearing his loud ass.

He shot her his middle finger and a scolding look over my shoulder, but turned his focus quickly back to me. "Never mind. Don't answer that, it doesn't matter. We're doing it." He bopped my nose. "And you have until we get to the beach to think of some good questions. Make 'em juicy."

I fought the groan that wanted to come loose. This sounded a lot like the perfect excuse for one of us to ask the wrong question and send us *both* into a tailspin. "Fine. But what if I ask a question you don't like?"

He paused, narrowing his eyes on me. "What?"

Confused, I tilted my head. "What, what?"

"Why do you do that?"

"Do...what?" I was missing something.

"Make up a problem before there is one." His tone was clipped. His eyes had turned to stone.

"Why are you angry right now?" I questioned, keeping my voice as level as possible.

Digging his heels in, clearly emotional. "Why are you picking a fight?"

Pretty sure my jaw hit the blacktop. "Uh, I'm not picking a fight, Judah. I'm trying to avoid one."

How could he not see that? Asking each other questions would inevitably lead to one of us venturing into territories the other wasn't ready to enter. How was I wrong for wanting to skip that part?

"Whatever, Phoenix, come on." He tried to walk around me, but I caught his forearm and tugged him back.

"Hold on a second."

He wouldn't look at me, so I stood on my tip toes and grabbed the sides of his face, forcing his eyes to meet mine. Even still, he had to bend a little. "Judah, stop. I wasn't trying to pick a fight, I was honestly trying to avoid one, okay? We're both...sensitive. I don't want tonight to get all fucked up for no reason."

My calves were burning, my legs were starting to shake. Why are you so fucking tall?

As if he heard my thought, he gripped my waist, taking some of my weight by pulling me into his body. I dropped my hands to his chest but maintained eye contact, not immune to the sexual nature of his gaze, too full of heat.

"Promise me that even if we fight, you'll stay." His voice was rough, no longer confident.

"Hey! You two!" Pharaoh called. "Come—"

"Shut the fuck up, we'll be right there!" Judah shouted back, eyes blazing in the direction of our friends before he looked back down at me and pressed, "Promise me, P."

I wasn't even sure what I was agreeing to or if I could hold up my end of the deal, but I nodded anyway, hating the fear in his voice. The true panic etched on his face. "I promise."

His blue eyes bounced back and forth for a second before he broke eye contact with a rushed out, "Good, come on."

Jesus Christ, what in the fuck just happened?

In a bit of a daze, I followed him, seeing Frankie up ahead, holding her phone up to her ear. She was bobbing her head to what I assumed was music, while Pharaoh watched from where he stood, leaning up against the black SUV. If they

heard our little...whatever that was, neither of them said anything about it.

"I'm ready for a drink," Frankie stated instead, walking toward G-Dog. "Anyone else?"

The three of us all muttered our agreements as we opened our doors and slid inside. It wasn't long before Judah handed me his phone, instructing me to play DJ. He even went as far as telling me the passcode to unlock it.

I refuse to read into that.

Suddenly nervous again, I ignored the ridiculous amount of notifications on his lock screen—and the lump that formed in my throat at the sight of them—and pulled up his music app. Going back a few years I searched for a specific song.

Once I found what I was looking for, I pressed play, grinning to myself.

"Oh, she's feelin' like *that*, huh?" Frankie yelled from the back as "Wonderful" by Travis Scott came through the speakers. "It's about to be one of *those* nights."

I sure hoped it was.

Choosing this song was my way of speaking it into existence.

???

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you assholes made me get tequila," Frankie bitched, stepping out of the back seat and onto the sand covered parking lot. It was late as hell, nearing three AM, and we were just now pulling up to the beach after making a pit stop for liquor and blunt wraps.

"I didn't make you get shit," Judah muttered under his breath, coming around the front of the car where he paused, waiting for me to catch up. He and Frankie had spent the whole hour and a half adventure bickering about anything and everything. While I, personally, thought it was hilarious.

"Oh, stop it," I mocked. "You love tequila!"

"Not without lime!" she retorted. "Tequila tastes like booty hole without lime."

"Frankie!" I laughed, shaking my head.

"Oh, don't pretend you haven't eaten ass before." She rolled her eyes, stepping over the curb and on to the actual sand. "Even on accident."

Pharaoh coughed over a laugh. "How do you accidentally eat someone's ass?"

Frankie stopped, turned, and looked him up and down with judgement in her eyes. "You get the pussy so sloppy, you slip into the unknown. Don't tell me you need a lesson on how to eat, drummer boy."

Judah tried to hold in his laugh as he shifted one of the bottles of tequila under his arm. I saw the struggle, but eventually he cracked, laughing openly into the night air. Pharaoh joined in while Frankie continued to pout about her lack of garnishes, waving the other bottle around as she did it.

We had planned to get vodka too, but on the way there, Judah struck a bet with Frankie, which she lost five minutes later, meaning he got to pick what her and Pharaoh drank for the night. Pharaoh didn't care, but Frankie was not handling the loss very well.

Meanwhile, I was too busy taking in the scene before me to focus on the joke.

There was something special about the ocean in the middle of the night. It sounded angrier, made me think a little harder about getting near it. The waves quite literally crashed against the shore, sending a mist-like spray over our group as we got closer to the water. It was pitch black, with the only lights coming from the parking lot. I could faintly see the outline of the Malibu hills in the distance, but seeing in general wasn't easy.

After the laughter died down and the silence of the early hour settled over us, we all spread out across the sand and along the shore, seemingly taking a moment to appreciate where the night landed us. Four hours together, and we'd done nothing but laugh, make stupid jokes, smoke, and listen to music. It was easy to forget my problems around Judah, the things I was starting to feel for him—rather than the idea of him—were louder, bolder, than my fears, therefore a little easier to deal with, but that argument back in the parking lot had me worried.

I overanalyzed everything, a habit I learned after years of thinking back over my father's behavior to try and come up with a reason for his actions. If Judah thought I was picking a fight every time I tried to avoid one...

Ugh.

A friendship with him wouldn't be a problem as long as I didn't give it undeserved priority and kept a clear line between us. One we wouldn't cross. Because trying to be more than friends would be the worst mistake I could make where Judah Colt was concerned.

"P!" My nickname floated on the air from my left, where Judah was standing with his hands cupped around his mouth. "Let's walk!"

I nodded, letting him know I heard him, but wasn't in the mood to shout back. Looking left, I saw Frankie and Pharaoh heading in the other direction, talking amongst themselves, so I didn't bother saying anything to them before making my way toward Judah.

Meeting him where he stood, he popped the cork on a bottle of Patrón, holding it between us with that ridiculous grin on his face. My belly warmed, and everything I just tried to tell myself fizzled into nothing, dissolving in the back of my mind. "To our first night as a couple."

"We are not a couple." I rolled my eyes.

"Shh, Baby Bird," he chastised. "I'm doin' a thing here."

Chuckling I waved a hand. "Sorry, proceed."

"Thank you." He nodded, clearing his throat and lifting the bottle higher. "To our first night as a couple, as friends, as whatever the fuck this turns out to be. We met on a rooftop, on a Tuesday night, and it ended horribly, but your stupid ass still got in my car tonight. I—"

"Stupid?" I interrupted, shaking my head. "You're not very good at this."

"You're such a buzzkill, girl." He sighed, dropping his head. "A guy tries to give his lady a toast and she can't even __"

"Come on," I cut him off, having a feeling that if I didn't, we'd be here awhile. I grabbed his hand and started to pull him behind me. "Don't we have a game to play?"

The feeling of his hand in mine...

I was so screwed.

Giving up, he grinned, but didn't budge from his spot, saying, "Fuck yeah, we do. But I need a cig and so do you. Then we'll walk and talk—like good little old ladies."

Fucking hell, this guy.

The laugh fell from my mouth easily, and I gave up on trying to friend zone my feelings. There was no way.

Because tonight felt like one of those nights you wanted to bottle up and keep forever—surreal, too much like a dream for me to get used to. That flawed part of me wanted to put an end to it, just because I knew there was no way it would last.

It was like the honeymoon phase when you started dating someone new. Everything was cute in the beginning, it was all fresh and bearable, but each person was still holding tightly to the lid on their shit storm.

I watched as he went about lighting our cigarettes, but a question hit me too hard for me to ignore. "Do you think if we told each other our issues, we'd avoid arguments?"

"You want the truth?" he asked distractedly, trying to juggle the bottle of tequila, the pack of cigarettes, his phone, and the lighter.

I grabbed the cellphone from his left hand and threw it in my back pocket and took the lighter from his other hand. Seeming grateful for the help, he stuck two cigs in his mouth and bent down, I flicked the lighter and held it up for him, cupping my hand around the flame to stop the wind from extinguishing it.

He inhaled, burning a solid cherry on each before standing to his full height and handing me one, explaining, "I could give you a grocery list full of my problems, but I doubt it would do you any good in an argument."

I took a drag, starting to walk again. "Why do you say that?"

"Let's put it this way," he said, using his long legs to move him ahead of me, only to meet my eyes as he turned around and began walking backwards. "If we got into an argument about some asshole flirting with you and I lost my shit, do you think that *knowing* I was a possessive asshole would make it any easier to handle in the moment?"

"No," I admitted. "But I think knowing you're a possessive asshole would help me avoid situations like that all together. So in the end, we would be better off."

"Or you'd end up paranoid." He shrugged. "If I gave you this list, you'd question everything you said to me. It would become about how *not* to piss me off and that isn't a relationship."

He had a point. "I guess that's true."

"Good," he replied. "Now that I don't have to list out all my fuckin' issues for you, can we play this game?"

"Go for it, Skyscraper," I agreed, taking another drag.

"Can I ask anything?" he inquired with a little too much excitement.

"No," I said harshly.

"Why the fuck not?" His lips turned down in the corners.

"Because you're going to come up with some crazy personal shit to ask, and I'm not about to ruin this night with drama."

"But if I don't ask personal shit, what would I even ask?" He sounded like a toddler. "I wanna know how many dicks you've sucked."

"Wow!" I choked on a laugh. "Absolutely not."

"So what you're saying is, you *don't* want to tell me how many individual pairs of underwear you own?" The smirk on his face had my clit aching. He was so goddamn sexy when he was like this—his eyes all lit up with mischief, his mouth so fucking fascinating.

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response," I stated, ready for a change in topic. "I'll go first, favorite cereal?"

"Stoned or sober?"

I dropped my head. "This is going to be a long ass game."

"No, sorry, sorry, I'm kidding. Okay, favorite cereal." He tapped his chin as he walked, pretending to think. I leaned forward and grabbed the bottle of tequila from his other hand, opening the top and taking a healthy swig, just as he decided, "Fruity Pebbles. Final answer."

"Good choice," I approved. "Your turn."

"What's your favorite cereal?"

"Can't repeat questions." I pointed at him.

"But I want to know..." He trailed off. "Wait, how are we supposed to get to know each other if I can't ask you the same question you asked me? How will I know if we have anything in common? What if we aren't compatible?"

"We're definitely not compatible," I murmured.

"Stop it, I'm serious."

"Fine, whoever *asks* the question also has to *answer* the question. My favorite is peanut butter Captain Crunch."

"Good choice." He nodded, seriously. "Okay, when's your birthday?"

Damnit. "June thirtieth."

The end of this month.

Judah stopped dead in his tracks, blew out the smoke in his lungs, and narrowed his eyes with excitement. "You're kidding."

"Nope." I popped the P, walking around him to continue.

"Hold the fuck up, little miss." He grabbed my arm with a big ass smile. "How old?"

"Twenty-four."

"Oh, baby, it's goin' down." His tone said more than I wanted it to.

I shook my head. "Don't even think about it."

"Too late." He shrugged. "Pretty sure I just unintentionally woke up my assistant with my excitement."

"Telepathically?" I laughed.

"What can I say? She's a mind reader."

Remember those flaws I was talking about? Yeah, one of mine was jealousy. The mention of his assistant was fine until the last comment. *She*? Mind reader? Did he fuck her? Does she know more about him than me?

Of course she does, Phoenix. She's his assistant and you just met him on Tuesday.

I stayed silent, trying to ignore the acid bubbling in my stomach. One of the biggest reasons I avoided relationships of any kind was this right here—jealousy so fierce, it choked me. And the sad part was, I had absolutely no idea why I was jealous. Of course he had females on his staff, he always would. Anyone would. That didn't mean he was fucking her or had fucked her or—

"What just happened to you?" Judah asked, being too observant.

"Nothing," was all I said.

Get it together, Phoenix. Pull. It. Together. This is the fight you're trying to avoid. It's fine, you're fine. Look, he's right there. He's here with you, he came to get you tonight, not someone else. Don't go there, you're just friends. Don't—

"P, look at me," Judah insisted as his hands cupped my cheeks.

I jumped back, shaking off his hold and throwing the butt of my now dead cigarette into the brush to our right. "Just give me a second."

My hands made their way into my hair, which was tangled as fuck from the wind, the salt in the air. I didn't care, but instead, welcomed the stinging ache in my roots when I forced my fingers through the knots.

"No, I'm not giving you a second." Judah crashed his way into my line of sight, his features back to worried, confused. "What's going on, Phoenix?"

"See?" I laughed without a trace of humor. "This is why it would be helpful to let each other know what our issues are before we dive into the fucking deep end."

Puzzled, his eyebrows drew in. "What are you talking about, P?"

Fucking hell.

I was supposed to be avoiding this. Being his friend wasn't supposed to lead to these types of feelings. Except it did, because this thing with Judah Colt was so much more complicated than friendship and we were fooling nobody. But I couldn't explain to him what was going on in my head, not without sounding like the psychopath he accused me of being just a handful of hours ago.

Forcing myself to meet his eyes, I did my best to convince him that everything was good, normal. "Sorry, I just...had a moment there. I'm good."

"Nice try," was all he said. He didn't budge from his spot in the sand, just took two long healthy sips from the bottle of liquor, then held it out to me. "Maybe the tequila will make you a better liar. Drink up, Pinocchio." His tone of voice indicated that he was on his way to shutting down completely. He was angry.

Fuck my life.

Staying silent, I couldn't help but stew as I snatched the bottle from his outstretched hand and sucked down three shots worth. I'd done everything I fucking could to avoid this fight, and yet I ended up being the one who started it. Because I was irrationally jealous over Judah talking to another girl. How? Why? What in the fuck? It wasn't even like I was insecure, because I wasn't. Not normally, at least. I didn't give a shit if someone I was sleeping with decided to bounce. Go for it, *I was using you anyway*.

But with Judah, I had a feeling it would never be that casual.

Eventually, he shook his head and started walking again, so I followed silently, hating that I'd ruined the moment but had no clue how to fix it. I couldn't shut this shit off. The last twenty minutes were playing over and over again in my head, spinning, twisting, and driving me fucking insane. Outside of my brain, in the real world, it was completely quiet with only the waves for company, until Judah blurted out, "You're going to be the reason this doesn't work."

You'd think he shot me. That's how hard the blow hit me. I bit out, "Excuse me?"

"You're going to think us into the ground." He didn't even turn around, just kept walking.

"Keep pushing me, Judah," I warned.

"Whatever."

I exploded, yelling at his back, "This isn't only me, okay? There are two of us here!"

"Yeah, except I'm willing to talk, and you aren't!" he shouted, stopping our forward motion. "You'll just make me question everything you say! Is any of it real?"

"Is any of it real?" I repeated, bitter laughter in my tone. "Fuck me, I don't know, Judah, is it?

"I'm asking you," he growled. "Who knows how you feel about me right now, it can change on a dime!"

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Now you're going to play dumb? That's what you do, Phoenix! You change your mind and bounce." My stomach sank, my anger took over its spot as he repeated, "That's what you do."

"Did!" I screamed. "I did, leave! Yes! I had to!" He was about to yell something back at me, but I stormed past him, unable to entertain any more of his assumed bullshit. He had no idea what I had to deal with every day, but I wasn't fucking ready to tell him. I just met him, I owed him nothing.

"Had to?" he sneered. "You just had to leave the other night? Like that?"

I didn't say anything, mainly because I didn't know what the fuck I wanted to say.

My life was up in the air, my future was unknown, and I lived every single day terrified of my own mind. It was nearly fucking impossible to see the positives when there were so many negatives in the way.

"You know," I kept walking, trying to speak over the crashing waves, "I could stay the night tonight, and you could wake up tomorrow and decide you don't like how I fucking sleep. Or how I eat, or how I take my coffee, or fuck—maybe you hate that I'm a mess and leave my shit everywhere, because I am and I do. But you don't know, and neither do I, because it hasn't happened yet. So, saying shit like I'll be the one to ruin us is a little dramatic, don't you think?"

A scoff sounded in the air behind me. "You don't even know what I'm scared of, do you?" There was a thick pause because...I didn't get it. Not fully at least. He was so fucking worried about me bolting, and I didn't fucking get why. "This has happened already, Phoenix."

When I met his stare over my shoulder, he continued, eyes intently eating away at my soul, "Just three fucking nights ago, you walked away from me, even after I made it fucking

personal. I didn't say 'get the fuck out.' I said, 'get the fuck out and let me know when I'm worth it.'" He smiled, but it was sad, pained. "And even still, you didn't reach out. Even knowing that we had a connection. Because we did, we do, and it makes no goddamn fucking sense, yet here we are, on our second night hanging out, yelling at each other. But fuck, Phoenix, you feel like home." The anger in his voice faded away, leaving me with a broken boy, embarrassed and afraid. "You feel like fucking home, okay? And when you pull away like that, it reminds me that if you're not in the mood to fight your demons, you'll let them win and you'll walk away from me. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?"

I hated that he was right, that my previous actions had hurt him to the point where he was already questioning my loyalty, two days in, but it was becoming obvious...that's just who Judah was. Passionate to the bone, he dove right in before I even decided to tread water.

Not knowing how to admit defeat I snapped, "I don't know, Judah. I left Frankie for four years, I'm sure she could give you some advice."

I brushed him off like a jackass, but I was feeling cornered, trapped.

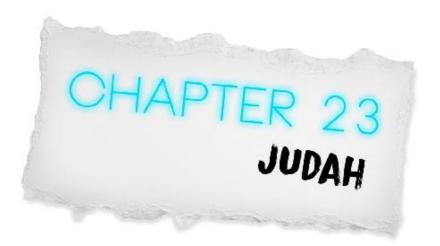
"You think Frankie and I are on the same level?" he asked incredulously. "You think I want to be another Frankie to you?"

I spun on him. "I don't fucking know, okay? I don't know what to do with all this!"

There was more going on than he knew, more than I wanted to explain right now—or anytime soon. I just...

I dropped my head, my chest caving in on itself.

I would fuck this up. I knew it was bound to happen, so I helped it along.



SHE WAS STANDING RIGHT in front of me, I could see her clearly. The pretty brown hair, her smooth, tan skin. She wasn't a figment of my imagination, she wasn't a hallucination, but she was slipping away from me little by little.

We were getting too close, too comfortable, and she couldn't see that we didn't need to think about tomorrow, or even an hour from now, because right here, right now, it was all *so good*. She thought too hard, saw our fights from a mile away because something made her think that way, and I couldn't figure out what it was.

I was angry all the fucking time. I didn't need her help in that department, and if I were any other person, I could've simply explained that to her. I could have walked her through whatever her damage made her believe. Shown her that I could handle taking things slowly, at her pace.

But I wasn't any other person, I was the same asshole I'd been when we met and quite frankly, she was pissing me the fuck off.

"Well, you better figure it the fuck out, Phoenix, because we're here now, yeah?"

"Stop it!" she yelled, and the heat in her eyes had my dick hardening. The sight of her hate should have scared me, but if she hated me, then she loved me just the same. And that right there was fine by me. "You don't get to dictate how I think, how I process shit, okay? I'm just... I just got back to...just... Fuck! *Give me a minute*."

She spun around, and with the action, my heart flew into my throat.

This back and forth between us, the emotional whiplash, was so much more intense than it should have been, but it didn't matter now. I was paranoid that I'd broken her further.

Her shoulders were rising and falling, her little body was shaking, and I was split straight down the middle. I'd promised her friendship, like a fucking fool, knowing damn well that friendship was the very fucking last thing I wanted. But I'd take it, if that was all she was willing to give. It just... it didn't seem like she wasn't willing to give me more, but rather something huge was holding her back, something that I clearly didn't understand and wouldn't unless she opened her fucking mouth and explained it to me.

Not wanting to piss her off further, I unclenched my fists and took a deep breath, trying to center the storm in my head, reminding myself that while I was bad, she was just as broken. It wasn't just me anymore, and I knew just what it felt like to be backed against a wall.

"You piss me off because I hate that I don't know what hurts you," I said quietly, not even sure if she'd be able to hear me over the sound of the ocean. Her back was to me, her frame covered from shoulders to knees in one of my hoodies that she found in the back of G-Dog after the liquor store. Her shoulders lifted and fell quicker than normal, as if she sniffed, so I assumed my voice carried enough to continue. "I hate that you go somewhere I can't follow and that I'm the reason you go there in the first place."

"Yeah, well, you've gotta get over that." She tried to make it sound snappy, but she was crying, I could hear it in her voice.

Taking a deep breath, I paid attention to the scents in the air, as if I could tell the difference between the salt of the

ocean and the salt from her tears. I wondered if her tears sparkled. Knowing Phoenix, they probably did.

"Turn around," I called.

"No." Her brown waves shifted as she shook her head.

"Phoenix." My tone was a command.

To my surprise, after a moment, she turned, giving me an eyeful of my broken bird. With no mascara streaks down her face, no puffy features from the tears, just a little extra moisture on her cheeks, Phoenix Royal was fucking stunning. More than beautiful, even when she cried.

Unable to see her like this and not do something about it, I closed the distance between us but made no move to touch her. It was fucking hard, but I wanted this to be her decision. That didn't mean my hands weren't itching to reach into her hair, grab the back of her neck and feel her pulse beneath my fingers, but I kept still.

"Why are you here?" I asked the same question I did the other night, but this time, I was expecting a different response.

She knew it too. "Because you asked me to be."

"Can you trust me?"

"No," she said softly as she shook her head, and more tears formed along her bottom lashes.

I schooled my features, hardening them as best I could and repeated her words back to her, "Yeah, well, you're gonna have to get over that."

She scoffed, attempting to look off to the side.

No way. "Eyes on me." I lifted her chin, no hint of happy on my face. "I'm not letting you run."

Her features hardened.

"Try and force me to stay," she began, as the fire in her eyes turned her tears to mist, "and you'll find out just how fucking crazy I can be."

"I think you're forgetting that crazy turns me on, Baby Bird." I smirked with an edge of darkness settling in my bones as I tilted my head and reached forward, running the tops of my fingers up the center of her throat. Just as they hit her jawline, I let go of my control, wrapped my hand around her neck and squeezed just hard enough to prove my point. "Especially when crazy looks as pretty as you do."

There was that heat again, right in the center of her gaze. She was burning the fuck up, but I was starting to doubt that it had anything to do with our previous argument.

Something told me this new fire was in response to my inner asshole.

"You may not have realized it, but I claimed you," I ground out, turned on by her ability to pretend like she wasn't ready to hate fuck me in the sand beneath our feet. "And you claimed me, Little Bird, long before we met. Isn't that right?"

She sucked in a breath. I continued, "Yeah, there was a little too much passion, too much power, behind the way you spoke about me the other night on the roof. I saw right through you then, and I see through you now, Phoenix, and I know you want this. You want to fix the sad, broken, fucked up rapper, just so you can make the equally sad little girl trapped in your head that much happier."

"There's no fixing you," she spat, voice rough as she tried to speak through the pressure I was putting on her windpipe.

"You got that right." I grinned. "But what you've failed to realize is there's no fixing you either. You're a lost cause, just like me. You're fucked, *too* fucked, just like me. Death is easier, isn't it? It's safer, right? No need to worry about if you'll—"

"Get the fuck off me!" she attempted to shout, using her tiny fists to push me away. "You know nothing!"

"Oh..." I chuckled darkly. "I know enough."

I underestimated her, made obvious when she lifted her leg and nailed me in the balls hard enough that I let go of her throat and crumpled to the ground, howling, "Fucking bitch!" "Oh, poor baby!" she shouted back, clutching her neck, right where my hands were. "You're insane, you know that?"

"Clearly, I'm not the only one." I groaned, rolling over to my side, wincing with the movement. Still, I managed to get out, "What's funny to me is that I just had your fucking *life* in my hands, and here you are, bitching at me instead of running back to your *bestie* or calling the police. You get off on this shit, Phoenix. Don't play me."

"Don't *play* you?" She laughed, completely devoid of humor. "You're delusional."

"And you're still here."

She was seething, I could practically see steam wafting from her skin.

The pain in my nut sack was subsiding, but the fear in my brain wasn't going anywhere. She could still walk away at any minute, and I might have just made it worse. Giving up the fight, I laid back on the sand and looked up at the dark purple sky. There weren't any clouds, nothing to block the view of the moon or the stars.

Truth was, I was exhausted.

The whole night was spent wondering if I'd say something that would send her running for the hills, but it turned out to be her that ruined it all on her own. I supposed I was partly to blame for that, but it didn't actually matter. Because she was still here.

In fact, she was moving to lay down next to me.

"What are you doing?" I questioned, unable to help the bite in my tone.

"Just shut the fuck up," she spat.

I chuckled, but said nothing else.

I couldn't tell how many minutes passed, but eventually, she spoke again. "Is this how it's always going to be?"

Normally, I'd fire back a response without thinking, but she was asking a question that would shape our relationship for the future and I didn't want to fuck it up. Despite my previous actions. "I want to believe that we'll be at least a little more mature than that in a few years."

"I don't think it's a maturity thing," she whispered. Somehow, I was able to hear her over the sounds of nature around us. "I think it's a fear thing. Or a damage thing, I suppose."

"You ever going to tell me what fucked you up?"

"Probably not," she admitted as another wave hit the shore.

"You know that won't work for me, right?"

A pause. "Yeah, I know."

"So, we're just gonna keep fighting about it until you give in?"

"I guess we'll see."

"I guess we will."

???

EVENTUALLY, we got up off the sand and started walking back in the direction of our friends, but both of us were silent, exhausted. It had to be near four in the morning at this point, and we'd just expelled more energy than we really needed to.

"I'm dead on my feet," Phoenix complained next to me, holding the bottle of tequila we found a few feet away from where we fought. Neither of us remembered when we threw it, but there was sand floating in the bottom now. Luckily for us, sand sinks, and we managed to salvage half the liquor in the bottle. As long as we didn't shake it, we were good. "I hope your bed is comfortable."

The thought of her in my bed should have made my dick hard, but after tonight, I was just excited she was still here. When I called her a psycho earlier, I was taking a wild guess, assuming a whole lot based on just the few hours I'd spent with her. Turns out I'd nailed it.

I mentioned my assistant, she got lost in her head, triggering me, and it all went downhill from there. But still, at the end of it all, she was here, right next to me, just fucking minutes after I essentially physically assaulted her.

I held in my crazed laugh.

"It is," I assured her.

Feeling it the moment her eyes landed on the side of my face, I turned to meet her stare. She opened her mouth, then closed it again before looking straight up at the sky and saying, "I hate this."

Surprised, I asked, "Hate what?"

"This." She waved an arm back and forth between us. "It's all weird now."

"It's only weird because you haven't accepted it yet."

"Accepted what?"

I was still watching her. "That we aren't normal."

"Trust me, I know we aren't normal." I pictured her eyes rolling back in her head, since it was too dark to actually see her doing it. "I just hate that I don't know how to go back to the good feelings again. It always takes me so fucking long."

Staying quiet for a minute, I mentally scrolled through my options of things to say but went with the first thing that came to mind. "It's not about going back to the good feelings, P. It's about accepting that people like us don't always feel good. So clinging to someone when it's dark isn't a bad thing, we just can't let it stay dark forever."

"Are you giving me a 'tomorrow is a new day' speech right now?" Her voice inched up in amusement, bringing a small smile back to my face.

"Please don't ever bring it up again," I chuckled. "But yeah, I guess I am."

She lifted the bottle of tequila to her lips, taking a nice long drink, not even wincing. Now that made my dick hard.

There was fucking sand at the bottom.

When she spoke again, she truly did sound tired, and for the first time, I felt like she was giving me information willingly. I soaked up every fucking word. "I can live with that, but I don't know if I can live with having to chant a line like that to myself every night before I fall asleep. I want good nights too, Judah, not just good mornings or good afternoons. I want good, fun, nights. Happy nights. It all ends up being shit by the end of the day."

Too curious for my own good, I asked, "What's stopping you?"

"Myself," she said immediately, meeting my eyes. She was scared. "It's always been me. There *is* no one else."

If she was opening up, then I could too. I glanced back up at the sky, unable to admit this while looking her in the face. "You're not the only one who spends more time in the darkness than the light. I live there too, Baby Bird. The sun is my worst enemy."

"The sun?" she asked, her stare hitting my profile again.

"Yeah, the sun. The bright as fuck yellow orb in the sky that's supposed to provide warmth to everyone it touches? Vitamin D, it soothes the soul and all that? Nah, not mine. Nothing soothes mine."

Another thick pause, one that had anxiety pooling in my gut. But then, "I'll find a way to soothe it."

I met her eyes then, seeing the sincerity in them. She was serious.

In that moment, I could have said anything, could have told her that it wasn't her job, that many doctors already tried, medications didn't work—most of the time, they just made it worse. I should have told her that I was a lost cause. But if anyone could do it...Phoenix could. So all I said was, "I hope so."



I SHOULD HAVE SMACKED HIM, kicked his fucking ass. But I didn't.

I laid down next to him in the sand instead.

Probably because even with his hands cutting off my oxygen, I felt more around Judah Colt than I did around anyone else. He kicked my numb to the curb, set my soul on fire, and that's exactly what I wanted. To feel, to live. Coming back here was about me finding life again. And *this* felt like living, no matter how fucked it all looked on the surface.

So now here I was, in the passenger seat, trying not to look at him because I truly had no idea what I was doing.

The car ride was silent, all of us were too exhausted to do anything but stare out the windows as Judah drove us back to his place. We passed two blunts back and forth between the four of us as "Nonchalant" by 6LACK played loudly as the soundtrack.

We took Pacific Coast Highway down past the Santa Monica Pier before hitting the highway, but now we were headed back into the Hills, and while I was just here earlier in the week, I was too nervous to pay attention that night. This night, however, was a different story. It would take more than a handful of years to forget the haunted feeling I got every time I made my way through this part of the city at night. There was something so tragic about Hollywood. The area

itself was full of so many ghosts, broken spirits, tears, and dead dreams, that you could physically feel it as you passed through.

Half of the houses were hidden behind massive wooden or even metal gates, but a good amount of them were on full display. Most of the houses were built into the hills themselves, some on stilts, some built higher rather than wider, with more floors to make up the lack of yardage in the front and back of the property lines.

Either way—old or new, big or small, the Hills had eyes.

I did everything in my power to focus on the road, the trees, the narrow streets, as we drove through the winding roads, because looking at Judah was just...too much. At one point, I got a text from Frankie, who was sitting in the back seat with her head against the window.

Franks: So Judah is...intense.

Oh, girl. I wanted to laugh.

Phoenix: LOL. You have no idea.

Franks: You know what that means...

Shit. I hadn't let myself think about my connection to Judah, but leave it to Frankie to force me to.

Phoenix: Don't start.

Franks: Fine, but we'll be talking about it when you get home on Sunday. I'm taking this time to do my research. I'll have a fully formulated opinion by the time you get home.

Of course.

Phoenix: Fantastic. Looking forward to it.

Frankie was a spiritual person, not in the religious sense, but rather in the whole *soulmates exist and fate will bring you together when the time is right* kind of mentality. She was big on karma too, and my friendship with Judah was like catnip to her. I should have expected it, knowing what I felt Tuesday night, but I didn't want to think about my relationship with

Judah being anything more than a casual thing that would eventually die off.

Basically, I was burying my head in the sand, and I had until Sunday night to do it because Frankie was going to burst my fucking bubble as soon as I got home. She'd have a fully formed opinion on our relationship status and the connection in our souls.

Which I already knew would be something I didn't want to hear.

By the time we slowed down and pulled into a driveway, I was practically bouncing with nerves. My tolerance for alcohol was through the roof and the blunts got me high enough to zone out a little, but it seemed that nothing worked to fully block out what Judah Colt was doing to me. I was a goddamn mess.

But I did my best to ignore the shit stirring in my brain and focused on the fact that I'd be sharing a bed with him in this house tonight...and apparently, now tomorrow, too.

From the outside, Judah's home looked like most of the others built into the hills—very minimalistic. The matte black garage door was the first thing you saw, followed by the front door directly next to it. The rest of the house disappeared down the side of the hill, leaving you to imagine what it looked like versus seeing it yourself...unless you got to go inside.

"Fuuuucking finally," Pharaoh murmured as the car shut off and the music was no longer too loud to talk over. "Why do I do this?"

"Do what?" Frankie yawned, stepping out on her side of the car.

We all followed her lead, getting out and stretching in the driveway.

"Agree to follow his stupid ass around until the sun comes up," he groaned, leaning backwards to work the kinks from his back. The action gave all of us a glimpse of the hard as fuck body he was hiding under his hoodie, and it was not a bad sight. Pharaoh was kind of hard to read. I hadn't been able to figure him out yet, but he wasn't my mission. Frankie, however, seemed to be getting along with him just fine.

"Let's go then," Judah said gruffly, heading past me to the front door.

"Is this new?" I asked, noticing how fresh everything looked. Modern and sleek, the house was all white with a black front door, helping it stand out compared to the older Hollywood homes we drove past on the way up. Most of them were done in subtle shades of brown and cream, some Spanish or Mediterranean style. Most of them weren't very unique until you drove further into the Hills, even more up toward and into Calabasas where the *filthy* rich lived. Those homes were worth tens of millions versus down here where the prices dropped to singular numbers followed by a whole lot of zeroes.

"No, not even close. It's an older house, but I had most of the place redone," Judah explained without looking back, heading straight for the front door.

"Wait, our bags," Frankie reminded the guys.

"Oh shit, right," Pharaoh commented, spinning on his heel to open the trunk. I would have forgotten all about them had she not said anything. Once Frankie had hers, he tossed me mine, and luckily, I caught it before it hit the concrete and shattered my perfume bottle at the bottom.

Judah was leaning against the doorframe of the open front door, waiting for the three of us to come inside, but I paused in the driveway to take a deep breath. I couldn't go back now, couldn't pretend tonight didn't happen, and if I were honest with myself, I didn't really even want to, but not being able to pick and choose what happened next wasn't something I was easily letting go of.

Meeting Judah Colt taught me that I was a bit of a control freak. Who knew?

Exhaling heavily, I made my way to him, trying to avoid his eyes as I got closer. He didn't move from the doorway, but instead, forced me to pass through with little room, ensuring that my body brushed his as I entered. Pretending to be unaffected, I stepped into the brightly lit entryway and glanced around at the white walls. We seemed to be on a landing of some sort, on what must have been the top level of the house.

There was no furniture, just a coat closet to the left and a glass wall with a railing that kept you from falling over the edge. It felt like a loft, but the only purpose it served was to get you to a set of stairs that led down to the main floor.

The ceilings were tall as hell, the floors were made of a dark grey colored tile until they reached the stairs, where the tile turned to a glossed white material. No idea what they were made of, but they were stunning.

"Jesus, these houses are no joke," I commented, looking down at the steep, slightly spiraled, stairs.

"Three stories," he agreed from behind me. His voice was clipped, deep, and just close to give me the push I needed to descend. Like the loft, there were glass walls on either side of the staircase, giving you the perfect view of the next level. It was dark so I couldn't make much out, but as we continued down the stairs, lights began to turn on, and I couldn't help my gasp. Didn't even try and hide it as I took in the expansive main level.

The house was built directly into the hill, so one half of the room had no windows at all but the other half was made entirely of what looked like framed glass. The whole space was open and airy with the kitchen, living room, and dining room all spread out on this main floor.

All three rooms were painted a beautiful, bright shade of white and decorated with all black furniture. It should have felt cramped, based on the relative size of the space, but it didn't because of the fucking windows. There was even a patio that seemed to extend the whole length of the house, though I couldn't figure out which windows were actually doors, or if there was a hidden way to get outside that I couldn't seem to find. Still, the whole place was fucking beautiful. "You've got to be kidding me."

I moved again, making my way around the living room. Judah was quiet from wherever he was, but I wasn't paying attention to him, too busy trying to figure out how a guy his age kept a place like this so clean.

"You've got a maid, don't you?" Frankie scoffed as she walked around the kitchen, reading my fucking mind. "There's no way you keep this place clean all on your own."

"Of course, I have a maid. Why would I bother when I can have someone do it for me?" he snipped back.

"Someone's testy tonight," Frankie muttered distractedly.

I held in my chuckle. She had no idea.

The wall where the TV was mounted was built into the center of the room and made up of white brick with a gas fireplace at the bottom. A massive black leather couch sat facing the TV, with two matching love seats on the sides, forming a sort of square seating arrangement for what was obviously the prime entertainment space in the house.

Finishing up in this room, I made my way into the kitchen, taking in the black cabinetry, the slate gray island and built-in Wolf appliances—the place was fucking stunning.

"This oven makes me want to cook a big ass dinner in here," I admitted with a small smile, running my hand along the most beautiful range I'd ever seen in my life. "You know? Have all your friends over and do the whole adult dinner party thing."

Judah chuckled, leaning up against the glass wall of the stairway as I explored. "I'm sure if I told my idiot friends that *you'd* be in the kitchen cooking, they'd be here in less time than it took to change your mind."

"I wouldn't change my mind, that's rude." I winked, holding his gaze.

And there it was, that intensity.

It was back, and so was whatever connected us. The air was charged, his eyes ate me up, begged me to see that he was

serious about this—us—while I was still hesitating in every sense of the word.

I cleared my throat, breaking eye contact and asking the first thing that came to mind. "Are you allergic to anything?"

"Aren't you allergic to some sort of medication?" Pharaoh asked, shattering the fragile tone in the room as he plopped down on the couch with a white remote in his hand. "Kavan tried to give you a prescription pill one time, and you asked what it was first, which is...you know, totally unlike you."

Frankie snorted. I didn't.

"Yup," Judah confirmed. "Penicillin. Kav was trying to give me a Perc."

Percocet. Pain killer.

My stomach squeezed.

To distract myself, I opened Judah's refrigerator to see what was inside.

"Hungry?" he asked, not moving from his position.

"No, just looking." I shut the door. My stomach was one giant knot.

"So what's the plan?" Frankie's voice bounced off the windows a little as she stood facing the early morning view with her hands on her hips. When she spoke again, it was over her shoulder. "I'm about ready to fall asleep standing up. Where can I crash?"

"Come on." Pharaoh hiked himself off the couch with a dramatic grunt. "I'll show you."

"P," Frankie called as Pharaoh headed down the hall just off the dining room. "Text me if you need anything. I don't have plans tomorrow, so I'm sleeping in."

I nodded, grateful that she was so fucking chill. There weren't many girls out there who would be cool with spending the night in a stranger's house, just because your best friend couldn't seem to stay away. Then again, we'd slept in much shadier places over the years.

This was opulent luxury in comparison.

"Bedtime for us too," Judah commented, and the sentence alone flipped my fucking stomach. The hair on my arms stood on end. Bedtime.

My eyes wouldn't let go of his as he sauntered toward me with stiff shoulders and a ticked off expression. I wanted to call him out on it, ask what his problem was *now*, but the house was too quiet and everything felt too breakable for my feelings at the moment.

He grabbed my hand almost on instinct, as if it took no thought at all, and pulled me down the same hallway Frankie and Pharaoh used. The dining room was actually full of instruments and recording equipment, to my surprise, and I made a mental note to ask about that later, still fearing what my own voice would do to the moment. I keep quiet as we hit another set of stairs, these leading down. We were heading into an entirely different level of the house.

"Bedrooms?" I guessed as stopped on a landing of sorts in the center of a room with just three doors.

"Yeah," he nodded, pointing to each as he explained. "Two guest rooms and my room."

He turned the knob of the closest door and held it open for me to walk through. As I passed, my shoulder brushed his chest like it did earlier, but this time, he didn't let me pass so easily. Before I could get any farther, he grabbed my bicep and stopped me in my tracks with a firm grip. It didn't hurt, but it sure as shit reminded me of what it felt like to have his hand around my throat. I shivered just as he bit out, "You sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

I peered up at him, my eyes taking inventory of the small scar through his hairline from the other night, the bump in his nose that indicated he'd broken it one too many times.

"Pretty sure it's too late for this warning," I said, shaking off his hold and walking past him into the room. Only to stop again, three feet in. "Oh, come on."

His bedroom was fucking *huge*, the size of the living room and kitchen put together, with the same windows, but I could see clearly that two of the windows were actually doors that led to an open balcony with two tables and two chairs at each.

His bed was pushed up against the back wall, directly in the center, with a black leather headboard and untucked matching black sheets.

Slowly, I turned in a circle, taking in another set of recording equipment in the far-right corner of the room with a drum kit and the three guitars that hung on the wall behind it. There was another huge TV, even bigger than the one in the living room, mounted across from the bed so he could watch it while lying down.

I narrowed my eyes on the dresser underneath the TV, realizing something was built in. "Is that a fridge?"

"Sure is," Judah replied, digging through the nightstands on the right side of his bed. "Where do you think I keep my munchies?"

"Under the bed like a normal person?"

He stopped what he was doing to glare at me. "You keep your snacks under the bed?"

I chuckled. "No, just wanted to see what you'd say."

"Funny girl," he mocked, rolling his eyes as he went back to his task.

I continued to peruse, looking around the room and memorizing each detail, just in case he decided he didn't want me around after tonight. I wanted to document this moment and keep it with me forever, as it was the first time in my life where it felt like anything was possible. We'd already broken the ice, gotten into an argument, got some insults out of the way, and now here I was, standing in his room.

He felt enough for me, about me, to fight and get worked up, get nearly violent, and despite the warning bells going off incessantly in my head, I wanted this. There was something about his pain, his damage—he carried it around with him like a lucky quarter and flipped it whenever he needed to make a

decision. Sometimes, he was rational, when other times, he'd let go of that control and fall right into madness.

Truth was, the maddened version of Judah Colt was sexy, dangerous, and a little too tempting.

By the time I was done looking around, Judah was sitting on the bed with papers and a grinder, rolling two joints. With his pinkie, he pointed to the two closed doors in the room, first door on the left. "Closet." Then the right. "Bathroom."

I nodded, biting the inside of my cheek as he looked down, no longer watching me as he said, "Go change, do whatever you need. Make yourself at home."

Ugh, but now I feel awkward.

I glanced down at the overnight bag I packed and back up at him. "Is this weird?"

"Yes," he said immediately. "But only because you're making it weird."

"How am I making it weird?"

"How about you just get changed into something more comfortable, and we can smoke on the patio and then get the fuck to sleep. Sound good?"

I didn't like his tone, so I didn't say anything at all as I opened the door to his closet...and tried not to let my surprise show in any audible noises, because holy *shit*. This guy had more clothes than a department store. Rows and rows of shirts, a massive wall of shoes, drawers stacked on top of each other and built into the far wall, which, I assumed, was where he kept jeans, underwear, socks.

Both Frankie's family and my own—before it was obliterated—had money, but not *this* kind of money. I didn't want to linger, not knowing how he'd take my snooping, but *goddamn*. I whistled as quietly as I could, impressed as hell.

Getting to work, I changed quickly, throwing on my favorite booty shorts and a tank before putting the rest of my clothes in a pile in the corner. I held onto his hoodie though,

the one he let me wear at the beach. It was too comfortable to give back yet, and it smelled like him.

Leaving the room, I didn't bother saying anything as I headed straight for the bathroom to pee.

Motherfucker.

This room was immediately my favorite, in the whole fucking house. From the black marble tiled walls to the massive matte black tub in the corner, the whole place felt like a cave. There was a standing shower made of glass and a small separated room with a toilet around the corner past the his and hers matte black bowl sinks. Everything was sleek, luxurious, shocking.

Smirking, I called out, "You're fucking kidding me, right?"

His voice came from the bedroom. "Just do your business and get out here, Phoenix,"

"I'm taking in all your fucking luxury, Skyscraper! Have you seen this place?" I joked, opening the door to the room with the...black toilet.

This fuckin' guy.

"No, I've avoided going to the bathroom since I moved in," he responded sarcastically.

"Hmm," I responded out loud, even though he couldn't hear me.

After doing my business and avoiding the mirror entirely, I headed back into the room and stood by the bed, watching him finish rolling a third blunt. "Damn, are we having a party I don't know about?"

He let a lazy smile loose, looking me over quickly before going back to his task. "I keep a pre-rolled stash because I'm a spoiled kind of stoner."

"At least you admit it." I shrugged, climbing on the bed to sit across from him. The mattress... "Oh, Frankie is going to love this."

"Love what?" he asked, still concentrated on his task.

"Your mattress. She's a bed snob. Hers is like sleeping on a fucking cloud."

"The one Pharaoh has on the bed in the guest room he uses is even better than this one. She'll find out soon enough, I'm sure."

Zoning out a little, I watched his fingers and how artfully they worked the thin as fuck paper. "I'm not so sure about that"

"Don't tell me you're blind." He glanced at me as he said it. "Those two will be fucking by the time this weekend is over."

"Maybe," I admitted. "Frankie isn't ashamed of her sexuality. She can fuck without feelings just like the rest of us, but I'm not so sure she's into him."

Ignoring the part about Pharaoh, he scoffed, asking, "The rest of you? Where are they hiding *the rest of you*? You two are as rare as they come."

Thinking about that a minute, I supposed he had a point. Frankie and I weren't the type to pitch a fit over stupid shit like sex or get attached to one-night stands. We were usually the girls who set the score, let the guys know to lock up on their way out when it was all over.

But that part of my life wasn't ever something I celebrated. My attitude toward guys was out of fear, not confidence or strength. I was protecting myself *and them* by not getting attached, by learning to see sex as a way to satisfy a need rather than an act that brought two people closer together. But I wasn't interested in having that conversation with Judah because that was a fight waiting to happen, so instead, I stood from the bed and asked, "Where are your cigarettes?"

He lifted an elbow toward the nightstand. "I should have a new pack in there. Grab one and head outside. I'll be there soon."

I grabbed the pack, figured out how to unlatch the door, and walked back out into the night air.

My guard was slipping, little by little. I felt myself sliding right into too comfortable, too fast, when we'd barely survived a whole six hours together, but despite the shitty moments we had...

I'd never felt so fucking alive.



ABOUT A HALF AN HOUR LATER, we both had joints as we sat silently in the early hour listening to the birds wake up and crickets head to sleep. The sun was starting to peek over the horizon, and anxiety was creeping in, fast.

I had a question for Judah, one that I wanted to ask so badly, it was giving me an upset stomach, but I wasn't sure where his head was at. Neither of us brought up his career yet, probably because we both knew that the first conversation might not end the way either of us wanted it to, but at some point, we were going to have to get that conversation over with.

However, I was content to let his fame sit between us like an oddly shaped, colorful as fuck elephant in the room, but I couldn't keep this particular question in. So, with a voice too rough for my liking, I addressed Judah. "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded distractedly, looking down at his notebook. "Go for it."

"Are you as overwhelmed as I am?" Shame wasn't normally something I felt. I didn't think it was in my DNA, but I was feeling it now. Like fate had handed me my own personal playmate, and here I was, questioning the fuck out of it. But how could I not?

This house, the cars I saw parked along the street, he hadn't even opened the garage... It was all just a lot for one night. My emotions were all over the place.

"Absolutely." He lifted his head to meet my eyes. *Fuck, he's beautiful*. "But isn't that the fun part? The rollercoaster of bullshit in the beginning of something good?"

I narrowed my eyes. "You think this is normal?"

"No." He shook his head. "Well, I mean, in a way...yes, actually."

"I don't get it," I admitted honestly.

"I'll explain," Judah started as he shifted a little in his seat, turning to fully face me with his elbows on the table and the joint between his fingers. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way or throw a fit about it, okay? Just let me get this out."

"Wow." I smirked. "What a way to start this conversation. I'm assuming I'm not gonna like what you have to say?"

"How about you just let me say it and we'll find out?" He smirked back.

See, this right here was one of the things that turned my stomach into a mess of knots, butterflies, whatever the fuck you wanted to call it. I was flirting naturally, without even trying.

"It's not uncommon for artists to hang out with fans," he started. I already didn't like where he was going with this. "It's actually kind of hard to avoid, since fans will typically do whatever they can to get noticed by us. They end up in the smallest corners of the biggest rooms, just waiting to jump out and scare us into a one-night stand. It works nearly every fucking time." He paused to take a hit from the joint, pulling the sweet smoke into his lungs and blowing it out in a thick, foggy cloud. "But it usually never goes beyond that. Unless, of course, the fan is someone we know or someone we have a previous connection to. That's when shit gets complicated." He leaned back in the chair, probably because I hadn't bitched about anything he said so far. "Think about it—if you met

someone from your childhood, twelve years later, and they wanted to reconnect, it would be hard to say no, right? Especially if it was someone you were either interested in before you found fame or if that person looked, smelled, and tasted like home—even if home was somewhere you wished to escape from." The faraway look in his eye had me biting a hole in my tongue. I wanted to say something so badly, hating that he seemed to be speaking from experience. It made me want to slap the dreamy look clean off his fucking face. "This is a lonely life, Phoenix. You never know who is after your money or looking to score a scandal from snooping through your room. My life can make people a lot of money. With the right information, nothing is impossible. So no, our situation isn't normal, but not in the way you're thinking."

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from lashing out. "I don't think you're explaining this very well."

"Hmmm," he murmured with a satisfied smile, sticking the joint to his lips. "Baby Bird has jealousy written all over her pretty face."

"Judah, don't," I warned.

"All right, all right." He laughed a small sound. "Look, we aren't normal. But only because I told you earlier that you felt like home and I meant that. You do. You're not from my childhood, you've probably never even heard of the small as fuck town that I grew up in, and yet *you*, down to the shoes you wear, the makeup on your face, and the heart in your chest, feel like home." He was serious now, watching me with nearly suffocating intensity. "You fell into my life, Phoenix, but you're not a stranger to me. You're not a random fuck or a one-night stand. You're home."

Okay, that wasn't so bad. The heart in your chest.

"But..." I started, sitting up and matching his previous posture, putting my elbows on the table. "How are you not overwhelmed by...us? This feeling?"

"I am," he insisted. "But you're looking at it the wrong way. Being overwhelmed by a feeling is how I live my life, babe. I'm overwhelmed every single time I step on stage,

every time I do a photoshoot, or sign an autograph. Don't get me started on television interviews." The sad laugh that fell from his mouth made me want to stand up and move into his lap, cuddle closer to *his* heart, show him I would be there to put all his pieces back together after shit like that. But I didn't, because I wasn't sure if it was true. "It's almost always too much, all the time. But this, what's between me and you? This is the type of overwhelming, all-consuming, completely-out-of-my-control passion that every person looks for. Even you."

I looked away then, since he'd hit the nail on the head.

He was right, I wanted this type of fire in my life, but I never let myself chase after it because...my love was capable of killing. My father's face, his anger that day, it all played on a loop in my head, even as I sat there watching Judah watch me. It was all there in his eyes, he meant what he said, and I could feel the sweeping flourish of emotions that threatened to push me over the edge.

"Do your friends have relationships with people outside of the industry?"

"Sure they do." He nodded, looking out at the view. "That's unavoidable. But most of the time, you can't trust your past or the people in it. It's something we learn early on—not everyone is down for your success, they don't want to watch you chase and catch your goals. Why would they? Because if you worked hard enough and succeeded, that meant they could too, but most don't want to do the work required to get where I am. Which I'm sure you understand, wanting to be a tattoo artist and all that."

"Eh..." I shrugged. "I'm not so sure it's the same thing, but I get what you're saying. Going after a goal is going to knock people off your bandwagon, but if they truly ended up getting off, then they weren't meant to be there in the first place."

This earned me a smile. "Exactly. See? You get it."

I didn't, but I'd been up for almost twenty-four hours at this point, and my brain was done.

"Are you ready for bed?" he asked, eyes bloodshot from the high. Mine probably were too, since I was floating perfectly above reality and everything around me moved just a little too slowly.

"Yeah." I nodded, even though I had no idea what to expect.

He didn't say anything, just stood up and made his way to the door. I followed, trying to calm my nerves.

Once we got back inside, he shut the door to the balcony while I climbed to the middle of his bed and searched for the remote, making myself at home like he said to. Briefly, as I turned on the TV and got as comfortable as possible under the covers, I wondered if he cared that I hadn't said anything in response to him admitting I felt like home.

If he looked hard enough, he'd see that I felt the same way, but that was my entire problem.

Earlier this week, he was just Judah—TheColt—the famous rapper that I fell in obsession with over the course of forty songs and one hundred and eighty nights. Now he was my skyscraper, my friend, and something in my brain just...

...had no idea what the fuck to do with that.

"You're thinking so hard that it's giving me a headache." His voice was low, matter of fact, as he used a remote from the nightstand to shut off the lights in the room. As I watched, shocked as hell, two massive curtains were drawn from either side of the windows, being pulled together by invisible hands.

"Jesus, that's cool," I muttered, distracted by their ability to make it feel like midnight instead of nearly six in the morning. The sun was almost fully up, and I was previously a little worried about sleeping with all that light in the room, but now everything was baked in comfortable darkness, with the only light coming from the TV.

Just like that, the night hit me, and exhaustion took hold.

"What's going on, Baby Bird?" Judah asked, dropping his joggers to the ground with a simple flick of his wrists. He gripped the back of his hoodie over his shoulder and tugged it

over his head, tossing that on the ground too. He was in just a pair of black briefs with a psychedelic looking weed plant over his dick.

Oh, come on...

Staring at him was unavoidable as I tried to memorize the lines of each tattoo on his chest, over his abs, down both arms. He was a work of art, and I was having a hard time breathing.

"Phoenix," he barked, looking for my answer.

I blinked, scooting over to make room for him, mumbling, "Sorry, jeez."

He slipped in next to me with lazy confidence, but when he looked at me, his eyes were impatient. I sighed, "I'm fine. Just still trying to process, I guess."

"All right, well, process a little less obviously. I'm starting to stress out." There was no hint of a joke in his tone. The sincerity in his eyes made my blood run hotter. "I better not wake up and find you gone."

I had already considered going home, but he didn't need to know that. Despite my fears, my worries...now that I was sitting here, his bed was too comfortable, his body heat was too warm, and his room felt *safe*.

I felt safe.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said softly. For emphasis, I wiggled a little further down the bed, pulling the covers up to my chin as I turned onto my side to look at him. A part of me wanted to say fuck being friends and make a move, climb on his lap and see if his lips were as soft as they looked, but I was too tired, too emotionally spent.

At first, he didn't seem to believe me, his guard still sky high, already on defense, but after a few seconds he thawed out. "What are we watching?"

"Uh, New Girl," I answered, looking up at him from the lower angle. "Or Schitt's Creek, something funny."

With one arm behind his head and the other holding the remote toward the TV, he looked relaxed with the black

blanket spread over his lap, his chest on full display. Tempted, I brought my hands up under my cheek to keep them from reaching for him. I wanted to get closer, run my nose along his jaw, feel his hair, his body under mine. But he seemed calm, high, content. The room was dark and warm, the TV volume was low, and I was...shocked, I guess.

Too fucking good to be true.

It would blow up, it would. And soon. Without either of our consent.

Seconds passed as my eyes grew heavy, as my body relaxed into his bed and made a permanent space for myself, as his warmth made its way into my subconscious...settling me without music for the first time in six months.

I was out in no time.



I'm the bad guy in the room
Asked her to join me in the glory
midnight moons and Gueei shoes
She told me no
She ain't bought by Fendi
But bad guys always bite the biteh
Take the horrid innocence
And snap that, snap that
Shit in half (snap it in half)
Round and round we go
Up and down the shadowed road
Still a villain lives inside me
I'm the bad guy in the room.

But bad guys have fun too

Let me make somethin' of you

HOLDING the piece of paper in between two fingers, I ripped it from the notebook, adding another jagged edge to the hundred-something already there. Doing what I did best, I left Phoenix sleeping on the bed and grabbed the lighter from my nightstand. But before I walked away, I lowered my gaze,

drinking in the sight of her all curled up in the middle, twisted in my sheets.

She fell asleep almost immediately.

Her little body had rested next to mine with that brown hair spread out on the pillow beneath her, smelling like fucking cherries. I could only see the side of her face, since almost all of her body was covered with the blanket, pulled up and tucked under her chin, but she should have looked peaceful.

She didn't, but instead she looked...desperate, like features were *trying* to relax, but they couldn't quite get there. She was on edge, even in her sleep, and I didn't fucking like it. I waited with the lighter in my hand, watching her, hoping a dream would come take over, pull her deeper so she could feel refreshed in the morning. Especially since she had no idea what I had planned—she would need all the sleep she could get in order to deal with me in the morning. No doubt the little bird was going to lose her shit.

Hell, she might not even agree to it, but I needed her to be at her best so the odds were in my favor.

She wanted to know if our connection was normal, and I told her my honest answer but left out the part where I admitted that I felt insane when she was around. Truly fucking insane. Because I needed her in the worst way, and now that I had a taste, now that her scent was on my sheets...

Well, I was a fucking mess.

Couldn't fucking sleep, couldn't relax. So I tried to write a song.

That brought me back to my task at hand.

Tearing my eyes away from Phoenix asleep in my bed, I moved to the corner of the room where my instruments were set up, grabbing the small trashcan from the corner and bringing it to my entertainment center where I set it on top.

I was too pussy to step into the actual studio down the hall—too fucking whipped by the industry to tell a true story again—so as I stood above the plastic bin, I lit the corner of the

paper on fire and watched as the singular flame ate away my words.

They're useless anyway, no one will miss them.

I caught the ashes with the trashcan, making sure the evidence left of my failure was dust.

Pretty sure I was crying on the inside, sobbing really.

Phoenix had broken something in me tonight. She'd taken a sledgehammer to the walls around my heart and obliterated them, setting free the useless little dreamer in my mind. He was free now, running wild, coming up with plans, ideas, hopes, for a future I knew we couldn't have.

She'd asked me if I was overwhelmed, and I wanted to laugh in her fucking face. Of course I was, but I didn't want her to run, didn't want the magnitude of my fascination with her to scare her away.

But now I had to live with the soul crushing fears that came with whatever this was, because not a damn thing was ever easy for me. I didn't just *love*, I fell so deep in *need* that I suffocated the other person. It had been like that my whole life, and now here I was, looking down on an angel with broken wings, asking her to stick around and fight with me. Let me claw my way to her heart so that if I went down, she'd go with me.

I couldn't help it. I couldn't pinpoint what exactly fucked me up, but at some point in my childhood—whether it was the flying fists from a man twice my size or the fact that Mom didn't stick around long enough to save me from it—it all got screwed in my head, and now I didn't know how to fix it. Control it. Whatever.

Then I went and got myself attached to a bird who knew—too well—how to fly. She'd leave me, hurt me, run from me, I could feel it. Because we were two sides of the same coin—where she ran, I clung. Where I wanted, she refused. Where I wished, she jinxed. But when I called, she answered. That's all that mattered, right?

No matter how fucked up it all got, she made me a promise. She said she wouldn't leave. She said *even if we fought*, she wouldn't leave. So, we'd be fine.

I was semi-sure of it.



"JUDAH!" A female voice sliced through my shitty dream like a whip.

I shot up in a foreign bed, disoriented, confused, and quite frankly, pissed as hell. I blinked, trying to figure out who the fuck was yelling and where the fuck I was before it all hit me.

Judah's bed.

In-N-Out.

Tequila and twenty questions.

Yeah, I remembered now.

Judah didn't even move next to me, but there was a blonde girl standing in the doorway of his room. My eyes narrowed all on their own. "What the f—who are you?"

"It doesn't matter, you won't be around tomorrow," the girl snapped before training her hazel eyes on Judah's sleeping form on the bed next to me. The girl was petite, like me, but she had a no-nonsense energy about her that confused me, given her...looks? That sounded weird, but she was soft, pretty, not at all what I would have pictured based on her tone, but her scowl made me reconsider. Further proved when her voice rose again. "Judah, get the fuck up, you have to get ready."

"Shhhh, be nice to the bird," he groaned in response, reaching an arm out for me. "She lives here now."

"No, she doesn't." I glared at his back, pushing away the offending limb. It didn't work though, he kept trying to reach me, so I grabbed his wrist mid-air and looked down at him. "What is going on? Who is this?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake." The blonde sighed, causing me to drop his arm and look back at her.

I saw her moving toward the windows, but my brain was too slow to register what she was doing before she did it, yanking open the curtain to disrupt the comfortable darkness. My hands flew to cover my eyes, blinded by the bright as fuck sunlight coming through the now unblocked windows.

"Jesus," I bitched, getting more pissed my the second.

Her voice hit my ears in a harsh snap. "I'm his assistant, and you can save the jealous bullshit. I don't want him. He's all yours."

I hated it, but her words worked to calm me down a little. This was the assistant. He'd mentioned her last night, and I had my freak out already.

I was fine. This was fine.

"Skyscraper..." I drawled, falling back on the bed and talking to the ceiling. "Care to explain why your assistant is assaulting me with sunlight right now—as if you're late for something?"

"Probably because I'm late for something," he grumbled into his pillow. Eyes still closed, lips all squished. "Ignore her, she'll go away."

"Ha!" The girl barked out a laugh, standing at the foot of the bed with her hands on her hips. "You're so full of shit." She smacked his foot. "Get up. Hendrix will be here in an hour, and we have to leave in two for soundcheck."

My head spun. "Soundcheck?"

What the actual fuck is going on here?

A hand snaked around my waist, ready to pull me closer, but I grabbed it before he could make any moves to distract me, "Oh hell no, pretty boy. What soundcheck?"

"Really, Holly?" Judah bitched into his pillow, rubbing his face on it before rolling onto his back and throwing an arm over his eyes. "You just had to come in and start shit?"

"Start shit? How the hell was I supposed to know you had a guest? And why is this a secret, anyway? This show has been planned for months." Holly sounded genuinely confused, which led me to believe that this little misunderstanding had nothing to do with her and everything to do with the asshole next to me.

I thought through the last twenty-four hours, hoping to find the little detail that would give him away, knowing there was a reason the blonde was confused and I was here in his bed.

Then it dawned on me. The bet.

Oh, that little... "I honestly can't even be mad," I stated, sliding from the bed and heading for the closet as Holly subtly slipped through Judah's bedroom door and out of the room.

I thought my way through his manipulation, but did it out loud because I was too pissed to keep it in. "Strike a bet, get me to stay the weekend with you, and pretend you forgot about a fucking concert that I now have to attend, all because I lost. It's genius, really."

The show tonight couldn't be at an arena, because there were no tickets on sale for any of the ones around the city. I'd know—I'd been waiting for him to perform locally since I moved back, so this show he didn't want to tell me about must have been an exclusive one.

Unbelievable. I shook my head in the comfort of the big room, padding across the thick, shaggy white carpet and bending to sift through my bag for fresh shit to wear. I dug out a pair of jeans and loose-fitting cropped tank to throw over the maroon bralette I brought with me.

"Okay, so on a scale from one to ten, how pissed are you?" Judah's voice came from the doorway about a minute later, reminding me of a bumpy ride through the mud. The sound was like jet fuel to my heart.

Not bothering to hide, I stripped out of his hoodie, pulling the garment over my head and throwing it straight at him. "I told you, I can't even be mad because a bet is a bet and you won. But you played me, so you *bet* your ass I'll remember that."

I wasn't wearing a bra. I didn't care.

"Will I get a strip tease every time I piss you off?" There was a smile in his voice, the bastard.

"I'm not pissed," I growled, kicking off my shorts.

"Sure, you're not," he responded in the same tone. "Is that why you're subjecting me to the delicious view of your tits right now? Because you're *not* so pissed that you aren't thinking straight?"

"Okay, get out!" I glared, turning my back on him.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen." He stepped fully into the room and shut the door behind him. "Come here."

"Not a chance in hell," I snapped, grabbing a fresh thong from my bag, along with the outfit I picked and tried to walk past him. It didn't work, of course, but you couldn't blame a girl for trying. He crossed an arm over my chest, so I met his eyes, offering all the warnings he needed. "If you want to be able to perform tonight, then I suggest you let me go."

"You couldn't do shit to me," he goaded, mocking my size with a lazy once over. "But I'll let you go as soon as you tell me you'll come to my show tonight."

I blinked up at him. "Now you ask me?"

"Well..." He struggled as if he had no other choice. "If I had asked you last night, you never would have stayed."

"You got that part right." I rolled my eyes, trying to get away again. Failed attempt, he wrapped the arm around my naked waist, securing me to his chest. Pretty sure he was only wearing his briefs, but I was too worked up to check. "Let me go, Judah."

"Sorry, babe." He shook his head, blue eyes determined. "Can't do that. You're mad at me."

I was mad, because it wasn't about the concert itself, it was that he manipulated me into going in the first place, but I was out of energy and there was no use arguing with him about it. His features were still clouded with sleep, but he was alert, focused, hyperaware of my every move.

I dropped my head, whispering, "Fuck my life," before meeting his eyes again. "Whatever, I'll go to the show, just send Frankie up and get the fuck out of my face. Make coffee while you're at it."

He didn't even loosen his hold. "Holly makes the coffee."

Is he kidding right now? "You're trying to lose a nut, aren't you?"

This time, he pulled away, holding up two hands. "Fine, fine. I'll go get Frankie, but hurry up. I'm starving."

Am I in an alternate universe this morning?

I didn't even bother telling him to eat without me, because I knew it would turn into a whole *thing* and I just wanted a shower. Glancing up at him, I didn't bother to hide my annoyance. "Towels in the bathroom?"

"Under the sink." He nodded, turning to open the door. "For the record, I'm not sorry."

My head fell back as I blew out a breath. "Just get out."

"Word, okay." He leaned forward and smacked a kiss to my forehead. "See you soon, Little Bird."



THE WATER WAS hot enough to make it feel like my skin was burning off, the steam was turning the room into a sauna, and I was doing my very best not to freak the fuck out.

There was a very specific reason I hadn't seen Judah perform live, and everyone was about to find out that reason in just a few hours unless I could pull it together.

"Okay, you gotta admit," Frankie's voice cut through the moisture in the room as she opened the door, "he's fucking good."

"Don't," I warned, talking over the sound of the water, still annoyed as hell. "What time is it? I haven't even checked my phone."

I practically ran from the closet to the bathroom after Judah fucked off, but not even the shower was helping my mood. Especially as I rinsed manly smelling shampoo from my hair, cursing myself the whole time for it. I should have brought my own—this shit was going to turn my hair to straw.

"It's one in the afternoon," Frankie responded, distractedly. I heard cabinet doors opening and closing. "Damn, this bathroom is the shit. The lighting is good as hell too. I bet our makeup will be on fucking *point* tonight, watch."

Tonight. Someone must have updated her.

Truthfully, I wasn't even mad about the show itself. I was just nervous, because there was no way that the truth wouldn't come out tonight. I would be in person, seeing him walk on stage, after spending the night in his fucking bed.

"Frankie, I am so fucking screwed," I complained, finding a bottle of expensive face wash on the little shelf built into the marble where Judah kept all his toiletries.

"Giirl." She gave me her signature laugh. The one she saved for moments where the topic itself wasn't funny, but the info was juicy as hell. "You got that right. He is something else."

I scrubbed my face with already wrinkly hands, speaking through my fingers, "Tell me what to do."

She giggled. "Yeah, no, that's a horrible idea. I'm not the one to help you with this."

"Frankie," I sighed. "You do this shit all the time. I don't. I would have fucked him and been done already. How am I supposed to navigate a friendship when he's...he's like..."

"Everything you've ever wanted and more?" she mocked, adding in the dreamy tone to her voice.

"Bitch, be serious."

Another giggle. "Sorry, sorry, nah, I get what you're saying. He's just...different. He even carries himself differently than everyone else. He's angry but needy as fuck, bitter but looking to be taken care of. It makes his damage almost adorable, even though it seems like he likes to fight."

"Yeah, except I'm not any different." I moved on to using the razor I found tucked into a shelf to shave my legs. "I'm not innocent when it comes to seeking out problems on purpose."

"No, you're not," she agreed. "But I don't really see an issue with it, honestly. Because if you both need to argue to get your blood pumping, to feel good, then who cares? At least you're not too much for one another, you know?"

Oh, we were too much for each other. We were both just too stubborn to admit it.

"Frankie, that is so not a healthy relationship."

"Listen to you." She opened the door to the shower, appearing right in front of me. I was bent over, making the second pass over my thigh, when she lifted a bottle of conditioner in my direction. *Thank you sweet baby Jesus*. I took it from her hand, and she shut the door, continuing her previous thought, "You're over here analyzing your friendship-relationship-whatevership and judging it on whether or not it's *healthy*. Healthy for who? Why? Why are you thinking so hard about it?"

"I don't know!" I threw my hands to the side, even though she couldn't see me. "I had this whole plan when I came back here. I was supposed to stop running from shit and try and make a happy life for myself. Getting involved with someone like Judah does *not* sound like it's going to lead to a happy fucking life. It sounds like the opposite."

There was a heavy pause before she asked, "Are you sure?"

My eyebrows pulled in. "Am I sure about what?"

"Let me rephrase." She cleared her throat, which was never good. Frankie was the queen of seeing shit for what it was. She was very black and white, and I needed her blunt, no bullshit attitude right now. "Just to clarify...you think that because Judah likes to fight, because he gets angry or loud, that he's not going to make you happy?"

I didn't want to tell her the truth, so I said, "Yes."

Another pause, then a click of her tongue. "Okay, so do you believe that I know you best, out of anyone on this Earth?"

I sighed. "Frankie, get to the point."

"All right fine, here it is. I think that Judah is just crazy enough to keep you happy. I think his toxicity matches yours, and I think that as long as the two of you try and respect one another's hard lines and you both avoid *intentionally* tipping each other over the edge, that you'll find something really fucking special under all that bullshit. I have a theory, but I'll know for sure after tonight."

A theory. Great. So she thought we were soulmates, and she'd come with evidence to prove it. I couldn't handle whatever the fuck she just said, so I ignored it and questioned, "I'm not going to like your theory, am I?"

"Oh no," she said, laughing darkly. "You're going to fucking hate it."

"Okay then, yeah," I agreed, rinsing the conditioner from my hair. "Save it for tomorrow."

"Will do." She clapped. "Now, let's get down to business. What are we wearing to this show tonight?"

My stomach dropped straight to the tile beneath my feet and slipped right down the fucking drain.

"I have no idea." I coughed a little, knowing I was lying to her too, that she'd be confused as hell tonight if I didn't hold it together. I continued as best I could, "I brought in jeans and a tank while we figure it out." "We don't have time to go home and get anything, though, so we're going to have to improvise."

"I know. Let me think..." I trailed off, going through our options in my head. Factoring in location, the fact that we had no car and very little time, I landed on only one thing.

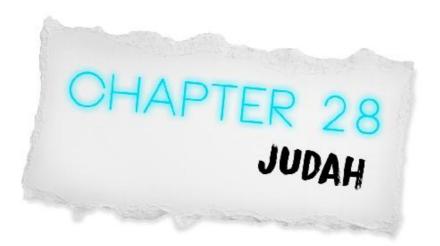
That one thing just so happened to bring a bright as fuck smile to my face.

"Frankie?" I called a few minutes later, when I was sure we could pull it off.

"Sup?" she responded, sounding like she was in the room with the toilet.

"I have an idea!" I yelled out, my voice carrying a tone that was just a little darker than before as the plan became solid in my head. "When you're done, go find us two pairs of scissors and meet me in Judah's closet."

It was time for a little pay back.



MAKING my way up the stairs to the main floor, I tried not to worry about whether or not Phoenix was going to stick around. I said what I said, did what I did, and now it was up to her. I wasn't going to force her into anything. But I certainly hoped she made the right decision.

The one that kept her within touching distance, preferably.

Pharaoh was coming up the stairs behind me, I heard his door click shut shortly after I hit the main level, so I headed into the kitchen in silence, knowing he'd start talking just as soon as he woke himself up a little more.

Sure as shit, as I walked around the big ass black dining table, he strode into the room, rubbing both eyes with the back of his hands.

"Did you fuck her?" Pharaoh asked immediately, sounding as exhausted as I felt.

We both walked to the fridge.

"No," I grunted, opening the door, wondering what Phoenix and Frankie were talking about upstairs. Nothing good, I'd bet.

"Why not?" he asked, shoving me out of the way to snag the orange juice first. He uncapped it and started drinking right from the gallon, watching me the whole time. "You're fucking gross." I ripped the thing from his hands and brought it to my lips to do the same thing he did. But *unlike him*, it was my house, so I was allowed. Tipping the carton back, I savored the freezing liquid as it hit the back of my throat like a salve. When I was finished, I made my way to the pantry, opening the door to search for cereal, ignoring his question.

"Fine, don't want to tell me? That's cool," he threw out, clearly looking for attention. "Ask me if I fucked Frankie."

My ears perked up just a little, but I didn't bother asking out loud, just raised an eyebrow over my shoulder before going back to searching for my breakfast.

"Nope," he admitted. There was a pause, so I imagined him shaking his head. "We didn't fuck, but we hung out."

"You hung out," I repeated, instantly bored. Ah, we're out of Fruity Pebbles too.

"Yup. In my room, on my bed. We just fucking sat there."

"And did what?" My tone was the same as I grabbed a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch instead.

"Talked, listened to music."

"Hmm," I replied, getting caught up in wondering again what the girls were up to as I got myself set up at the island. Now that I was seated and watching him, I changed the subject but kept it about Frankie. "Did she say anything about Phoenix?"

"Like what?" Pharaoh asked, reaching in the bag and pulling out a handful of my cereal. His brown hair was all fucked up from sleep, but his Givenchy hoodie looked fresh.

Rolling my eyes, I clarified, "Dude, I don't know, anything?"

I mean come on. I'm clearly fishing for information here.

"Oh, nah, not really." He lifted his shoulders, not seeing that I was like a starving, dehydrated man after being stranded in the desert for years. "She was pretty tight lipped about her life. Stuck to the basics, but we got into our opinions on all kinds of things."

Yeah, I didn't care about any of that, so I zoned out, focusing on making my breakfast and getting lost in my head.

I tricked her. Phoenix.

I tricked her and it was shitty, but it was also smart as hell and it worked, so I wasn't going to apologize. She may have been mad, but she hadn't left yet, so she was holding up her end of the deal and I was good with that.

The show was nothing to be concerned about anyway, since it was sort of local—just outside of LA in Orange County. Plus the venue was smaller, the crowd would be mainly VIPs, and I was feeling good enough to perform at my best. The little bird was in for a treat, as far as I was concerned.

"I wonder if she's ever been to a show," I voiced the thought out loud.

Pharaoh gave me a blank look. "You didn't hear a goddamn thing I said, did you?"

"Nah, I didn't hear a word. Did you need something?"

I was such an asshole.

"All right," Holly's voice stopped all the fun as she barreled into the room with just her phone and the permanently determined look on her face. "We don't have a whole lot of time, but you do have two openers, so we're looking at a nine-thirty start time." So ten o'clock, because I, as mentioned earlier, am an asshole. "Sound check is early though, so we should get you there quickly."

I nodded. "Sounds good. Just have to change, and we can roll out."

"You going to check on the girls?" Pharaoh asked, crunching on his dry breakfast.

"Wait, you're bringing them?" Holly asked with a look of annoyance on her pale face. "Judah, we don't need the paps seeing you with someone right now."

Man, just like that, my good mood was yanked away from me. The label could decide what I wore, how I acted on television, the type of radio sound my music had, they could sign me up for features, but what they couldn't do was dictate who the fuck I hung out with.

With my eyes on Holly, I shut that shit down immediately. "I have zero interest in having this debate with you going forward, so I'm going to lay it all out right now. Phoenix Royal will be around from now on, we treat her like we treat my staff, except *better*. She goes where I go, so get her whatever clearance you need with the label. I don't want any bullshit."

My face must have looked a little harder than I thought it did, because Holly was stunned as hell. I'd never talked to her like that before, I hadn't needed to, but there wasn't a single centimeter of my body that felt bad. Slowly, she came back into herself, and with every second that passed, her eyes narrowed further. But there was a small smile on her face. "Hold on, let me take off the assistant hat for a second so I can ask, who the fuck *is* this girl?"

"Yeah, Judah," Pharaoh mocked, throwing individual pieces of fucking cereal at me. "Who is she?"

"Cut it out." I tried to smack his ass upside the head, but he skirted around the island before I could get him, escaping from the room entirely. It was just Holly and I now, and my assistant was ready to gossip.

"Who is she?" Holly asked again, too much excitement in her voice. "I wasn't paying enough attention when I woke you guys up, and now I'm pissed at myself because I don't even remember if she's hot."

Oh, she's hot.

Meeting Holly's gaze, I searched her pretty hazel eyes, looking for any hint of stupidity. She could fuck me over if I told her too much, but since she started working for me, I learned that if I looked hard enough, she'd take me to the line I couldn't cross all on her own, without saying a word. Her true

nature would show me how much I could and couldn't say to her.

The thing about Holly was, she was so green, she'd always be a risk. She knew nearly everything there was to know about my career, had access to all my emails, accounts, bills, things that needed taking care of that I didn't give a fuck about doing, but if someone approached her about me, the NDA covered my secrets.

However, Phoenix was different, and Holly could offer opinions that would get in my head and set fire to my plans. Neither Phoenix, nor I, were confused about the ramifications of our friendship. We knew what we were getting into. We just didn't care.

At least, I didn't care.

So, I went with that. "Listen, I don't want any shit from you, and I'd prefer it if you could let me handle the label. Don't tell them anything unless they approach you directly, and even if they do, refer them to me—you can say that you don't know anything. This is off the fucking record, Holly." I gave her a stern look. "I'll handle them, you handle my shit."

She watched me with a new look in her eye, something that mirrored respect but could have been admiration under different light. Either way she said, "I don't know what I'm doing, Judah, and you're the only person here willing to level with me and treat me like a professional. I get kicked around out there, so in here, when you treat me like a friend, when you listen to me—even though you give me shit more often than not—it reminds me of why I wanted this job in the first place. I love what I do because it allows *you* to keep doing what *you* do. If this girl aids your art, if she's it right now, then I'll treat her with the exact same care as I do the rest of your possessions. That includes keeping her privacy."

Damn.

She called Phoenix one of my possessions, and although I doubted she meant it in the way I received it...the statement still sent a thrill to my bones. "I don't know what I did to deserve a kick ass assistant like you, my darling girl, but I am

one semi-happy boy right now." I winked. "Now sit, and I'll fill you in."

???

HEADING DOWN THE STAIRS, skipping two at a time, I slammed open the door to my room, ready to see what the fuck these girls had been up to. After I filled Holly in on the night I met Phoenix, and how our relationship was...whatever it was, Hendrix showed up, all gassed and ready to go.

I wasn't though, and he almost lost his mind when he saw me "gossiping" with Holly. I still needed to change, though I didn't need to get fully dressed, since wardrobe would meet us at the venue to get me and the guys stage ready.

Phoenix would be stepping into my world tonight—the one I loathed way more than I loved—and there were so many different things I could worry about, that I tried to not think about a single one of them. Whatever happened tonight, happened. I couldn't control what I couldn't control.

Just keep telling yourself that, Jude. Eventually, you'll believe it.

This was going to be a shit show.

But in the meantime, I heard female laughter coming from my closet, and they were about to find out that I knew nothing about boundaries. Turning the knob, I pushed open the door but stopped dead in my tracks, when I stumbled upon the... strangest, hottest, most confusing scene I'd ever witnessed in my life.

There was fabric *everywhere*. Phoenix and Frankie stood in the center of the room, fully dressed with shoes on and everything—their makeup done, hair curled to delicious perfection, except something wasn't right.

"Baby Bird..." I dragged out her nickname, tilting my head. The smirk plastered on her face was pure evil wrapped in a stunning motherfucking package. Pink lips, straight white teeth. Her hair fell over her shoulders in long, thick waves, her

dress was strapless, showing off her neck, that sexy as fuck collarbone, and had a punk rock kind of look to it, sort of reminded me of— "Wait just a fucking second..."

A stunned laugh fell from my lips as I realized what they'd done.

"Fuck, you win." I clapped—loudly, unashamed, fucking elated. She was wearing my clothes. Two of my T-shirts had been cut in half and tied together in intricate knots on both sides of her body, creating a tight as hell sleeveless dress that clung to her curves in ways that would probably kill me before the night was over. "You...fuck me. Did you think this was going to be some kind of payback?"

Phoenix laughed a light sound, the smile on her face blinding. "It started out as payback, trust me. We were *violently* destroying shirts." She looked around her at the mess. "I'm pretty sure we didn't even use two of them, but then it became a race, and *then* we were having too much fun to care about anything other than shocking you."

"Not to mention, once I started tying them together," Frankie held up a finger and eyed Phoenix and I with a scary expression, "—which I better get a fucking award for, thank you very much—I could picture how hot she was going to look in it, and then it became about how fast we could give you a boner, and it looks like..." She squinted toward my crotch, then lifted a hand toward Phoenix for a high five. "Under twenty seconds. Nailed it."

I honestly thought I might faint, that's how fucking happy they made me. I figured Phoenix would bitch, throw a fit, tell me to fuck off, and storm out of the house, but instead, she got back at me by covering her body in *my* clothes, to wear to *my* show, on *my* arm...I just... "Frankie, get out."

Phoenix's face instantly fell. "Oh, hell no."

"Out, Frankie," I repeated as the smile she dropped ended up forming on my own lips as nervous excitement began swimming in her brown eyes. Frankie tried to stall, looking back and forth between us and clearly reading that Phoenix didn't want to be left alone with me. "I don't think you guys have a very—"

"Out," I growled, cutting her off.

"Sorry, P. I tried." She scooted around me and escaped, shutting the door to the closet behind her.

Phoenix looked good enough to eat, juicy enough to savor, and all I fucking wanted was to have her body molded to mine. Those clear brown eyes, thick lashes, her pink fucking mouth. She was perfect. "You know, if shit goes down tonight, it's your fault."

Unable to deny her inner brat, the smirk resurfaced as she started taking slow steps backwards, headed into the wall of drawers and shoes at the back of my walk-in. The glossed white furniture made her look like a bronzed heavenly being. She tilted her head, asking, "How so?"

"My name is written across your ass, Phoenix." I lifted my chin. "I know that shirt. Frankie flipped it upside down on purpose, didn't she?" I was *this close* to having her up against the wall. "Every guy in there tonight is going to think you're just an ass to smack, that you'll be free game in no time."

"Yeah?" she asked seductively, her voice sweet. "Who's to say I won't be?"

Finally, I closed the gap between us and had that ass firmly up against a drawer, while I had her head caged between my hands, planted on either side of her body. Even like this, she was so fucking tiny compared to me, if I looked down and she glanced up, there'd still be space between my lips and hers.

What a fucking shame.

"Hmmm, my shampoo. My body wash. My clothes. I'm everywhere, baby." From this angle, I could smell myself all over her. "Even if one of those fuckers got you in two weeks, you'd be ruined for anyone but me, and you damn well know it."

She looked up, proving me right. Her lips were the perfect distance away—just far enough to have my dick pulsing,

aching in my joggers, but close enough to feel her minty breath on my face. She wasn't bothered by my comment, but she did laugh a semi-frustrated sound. "You weren't supposed to be so happy about this."

"Try harder next time," I whispered, letting the heat between us speak the loudest.

Whatever lived in my soul had a vacation home in hers. It was obvious, clear as day, as she met my eyes with an air of reluctant surrender—like she was done fighting the feelings, or maybe she was just too tired continue for the moment. Either way, I doubted whatever she was feeling right now would last. It certainly wouldn't be enough to save us from any future drama.

Feeling my phone vibrate in the pocket of my joggers I dropped my head on a sigh, hating that I had to halt this moment. Brushing the hair from her collarbone, I ran a finger across her chest, watching as goosebumps pebbled in its wake. "I really don't want to leave this room without fucking you senseless, and I should probably teach you a lesson or two about manners, but we have to go." Her body was responding to mine, convincing me to throw the friends idea right in the fucking trash. Especially as her tiny hands found their way to the hem of my boxers. Her fingers curled under the elastic as she seemingly held on for dear life. I bit out, "I have to change, soundcheck starts soon, and I have a feeling you and I are gonna be butting heads tonight, so let's get this bitch over with."

Instantly, her mood turned cooler, and the places she was touching me followed suit as she pulled her hands away. "Why would we butt heads?"

Rather than face the hurricane head on, I started sifting through hangers next to us, trying to find an outfit to wear. "Because tonight, you'll enter my world, and *overwhelming* doesn't even begin to describe it."

She sucked her teeth, trying not to start a fight. "I should be so pissed at you for this, Judah. People are going to see us together." "They sure are." I nodded, not giving a fuck. "Just stick by me whenever I'm not on stage or busy, and when I am, Holly will make sure you're good. I can even have Hendrix hire a new bodyguard, just for you, if it makes you feel better."

"I don't need a whole bodyguard." She sighed a frustrated sound. "But I hate that I'm doing this in the first place, that I want to go just because you're asking me to."

My blood started to boil, not liking where she was going with that thought. "What the fuck does that mean?"

Since my tone changed, so did hers.

"It means," she sneered, "if you were any other person, I'd tell you to kick fucking rocks. I don't want this lifestyle, Judah, and you manipulated me!"

"Yes, I did. And I'd do it again." I turned, making sure her eyes locked on mine—she needed to see how fucking serious I was. "I did what I needed to do, because I wanted you with me. I've spent years hoping to find someone I could bitch to in the wings backstage, someone to meet me in a dirty bathroom and fuck me raw when the adrenaline is too much. We both know that's you, we both know that you want to be that person, so what the fuck is the problem? You're going, so now I need to prep you." I stopped what I was doing to crowd her space. "From one fucked soul to another, steel yourself. This industry is ruthless."

"I'm not fucking you," she bitched, looking up at me with defiance in her eyes.

I smirked. "That's all you're objecting to? Fine, *friend*, I'll take that deal. Go get your shit together, we leave in five."



JUDAH HAD GIVEN me five minutes, so naturally, I was still hiding in a bathroom just off the kitchen when minute six rolled around. I wasn't doing anything other than staring at myself in the mirror, wondering where the fuck my backbone went and how the hell I'd gotten there, so I could have done it in the car, but I was protesting.

He was mind-fucking me into falling for him. He was always one step ahead and *fuck me*, I was running to catch up.

Over the years, boyfriends weren't my thing. Guy friends? Sure, absolutely, but I'd never met someone like Judah. He said whatever he needed to say, even if it was fucked up, to get what he wanted, without having a single ounce of remorse after. But if I didn't respond the way he wanted me to, he'd fall into panic so intense, I couldn't do anything but try and make it go away. I hated the haunted look in his eye whenever I pulled away, I hated that there was something within his soul that refused to let him go, even though I had a gut feeling that this was going to end horribly. For everyone, not just me. I could see it all, our lives twisting together until we were in every facet of the other's life. There was no Phoenix without a hint of Judah.

How the hell was that going to help me?

Judah wanted to talk about things, he saw my heart in my eyes and wanted me to be vulnerable and explain myself, reassure him whenever he saw my fear taking over. While I respected the hell out of his ability to be that open, I had the opposite problem. I bottled my shit up so tight that one of these days, I would probably explode from the inside out. I didn't want to open up. I didn't want to dig into this shit any further than I already had. I'd been avoiding it for years. I looked at it, put it away, and decided to chase a new life. Period. The end.

Except, now I found someone who could read me.

Judah saw all the shit I was hiding in plain sight, was tuned into the moments I fell silent because I got lost in my head.

Somehow, I'd chained my soul to the one person who really did make me feel like I was crazy, like I was on some kind of fast paced drug that warped time and fucked with your feelings. There were already drugs out there that did that, of course, but I'm talking...super speed. My feelings for Judah were soaring to heights I couldn't explain, they were too loud for the amount of time we'd known each other.

On top of that, what about the lifestyle? His lifestyle. I didn't want it. Any of it.

The cameras, the fans, the things every person pictured when they thought *fame*... It's different when it's someone else's life, someone else's privacy being obliterated. But it was about to be my own, because no matter what the fuck Judah said, he was the hit story in Hollywood. *TMZ's* golden boy. Whatever he was up to, people wanted to know about, and ninety-nine percent of the time, they used that information against him.

None of that sounded appealing to me.

The drugs, the girls, the competitive nature. I. Didn't. Need It.

Hell, I was supposed to be running away from it. Even posing with Frankie for photoshoots was pushing it. Eventually, the invites would get more exclusive, the parties would get bigger, and I'd be screwed.

But Judah himself, the guy who had somehow wormed his way into my cold, nearly dead heart? He'd asked me earlier in

the week to let him know when he was worth it, and I couldn't give him an answer back then, but I probably could now. That was most likely why I was still standing in the bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror.

Because after all that, I knew I'd already made my decision.

Despite all those negative things, despite the fact that I wasn't ready for love or a relationship of any kind...I would stay.

Because he wanted me.

Because I wanted him.

Because Judah Colt was worth it.

"Phoenix, what are you doing?" Frankie called, slamming her fist on the heavy door of the bathroom. "Judah is honking the horn like a maniac, and I'm willing to bet the neighbors are going to call the police soon. Not that he gives a fuck, but... still—"

I pulled open the door before she was expecting it, seeing my best friend standing there in her black body con dress and white Nikes, with her hand still raised in the air. I gave her a smile, surprised at how genuine it felt. "Let's roll."

???

OKAY, so, just because I made a decision didn't mean my decision didn't suck.

My stomach was a mess. I was so fucking nervous that Judah slapped his hand down on my bouncing knee halfway through the drive. It did very little to calm me down, but it was distracting enough that I avoided bouncing the other leg.

"We're almost there," Judah said, sitting taller in his seat. He blew out a slow breath. "P, you gotta calm down. I can't handle you being all freaked out like this."

"Can you blame her?" Frankie muttered from the back seat.

"Not now, with your fucking mouth," Pharaoh hushed her.

I let my head fall back on the seat. "Are there going to be a sea of paparazzi to fight through at some point?"

I couldn't stop thinking about it. He was popular enough to have hundreds of fan accounts on social media—crazy, obsessed, dedicated as fuck followers, who would lose their goddamn minds when they saw him with someone like me. And by that, I mean a regular girl. A fan, a nobody.

What would they think? Would they be happy for him? *Should* they be happy for him?

Am I really going to come out of the box as his friend, publicly, this fucking soon? Because no one would believe we're just friends. I'll be hated, loved, trashed for sure. My hands found my hair. "Son of a bitch."

I was spiraling.

"Stop it," Judah growled. "Just chill the fuck out for a second. I'm going to let these two out and we'll talk."

"Talking doesn't change shit, Judah." My voice was hard.

"Stop saying my fucking name like that, *Phoenix*," he snapped, white knuckling the steering wheel.

The energy in the car was...not good.

"Jesus Christ," Pharaoh sighed under his breath. I could hear him behind me, leaning forward to rest his head on the back of my seat. A hand touched my right shoulder before his voice hit my ear, hushed just enough that Judah couldn't hear but loud enough for me to understand clearly as he whispered, "Word of advice, little P?" When I didn't say anything, he continued, "He'll take care of you, but he needs to be levelheaded. Which means you need to get it the fuck together, because otherwise? He'll self-destruct and take you with him, all out of fear. Tell him you believe in him, in whatever way you can, and you'll never meet anyone more equipped to protect you from the vipers. He's got you, but you gotta have him first."

I couldn't respond without Judah figuring out Pharaoh was talking to me, so I stared out the window with tears in my eyes and a horrible, shredded feeling in my chest. I was trapped again, but this time, I felt everything instead of nothing.

I went from not living life, not taking risks, and trying to drown my bullshit in liquor and one-night stands, to finding too much of all the things I was missing and not enough sanity. I shouldn't have gotten in the car. I should've walked the fuck out when I realized he only made the bet to get me to the concert. Which was manipulative and toxic. But I couldn't, because he was Judah and I was fucked.

"Why can't you drop her off at the front? Just give her a VIP ticket or something?" Frankie pipped up, clear excitement in her voice about the decently good idea she had.

"It's a VIP event, so she wouldn't be treated any differently than a regular fan, since the VIP part only includes free merch and two drink tickets," Pharaoh explained as my chest sank.

"What time is it?" I asked, just to change the subject.

"Almost four," Frankie answered from the back.

"We're here," was all Judah said as the car rolled to a hard stop. "Everyone but Phoenix, out."

Avoiding Judah's eyes in favor of looking around me. We were in a secluded suburban area in front of what looked like an old gothic-looking church. The building was massive, felt haunted, and was made even more terrifying when the afternoon sun cast a beautiful orange hue in the background, making the place look like a giant shadow.

There was a big open field next to the church, where a line was already forming around the building as fans waited to be let in the doors. "Is Pharaoh good to go through this way? Won't the fans recognize him?" I asked.

The question was meant for Judah, but Pharaoh wasn't quite out of the car yet, so he just turned around and said with a surprisingly dark tone, "I'll be fine, sweetheart. No one knows who I am."

Then he slammed the door and I was locked in silence with Judah—who was in his feelings about me being in my feelings. *What a fucking disaster*.

The night was tainted, my throat felt too tight, and all because he hadn't prepped me for this, he'd lied to me instead.

After Frankie met Pharaoh on my side of the car, they walked across the field with their heads down, to the opposite side of the building. There was a cemetery next to the church that seemed to be calling my name, all creepy and darkened by the massive trees that grew around it, caging it in. This venue, the area, the vibe, it all felt perfect for Judah's music. It was almost as if the place was ready for him to leave his mark.

As he pressed the gas and the car rolled forward again, I remained looking out the window, but I couldn't stop myself from asking, "Why did you have to force this?"

No hesitation. "Because I wanted you with me."

He said it before, in the closet, but now I had Pharaoh's words flying around my mind like a boomerang. Every time I threw his words away, they came charging back, no matter what I did.

"Tell him you believe in him, in whatever way you can, and you'll never meet anyone more equipped to protect you from the vipers. He's got you, but you gotta have him first."

I wouldn't use those words, because they weren't appropriate for the current situation, but I knew what he meant. I turned to Judah, saying, "I'll make you a deal."

What was with us and deals? Bets? Everything was a game.

"This'll be good." His tone was dry.

I ignored his attitude. "You want me here, fine, I'm here. But from now on, you *ask* me to come to this shit with you—like you said you would—and if I'm available, I'll be there. You're not allowed to manipulate me into this shit anymore." I paused, gathering my thoughts. He was watching the road with an angry tic in his jaw. I didn't care. "And from now on when

I'm entering a situation where I don't know what to expect or how to navigate it, you've gotta give me a crash course." I settled back in the seat, crossing my arms. "Which is exactly what you're gonna do now. So, what the fuck am I walking into?"

There was a thick stall in time, one that had me questioning my confidence.

He sighed, shaking his head as if disappointed in me. "Phoenix, I wasn't ever going to let you walk in blind, but the fact that you thought I was proves just how little faith you have in me. Sure, I made up the bet so you had to come with me tonight, and then I could bring you back to my place after go to sleep with you in my bed, but I was planning to explain all this before we went in. You just didn't trust me." He was sad, which sucked, because I wanted to be mad at him so fucking bad but...did he really plan to walk me through this? He took a breath and continued, "I show up late to every local show. I don't like rules or being told what to do, and my personal time is the only thing I have control of. The only time I get that control is when I can drive myself to venues. So settle in, because I'm supposed to be in there in two minutes, which means we've got thirty more to kill." Even though he had a sour as fuck look on his face, my pussy clenched at his words. He must have noticed the lust in my stare, because he chuckled a little and looked down at my lips, those blue eyes full of ideas before he slowly made his way up to my eyes. "We're gonna hotbox this bitch and take our time doing it, and then I'll prep you—like I planned to." With one hand on the steering wheel, he used the other to point at the glove box. "Light a blunt."

Stunned, I could only watch him in what felt like amazement but probably looked more like surprise. "Why didn't you just say something?"

He shrugged, rubbing his chin with an inked finger. "Always fun to see what the peanut gallery has to say about you before you stand up for yourself. Tells you what they really think."

His words punched me in the gut before I remembered he was still in the wrong for how I ended up at this venue in the first place, so I didn't comment back, letting him be pissed. I was pissed too.

Horny as fuck after that open tour of his mind. But still pissed.

While I got everything ready, including the music, Judah drove down the street, turned a few corners, and found an empty parking lot with a broken fence and a whole lot of trash littered throughout. He parked near the back while I took the first hit from the blunt and pressed play on "Faith" by NAV and Quavo.

I had a strong feeling that the vibe would fit Judah's mood perfectly.

I wasn't wrong.



THIRTY MINUTES PASSED SLOWLY as we burned the blunt down to a roach and got lost in the sea of sound. We played all different kinds of music—his favorites, my own, we didn't care. I settled, relaxing into the front seat, enjoying the fog that settled over my mind and destroyed the ability to focus on the negative things.

Judah sighed in his seat, running a hand through his hair, stretching a little as he did it.

I watched him move around with my bottom lip firmly between my teeth. If I bit any harder, I'd break skin and really make a mess. "How are you so fucking hot?"

A shocked, short laugh fell from his throat. "You're a Sour Patch Kid, I swear."

"The yellow kind," I agreed. "Double the sting."

"You got that right." He smirked, closing his eyes as our time alone came to an end. "All right, you ready for this?"

"Not even a little," I admitted, studying him shamelessly.

Friends. What a joke.

"There will be paparazzi, but we're going in later than they anticipated, so some of them might have gone home, thinking they missed me." His head rolled toward mine on the headrest. I fought the urge to run the tip of my finger along his eyelashes as he continued, "There won't be much I can do to

shield you—aside from hiding your face—so you'll have to trust me to do that. We'll throw a hoodie on you and keep your head down. We'll be fine."

"That's your plan?" I deadpanned. "Just throw a hoodie on and keep my head down?"

"Listen," he sighed, running two hands down his face. "This is one of those moments where you have to decide if I'm it for you—if this is what you want right now—because I can't fucking change it, Phoenix. I know that you're not ready for this kind of attention, and I wholeheartedly understand why, but if I think about it too hard, I'll get angry enough to shatter my whole career over it." He wasn't looking at me anymore, instead, staring up at the roof of the car. I couldn't help but feel sorry for acting like a baby about this when he clearly didn't like it either. "It's one of the many things I'd change about the music industry if I could, but I can't. And this event is going to have not only me as a performer, but I've got friends coming too, other big names that the paps will be on the lookout for, so we've just gotta tough this out."

I took a deep breath, grateful that the high wasn't allowing my panic to reach its usual heights. Instead, it seemed like one of my mental filters had been obliterated, because the longer I looked at him, the more I felt like a fucking asshole. I'd been complaining about his lifestyle all day, without thinking about whether or not *he* even liked it. I knew he didn't, he rapped about it all the time. He even confessed earlier—that he wanted someone to bitch to when things got hard, someone to fuck and relieve the stress, and while I was semi-serious about not fucking him, I wasn't serious enough about what he was actually trying to say.

"Goddammit," I muttered under my breath. "I'm the worst."

"Why do you say that?" His head was in the clouds, lost in the high, as he stared through the front windshield toward the skyline.

"Hey, look at me," I said softly, hating how my throat was threatening to close. When his eyes met mine, it was all right there again—the exhaustion, the stress, the lack of passion, even a brutal amount of sadness. Unable to stop myself, I lifted a hand to fix a piece of hair that had fallen over his forehead, feeling the tears starting to form. He tilted his head in confusion, starting to sit up, but I put a hand on his chest, holding his stare. I swallowed my doubts and whispered, "You're worth it, J."

I knew I'd be here eventually, telling him the truth, but I didn't think it would be so soon. I planned to fight it harder, make sure it was worth it, but I knew that if I didn't go into this venue with him, I'd lose him. He wouldn't be able to see that I wasn't abandoning him, I was just...not interested in being a part of that side of his life. That wasn't an option for him, it was all in or nothing at all. He'd toss me in a pile with the rest of the cunts who disappointed him.

So while it was soon, while I had absolutely no idea if the risk was even worth it, I gave in. Because I simply...wasn't done with him yet.

With this, with us.

I wasn't done fighting with him yet, about real things, things that I did to piss him off or vice versa. I was too curious, needing to know what he'd do when things got so heated, we wanted to draw blood, rip our hair out, because that's where this would inevitably lead. I wasn't stable. I was sliding right back into Nix territory, and that bitch was ruthless, petty, and one hundred percent dead inside. Yet this new version of me had tasted a little bit of true happiness, but apparently, only when Judah felt it too. He sparked me back to life, but I followed his lead.

Already. So quickly.

He did all the work for me, pushed us in the direction he wanted us to go, but that didn't mean I had to just agree with him. He could handle it when I bit back, when I snapped and called him out. He bit harder, shutting me down, but at least I got it out—some of that anger I carried around.

Fuck me, but I wanted to see where this was going to go.

Problem was, loving him would kill us both.

If anyone was going to drive me to insanity, if anyone could get me to snap straight in half like my father did, it would be Judah Colt.

Slowly, he sat up, turning toward me with a look I wasn't sure what to do with. There were too many emotions churning in his blue eyes, on his face, causing a new sort of energy to spread through the car. The feeling was shaped like surprise, colored like sunshine, but dimmed by disbelief. "Say it again."

I blinked, swallowing. My father's face appeared behind Judah's head, like a phantom nightmare coming back to haunt me at just the wrong time. What the fuck was I going to do now? I'd given him everything he needed to take over my life —I was about to go through with this, the public would know, and there would be no going back, even if I left tomorrow.

Unless I leave right now.

But I couldn't. Because of that look in his eyes, the one he had right now, the complete and utter disbelief that etched his face—as if the idea that I would accept him and the life he lived was so out of this world that it deserved a whole moment of complete silence.

When I didn't say anything right away, he narrowed his eyes a little. "You're afraid right now." It was an observation, almost an accusation. But he must have seen that this was real, that I was warning him, that I was really fucking scared, because his voice dropped to a whisper as he asked, "What happened to you, Little Bird?"

How did he do that? How did he know?

I inhaled another huge breath and opened my eyes, exhaling as he watched. "Too much to explain on a night like tonight, okay? We need to get this over with before I have a goddamn heart attack, and I'm...worked up. I just need a little time, and I'll be fine."

His eyes bounced between mine, his own leg vibrating in the driver's seat. "This conversation isn't over," he pushed, staring at me long and hard for a solid few seconds before he laughed sadly. "Fuck it, I'm about to pull a no call-no show on this venue."

Shit, Pharaoh was right, I needed to get it together.

"Shut up," I waved a hand, trying to smile. "I'm fine, we need to go."

"You're a horrible liar, Phoenix."

"No, I'm not. You're just too observant."

"Fine, we'll go," he started, pressing a foot on the break before glancing my way with a harsh sort of vulnerability in his eyes. "But first, tell me I'm worth it again."

That was the second time he mentioned it, and I'd learned enough up until this point to know when Judah sounded just a little bit off. This was one of those moments. He needed me to say it after what he'd seen in my eyes. He didn't want it to be a lie, he needed to know I meant it.

Doing my best to let go of my fear of falling and the ticking timer on my life, I said what I was feeling as honestly as I could. "You're not just worth it, Judah... I don't even have a choice, and I think that's the problem. I couldn't walk away if I tried."

A small laugh fell from his mouth. "That's good, because I'll fuck it up," he promised. "This, us. Eventually, you'll figure out where I'm hiding the skeletons in my closet, and you'll forget you ever said that."

I shrugged as if I didn't care. "Guess we'll see."

"Guess we will."

At least we were consistent.



I PARKED around the back of the venue in a small lot that was hidden away from fans and used only by crew members. Everything was already here and ready to go, including the trucks and busses that held the set, equipment, wardrobe, plus all the other shit that the crew needed to pull off a show. It was a laundry list. Crew members were scattered about, running between trailers, communicating through headsets, and making final preparations for each band that would go on in a few hours.

We were thirty minutes late for soundcheck, which meant we were right on time.

Phoenix seemed to calm down a little, but for some reason, I was more on edge. This was the moment I was dreading the other day, back at the party—the one where she'd be surrounded by my friends, introduced to snakes, and exposed to the filth of the industry.

In having her here and getting what I wanted, I was testing fate and running the risk of someone else taking her from me. On accident, on purpose, with one slip of the tongue or oddly timed photo, a conversation, anything. But she was here willingly, and she said I was worth it. That right there was the number one reason I was still going through with this. It would be hard for her to fall for any bullshit, when she wanted nothing to do with this side of my life in the first place. She

was only making it work because she had to if she wanted me in her life.

It was a euphoric feeling, one I wanted to bottle up for later when I struggled to write. It made me feel invincible, like just because my little bird was tucked into my side, I could handle anything—even things I wasn't capable of handling just a week ago.

"Okay we have to wait here," I said quietly as we came upon the corner we needed to round before hitting the back door to the venue. "Phil will be here in a few to get us inside."

"Phil?" She quirked an eyebrow.

"Bodyguard," I clarified, feeling stupid for needing one in the first place. My life felt like a joke. I had all this money, but I needed to spend it on shit like security to keep making it.

"Ah." She nodded, rubbing her hands together as if she was cold. It was like ninety fucking degrees outside.

She had anxiety.

I was about to say something when Phil's deep ass voice came from behind us, "Hey, sorry, let's go."

Neither of us said anything as Phoenix pulled up the hood of her sweatshirt and tugged it down over her face. I lifted an arm, and she walked right into me, giving me an almost side hug. As soon as my arm curled around her shoulders, something settled in my soul, my heart, my mind—even more when she held on a little tighter and pressed her face against my chest. I swear, I could have cried. That's how fucking good she felt.

Unable to stop myself, I kissed the top of her head and breathed her in as I did it.

When the three of us turned the corner and into the wide wave of flashing lights, my stomach boiled with harsh acidity, hating that they called my name like they were desperate for me, for my attention, an answer to their question. When in reality, they were desperate for the paycheck that one glance made them. All it took was one solid photo at the right place and time for these assholes to be fed for a fucking year. So, I

kept my head down, feeling Phil's hand on my back, right above where Phoenix clung to me. I squeezed her tighter, focusing on how she brought her other arm up and linked her fingers around my waist. She was holding me, hugging me, trusting me.

For the first time, it actually felt like she could be mine.

???

"FUCKING HELL, THERE YOU ARE!" Hendrix's boisterous voice hit my ears as soon as we crossed the threshold into the makeshift dressing room—which was really just a Sunday school classroom in the basement of a church older than the devil himself. Doing a quick scan, I didn't see any of my guys hanging around, which most likely meant they were all at soundcheck—fucking around no doubt. Hendrix shot me a glare. "Get the fuck on stage before I lose my damn mind."

"Wow." I chuckled, slapping him on the back. "You need to take a fuckin' chill pill, my friend. It's all good."

"Just do it." Hendrix rolled his eyes, done with me already. Couldn't blame him.

I wasn't a high maintenance artist, I didn't need special pillows or my coffee to be an exact temperature before I drank it, but I did expect my team to understand that I wasn't going to be some whipped poster child for Mammoth Sound Records. I made the music, they just so happened to be the label that produced, managed, and sold it. We were a team, a partnership, and I wasn't their monkey that danced when told to.

Hendrix hated it a little, which of course, I loved.

"That was your manager, right?" Phoenix asked as soon as Hendrix brushed past me and out the door, headed quickly down the hallway. He didn't even notice her.

She was standing next to me, no longer holding on for dear life but taking in the room full of people with curious eyes.

She didn't appear to be overwhelmed or anything—just watching everyone do what they did best.

"The one and only." I nodded, moving closer to her just because I could. I felt better as soon as the palm of my hand hit the small of her back. She gave me a little of her weight as she leaned into me, sending hope straight to my heart. I continued, trying not to make my obsession with her too obvious. "Hendrix Martin found me from a stupid music video that Pharaoh and I made and threw up on YouTube a million years ago. Forced me to leave the shitty town I was living in and promised to set me up in Los Angeles if I'd take the risk." Like it had a mind of its own, my hand made its way up her back, but I took over from there, slipping my fingers under her hair and curling them around the back of her neck. She stiffened at first before almost melting into my side. Feeling better than I had all day, I continued, "Of course I took it and brought Pharaoh with me, said we were a package deal. And now Hendrix spends every day regretting it while my career makes him rich."

Her body vibrated a little on a laugh. "Does he manage anyone else?"

"Nope, lucky bastard only has my moody ass for company."

"I told them you were going to be late," a voice interrupted from our left. Letting go of P's neck, I turned to see Holly walking toward us as she hung up her cell phone. Coming to a stop in front of Phoenix and I with a friendly smile on her face, she looked at my little bird with playful warmth in her eyes as she extended a hand. "Hey, I'm Holly."

Phoenix grinned, returning the gesture. "Nix, nice to meet you. Sorry about earlier, I'm not normally such a prick to strangers but I was...not exactly warned about the show tonight."

"You're good." Holly laughed, pointing a thumb at me. "I found out shortly after that you'd been played by this one, so I didn't take offense. You ready for your first show?"

My chest caved in a little as Phoenix swallowed harshly, as if there was a lump stuck in the column of her throat that she couldn't talk past. Her smile was half-assed. "I'm about as ready as I'm going to get."

Holly didn't notice, just laughed like P had made a joke. "That's the spirit."

Clearing my throat, I shoved the panic down deep into my chest and attempted to suffocate it. Phoenix was allowed to be nervous. This was new to her, and while we both thought we avoided the paps getting any pictures of her face, it was only a matter of time.

Baby steps, Jude. Let her adjust.

"Fucker!" a shouted voice blew next to my ear, loud enough to startle all three of us. On instinct, I grabbed P's arm and stepped in front of her, winding a hand around her back to keep her body close to mine—but of course, it was just Sage being an idiot.

"Bro, come on," I breathed as my heart rate slowed down. "You can't do that to me, we're stoned as fuck. Slow on the uptake."

"I know, man." He let go of a full-mouthed laugh, one that had Phoenix chuckling a little as she pushed me away to step back into her own space.

Sage noticed immediately. With wide, delighted eyes, he looked down at my little bird. "Well, well, well, who the fuck is *this*? What's your name, princess?"

My lungs were in my throat as he studied her, eyes shining with misconduct, but Phoenix handled it perfectly by meeting his slightly intimidating gaze with one of her own, reaching out a hand, saying, "Nix."

"Not a talker?" Sage looked from her to me with her hand still firmly in his grip. I wanted to snap his wrist in half.

"Oh, she talks," I gritted out.

"Sorry, I'm just getting used to seeing all this behind the scenes shit." She laughed a little. Then, no doubt sensing my

growing unease, Phoenix pulled her hand out of Sage's grip and subtly moved closer to my side, her arm brushing mine.

"Are they done with you?" Holly asked, addressing Sage, who was most likely coming back from soundcheck.

"Yeah, little biscuit, we're done." He winked, laying it on thick. "Jude Law here is up next."

I rolled my eyes at the stupid joke, eyeing Holly. "I'll be right there, just let me get her set up."

"Sure," Holly said politely. "I'll go let them know you're on your way."

Dropping an arm over P's shoulders, I pulled her body into mine, my favorite place for her to be, and whispered low enough for only her to hear, "I better get on stage before Hendrix rips my dick off, do you know where Frankie is?"

She shook her head and pulled away, holding out her empty palm. "You've got my phone."

Right.

Grabbing it, I held it up to her face to unlock it, before adding myself to her contacts and shooting a text to my personal number. "Text Frankie and find out where she is. I'm sure Pharaoh has her posted up with a drink somewhere. Soundcheck shouldn't take longer than thirty minutes, and then we're just chillin' in here until I need to get ready to go on. Text me if you need something in the meantime, yeah?"

I was expecting her to look more nervous or afraid, but the longer she watched the room, the more comfortable she became. I filed that information away to ask her about later tonight when we were back home in my bed, pretending to watch *New Girl*.

"I'm good." She grinned up at me, but something was missing. "Go. Do your thing."

I didn't move, too scared that I'd come back and she'd be fucking gone.

"Judah," she chided, putting a hand on my chest, right over my heart. When she met my eyes, I calmed, seeing that she was okay—she was just taking it all in, she'd be here when I finished. "Go."

I did, hoping to fuck someone didn't run her off before I could get back here.



EVERYTHING from that moment on was a blur. As soon as Judah left, it felt like I got swept away in the life of an industry professional. I'd always been a watcher—someone who liked to sit in the shadows and just watch people live their lives. I liked to try and figure out why they made the choices they did, why they said what they said, it was all fascinating to me, and this was no different.

As soon as the door shut behind Judah, I shot Frankie a text, finding out that she was wandering the halls of the venue since Pharaoh hadn't given her any rules but handed her two staff passes. She had mine, good thing too, because I would've been kicked out for sure. On the way to meet Frankie in a bathroom down the hall, every single person eyed me like I could be a threat to the show because I didn't have the stupid pass over my head. Judah had forgotten to tell me about that little nugget of information.

She finished peeing as soon as I got there, so I did my business quick, and the two of us headed back to the dressing room and made ourselves comfortable in the corner while everyone else rushed around to get things ready for Judah's set. I had so many questions about who did what job and how it was all put together, but everyone was moving so fast, I wasn't able to ask a single one until Judah came back. Even then, he could only answer my questions when he wasn't discussing the setlist with Pharaoh, Pierce, and Vale—his drummer, guitarist, and bassist respectively—or working with

Holly on the varied list of things he needed to have ready for him in the wing's backstage.

When we all sat down to eat around seven—barbeque chicken, veggies, salad, a bunch of boring healthy shit—Judah explained that tonight's show only required a crew of about a hundred, but his upcoming tour was scheduled to have around two hundred and fifty members traveling with them. With the tour manager, production team, stage team, front of house, and monitor engineers, lighting directors, pyro technicians, merch crew, and bodyguards, there were so many people needed in order to pull off a successful show, I realized I had severely underestimated Judah's ability to turn it all off when he got home.

He was a different guy when he was in work mode, when he was doing what he got paid to do. Not necessarily angry, but he certainly didn't have his playfully dark swag turned up like he normally did. His energy was almost a little dangerous, like he was sending out warning signals to anyone within reaching distance—don't come too close, you'll probably piss me off.

"This is all nuts," Frankie muttered at one point while the two of us passed a bottle of vodka back and forth. Frankie, of course, found it when she went searching for unlocked rooms down in the basement.

Now, a couple of hours later, we were seated on two massive speakers that weren't being used backstage while Judah was getting ready in the dressing room. I was tempted to stay with him, but Frankie didn't want to be alone and I didn't blame her, so we wandered out to watch Sage perform, side stage.

Thank Christ for Holly.

She'd taken Franks and I under her sparkly white angel wings, directing us to the little spot we were seated in with the perfect view. Tucked away in the back, we could see most of the crowd, along with the back of Sage's set. Where the audience saw him from the front, all lit up in sound and lights, we got to see him from the back, from the viewpoint of the

crew. It was a little strange, not quite as exciting as being in the belly of the beast, but it was thrilling in a different way, knowing that Sage would walk off stage and if I wanted to, I could strike up a conversation.

Being able to chill with an artist like Sage was an unexpected perk to being friends with Judah. I couldn't help the excited energy that swam in my veins at the prospect of learning more about his music. Sage was good as hell when he performed live. His punk rock sound had ignited the crowd and prepped them for whatever Judah was about to lay on the line.

Despite wanting to know more about Sage, I said nothing as he walked past Frankie and I at the end of his set. Not that it mattered, since he hadn't even bothered to look left or right, but instead, headed straight into a group of three girls, who'd been eyeing the fuck out of Frankie and I this whole time. Which, of course, now made sense, seeing as how they thought we were here for their man.

We weren't.

Frankie was mostly quiet next to me, sipping from the bottle and playing with her phone now that the crew had come back full force to tear down Sage's set and get Judah's ready. The transition was wild, watching everyone run around as we sat cross-legged on the same two, unused and unneeded speakers, that were off to the side and out of the way.

On top of being able to watch the stage crew breakdown and set up, we could also see almost the entire ballroom, which was lit up with blue and pink neon accent lights—in, under, and all around the massive bar that lined the back wall, parallel to the stage—where they continued along the perimeter of the floor before heading back up the walls.

Out in the crowd, fans talked to one another as Lil Baby and Gunna's latest hit shook the floor beneath us. The longer I looked around, the more time that passed, the harder it was to not get choked up. As we got closer to Judah stepping on stage, the energy got thicker, more excited, and full of anticipation. The vibe in the room was fucking amazing,

palpable, though it was clear who was here for publicity and who was here for the artists. I knew Judah's VIP fans were fiercely loyal to his music, to Judah himself, and it really showed in this specific crowd. Most of them sported Colt merch—both his newest material and the older stuff—some even wearing faded T-shirts with the cover of his very first single printed on the front.

Everyone in the room seemed to anxiously await his set, though there were quite a few fans wearing Sage's merch as well. It was common knowledge that the two of them were good friends, especially since they frequently produced music together. Sage didn't have the following that Judah did, but most of the fans supported both artists equally.

About twenty minutes later, I was starting to zone out from the weird sleep schedule last night, the exhaustion and commotion of today, as I sipped absently from the bottle of vodka. Then my name was called.

It was one of those moments where I just knew what would happen next would change everything. That nothing was going to go as planned. The night would no longer be easy.

Judah's voice sounded deeper, rougher, sexier than it ever had before. There was even a hint of violence in it, like if I didn't turn around, I might pay for it later.

Everything slowed around me as my heart rate picked up and the moment I'd been dreading was playing out in real time. Steeling myself, I looked to Frankie, who wasn't paying attention, and went for it.

I jumped down from the speaker and took a deep, fortifying breath, before heading in the direction of his voice.

There was a secluded area about ten feet away, hidden in the shadows, that would allow us to have a few minutes alone before he needed to become the guy everyone came to see. His voice came from that direction, so I walked straight there, trying not to bitch out, but I didn't immediately see him.

"Right here," he called from my left.

Turning quickly, my heart flew into my throat.

There he is.

TheColt.

Except, instead of the giddy feeling I should have felt when seeing my favorite artist of all time, right before he was going onstage to perform, my stomach bottomed out and a sweat broke out on my forehead. Goosebumps ignited on my skin as I scanned the black mesh tank he wore with bright pink jeans, as my eyes roamed over the matching Chucks and fucked up hair, styled messily on purpose. When my eyes met his, my heart cracked straight down the middle.

He was The motherfucking Colt.

Gone was my Judah, my skyscraper, and in his place was my savior. The voice in my ear at night, the reason I was still alive.

He was here, in the flesh, and I was...

Struggling to breathe through the onslaught of emotions that hit me all at once.

Shattered, scared, ashamed, in love, elated, and horribly sad—all of the above and all at the same time, the feeling was bone crushing. The sight of him hurt so bad, I almost hid it from him, almost tried to glance away and wipe the evidence from my face, but I knew the tears wouldn't stop. There was no point. They'd keep flowing until the show was done, until he was *my* Judah again. My skyscraper. Not the voice that told me to keep living. No, *that* guy was my secret. Mine and mine alone.

Except he isn't.

TheColt was not Judah. Judah was not TheColt.

Not until right now.

Another brick hit my chest.

He was Judah. But he was also TheColt.

He was famous. He was here, he was real, and he was looking at me like he knew I was tumbling quickly into a

breakdown I would struggle to come back from. But the most terrifying truth of all was, with him now standing in front of me like this, there was no longer a way that I could ignore the feelings I had for him. Any of them. Because he was bigger than the guy I met on Tuesday. He already had a larger role in my life, one that would add pressure to our fragile relationship, and I truly wasn't sure he could handle it.

He knew I tried to kill myself at some point, but he had no idea why and he had no idea what stopped me. That *he* stopped me. That he was the reason I was still breathing.

Except now it was personal, now I could have both. My savior and my newfound almost-happiness.

I wasn't sure I could do it. Wasn't sure I knew how.

How does one translate this awful, soul crushing, horrifying feeling into something good? How was I supposed to bite the bullet and watch this concert, knowing that the magnitude of my feelings would most likely kill us both?

My future was so goddamn uncertain, I had no idea what to expect and I was only supposed to be dipping my toe into risk, not throwing caution to the wind and diving head first into a whirlwind romance with TheColt. But based on the way he looked at me as he slowly but surely figured out that I was seconds from bolting, I wasn't getting out of this easily. Not without spilling blood first. Fear and desperation had begun to take over the features, those eyes widened ever so slightly, his lips flattened into a nervous line, until Judah's brain did what it did best and turned those two things into anger so fierce, that the emotion seemed to physically crash into his eyes, sending him forward and straight into my space.

Like a knife to the chest, his presence brought the pain, the memories, the night I tried to end it all.

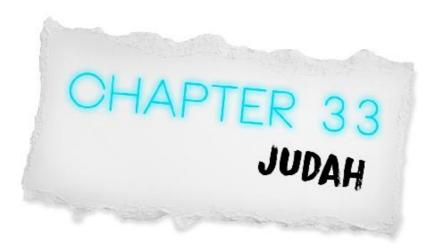
Judah Colt saved my life, and he had no idea.

I couldn't... I just...

Breathing was difficult, panic had taken hold, the room was spinning, Frankie...

Where's Frankie?

I needed to get the fuck out.



AS SOON AS Phoenix stepped into the shadows—only illuminated by the lights coming from the ballroom, from the crowd—her guard dropped straight to the floor and shattered before my eyes. The walls around her heart were blown to bits, and her brown eyes screamed in a way my mind couldn't properly compute. All I knew was something drastic had changed, and she wanted to leave.

My bird wanted to fly from the nest.

Absolutely fucking not.

I was in her face. "What the fuck is happening to you right now?" Sandpaper rubbed my throat as I talked, as the words squeezed their way up my rapidly closing throat.

If she walks away, I'll kill her.

"I can't," she whispered, shaking her head and trying to turn away from me, but I'd hit my limit. I flew right into selfpreservation mode, knowing that the only thing capable of making me feel good was about to bounce. I stopped that shit right in its tracks, grabbing her face between my hands, forcing her eyes to meet mine.

She was crying. There were fucking tears in her eyes.

My eyebrows met in the middle as I stared down at her, trying to figure out what happened. But the longer it took me to figure it out, the tighter my chest got, the sicker my stomach felt, the closer my heart got to exposing itself to her. The stupid fucking organ was thrashing in my chest, aching to chew its way through my skin and toward the girl in front of me. My heart wanted her, I wanted her, my dick sure as fuck wanted her, and Phoenix fucking Royal wanted me—she was just too scared of *something* to admit it.

Which meant... "You're lying to me right now."

Hard voice again, my body was locking up. *She lied about something*.

I was proven correct as soon as she looked down and to the left. Her breathing wasn't normal. She was worked up as she tried to explain, "Judah, I really—"

"No," I cut her off, mature enough, man enough, smart enough to see that my bird was broken. "Whatever the fuck this is—it means you lied. Somewhere along the line, you fucked up, you kept a secret, and now it's back to haunt you."

She said nothing.

I looked above her head and out into the crowd, scanning the faces I could see, focusing on the bodies of the ones I couldn't. I tried counting to ten, tried to stop my hands from shaking on her face, where they still held her cheeks, but I couldn't. So, I dropped the hold I had on her and stepped back completely, giving her room, hating the space, wanting to run and hide from the distance between us.

"Get out," I spat, knowing it was coming and beating her to it. "Go the fuck home."

Through her tears, confusion bloomed on her pretty face, and I found I was right back at the beach last night. Her tears did sparkle. They were fucking beams of precious see-through light, and if we lived in a fantasy world, I'd be willing to bet that each drop of emotion would turn to glass as they fell off her face. She was that perfect, that beautiful, and so far away from being mine, it was driving me straight for destruction.

She couldn't even speak.

I'd lost her.

No fucking way I'm losing you.

"What did you do?" I demanded, near shouting. "What the fuck are you hiding?"

"I can't explain—" She looked around, cutting herself off as her chest jumped on a sob. "Please, just—"

Quicker than she was anticipating, I reached out a hand and wove it into the curtain of her brown hair, gripping the side of her face. Using the leverage, I pulled her into my chest with tears pricking my own eyes. I knew it then.

Whatever she didn't want to tell me was capable of taking her away from me for good.

But I just got you, Baby Bird.

It hurt too fucking much, too loud. I scratched my chest, trying to find the words to say as my heart fell apart. The pressure, the pain, it all made me want to return the favor—rip her head from her shoulders, fuck her best friend, do something just to get a rise out of her.

Scream at me, tell me what I did, what you did—why won't we work? Why are you leaving?

With her shaking body pressed up against mine, she didn't melt into me like I expected, and it tipped me right over the edge.

"Fuck this." I shoved her away, sending her stumbling into the shadows.

As fast as I could, I gathered up the pieces of my shattered soul, threw them into a room in my mind, and locked the fucking door. Didn't even know if I had to key to open it again.

Didn't care.

Fuck her.

I had a show to perform.



"WHAT THE HELL is going on over here?"

Pretty sure it was Frankie talking, but I couldn't see straight enough to register her face. Couldn't get past the mountain of nightmares that had somehow detonated in my chest. The memories attacked my brain, stealing my vision and only leaving me with the sight of my father with a gun in his hand.

I just wanted to know why he did it, how he could do it, what pushed him to pull the fucking trigger.

Because here I was—his fucking daughter—questioning if the same thing would happen to me.

Except, this wasn't my fault. This was fate's doing, that rotten fucking bitch. Setting me up to fail, leaving me to decide between Judah's life and my own happiness, because I had no other fucking choice.

I had no answers, no facts, no one to tell me it was safe to fall in love.

I'd *just* clawed my way up from the pit of hell. I was standing on solid ground for the first time in my adult life, and then I met Judah Colt.

"Phoenix!" Frankie was in front of me then, shaking my shoulders, trying to meet my eyes. But I was numb, blank.

He walked away.

Pretty sure that was his voice in the background, his music playing somewhere in the distance. Sort of sounded like he was underwater. Or maybe I was. Maybe I was drowning.

Either way, the reality bus had just driven up on my front lawn so the driver could point out that Judah Colt, the guy I met on a rooftop, was the same guy who put me to sleep every night, the guy who kept me breathing. I was doing just fine pretending this wasn't true. I buried it, did everything I could to avoid this moment, except "everything I could" was a crock of shit because I was useless against my feelings for both versions of him.

It was all just...too much.

"P, babe, I can't hear you." Hmm, I must have said that bit out loud. Frankie sounded worried.

She probably should be.

"Is she okay?" I heard another female, ask but I tuned it out. I think they kept talking.

At some point, an arm encircled my waist and my feet started to move me forward, but I saw nothing, made none of those decisions myself.

I was blank. Numb.

Because I was already in love with Judah Colt.

I need to stop saying his first and last name like that. He's just Judah.

Judah.

Just Judah.

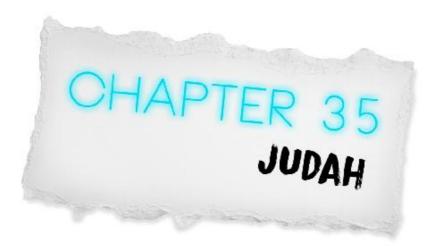
I think I shook my head. No, he wasn't just Judah, though, was he?

He was the other half to my soul.

The other half to my soul.

I guessed that's when it hit me.

He was my twin flame.



HALFWAY THROUGH THE SET, as I was screaming my shit into the mic, reliving the lyrics, speaking all the truths I dared to speak too soon...I realized something.

Sure, I didn't give Phoenix a chance to speak and I definitely didn't ask enough questions, but even still, she was flighty. She'd find a way, an excuse, a reason to not pursue this, no matter how hard I fought for her.

But she didn't get to just walk away.

The sound was right, the audience was lit, but the whole vibe felt wrong without Phoenix in the building.

She left, and I felt it when she did. I knew the instant she was gone, in a cab and on her way home. If you asked me how I knew, I'd say, "The light left with her."

Because it did. I was dark again, thinking about not seeing her again, not ever knowing what changed her mind.

Nah, we weren't finished. Not even close. She lied, and she was going to admit it. She was going to tell me the truth, no matter how bad it looked, how bad it sounded. I didn't give a fuck because that truth was *mine*. She owed it to me, because she tried to keep it in the first place.

So as the song faded, as Pharaoh slammed his sticks into cymbals and Pierce's fingers flew across the strings, I prepared to fuck shit up. Phoenix was my little bird, and one of her biggest fears seemed to be my fame, the fucking paparazzi, but unfortunately for her, they weren't going away. She needed to take all that extra energy she used up by worrying about shit like that and throw it into something good. Like me and her. Together. Real deal.

"All right, Los Angeles, I've got one last song for you," I breathed into the mic, my lips brushing against the metal. "But this one goes out to the little bird who broke my heart tonight."

The crowd erupted in a sea of booing, some even screamed "Fuck her!" and as messed up as it was, the sound made me smile.

"Now, now, I'm not done with her yet, so save the negativity for the break-up." It sounded like one collective laugh, that's how intense, in tune, and in sync this crowd was. I let the camera connected to the big screen above my head catch the smirk on my face as I put both hands on the mic and held it like a lover. "It's okay though, Colts, because I'm going to get her tonight and I'm going to bring her back to the nest. But before I do that, here's a little song called 'Heartless Romantic."

This one was perfect for her. It felt like something she needed to hear.

Smiling as the chords to the song flared to life, I felt better than I did before, knowing that I'd just sent the snakes into the hills. I could see them, shuffling through the crowd to get to the exit, where they'd call their bosses, explain the headline, and get the go ahead to stalk me until the little bird was found, caught, and named. The price would be huge, six figures at least.

No more running, Baby Bird. I just clipped your wings.



I WOKE up in my own bed at three AM.

The room was pitch black, the sheets were twisted around me, my hair was matted to my face and...crunchy? Like it had been wet? *Ew. What the fuck?*

I didn't even remember coming home, or leaving...oh, god.

Bang, bang, bang. "Phoenix!"

My head snapped toward the sound. Someone was knocking on the door. At three o'clock in the goddamn morning!

"Phoenix Royal, open this fucking door before I kick it the fuck in!" a male voice shouted as more banging filled the house. I knew I should get up and do something, but I couldn't move because it was Judah screaming out front, and if I really was hearing his voice this late at night, that must have meant the past twelve hours weren't just a horrible nightmare.

His voice meant I wasn't trapped in a dream world. I was trapped in the real one.

"Phoenix, what the fuck?" Frankie threw open my door to the bathroom. "I'm gonna kill him, I swear to god. Are we letting him in or sending him home? And make it quick before I pitch a fucking fit." My best friend needed her sleep, she was the worst when woken, but for some reason, I still couldn't speak. I wanted to say I'm sorry—for the intrusion, for my behavior last night, for Judah—but I couldn't form the words.

I met her eyes and didn't hide a thing, letting her see that I wasn't much better off than I had been the night before, and the irritated look in her eye became one of concern nearly instantly. She moved toward my bed, sighing. "I'm being a bitch and you're clearly going through it, so why don't you tell me as fast as fucking possible, what you'd like me to do about the raving lunatic out front?"

I tried to clear my throat, but it was too dry for even that. "Fuck today, man," I rasped, reaching over to grab the day-old glass of water on my nightstand, ignoring the nausea in my stomach from lack of food.

"It's kinda quiet out there," Frankie whispered. "Think he went home?"

I swallowed a massive gulp, then said, "Not a chance in hell."

"He's here to find out why you left, isn't he?"

"Yup." I took another sip.

"Do you want my opinion yet?" she asked, not bothering to hold back.

I scoffed, bitter. "I already know your opinion."

"Oh?" she questioned, her blonde eyebrows raised.

Here we go.

I held her stare, needing to make sure we were really on the same page, because if we were...then there was nothing I could do about this feeling in my chest, the unknowns up ahead. They'd haunt me like my dad did, probably worse.

"Why did you have to show me that article?" I groaned, flopping back on the bed as dread leaked through my system and infected everything. She knew what I was referring to—the night that taught us all about the connection that I suspected Judah and I shared. That first girls' night, the one I

had no idea how to participate in. "Why did you have to bring it up at all?"

"I didn't." She laughed, sadly. "You insisted that we put away our phones for the night and read a magazine instead."

Right, because I was trying to stop myself from looking Judah up and staring at his pictures.

"Tell me no next time." Running two hands down my face, I breathed out a harsh breath and sat up. "I need to handle this, but it...might get loud."

"I'll put music on or something," she said. "I mean, at least you guys are hot when you fight." I raised an eyebrow, causing her to slap my arm with the back of her hand. "Bitch, don't pretend like you two even cared about your surroundings over the last two days. I've been a witness to two fights so far, and in one of them, his hand was around your neck."

"Uh..." I laughed, standing from the bed to run a hand through my hair in front of the mirror. "You didn't think to help me? He could have been legitimately choking me."

She gave me a dry look. "We all know he wasn't. You looked hot and bothered, and so did he. Y'all are dirty, dirty freaks." She was making jokes to help calm the storm in my head but it did very little to actually soothe anything.

"Sex with Judah is the last thing on my mind right now. First, I need to figure out how to talk to him without one of us pissing the other off." *And how to tell him about everything else*.

"Or you can stop thinking so much and just let whatever happens, happen," she suggested with a shrug. "All I'm saying is, you guys have *that* connection. The one everyone hears songs about but rarely ever experiences. Own it. Get messy."

As much fun as that sounded... "Our mess isn't fun, Franks. None of what I'm going through right now, because of him and all the shit he stirs up, is fun."

"Because you're letting your damage ruin the good in it." She followed me into the bathroom. I needed to brush my teeth. "The only thing I'll say for tonight is, get it all out of

your system. Tell him how you feel, tell him what you think about what we've both discovered, and then go from there. But don't stop because..." She paused, looking up at the ceiling to blow out a breath before looking back at me. She continued, "Don't stop this thing just because you're afraid you'll end up like your dad. I think Judah can handle that fear. Let him."

I swear, this girl is a witch.

She was always able to read situations, people, me, and once again, she was right. I nodded. "I'll try."

"Good, thank you." She gave me a sharp nod and a wink right after, before spinning for her room. "I'm going back to bed. You handle the home invader and let me know if you need anything."

After she was gone, I stripped out of the stupid dress that I was somehow still in and threw on an extra-large hoodie over a pair of cotton shorts. Slipping my feet into my slippers, I swallowed the anxiety in hopes that he would be sane enough to hear me out right now.

My hand was on the doorknob just a millisecond after he shouted my name, so when he lifted his fist to slam it against the door, I pulled it open before he could land the blow. He didn't even stumble, just dropped his fist and stared at me.

Fucking hell.

He was drunk, probably high too, if his eyes were any indication, but I couldn't find it in me to care about that when he looked so fucking heartbroken. Everything I was trying to avoid stared back at me, and my own heart cried out in response.

He'd changed into black joggers and a yellow hoodie, adding a snapback to cover his hair. I wondered if he went out after the concert, where he got drunk, but I didn't get the chance to ask because he spoke first.

In a voice so battered and abused, it made me want to turn back time and do it all differently he said, "You fucking left." Nothing came after, not for another few seconds. Then he exploded right on my porch. "You left me with a fucking show to perform, Phoenix! All because you're a goddamn liar."

I wasn't a liar, not really. I just wasn't ready to talk about it before now, but how was he supposed to know that? My hidden secret looked a whole lot like a lie, so I couldn't blame him for questioning me, even though I wanted to.

Don't explode, this is how he handles things. He's hurt, and you're the one who hurt him. Just make it better.

"Come on." I grabbed his hand—which was dangling at his side with little to no life in it until our fingers brushed. Instantly, he gripped my fingers. I went to pull him inside, but somehow, the contact must have turned on all of his internal lights because he flipped the script and pulled me out of the house, onto the porch, and into the driveway. I was left gaping at him as nervous energy cracked between us.

"Sit," he barked softly, pointing at the blacktop.

I did, folding my legs under me, letting the hoodie cover the tops of my thighs. It was chilly outside, since it was the middle of the night, but I had a feeling that I wouldn't even notice the weather for much longer. He lowered himself to the driveway, sitting next to me with his elbows on his knees, reminding me a little of the rooftop, except here, there weren't any twinkling lights or shiny objects to get distracted by. It was just us and our problems.

And it was fucking silent.

Until he broke that silence about five minutes later with, "Can we start over?"

I sucked in a lungful of air, exhaling relief. Thank the universe that he was willing to fight for this, because if it was left up to me, we would have stayed broken forever. "We probably should."

His eyes hit the side of my face. "So...that means you want this?"

Yes. "We don't even know what this is," I said instead, pulling the extra material of my hoodie up around my neck, needing to feel the weighted sense of false security.

He was still watching me, his chin resting on his shoulder. "What do you want it to be?"

I looked at him then, meeting his blue eyes, taking in the chiseled lines of his face, his lips...god, his lips. I didn't want to be just his friend, but how was I going to explain that without going into detail about everything else?

"Baby Bird," Judah whispered roughly. "Just spit it out. Please."

I wasn't ready to tell him about my parents, so I had one other option that I could distract him with first. He was begging me to put him out of his misery because he'd already gone and gotten attached, but now I couldn't even blame him, because there was a name for what we were. What we meant to each other. Unfortunately for me, this was one of those things in life that you either believed in or you didn't, there was generally no in between. But Frankie and I? We believed. Her maybe more than me, but even still, I couldn't deny it now.

"Do you have a cigarette? Or a blunt?" I chuckled sadly. "I need help for this conversation."

He clicked his tongue, producing a blunt from behind the ear I couldn't see. "Stoner city over here, baby."

I laughed quietly, shaking my head as he lit up and took a couple hits while I waited for him to pass it over. When he did and I was on my way to high enough to spill my secrets, I started. "Have you heard of twin flames?"

"No," he admitted, laying down on the driveway and looking up at the sky. I expected him to be more tense, but I guessed because I was talking, he felt better. I watched in fascination as he blew smoke rings into the air around us.

Yeah, the bees are back in my stomach. He's so fucking hot.

When he went out of his way to look at me, I realized I was still staring at him and quickly cleared my throat. "Sorry, I'm clearly still subconsciously trying to avoid this conversation."

"Why?" he asked, sounding sincere.

"Because it's one of those things that you may or may not believe," I admitted, watching him take another hit.

"How about you just lay it on me, and we'll go from there." He passed me the blunt, placing both hands in the pocket of his hoodie and looking back up to the stars.

He was talking normally, but there was a hint of something in his voice that I couldn't figure out.

"All right, fine." I paused again, really fucking nervous to tell him. *Rip the band-aid off.* I went for it. "Twin flames are supposed to be a level up from soulmates. Experts say that at some point before humans settle into their physical selves, we shared a soul with someone and that soul eventually splits in half, leaving one side to each person." I really hoped he wasn't going to think I was nuts, but I continued, "There are a ton of articles and shit about it online. But anyway, one night a few months ago, Frankie and I had a girls' night. We bought magazines and did a whole bunch of girly shit. But there was an article in *Cosmopolitan* that talked about the twin flame theory, and we've been fascinated by the idea ever since."

It was silent for a beat, before his confusion became evident. "Ooookay? And?"

I laughed a sad sound. "And I think you're mine."

Refusing to look at him, I set the blunt down, not even bothering to stamp out the cherry, just letting it die out on the driveway next to me while I tried to think of ways to bury myself alive.

"You're serious," he stated. It wasn't a question.

Yes. "I mean—" I started, but he quickly cut me off as he sat up and put his index finger over my lips.

"Hold on, I'm looking them up." He had his phone already out and his fingers flew across the screen for a few moments before I watched his eyes scan back and forth as he read an article.

Biting my lip, it felt like my stomach was made of rope, as his facial expression seemed to change with every new piece of information he read. I assumed he was figuring out that twin flames weren't exactly a love match.

"Okay, I found an article," he stated, still staring at the screen. He tilted his head and cringed a little. "Well...okay, it's not really an article but it's a Pinterest post. 'Seven Major Signs that You've Met Your Twin Flame.'" He paused, looking me in the eye. "We're gonna read them."

What? "We are?"

"Yup. Let's see if we fit the description." He shrugged.

"Soooo..." I dragged the word out. "You believe in this stuff?"

He paused to consider, handing me his phone for some reason, before laying back down. "I believe in anything that feels real. So let's just see if we fit any of these signs on the list, but so far, so good."

So far, so good. There was no fucking way I was actually getting away with bringing up twin flames with Judah Colt, right? Except, there I was again, saying his first and last name like he was above me in some way. He wasn't. He was just as broken, just as annoying, just as fucking crazy as me. And I was still holding his phone, so I held it up, "I'm the one reading these?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "I like your voice."

"My voice?" I squeaked, caught off guard.

He chuckled. "Yup. Now read."

Well, when he put it like that. On instinct, I cleared my throat. "All right. Number one is, 'you felt a strange, inexplicable sense of recognition when you met them."

"Definitely," Judah said instantly.

My heart both warmed and crashed in my chest, because fuck me, he had no idea the magnitude of my feelings for him *before* we even met. Now, the longer I stared at him, the more aware I became...he was going to lose his fucking mind when I told him the truth.

"What about you?" His voice wasn't as confident this time, probably because I'd gotten lost in my head.

"One hundred percent," I choked out.

"Good. Next one, Baby Bird."

"Okay, uh..." I scanned the photo, reading ahead. *Fuck me*. "You have an immediate feeling they're going to play a very important role in your life."

I looked down just as he looked up, and we were back to our usual dance, watching each other with more emotion than we knew what to do with.

"I'd say that's a yes," he whispered, looking back up to the sky as the mood started slinking into somber territories. The weight of the truth was starting to settle on our shoulders.

"You've established an immediate, intense connection with them."

Judah scoffed. "This is kinda creepy."

"You feel as though you've fin—" I couldn't help it. Moisture formed at the edges of my eyes as the words sank in. I started over, repeating, "You feel as though you've finally found a...home or safe place."

For this one, he sat up. "It says that?"

I nodded, choked up. "You're able to be your authentic self without the fear of rejection, persecution, or judgement." I shook my head and met his eyes. "Okay, that's not us."

"It's not?" Judah laughed a little, and the sound had me suddenly aware of how close he was. His face was just a few inches from mine as he said, "I choked you out yesterday—and not exactly the fun kind—yet, here you are, telling me you believe our connection is bigger, stronger than soulmates. Come on now, that sounds like you accepted me for my authentic self. And here I am, sitting next to you after you ran off for a reason I *still* don't know. I'm accepting that you run when shit gets hard. It is what it is. So, keep going, that one applies too."

Goddamn him. But he had a fucking point, and if Judah really was my twin flame, then my...dedication to his music made sense, my feelings for him made sense—more than before, at least. So I said nothing, just looked back down at his phone, reading, "'You both embody the yin and yang.""

When I looked over, his nose was wrinkled in confusion. "What the hell does that mean?"

I couldn't help the laugh that fell out. "You don't know what yin and yang means?"

He clicked his tongue and tilted his head, regarding me with a blank expression. "Phoenix."

"Right, okay." I chuckled shakily, shifting on the driveway. The fucking concrete stopped being comfortable after minute one. "Yin and yang are opposite but complementary energies. One cannot exist without the other. Like night and day," I explained. "But in relationship speak, it would mean that I both want to fuck you as much as I want you to fuck me."

Still confused. "I'm sorry?"

This time I let go of a real laugh, one that felt good, coming all the way from the restless part of my stomach. "Sorry, your face."

"Now she's laughing at me." He scowled at me, laying back down. "Whatever, I'm pretty sure everyone knows I wanna fuck you, and you *definitely* wanna fuck me, so we're good there. Keep it movin'. One more right?"

"That's not really what it means, but whatever." I shook my head. "Also, I'm not sure where you got your information from or who *everyone* is, but I'll let it slide." *Because it's true*. "And, yes, last one. 'You feel a sense of expansion with them, as though you are larger than your limited identity." I paused, letting the words sink in. Then scrunched my nose. "Ehh, that one got a little preachy."

"But," Judah started, "I think that one applies too."

I paused, read it over again, then asked, "How?"

"My life feels—I don't know—more *full*, I guess, since I met you. Almost like wherever you are, I can still feel you. So whenever we aren't together, it feels like my soul is being stretched across the city...AKA 'larger than your limited identity."

Holy fuck.

"Right," was all I could say.

He was handling this too well, seemingly accepting things that should have been impossible for him to understand.

"I think it makes a whole lot more fucking sense now that I know there's a word for it—or two words, I guess—but at least there's a meaning. At least we have a reason," he said, sounding genuine as hell. Curious, cautious, but genuine. His blue eyes scanned my face. "I claimed you, and you claimed me, right?"

I would have had more to say, but I had yet to tell him about the role he played in my life long before we met, and I knew that he hadn't called me insane for believing we shared a soul at one point. I needed to just do it. He was too happy, and I wasn't done. "Judah, there's...more."

"More...what?" He studied me with that hesitantly curious expression.

"More evidence," I gritted out, looking to the left to try and slow my heart rate down.

I felt a hand under my chin and nearly closed my eyes. But I knew it had to be done, so I kept them open as Judah pulled my face toward his. "You're not getting rid of me now, so you might as well just tell me."

He was so serious, so present, so ready to listen to me, that it had me tripping over my words, my fears. "I-I—can't. You're gonna hate me."

"Maybe." He nodded, pulling away with that bad boy swag full of confidence he didn't always show. "But I'll love you as much as I hate you, always equal, yin and yang." "Still not sure you understand the concept," I whispered, trying to ignore what he said. Those three words were capable of so much damage.

"Doesn't mean it's not true," he whispered back. "How about you stop stalling and tell me what you did to fuck this up so we can fight about it and move on."

I laughed sadly, unable to deny his stupid charm. "I didn't fuck it up—at least, I don't think I did. But fine, just don't... freak out."

Rather than promise me he wouldn't, he just held my gaze with impatient expectations swimming in those blue depths.

Breathe through it. Once it's over, it's over. He'll know about it, and you can move on. "Six months ago, I tried to kill myself and 'Heartless Romantic' saved my life. It was the first song of yours that I'd ever heard. I, uh, I—" I coughed a little. "I couldn't go through with it."

He whipped his head to glare at the side of my face. "Come again?"

I closed my eyes. "You heard me."

I didn't bother grinding my teeth together or getting angry, knowing he'd handle both of those things for us.

"I need more than that, Phoenix," he growled. "Why did you try and kill yourself? How...how did you find that song? How was *that* the first one?"

He was panicked, afraid of my reality, and hearing it all in his voice sent the words tumbling from my mouth in a bitter string of sound. "My father shot my mother in cold blood when I was thirteen, then turned the gun and shot himself... while I watched." I wrapped my hands around my knees. "Been fucked ever since."

It was silent, but there was no fucking way I could look at him, not with all my shit on display. So, I went on, "No one knows what happened. He came home from work one day while I was playing with some fake makeup my mom had gotten me for my birthday. I wanted to see him so badly, I dropped everything and ran into the living room. My dad was

a defense attorney, so he worked long as hell hours, and whenever he was home, I tried to spend as much time with him as possible." I felt the tears building as the truths got deeper. "I loved him so much, you know? I wanted more attention, and I think my mom did too, but they never let me see them fight. I never witnessed the two of them even so much as arguing. But that day? He wasn't even the same man, I swear to you. He was..." I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to swallow the sob in my throat. "He was completely unhinged. Something in him fucking snapped, and I saw it as soon as I entered the room. It was like he was trying to hide the evidence of his madness, so he shot her, killed my mother right in front of me. A bullet clean between her eyes. He panicked, I saw it on his face, but he didn't say anything." Rivers of water fell from my cheeks. "I can't help but wonder what would have happened if I had just kept playing, you know? Because he shot himself so fast, I believe he did it just so he didn't have to explain himself to me. I was thirteen. Fucking thirteen years old. My mom was dead, my dad was dead, they were two bodies bleeding all over our living room floor with me just...standing there."

I was having a hard time catching my breath, but Judah had yet to come near me. Fearing that my story was too much, I kept going, because I wasn't about to sit in silence while he figured his shit out. My story was what it was. "I spent the first year after their deaths trying to get answers. I wanted, no, needed, to find out why he killed her, why he just fucking snapped, you know? Because he loved my mother, Judah. I know he did. But he was a different man that day, and it's haunted me ever since."

There was a string hanging from the sleeve of my hoodie that quickly became the object of my fascination as I kept talking through a wall of fresh tears. "No one could tell me anything. No doctors, therapists, psychologists. There isn't enough information on murder-suicide since all the victims are dead by the end. All they have left is me, the one they left behind, to tell them about his behavior that day. But I only saw him for a matter of seconds before it all happened." The frustration was back full force. "No one could tell me a

goddamn fucking thing. All I wanted to know was what caused it. How did my loving, attentive—albeit busy—father, just lose his fucking mind one day and kill my mother? How? And beyond that...will it happen to me? When will I snap? Will it be when I'm in love like he was, thirty years into the marriage? Or will it happen randomly when I'm just having a good day? Or even a bad day? How am I supposed to live like this? Being afraid of my own mind? With those kinds of questions?" The tears flowed too hard for me to catch, so I stopped trying. "When I got no answers, I shut down. I was so fucking scared, Judah." My voice cracked as a sob crushed my chest. "I couldn't hang around my friends, do schoolwork, go to the grocery store—not without seeing the differences between everyone else and me. They had a life, plans, goals, dreams, while I was stuck wondering if tomorrow would be the day I broke like he did. So, six months before my college graduation, I stole a bottle of Percocet from a guy I knew and planned to swallow the contents because why continue to torture myself? Why spend every day afraid to love? Our love kills. My father loved my mother, he spent every day caring for our family and yet, he obliterated it one sunny afternoon. He killed her, then himself. And since no one could tell me anything, I was left to assume that I would meet the same fate." The next pause was lengthy. I sniffed, wiping my nose with the sleeve of my hoodie. "In a weak moment, after four years of running around numb as fuck, trying to shut off any and all feelings, quiet my mind, get lost in...anything...I couldn't take it anymore. I was ready. But right before I uncapped the bottle, I heard your voice in my ear for the first time. There's this playlist someone made on Spotify called 'Songs everyone should hear before they die' and 'Heartless Romantic' was the first song that played. And the last verse..." I turned to look at him then, with the evidence of my pain written in tiny waterfalls down my cheeks. "That last fucking verse."

I ended on another sob, rested my forehead on my arms, and let the nightmare eat me alive.



"THAT LAST FUCKING VERSE."

I knew it well. Better than all my other songs.

But the thing was, I knew what Phoenix needed now, and it wasn't for me to hold her. She didn't need me to baby her, to coddle her, and tell her that life is full of good, even when it looks bad. Because to kids like us, it isn't good. It's almost never good, because how can it be? When we've got the voices of those who crushed our spirits long before we even had the chance to taste real life screaming so loudly in our heads, it's almost all we can focus on.

This was one of those moments where humbled was all I could feel, because she was right. Phoenix was right.

She was my twin flame.

Except, I almost lost her.

Before I even had her.

Before our perfectly timed smoke break, I saved her life. My words, my music, my sound. Me. I saved her life.

And then I picked this song for her tonight, dedicated it to her in front of a sea of people, made a big show of it too, one that would no doubt bite me in the ass tomorrow morning. There was no room for questioning it anymore. I didn't have to. I felt her pain like I was experiencing it all on my own, which is how I knew that now wasn't the time for cuddling or

soft kisses. It was time for me to man the fuck up and give her the same respect she gave me.

I said before that broken screamed to broken, and man, was she screaming now. Phoenix needed something from me. From one shattered soul to another.

Every tear that fell was a cry to be understood. Little by little, I realized she wanted me to tell her I got it, I was just as fucked, that it was okay to be broken and I'd love her anyways, because I was broken too. There was no going back now, no confusion about my feelings, no need to question her loyalty, because I felt Phoenix Royal in the marrow of my bones. She was in my heart, in my head, in the tips of my fingers. She breathed new life into me, but that didn't mean we were ready for all this. Because we weren't. Not even a little bit.

But it seemed that fate, the universe, god, or the devil—whoever deserved the credit for this—didn't give a fuck about our timing, our plan, our wants and needs. None of those things mattered anymore, because she was here and she was mine.

My little bird ripped herself open for me, and I now understood where her damage stemmed from.

Now I just wanted to pull her into my lap and strangle her little ass for not saying something sooner, while somehow, simultaneously, gluing myself to her so that we never had to be apart. But she was quiet and looking away from me. Her shoulders were shaking, her heart bleeding all over the driveway, and she was fucking killing me.

It was my turn now, to do what she needed me to do and return the favor. Open myself up, give her a glimpse of what made me into the guy she's spent the last week thinking about. The emotions though, the memories, they clogged my throat as I started to speak, because who wanted to go back in time and relive the shit all over again? No one. None of us. The moment when true damage occurred wasn't something *anyone* wanted to relive. And if they did...what happened to them was probably just *that* fucked up.

But I had to, because her father killed her mother right in front of her, and that was horrifying for even me to think about. I didn't want to, but I did it for her.

Looking at her profile, I started, "I grew up in Pennsylvania, in a small ass fucking town, in a dirty trailer park with a monster for a father and loosely dedicated mother." I laughed sadly, "That's actually generous of me, saying 'loosely dedicated,' because I still believe she never should have become a mother in the first fucking place. She should have aborted me."

Phoenix choked on a sob, waking up my own tear ducts. I blinked the moisture away. "She was a prick, you know? It was always my fault, no matter that most of the time it was my father who pissed her off. But it didn't matter, she fucking hated me, Phoenix. To this day, I have no idea what I did to her, but my father could kick the shit out of both of us and that woman would end up fucking his brains out in the bedroom while I tended to my own wounds. It was two against one, every fucking day. Except, I was the one standing alone. I was stuck somewhere in the middle of them, being used as a trigger, a big red button they both liked to press when they wanted a nice hit of toxicity."

It sounded more fucked up when I said it out loud, which is why I generally tried not to. "One time, she threw a pot of macaroni and cheese at me because not only would it leave burns all over me, but it would piss my father off. He didn't like unnecessary messes, and my mother was constantly creating them so he would punish her." I laughed a bitter sound. I mean, really? Who the fuck was this woman? "She loved his pain more than she loved me, which is ironic, since she left me *and* him."

I felt her stare hit the side of my face, could see her expression from my peripheral. It was almost identical to mine when she dropped her suicide bomb. Shocked, angry, scared, outraged. I sniffed and laughed at the same time. "Yup, she bounced when I was thirteen, same age as you were. She said something juvenile like, 'I'm sick of living in this fucking shit hole' and slammed the door behind her. Dad said she'd be

back, but she never showed up, and for every day she didn't come back, he beat me because he couldn't beat her. Except, I didn't like the pain. At least, not until I learned how to inflict it."

Digging this shit up was isolating. Phoenix was there, but I wasn't. I was trapped in the past, watching it all play out in front of me. Feeling the hits, seeing the hookers, the broken beer bottles and cigarette butts all over the place. I kept going, "Everything I feel now turns to anger. It doesn't matter if I'm happy or sad, scared or worried, even insecure—it all translates into anger so loud, it takes over every thought I have. And I don't know how to stop my brain from registering one emotion for the other without medication, but the meds made me *really* insane." I sighed. "The sick shit is, a part of me likes it—now that I know how to avoid the punches I don't want to take—because I can protect myself *and* the fragile state of my mind with my fists. I know it isn't healthy, I know I'll end up getting myself into some serious fucking trouble, but doctors don't help—"

"No, they don't," she interrupted. "All you have is yourself." I didn't say anything, knowing she wasn't quite done. A moment later she whispered, "It's up to us to *want* to fight the demons and set goals to get better, because if we don't, we'll drown."

We both fell quiet, letting the empty air talk for a little while. Dumping all of this on her should have been embarrassing or even too soon, but I wasn't feeling either of those things. In fact, it felt so good having it out there, I couldn't help but be a little pissed that we hadn't done this from the start.

Phoenix was letting the tears on her face air dry as she watched the house across the street. I doubted she was actually seeing anything, based on the blank expression and the fact that she hadn't blinked in over a minute, but she was in that head of hers, working out what I said, trying to pack it all away into the appropriate filing cabinets.

She had no idea that my shit couldn't be sorted like that, and I had a feeling that hers couldn't be either, but she was

going to try.

Then something dawned on me. "We're the same, you know." I didn't want to look away from her now, loving how small she looked, how broken she was, how I thought I might have actually found someone who understood me. "My mom taught me that sometimes, love and pain walk hand in hand. And you learned to believe that your love kills. Which is essentially the same thing."

"Except, it's not," she argued sadly. When she looked at me, my eyes found her lips, zoning in on the way they'd been bitten into and gnawed on, like she spent the whole conversation using her teeth to tear the flesh apart. Blood was pooled in one spot so every once in a while, her tongue peaked out to lick it clean. I wanted to know what she tasted like, wanted to sink *my* teeth into those lips, but she spoke again, and this time, she was more animated, she was more upset than before. "What if I fall in love with you and then snap, just like my dad did?" The question fell from her mouth in a rush of sounds and syllables. "What if I can't handle a fight we have or maybe we have *too* good of a day, or someone says something to me that I don't like, or I don't even know! That's the fucking problem. It's not like I could ask my dad what happened to him that day because he's fucking *dead*, and I just "

"Stop." I reached out and put a hand over her mouth to try and shut her up for second, but she wasn't having it. She shoved my arm away.

"No." She shook her head with terror in her eyes as tears soaked her cheeks again. "I need you to tell me I'm not crazy, that I won't kill you in two years, that my head is on straight, and I'm not anything like my father."

Her panic got me worked up. It was going to get loud out here if she didn't calm down, but what she was saying? It proved that she had every excuse in the book to walk away from me. She could even say she was saving my life, and fuck if I could blame her? She wanted me to tell her she was sane, that everything would be okay between us and she was overthinking it but...

"I can't do that, Phoenix!" I nearly shouted, not knowing what to do with her fears. I could do it, I could try and put it all back together for her, fix her soul with my love, but I didn't fucking want to. I didn't want to fix her because, despite everything she told me, I didn't think she needed fixing. "I can't give you a different answer than the doctors did, just like you can't tell me why I want to flip tables right now—*I just do*. So yeah, I want to flip tables, I want to throw shit just to see it break, and *you* could snap at any moment. Well? I told you we were a match made in hell—you didn't believe me."

"We're a *match*? Are you insane? That's what you're getting from this?" She laughed without humor, getting louder in the driveway. "We're a disaster waiting to happen, and we both knew it long before right now."

"Long before?" I sneered, standing up. I was ready to lose it. "No, you can't say that because we *just* met. We're *just* figuring this out. You're trying to make it seem like we've been at this forever, and it just isn't working. But you want the truth? Stand up and I'll give it to you."

She eyed me for a moment, no doubt trying to decide if she wanted to be difficult about it or just hear me out. She decided on the latter, standing up and facing me with a reluctant but curious huff. She had no idea that I was about to obliterate her fears and give her no excuses.

I closed the distance, looking down at her while she looked off to the side. "Phoenix, look at me."

When she did, there were such a wide variety of emotions, fears, questions, written all over her face. I wanted to make the ache go away, but I loved it all the same. She was vulnerable and disheveled, but damn, was she pretty. I grabbed the sides of her neck and brushed my thumbs along her jawline, resting my forehead against hers. She was shaking. "The article said that twin flames push each other. They're a mirror, the other half to one shared soul, and the connection is immediate. But it also said most relationships between twin flames don't work out because typically, one wants to move forward, grow, reach all of their potential, while the other one lacks in that area. Fights change." Our breath mingled as her tears slid down the

length of my thumb. "But you and me? We can get better, or not. We can fight for a better future, or not. Either way, the future is uncertain, unpredictable, and all we have left is our own instincts." This was the important part, so I added a little pressure to where my forehead met hers. "Phoenix, every single one of mine are saying that if you're the devil that will serve me my death sentence, then that's the way I'll go. I won't question it, I don't even want to, because I don't care how long we live, how long this lasts, or how messy it gets, as long as I spend the time I have left fucking shit up and getting messy with *you*."

"Judah—" she tried, but I kept going.

"I'm not afraid of death, Phoenix, never have been. But I'm afraid of living life without you in it."

"We just met," she cried softly, lost in haunted memories.

"That means nothing," I insisted.

"You're rich, famous, and so far out of my reach, I can't even see you."

"That's because you've got blinders on, P." I lifted my head and gathered her into my arms. "None of it matters. None of it. But you want to know what does matter? That I still want to tear the skin clean off your body for not telling me that one of my songs saved your life." The last few words came out rougher than expected as my emotions took the front seat. "I want to kill you myself for letting me think that you were just a fan. You're not a fucking fan, Phoenix. You just found me before I could find you. Then you showed up feeling everything I learned to feel in less than two hours, and both of us thought it was too good to be true."

"It is," she mumbled against my chest.

"It's not," I growled against the top of her head, feeling totally in control, completely sane, and a little left out. "I hate that you knew me first, that you watched me from afar and got to figure me out before I even knew who you were."

She sniffed and squeezed me a little before whispering, "So you're a romantic now?"

"No." I laughed at that, loving the feel of her in my arms. "This nice guy act goes away as soon as the sun comes up, but you need this side of me right now. The side that will hold you when you think I give a fuck that you're just a little out of control. I don't, I'll rock your crazy ass to sleep if I have to, because you'd do the same for me."

"Stop calling me crazy." I pictured her rolling her eyes.

"Stop pretending that you aren't." My hand started to move up and down her back, bringing her closer to me. I needed her to understand that I wasn't judging her, not even a fucking little. "And it's not because there's anything wrong with you—or even wrong in your brain. You feel crazy because your circumstances taught you to question everything and then gave you no answers. Now it's been ten years of living like that. Of course you see, handle, and think differently than everyone else."

"And you?" she asked, knowing I was right.

"I'm nuts because my mom was." I shrugged. "That shit is genetic, and that bitch lived for the pain, the fights, the toxicity. Now I live there too. Phoenix, we're both a product of our circumstances, but finding someone who can handle that side of me is next to impossible. But here you are. You understand that sometimes, anger takes over and it's easier to shatter glass than deal because, really, how am I supposed to deal if the meds make it worse? I'm not angry anymore, but I'm depressed as fuck. How does that help?" I was getting more angry just thinking about it. "Listen, I'm not trying to tell you that we're going to be a good example for a healthy relationship, but I'm saying we can handle each other." I pulled back a little to look her in the eye, but got more than just her gaze. Her entire spirit was on full display, in all its murky, terrified, downright fucking beautiful glory. "I'll fuck up, you'll have bad days, but you and I can break each other's hearts over and over again, and nothing will change the fact that when we're together, our shared soul will always make it right. We can be both the death and the life of each other, Phoenix. There's not a single person, place, or thing stopping us."

"Except ourselves," she added, stepping out of my embrace.

I nodded. "Exactly."

"So, what do we do?" she asked, pulling the extra-long sleeves down her arms and using the remaining fabric to wipe her face. "This still isn't easy for me to wrap my head around. Just because you're okay with risking your life on me doesn't mean that's what you should do."

"Should do?" I asked, feeling incredulous. "Where is the rule book, and who said that one rule fits all? Because if you think that's the case, then I've got news for you. What one person says is healthy, might be incredibly triggering for another person. Look at BDSM, spanking, humiliation, voyeurism—none of those things are one-size-fits-all, every couple will interpret it however they want to, and we will be no different."

"We? A couple?" Her laugh was darker now, with more disbelief mixed in. "Now we're a couple? That sounds a lot like testing fate, Judah."

I rolled my eyes. "Stop simplifying this to find a way out of it, Phoenix. Whether we're just fucking, a couple, best friends, it all feels the same, yeah? You still got in the car after we fought Tuesday night, you still talked to me after I had my hand wrapped around your throat three days later, but if someone from the outside took away our actions and only looked at our feelings, they'd look the exact same as all these 'healthy' couples you have in your head. Ours might even be stronger, better, louder. Because love, passion, pain, regret—it all feels the same, no matter how you ended up on the doorstep of feeling each emotion. Healthy or unhealthy, sane or insane. Love will still be love." She was going to bitch, I could feel it, so I rushed out, "Do you want me?"

She narrowed her eyes, "You know the answer to that."

Fuck this. "No! You have to say it, Phoenix! Use your fucking words."

"Why?!" she shouted. "You know how I feel about you! I just told you that you saved my fucking life!"

"Then tell me to stay!" I roared, feeling her rejection so loud, I was afraid my ears would be permanently damaged. "Tell me you want me around, that you can't breathe when you think of someone else being able to give me what *you* want to give me, be who *you* want to be for me. Because that's how I feel! You're mine to break and fix, Phoenix. Period. Are we on the same page here, or no? *You* came to the twin flame conclusion, which means you know *for a fact*, that what you feel for me is out of the realm of ordinary—that it's real, it's loud, and it can't be ignored. So, what the fuck do you want from me? What else am I supposed to say to convince you?"

"You can't!" she screamed, shoving two hands in her hair as she gave me her back. Pain radiated around us in a vicious tornado. "I don't want to snap, okay? My father, the man who raised me and loved me and made me feel safe, shot my mother in the head, without even blinking!" She threw her hands in the air. "And then blew his brains out in front of his thirteen-year-old daughter, and no one—fucking no one—can tell me why. How do I walk into this with you, knowing what I know, and not consider the fact that if one fucking thing goes wrong, the same thing could happen to us? I don't want to end my life, or yours, or anyone's! I want to live!"

"Then live with me," I said quietly, giving up the fight, having no energy left to exude, hating her tragedy. I walked forward a little. "You want to let go, right? To find your happy?"

She turned, watching me with reluctant eyes, but nodded anyway, so I stepped forward and into her space. "What if your happy looks a little like mine? What if we don't label shit. Instead, we spend time with each other when there's time to spend, and we live dangerously close to the edge. Because if we try too hard to swerve in a lane that isn't ours, we're going to end up in a place we were never meant to be." I had all of her attention, every ounce of her focus on me. "If we're both a little insane and we take our shit out on each other, but we fuck like rabbits and laugh like comedians while we do it

then...what's the motherfucking problem, P? You want risk? You want fun? You want adventure? I'm pretty sure it just landed in your lap and it looks a whole lot like the guy who saved your life. The one you're refusing to actually live with, and that seems like a total fucking waste to me."

I nailed that, she couldn't deny it, she couldn't say she didn't want it. Especially since there were no strings aside from the one that connected her soul to mine. She knew that whatever had going on here was special, rare, and completely ours. She knew there was no going back.

She gave up and started our game. "I'm a bitch."

"I'm an asshole," I fired back.

"I get jealous."

"And I don't?"

"I need space sometimes. I like to be alone."

I shrugged. "I'm gone a lot."

"I may need space, but I won't like that you're gone," she warned.

"Good." I winked. "Make me pay for it when I get home."

A smirk bloomed. "You sure you can handle that?"

"I'll take anything you're willing to give me, Little Bird, and make no mistake about it."

A pause. Then, "Fine."

She tried to hide her smile, but failed.

"Fine." I smiled back at her, full on.

She rolled her eyes. "Are you ready for bed now?"

I lifted both shoulders. "I could sleep."



WHEN I WOKE up the next morning, I was sprawled out next to Judah on my all of a sudden too-small mattress. He had a king-sized bed in his house, while mine was just a queen, and with him being well over six feet, it wasn't exactly a surprise that his feet were hanging off the end.

It didn't look like he cared though, with his eyes firmly shut, his mouth slightly open as his back rose and fell with sleep. He didn't have a shirt on, but his waist was covered by the blanket, while I was still fully dressed. The time after our little late night come-to-Jesus was a blur—I couldn't really remember much about coming back inside for bed last night, other than feeling too fucking exhausted to think straight.

I fell onto the mattress and right into sleep. By on the looks of it, so did he.

Lying there with him next to me, it was warm, I was comfortable, and it still felt like a dream as I studied the contours of his face, taking in the look of relaxation on his features. He was so beautiful, it brought fucking tears to my eyes, and the longer I stared, the louder his childhood became in the back of my head. I could see it—the trailer park, his mother, a younger, shorter version of my skyscraper walking around with black eyes and a bone to pick with the world. It was the side of him that I could relate to the most. Even though I grew up with more money in my family than he did,

our spirits were forever changed at the hands of our parents, and that shit sucked.

Parents were supposed to guide you, hug you through the shit storms life handed you. But when *they* hand you a shit storm before life can dole out its unfair honesty, you're double fucked and always faded. It makes you question your place in the world, makes you wonder if you even know how to love properly, live happily, dream appropriately. You can't help but question your talents, your best assets, wondering if one of those might have been the reason your parents decided to ruin you.

It just so happened that Judah's parents were worse than mine—where my father took my mother and ran to hell before he could tell me why—Judah's mother had done the same, but left him in a worse situation than he was in before. Leaving her thirteen-year-old boy in the hands of an abuser because she got too lazy, stupid, and selfish to take care of him anymore? She was a fucking coward.

The thought made my heart squeeze, made me want to touch him, feel his skin under my fingertips, let him know that everything he went through would be worth it. Hell, it might have already been worth it. The money, the clothes, the cars, the girls—it was all available to him in large quantities now. He could afford luxuries that his parents wouldn't even dream about.

But then you have Hollywood and the life of an underdog. Judah had the talent, the drive, the fortitude, and dedication, but he also had a backbone where most of the industry was spineless. Add drugs, sex, and other people with the same ideas and amenities as him? Together they went and formed the lonely-hearts club, and now I would be an honorary member, just by being connected to him.

Was that something I wanted? Just to keep him?

Yes.

For him and only for him.

He was right, Frankie was right, I was right. We were twin flames, and he was the other half to my soul, the mirror I needed. We would fight and argue, but I genuinely believed that he wouldn't leave me, because in the end of it all, I didn't think he could.

Hell, I was pretty sure I couldn't either. Look how many times I tried.

But that didn't mean I wasn't absolutely petrified of the future, our future, and if we even had one. It just meant that I would have to consistently pretend that it was all good, that I wasn't a ticking time bomb, because Judah was right. I wanted him, I wanted it all, even if it only lasted a little while.

Dropping my baggage and walking away would be nearly impossible, but I'd try to lighten the load along the way. Leave my worries in the dust behind me as I walked into whatever was next.

Turning over as quietly as possible to check the time, I grabbed my phone from the nightstand, seeing that it was just after noon. The sun was peeking through the blinds to the left, my body was sore, my head throbbed, and I was going to need a fucking nap at some point in the day.

Seconds later, I cringed when my stomach growled loud enough to wake the whole neighborhood. I stayed stone still, worried Judah would wake up, but the bastard didn't even move an inch. I blew out a breath.

Taking that as my cue, I threw the covers off my legs, stuck my sore feet into my slippers, and went to see if Frankie was awake. I needed to get some coffee in my system before Judah woke up so I wasn't a total monster to him after everything we'd talked about last night. Wasn't sure he was ready for *all* my morning bullshit yet.

The sun coming through the open windows baked our furniture as I ambled through the living room and into the kitchen, making me feel isolated, like it was here just for me. I smiled at the thought, which was stupid because I was not the type to smile at the sun, which meant I was *really* smiling because Judah made me fucking happy. He made me happy,

even when he infuriated me, made me want to rip my own hair out.

"Phoenix!" My name was harshly whispered from somewhere in the house, making me jump and spin around, but I didn't see anything or anyone near me. "Dude, in my office! You're gonna want to see this."

"Frankie?" I asked in a normal voice.

"Shhh!" The sound itself was louder than my voice but, *okay*. "Just get over here and keep your voice down."

Why the fuck we were keeping our voices down at noon on a Sunday was beyond me, but she was my girl, so I dropped what I was doing and headed down the hall and into the office, where I was immediately tripped and sent crashing to my hands and knees as soon as I passed the threshold. "What the hell, Frankie!" I whisper-shouted, whipping my head to glare at my best friend. She was wearing little booty shorts and a sports bra, with her blonde hair piled on her head as she knelt on all fours, watching something out the window.

"Hush." She waved a hand at me without bothering to turn around. "Okay, don't freak out."

"You know I immediately start to freak out when you say that, right?" I rolled my eyes but kept my voice down. "What's going on?"

Frankie stayed at the window but said over her shoulder, "I'm like ninety-nine percent sure there are three paparazzi vans on the street right now, and I'm like ninety-nine *point nine* percent sure the drivers of those vans are watching the house."

My blood ran cold as I lifted an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, bitch! Your boy brought the fucking paps here!" There was a smile on her face, which of course I wanted to slap right off because that meant...

"Where's your phone?" I asked urgently, holding out my hand.

"Uhhh, somewhere on my desk, but be careful! Don't let them see you." I reached up and grabbed it, not giving a shit about anything besides confirming my suspicion. I pulled up Safari, searching Judah's name in the search bar, and sure enough...

My stomach fell straight into my ass.

"He *didn't*." I shook my head, not entirely paying attention to Frankie in the room, who quickly realized I found the dirt and came crawling over to snatch the phone from my hands.

She gasped, but then slapped a hand over her mouth when the sound came out louder than she intended it to. Then she read the headline out loud between her fingers. "Who is TheColt's Little Bird?"

Okay...he was fucking done for.

Her eyes flew across the article while I pictured creative ways to rip off a dick before she finally filled me in. "Oh, he's good. Listen to this. 'Last night, at a local VIP concert held in the Old Masonwood Church, Judah Colt let his fans in on a little secret. Our sources said that when he opened the show, they could tell that something was off with him, but eventually, he did explain himself to crowd, saying, "A little bird broke my heart tonight... It's okay though, Colts, because I'm gonna find her, and I'm gonna bring her back to the nest, yeah?" The response from the crowd was contagious, fans say, and now the hunt is on... Who is TheColt's little bird? Will he find her? What will he do when he does?""

I groaned. "I'm going to rip his dick from his body and feed it to the dog."

"We don't have a dog," Frankie supplied, trying not to laugh.

"We'll get one." I glared at her. "Stop laughing, it's not funny."

"I mean..." She snickered. "It's a little funny."

"Frankie!"

"What?" She held up two hands with a smile on her face. "Did you guys talk last night? About the whole soulmates on steroids thing?"

"Yes," I grumbled, biting my fingernail and trying to think about how I was going to leave my house without everyone seeing my face.

"And?" she pushed.

I blew out a breath. "And nothing. He fucked up, again. He pulled this shit, and now there are paps outside right now."

"Because *you* ran out of his show last night," she so helpfully pointed out. "I mean, that sounds like a twin flame reaction to me, no? Because it's something you would do if the roles were reversed."

Would I? If Judah and I swapped places, and I was the one riding on fame, would I use my career to find Judah if he left me?

You would, and you can't even deny it. You're gone for him.

"Yeah, except the roles *aren't* reversed, and he's the one who fucked up, so guess what?" I asked, lifting an excited eyebrow.

"Oooooo! Do we get to kick him out?" Franks asked, rubbing two hands together. "Can I throw water on him?"

My nose wrinkled. "No. That will soak my bed."

"Right." She bobbed her head and tapped her chin with a pretty tan finger. "Well then, he'll have to let me stay at his house again, because I'll do it when he's in *his* bed and just remind him of this moment. It'll be fine."

She was talking to herself more than she was talking to me, but I appreciated her willingness to be on my side about this. She was down for whatever I chose to do, and that was the type of friend I needed in my life.

"Time to wake his ass up." I moved to stand, using Frankie's desk to steady my tired body. "And then I'm going the fuck back to sleep."

"Word, good plan," she agreed, standing with me.

When I moved forward, she moved with me.

I paused and looked at her from over my shoulder. She smiled nice and bright. "Oh no, I'm coming with you. This is my house too, and now I'll be considered as an option for Judah's mystery bird." She edged past me, out into the hall. "Though, it won't take long for them to realize our names are Frankie and Phoenix. And since Phoenix is a bird..."

"Why do you sound so happy about that?" I asked, annoyed, while I stomped my way back through the house.

"Because you need this!" She clapped a little with too much excitement in her voice—which only served to sour my mood even more. She kept going, "I mean, he basically trapped you by doing it on stage. I bet that was his plan, because then he came over here and got your panties all in a twist, didn't he?"

He sure did.

"How do you do that shit?" I glared at her. "You weren't even awake! Or did you sit at your window and watch?"

She scoffed. "Please, I don't need to stalk your ass to know what kinda guy he is." There was a short pause, then an equally short gasp. "He's probably going to be a fucking animal in bed. You haven't fucked him, right? Nah, you would have told me if you fucked him."

She answered her own question, so I said nothing, just threw open the door to my room and barked, "Time to get up!"

The fucker didn't even move.

"Judah," I called. No response.

Fine, I'll be an asshole then.

Padding into the room, I rounded his side of the bed, leaned down in his ear and yelled, "Wake up!"

"Jesus!" he barked, lifting his sleepy head to scowl at me. "What the fuck is your problem, P?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said, probably a little too loudly. "How about the three paparazzi camped out in front of my house? Or maybe the articles I woke up to this morning?"

He flopped back onto the pillows, running a hand through his blond hair, which was all fucked from how hard he slept. Closing his eyes, he asked, "Are you dead?"

"What?" I asked, taken aback. "No?"

"Good." He nodded on the pillow, already rolling over again. "Then you're fine. Get back in bed and quit bitchin' at me."

"Ha!" I barked, grabbing his shoulder so he couldn't face plant into the mattress again. "No. Get out."

He peeked an eye open. "I'm sorry?"

"Get. Out." I pointed to the door.

"You want me to leave," he deadpanned.

"Absolutely." I nodded. "Now."

He sat up, looking more worried than I would have liked, since his worry triggered my wish to protect him. "Is this just for today? Or am I in the doghouse for a while?"

I rolled my eyes, trying to stand my ground. "Just go, Judah."

"Not until you tell me when you'll be done with whatever this is." He waved his hand in a circular motion around my body.

"Whatever this..." I trailed off, pinching the bridge of my nose. "You truly don't give a fuck about what I want, do you?"

"You want me," he stated as he slid out of my bed. But *fuck me*, because he wasn't wearing any pants. Just another pair of briefs with weed plants all over them. Like a fucking teenager. "So, beyond that, I don't really care what you want. You tried to leave me yesterday, and we all know I don't handle that very well."

"So, you what—did it for payback?" I asked incredulously, as he pushed his legs into his jeans.

Lifting two shoulders he said, "More like I did it out of panic. Before our little talk last night, I thought your biggest fear was my fame and my fans knowing about you, so I threw you to the sharks."

"God, he says it so casually," Frankie muttered from the doorway. "Even *I'm* a little wet."

Yeah, I am too. His no-nonsense dominance and ridiculous passion for me had my toes curling in my slippers.

"No one wanted to know that," Judah said as he rolled his eyes at my best friend, but looked back down at me quickly, scanning my face, no doubt looking for signs of me bolting. He pulled a shirt over his head as he pushed his feet into shoes, then raised an eyebrow in my direction. "Well?"

I wasn't going anywhere, because truthfully, I was too emotionally spent to care. I sighed. "You're in the doghouse until I say you're not in the doghouse anymore. Just go home. I'll...text you or something."

Too fast for me to anticipate, he had my chin in his hands. "No 'or something.' You text me, got it? I know you're pissed, but I don't give a fuck. Text me and tell me just how mad you are. Every five minutes, preferably."

My belly warmed, and my heart soared.

"Awww," Frankie cooed from the door. "Gah, he's hot, P!"

I rolled my eyes, trying to stay mad. "We'll see."

"We'll see," he mimicked, and leaned into my space, using his hold on my chin to bring our lips dangerously close together. With a small grin he added, "Yeah we will, but don't forget I know where you live, and I'm not scared to bang on the door 'til you come out."

My eyes zoned in on his lips, and nothing mattered anymore. I wanted him to kiss me so bad, my body started to ache for it, leaning toward him without my consent. But then he dropped my chin out of nowhere and walked past me with a smirk, grabbing his keys and wallet off my nightstand as he went. With one quick look back, his heated gaze danced over my frame, leaving tingles in their wake. When his eyes left

me, they shifted to Frankie in the doorway. He nodded his head at her as he passed. "Francine."

She gave me a puzzled look, before calling out, "Not my name!"

"It is now!" he called back, just before the sound of a door closing could be heard through the house.

"What's that about?" Frankie asked, crossing her arms with a scowl. "I hate that name."

"Yeah, well..." I laughed a little. "He's got a thing for nicknames, so I doubt it's going anywhere."

"Hmm," she considered. "I kinda hate him, you know that right?"

"Do you, though?" I asked, already climbing back in bed, but this time, sleeping right where Judah just was.

"Nah, he's kinda funny," she started, moving toward the other side of my bed and slipping in next to me. "And he's hot, and I bet his dick is big."

As she got under the covers, I turned to face her with a small smile and a bee buzzing in my belly. "Why should you care about the size of his dick?"

"Please." She laughed, tangling our legs together. "Can't have my girl fucking a sad dick for the rest of her life."

"The rest of my life?" I joked. "That seems like a stretch."

"Is it though?" Her eyes were already closing, and mine followed suit.

With a tummy full of anxious excitement and a brain still full of fear, I moved closer to Frankie and turned over so that my back was to her front. Wrapping her arms around me, she murmured in my ear, "He's good for you. You're good for him. But make him sweat."

I fully intended to.



J: It's been three fucking days, Phoenix.

I STARED at the text message with a smirk on my face as I waited for Kenji to finish up in the bathroom. We were about to close the shop for a couple hours and head down the street for a sit-down lunch at a place on Arizona St. It was Wednesday afternoon, he had no clients, and I was fucking starving.

When Frankie told me to make Judah sweat, I doubted she expected me to hold out as long as I did. And she wasn't the only one surprised, but I needed the space. Saturday night was so emotional that I carried it all through Sunday and even to work with me on Monday. I ended up drawing a flash sheet full of little pieces that reminded me of Judah and how he made me feel. Different variations of cracked hearts, sharp knives, even a band-aid over a bullet hole. Was that an accurate representation? Maybe not literally, but even when he made me happy, he was breaking my heart, but that wasn't his fault. It was just how my brain worked.

There was no avoiding what he made me feel. I was useless against him, but that didn't mean I couldn't take back some of my control. He pushed me by dropping the 'Little Bird' bomb on the crowd Saturday night, but luckily, no one had figured out who I was yet. Judah was caught on camera leaving our house the other day, but since Frankie and I

weren't on his level of fame, the paps had yet to figure out who lived here.

Desiring to keep it that way, I wore big hoodies, sunglasses, and a hat when I went in public these last two days. Knowing I couldn't run forever, I didn't bother hiding, but I wasn't going to make it obvious either.

I said, "whatever happens, happens" multiple times when it came to Judah Colt, but I never meant it. But I was trying to now, because at the end of the day, Judah made a choice the moment he found out that my family has a history of murder-suicide. He wasn't in the dark anymore, and yet, he was still here, looking for my attention. Who was I to not give it to him? Especially since I wanted to so bad.

I just had to loosen my white knuckled grip on control. I couldn't predict shit, I couldn't change shit, so I needed to just walk my way through it.

"Ready?" Kenji asked, smacking a hand down on the glass case to get my attention. He had to pull me out of my head more times than I could count over the last two days, but slowly, the fog of bullshit was lifting and I could see things more clearly.

There I was...getting excited. My tummy was a bundle of knotted nerves, I was starting to feel those anxious urges to text, call, hear his voice, hold his hand. It was a new feeling I wasn't used to, so I had no idea how to properly articulate it. All I knew was I was almost ready to text him back...but not quite yet.

Putting my phone in my back pocket, I turned to Kenji and smiled for the first time in a while—and this time, it was a real one. "Yeah, I'm ready."



I WAS GOING...INSANE.

Phoenix hadn't answered a single one of my text messages since Sunday night, and while I was trying my fucking best to leave her be, I was only human.

"Jude," Hendrix barked from across the massive cherry wood table. "Are you listening?"

Sitting in a conference room with Holly and myself, he was pissed at me—had been for days—but I was in a shit mood and not a single fuck was given. "No, repeat what you said."

"Judah," Holly chided from her seat next to me. "Come on. We're almost done and then you can go sulk, but can we just get through this?"

"I don't give a fuck what cities we go to! Just pick!" I growled, running my hands down my face before shoving both in my hair and leaning back in the office chair, trying to calm down. After a few deep breaths and a heavy sigh, I said, "Look, I don't have a fucking preference. Just pick."

Hendrix shook his head as if he hated that answer, but still said, "All right, whatever, fine. Holly, you can schedule the cities by week, and I'll take care of everything else."

We were already working on the international tour schedule for the album I was supposed to be working on but wasn't. They were planning two years ahead, and I was ready to lose my shit because all this did was add more fucking pressure. I had the last leg of my *Uninvited* tour coming up in August, and I sure as fuck wasn't looking forward to it now that I'd found Phoenix. How was I supposed to manage four months away from her? Juggling tour life and being in a relationship was nearly impossible, especially if she wasn't there.

She'd have to come with me. There wasn't another option.

"Got it." Holly nodded, keeping one eye on me as she added the job to her list of things to do. "All right, let's talk about other shows..." She scrolled through her phone, looking closer at the screen. "Actually, I think the tour might be it. We don't have anything else planned for you because you're still working on the album, but I think Silas' manager sent an email about a show in Vegas he wanted you to be at?"

"Yes," Hendrix said, taking a sip of his coffee without looking up. He was typing something out on his tablet, staring at the screen like he was emailing an old girlfriend. He was almost always as angry as me, but from what I knew about him, he didn't have a reason to be. Aside from the industry being made of pure assholes, of course. That was just the way he was. We didn't mesh well.

When he was done, he looked up. "Yes, Silas has a gig in Vegas at the end of July, and his manager asked if you could make an appearance for 'Empty at Midnight' so that will be the last show before the tour leaves in August. Good promotion."

"Agreed. Who do we want on that flight?" Holly asked, making a note. "I'll send out take-off times once I know them for sure."

I was looking through the wall of windows in front of me, staring down at the traffic on Wilshire Blvd. The sun was way too fucking bright, and I was ready as fuck to get out of here. "Add Phoenix Royal and Frankie Skyes to that list, please. I'll send over their emails in a couple days."

Neither of them answered, so I tore my eyes from the windows and looked between them both with a popped eyebrow. Hendrix was the first to speak in a bored, uninterested voice. "Who are these girls?"

He met them Saturday night. "Doesn't matter, put them on the list, they'll be there."

"Are you picking them up?" Holly asked, jotting down my request without saying anything about P. Good thing too, because she knew the girls and her silence proved she was letting me handle it like I told her to.

"Yes," I answered, hoping I remembered to tell Phoenix about the Vegas show with enough time to convince her to say yes. Being a stoner didn't help my memory, and I was likely to forget about it until three days before when Holly told me to pack my shit.

Either way, I wasn't going without her—not yet, not with a tour coming up in less than two months and a whole lot of shit to work out before I left...preferably with her on the bus with me.

It was a long shot, I knew that, but I wasn't going to leave the states for four months without at least trying to convince her to come with me.

Her birthday was a couple weeks away, and while she still hadn't texted me back, I knew she would. And I had plans for her special day. Big ones. Ones that I'd been working on since she told me about the occasion. I was more excited about June thirtieth than I was about anything else currently on my schedule. Turned out, spoiling the little bird was one of my new favorite things to do. Especially when she wasn't talking to me. Had to put my feelings somewhere.

"Whatever, fine," Hendrix gave in, typing out the plan. "I think that's it, right?"

Holly scrolled a little before nodding. "Should be."

"Great." I slid my chair back and grabbed my snapback from where it sat on the table, placing it on my head before turning toward the door. "I'll see you guys next week." "You in that studio, Judah?" Hendrix called after me.

Nope. "Yeah, man," I muttered as I waved over my shoulder noncommittally and hightailed it through the glass door and toward the elevators.

Mammoth Sound Records was a nice as fuck label and a well-respected company within the industry, but it lacked the spark I was looking for. No one who worked in this building was passionate about my music—I was a dollar sign, a voice they could use to filter in the cash and grow their pockets. That was fine, it was a means to an end, but that meant I had zero interest in spending any extra time in this place if I didn't have to.

Hendrix's question about the studio spiked my anxiety, settling prickly little bugs at the bottom of my stomach.

I had nothing to show for all the fucking work I'd done over the last few months. I was writing new shit daily, I had material out the ass—I just set it all on fire before anyone could hear it. I was supposed to be in my home studio already, working through the kinks, getting some shit finalized, but that door was currently locked. Had been ever since I put out *Uninvited*.

I hated everything I was writing, every word of it. Nothing felt right, and I had no idea what I was even trying to say. I had no muse, plus no one gave a shit anyway.

It didn't help that Phoenix kept popping in and out of my life—granted, it had only been a week since I met her, so I couldn't blame my writers block solely on her—but still, most of my current problems had to do with the little bird.

Walking through the top floor of Mammoth Sound, you got a nearly three hundred and sixty view of Los Angeles through the glass panes of each office. Everything was modern and sleek, even the fucking elevator, which was decked out in black, white, and silver marble to match the flooring throughout the place. When the metal doors dinged open, I stepped inside, pulling my phone out of my pocket as I did it. I sent that girl ten fucking text messages and didn't get a single fucking one back.

So, I typed out another.

Me: I'm about to come get you my goddamn self. Don't think I won't show up at your shop and drag you out by your hair.

I wasn't even kind of kidding, which I'm sure she could guess based on the lack of playfulness in this text, which had been in all the others. I ached for her attention, her conversation, even her bitching. So help me, if I didn't get my lips on hers by the end of tonight, someone was going to die.

I nearly jumped out of my fucking skin when my phone vibrated in my hand. I checked it so fast, I locked and unlocked the screen multiple times before I actually got it to do what I needed it to do—display the new text.

It was her.

Baby Bird: We have officially reached threat level, folks.

Me: You testin' me?

Baby Bird: Me? Always.

Me: Good. When the fuck can I see you again?

Please, for the love of the devil, say tonight.

Baby Bird: I forgot to tell you...Frankie and I are leaving tomorrow. Vacation. 2 weeks.

She. Was. Kidding. She had to be. Fuck, she better be.

Either way, I was seeing her.

Me: Great, I'll book a ticket. Where are we going?

Baby Bird: *rolling eye emoji* your money takes away all my fun.

The most intense relief crashed over my body. She was joking. *Jesus fucking Christ*. My heart was beating triple times the normal rate, but I kept it cool when I responded.

Me: Boohoo, little liar. What's the move for tonight?

Baby Bird: Netflix and Chill?

...for real?

My dick woke up at the thought, just as the door dinged and two more people got in the elevator. I continued typing.

Me: Is that a legitimate option or are you playin' me?

Baby Bird: I'm serious. But I have my period.

She's on her fucking period.

Me: Is that your way of telling me that we can't fuck tonight? Because I'm not even a little scared of blood. Or the female anatomy. Or the reproductive system. I'll fuck it bloody, dry, or dripping.

There was a small lag in time after that response, which had me smirking. Bet she wasn't expecting that.

Baby Bird: We never discussed fucking.

Me: We just did.

Baby Bird: No we didn't. That was you trying to...

Baby Bird: I don't even know what that was, actually, but it most definitely wasn't a discussion.

Me: There's nothing to discuss. We're fucking, asap.

Baby Bird: Mhm. See you after I get off.

Me: Pack a bag, you can leave for work from my place tomorrow.

Baby Bird: Don't push it, baby boy.

There was a little winky face at the end of that last one, and I was still scowling at my screen when the elevator doors opened.

Don't push it, my ass.

I crashed my way through the door that led to the parking garage, immediately being assaulted by the thick summer heat. Gross.

Heading to Shelby—my one of a kind, totally souped-up, completely stunning, and ridiculously fast Shelby Mustang GT 350 R—I hoped this drive wouldn't be awful. I busted her out

of the garage this morning since Pharaoh had somewhere to be all day and he left with G-Dog early.

Sliding into the car, I folded my body as best I could, hating that my height always put restrictions on my comfortability, but it was worth it to drive a car like this one. Limited edition, sounded like a fucking monster, drove like one too.

Pulling out my phone, I opened Instagram and pulled up P's profile.

I had to be careful, knowing that I was only a few inches away from her out-of-bounds line at all times. If I pushed her too hard, too fast, I could lose her completely, but there was only so much I was willing to hold back from here on out.

My finger hovered over the little blue button for a less than one second before I pressed down, officially following her back. From now on, I wasn't going to stop myself from glancing at her social media when she wasn't around, because why should I? Whenever I did, I got lost in the sights on her feed, in the photos of her long tan legs in short, pretty dresses and tall heels, her soft curves shown off in bikinis she wore around her back yard or at the beach with Frankie. Everything down to the shape of her fingers turned me on.

I wanted her hands on me, all over me, *in* me—fuck if I cared.

No, holding back wasn't an option anymore. She was mine.

I saved her.

Just as I was about to pull out into traffic, my phone rang through the car and P's name popped up on the screen in my dashboard. My heart dropped to my knees, beating fast as hell in my chest as I connected the call with a sultry, "Baby Bird."

"Skyscraper," her sweet voice responded in a flirty tone. "Miss me?"

"Are you gloating?" I asked, a little impressed and a little pissed off.

"Are you surprised?" She chuckled. "Just kidding, just kidding. Do you want me to bring take out? I can stop and get sushi or something."

Looking both ways before I pulled out of the garage, I tried not to think too hard about how her voice immediately made me horny. Like I was talking...my dick wasn't just semi hard. "Nah, I don't know what I want yet, we can order it when you get here."

"Here?" she asked, sounding like she was walking outside. "Are you home?"

"No." I hit the horn, slamming my foot on the break as some asshole in a massive truck cut me off. "Little fucker," I mumbled.

"What?" Phoenix sounded confused as hell.

"Sorry, baby, I'm driving home and some guy pulled out in front of me," I said quickly, looking to switch lanes so I could actually talk to her without getting distracted. "Traffic fucking sucks, hold on."

I took about a minute to maneuver my way through the clusterfuck before hopping on the highway as soon as the opportunity allowed...only to hit the bumper to bumper shit as soon as I drove up the ramp. "Goddammit."

"That bad?" she asked, chewing on something.

I ignored her question. "What are you eating?"

"Gummy worms," she replied casually. "Kenji and I went for lunch down the street from the shop, but then he dipped out early for the day, so I'm going home to pack and then I'll head your way. That's actually the reason I called. I'll be a little early."

Looking at the dash, I checked the time. It was only three PM. Fuck yeah, that was basically a whole day. "Sounds good, hottie. I'll see you soon."

"Hottie?" She laughed. "I haven't been called that since high school."

"I got a crush on you, girl," I drawled with a smirk before yelling out, "You got me feelin' like a true 90's boy!"

"Wow!" She giggled. "That's... really somethin'."

"You're really somethin'," I mocked. "Bye bye, birdy."

I hung up with a smile on my face and a plan to roll some blunts when I got home.



"OKAY, so you're staying the night there, heading to work tomorrow, and then what?" Frankie asked from the island, where she sat perched on a stool with two different bags of chips open in front of her. She was dipping both flavors into pineapple guacamole as she watched me pull my shit together for Judah's.

"I don't know," I said distractedly. "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

"He seems like a clinger." She licked her fingers. "But in a hot way? Is that possible?"

"For sure," I answered. "His hotness comes from his vulnerability. He wears everything on his fucking sleeves."

"Oh, I know," she murmured with a small smile as she turned to pull a Truly out of the fridge. "Sad boy eyes, I'm tellin' you."

"So get this." I paused, setting my phone charger on top of my laptop and taking inventory of the things I was bringing. Everything was laid out on our couch, the grey material was worn, loved, and comfortable as hell. "I told Judah that I had my period today, thinking he'd be too grossed out to try and fuck me tonight. But...turns out he's a freak."

"Oh my god," Frankie yelled out, laughing. "You're such a savage. What did he say?"

Thinking of his response, I couldn't help but start laughing. The fucker actually made me blush when I read it. And I was *not* a blusher. "Ready?" I chuckled. "He said, and I quote, 'I'll fuck it bloody, dry, or dripping."

She threw her head back and groaned so loud, I almost covered my ears. "Phoeeeeenix, are you *kidding*? That's the goddamn wet fuckin' dream right there. He's gonna tear your shit up, no matter what. Girl, you better buckle up."

I scowled at her. "Stop it."

"What?" She laughed, throwing up two hands. "Girl, I have a feeling neither of us could walk in blind to a fuck session with Judah Colt. You need all the warning you can get. Think about it—any guy that's willing to fuck it bloody is generally a master in the sack. They know the female body. And the two of you have enough chemistry to start a science lab fire by just standing there, so imagine what'll happen when you start fucking." She fanned her face. "Lord save us all."

Then she winked at me and went back to her snack, eating with a knowing smirk.

"I hate you, you know that?" I sneered.

"Ah, yes. But you love me just the same."

Now she sounded like Judah.

???

"KEEPING SECRETS" by KANDY and Madison Rose kept me company as I drove through the Hills after sitting in the same traffic that Judah got caught in, except mine was even worse due to the fucking time. Rush hour.

He'd already started texting me about me being late. Which was ironic, since I hadn't planned to be there until after the shop closed tonight, but Judah didn't care. He was impatient and adorable, and I bit my lip the whole fucking drive to stop the cheesy ass grin from blooming on my face.

Frankie was right earlier, I just didn't want to admit it. If I fucked Judah tonight—hell, if I fucked him at all—it would be over for me. I'd be ruined forever. And yet I was driving there anyway, fully aware that if he pushed me—if he even kissed me—I'd cave. I'd give in. And I'd love it.

There wasn't a single doubt in my mind that he knew it, too. Judah was inherently good at knowing exactly what to say to get me to please him, and he'd use it against me. I expected him to take advantage of my addiction to him, and I expected it to happen tonight. I also expected to fall deeper, harder, even fucking further into my feelings for him, and with every inch closer to hell, I'd burn hotter and risk us both.

But he made his bed and all that.

Trying to push that fear aside, I took deep, fortifying breaths, and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel as I approached his house, seeing the black and white exterior just up the road. "It's all good, Phoenix. This is going to be fun. You need this."

Talking to myself only worked sometimes, but this time, was an utter failure because as I pulled in, I noticed four other cars parked around the house, two on the street, and two in the driveway. My stomach sank to my feet. All four of them were expensive, shiny, and custom. "Oh, fuck."

His friends.

He warned me about this.

That house would be full.

I looked behind me, into the street, scanning the area for paparazzi. *Shit*.

They hadn't figured out who I was yet, by some fucking miracle, but it was only a matter of time. At some point, they would dig deeper into who Frankie was and connect the dots to me through photos on her social media. That was, if they didn't find me here first.

My phone vibrated in between my legs, the screen lighting up with a text.

I knew who it was immediately.

Skyscraper: Get out of the fucking car and get ur little ass inside. *knife emoji*

Me: Paparazzi are going to see me. *camera emoji*

Skyscraper: *rolling eye emoji* if they don't see you now, then they'll see you tomorrow, or the next day or the next. But they'll definitely see you eventually, so I suggest just getting it over with.

Instantly, my blood started to boil. He was acting as if my reluctance to become a public figure wasn't understandable or just.

Me: I'd suggest changing your tone or I'll just go the fuck home.

Skyscraper: If I have to come out there, the headlines will be much worse than they would be if you just put on your big girl panties and opened the door. I'm already hated, Phoenix, I am not above making a scene to get you inside.

Me: You are the fucking worst.

Skyscraper: And you're still sitting in my fucking driveway. Save the insults for when I'm nine inches deep, yeah? Turns me on.

Unhelievahle

I didn't bother responding, just got out of the car instead. Not only because he was right, but because he said nine inches, and well...I wasn't about to turn that down. He was already woven into my soul, but if he could fuck me into oblivion too? Game over.

My bag was in the passenger seat, so I just tucked it under my arm, kept my head down, and hustled to the front door. Judah held it open for me with a sour look on his face as he glanced around his property and out into the street. "You might be clear."

He wasn't wearing a shirt, just a pair of black skinny jeans and black socks. If I wasn't so annoyed, I'd be drooling over the sight.

"They'll see my car." I sighed, giving up. "Whatever. You already blew my cover at the concert."

Clearly, I wasn't over it.

"I didn't blow your cover." He rolled his eyes. "I didn't even say your name. You're the one who showed up here willingly and blew your own cover."

I paused, turning to gape at him. "Is that how you see this? Because that's not fair, and it's also not true. I came here willingly because I wanted to see you, but you blew my cover at the concert because you panicked and got petty."

"Because you left when you said you wouldn't," he deadpanned, then popped an eyebrow, asking, "Want to keep going? We can, if you really want to. Or you can suck it the fuck up because you're already here, you've made your decision, and they would have figured you out anyway."

I sneered, "I could fucking slap you right now."

"Not yet." He smirked darkly. "Save that for when the sun goes down."

I went from simmering to boiling for a totally different reason. He liked it rough, that was evident from his lyrics alone, but in person? Knowing who he was, being able to physically touch him...I was royally screwed. I was a biter, I scratched and screamed in bed. I wasn't ashamed at all of my sexuality. At. All. But the thought of having sex with *Judah* was enough to turn me into a blushing bride.

"No response?" The fucker tilted his head, watching me like I was a dog bone that he buried years ago and forgot about. His energy told me he'd just dug me up, and now he was obsessed. I was his new favorite toy, and he was going to play with me until there was nothing left to play with. Proving me right, he walked forward, trying to close the distance, while I walked backward to try and maintain it.

It was useless though. He had my back against the wall and my eyes locked on his within seconds, his heat, his height, looming over and all around me. I narrowed my eyes. "Whatever you're trying to do, it won't work." He chuckled a low, dark, seductive sound. "You don't know what I'm trying to do yet?"

I was slow on the uptake apparently, but I wasn't going to admit that. I said nothing.

"I'll explain." The gentle finger he ran down my cheek had my eyes closing on their own, and then he leaned in. When his temple hit mine, his scent invaded all five of my senses, and I nearly fucking fainted. "You're angry, yeah? You're mad that everything is about to change, but even with all that negative shit in your head, you *still* got out of the car. Now here you are, pissed, not only at me but at yourself for giving in." One of his hands came up to my waist, searing my skin, even as his touch managed to settle a restless part of my spirit. "I'm trying to get you to see that there's something you're still missing. I *know* I'm an asshole, I *know* I fucked up in the eyes of everyone else, but I'm cool with that, P. You can be mad at me, hate me, stop talking to me, but from now on—you do it where I can see you. Where I know you're good, safe, and still mine."

Well, what in the *holy fuck* was I supposed to say to that?

He just...he was just... "How do you do that?"

There was awe in my voice as I got lost in what his dedication made me feel. Never in my life had another person been so *about* me. Judah was down for me, wanted me around all the time, didn't care about my mood or my bullshit. Judah was truly...mine.

If I wanted him.

"Do what?" he asked, running his nose along my hairline, breathing me in. The feel of him this close, his scent, his voice...I wanted to get closer.

Putting a hand on his naked chest, it dawned on me that every time we stood together like this, I was eye level with his heart. My chest squeezed.

"Take a problem or an argument and make it comfortable," I whispered, not wanting to shatter the peace we'd found in the entryway of his home. "I'm so angry at you, and yet you say

things that no one has ever said before, you make me change how I see your actions. In my eyes, you fed me to the sharks to be an asshole, but to you, you fed me to the sharks to keep me closer, to keep me from running. Which is a shitty way to do it, but it's also the only way I'll listen."

A throaty chuckle vibrated his chest. "If I were any other guy, you'd chew him up and spit him out, Phoenix. You need someone who isn't afraid of you, but rather, afraid to lose you. Your fear feeds my internal need to protect what's mine, because I've never had anything that's truly mine before. At least, not something as fucking perfect as you."

"But that's the thing," I argued, pulling away to look him in the eye. The icy blue color was a little dimmed today, leaning toward gray. "For some reason, you think I'm perfect when anyone else would tell you I'm not even close."

"There you go again." He shook his head sadly, reaching for the sides of my face and wrapping his warm hands around my cheeks. "You live your life through the filter of what you think you should be doing—how you should feel, how you should act. All based on your damage. But it's never going to work. It hasn't been working. Every time you walk away, every time you do the thing you think you should be doing, you set yourself up for failure and disappointment. Because you'll eventually give in to what you really want. And while you see that as a bad thing, I want to show you that it's not." He wiped away the single tear that leaked out with such care and attention, I almost cried harder. "Phoenix, enough with the pressure, enough with caging yourself in, just...live with me. Be with me. Fall for me. Let me fall for you, messily and too hard."

There were those fucking tears again. I responded honestly, "I'm almost there."

He nodded, pressing a kiss to my forehead. "I know."

We stood like that for a moment—me trying to leave my worries at the door, and him letting me figure it out on my own—because he was right, and I knew it.

Attempting to shake it off, I put a hand on his wrist and stepped away. "We doin' this?"

I could already hear the voices coming from the main level of the house. There were people here. His friends, his world. In a relaxed setting.

Yikes.

His grin was knowing as he grabbed my bag for me and nodded toward the stairs. "Fuck yeah. Get to it, missy."

Nervous as hell, I started to descend, but paused a little as I took in the living room full of guys lounging around.

I recognized Ricco and Kavan immediately—the two guys we played beer pong with last week at the party. Both of them sat on the couch facing the TV, holding gaming controllers. They were both sitting with their elbows on their knees, shouting at each other as they played some military based video game. There was another guy sitting in one of the love seats, but his back was to me and he was looking down at his phone, so there was no chance of me seeing his face.

Pharaoh sat on the opposite side of the room with someone I didn't know, both of them holding joints and scrolling through their iPhones. Everyone was just hanging out, and none of them noticed our presence until someone stormed into the house, slamming the door shut behind them. A second later, Sage leaned over the railing in the loft and called into the living room, "We got a fuckin' pap out there y'all. Who fucked up?"

A pap.

Let's hope they didn't get anything good from behind, or I was screwed.

One by one, every head twisted to look at Judah and me. And that guy I saw? Sitting in the chair with his back to me? Yeah, well, that was Silas fucking Madigan.

And he was now facing me with a curious but friendly expression. God, he's hot as hell in person.

Tall, ripped, with a shaved head and beard groomed close to his face—he was all man. Dark eyes and a sexy as fuck grin to top off the whole look? I was hopeless as he asked, "Who do we have here?" I couldn't form words. He didn't seem to notice though, as he nodded his head at Judah. "J, you bring us a snack?"

Judah didn't laugh, but his arm wound around the front of my body and pulled me into his chest. Shocked, my eyes flew to look up at him, but he didn't bother acknowledging me. Instead he said to Silas, "Careful, she bites."

"The harder the better," Sage called as he walked down the stairs with way too much energy to be considered normal. His megawatt smile was on full display, dark brown hair sticking up in all directions, eyeliner around his eyes. He stopped in front of me. "What's up, little lady?"

"Hey." I laughed, pinching Judah's arm when he didn't let go right away. He huffed but dropped his arm, leaving me free to walk further into the room.

"Wait, who is it?" Ricco asked before I could properly introduce myself to Silas. I smiled a little, wondering if he would recognize me. These guys met a lot of people, so I wasn't going to be offended if he didn't remember my face.

"Dude, don't look back!" Kavan shouted as Ricco got distracted by his own curiosity. "Fuck fuck fuck, we're losin' 'em, man! Come on!"

"Shit!" Ricco yelled as his character died, causing him to send the controller flying to the side, where it landed on the couch and hit another guy I didn't recognize in the leg. "Who the fuck is—"

Ricco turned around, and as soon as his eyes landed on mine, his face lit up like the fourth of July and he ran, jumping over the back of the couch, straight in my direction. I had absolutely zero time to prepare myself for when his determined body slammed into mine with way too much excitement. I couldn't help the smile that bloomed as he lifted me up and spun me around. "One half of the beer-pong duo is here! Where's the other half?"

My lungs were being crushed, so my voice sounded strangled as I said, "She's home."

"Get your filthy hands off my girl before I cut 'em off," Judah threatened affectionately, walking from the living room to the kitchen after throwing my bag aside. "P, you want something to drink?"

"Is someone going to introduce me?" Silas interrupted, still watching. "It aint fuckin' right that Ricco knows her, and I don't."

"No one's said shit to me either," the guy on the couch raised a thick caramel colored arm in the air but didn't even bother looking up from his phone.

"Her name is Phoenix and she's mine, so just chill," Judah supplied, standing at the open fridge with an impatient eyebrow raised in my direction. "Drink or nah, babe?"

"Yeah," I called as Ricco set me back on my feet. I gave him a quick smile and a slap on the arm before addressing Judah again, "Whatever is fine."

He nodded, turning around to grab something for me while I moved to sit on the couch, near the guy I didn't know. As soon as my ass hit the cushion, he looked up from his phone and met my eyes. *Goddamn*. Bright blue eyes, rich, brownsugar skin, and light brown curly hair shaved into a faux hawk. His face was carved like fucking stone, too. Mother of god. Where did they make these guys?

I cleared my throat a little, trying not to seem affected, and said, "Hi. I'm Nix."

His grin was all fuckboy. "Wassup girl? I'm Keon."

"You're fresh meat," Silas called, gaining my attention. I was actively trying to pretend like I wasn't freaking out, but as soon as my eyes landed on his, the nerves began poking my insides again, making everything all kinds of uncomfortable.

Silas fucking Madigan.

Unlike Judah, I'd heard plenty of Silas' music before the night I tried to kill myself. He was a frequent flyer on my playlists. He wrote those angry rap songs, the ones with power behind his vocals and truth behind his words, and much like Judah, he was an inspiration of mine.

It hit me fast and hard that this was my opportunity to become a legit part of Judah's life, so I packed away my nerves and saw every person in the room for who they were... people. Just like me.

"Yeah, I am." I chuckled. "I gather that's why there's paparazzi outside trying to figure out who I am."

Pulling my legs up on the couch, I crossed them and leaned back, calming even more when I studied everyone else. They were all relaxed, like this was their second home. Feet were perched on the coffee table, hands rested behind heads, snacks were open, blunts were split, they were a family.

"You're fucked now, girl," Keon warned with a small shake of his head and a smile on his face. "Once the paps catch you here, your secret is out."

My stomach still dropped, reminding me that I wasn't as cool with it as Judah wanted me to be. I needed to change the subject before I said something that would start a fight. "Okay, so I know Silas and Keon, Ricco and Kav, but I don't know that guy back there." I pointed to the guy standing next to Pharaoh. "What's his name?"

"Jackass," Kav called, and the guy lifted his head.

I would have laughed at the fact that he answered to that name, but he was striking. Blond hair that looked smooth and silky, blue eyes like Judah, but this guy was younger, cleaner, with a slight baby face.

"That's Pierce," Silas introduced the guy, who waved a hand in my direction before going back to his phone. Silas clicked his tongue. "We didn't train him very well, apparently."

"I'm playing a fucking game, dude, hold on," Pierce shot back. I had to hold in my laugh. They were just a bunch of kids with too much time to kill. "So," Sage drawled as he walked through the room with his hands behind his back like a professor giving a lecture. "Nixxy baby, what's your story?"

Another fucking nickname.

Sage was probably the most eccentric of all of the guys, but even that was sexy. He wasn't ashamed to wear a dress and Doc Martens to a show. He'd put on lipstick if he was feeling like it, and he'd let it smear all night long.

It was something I admired, understood. I mean, why not? Individual style was a form of expression, and Sage had managed to normalize his own personal swag within the singer-songwriter community. He was making small waves, and I couldn't actually believe I was standing in a room with this much talent.

There was absolutely nothing about my life I wanted to share with them, but I didn't need to tell them my life story, I needed to show them I had a line that I didn't want crossed. Flip the conversation back around on them.

"My story isn't very interesting, but I wanna know what's up with you grown ass men handing nicknames out like candy." I smirked meeting his hazel eyes with intention. Judah had already told me his reasoning, but I wanted to know if the answer was common, or just his personality.

"That's actually a good question," Kavan stated as they loaded up a new game. "I got an answer, do y'all?"

"For sure," Ricco echoed.

I didn't wait for others to speak up, just told Ricco to, "Go for it."

"It's about to get hella real, so sorry about that—but basically, nicknames personalize things, make them yours. But us as artists, we share everything. We share studios, radio time, listeners, followers, cars, girls, but when we find something that is ours and only ours, we nickname it to keep it close to the chest." Judah's response had been almost identical, and it had me putting pieces together like a puzzle.

Did I believe that people should be considered possessions? No. But when possessions were given freely and taken away just as fast, I understood the territorial side of the male brain kicking into high gear and claiming what he felt was his.

"Okay," Judah interrupted before I could respond, coming in the room with two glasses of orange juice and an arm full of snacks. "Put the fuckin' controllers away, we're watchin' TV."

Just like that, the guys hopped up and shut everything off, each of them spreading out on one of the other many surfaces in the house. Pharaoh came over from his spot at the window and leaned down to kiss my cheek, murmuring, "Hi, little P," in my ear.

I felt warm. Lit up. Too...content.

I didn't want to get used to it, almost wanted to ruin it before someone else did.

As Judah passed, he set down the snacks on the coffee table and threw himself onto the couch next to me.

"Come're." He lifted an arm, motioning for me to cuddle up to him. Everyone was settling in, grabbing blunts and things to eat. I glanced around briefly, wondering if anyone was paying attention, but they weren't. No one even cared. I was the only one hesitating.

Fuck it.

I pulled up my big girl thong, listened to my heart, and not only moved closer to him, but threw my legs over his lap, grabbed the freshly rolled green from behind his ear, and smirked up at him with my palm out. "Lighter?"

Lust flared, sparking as his eyes met mine.

Rather than giving me what I wanted, Judah's mouth lifted in a sensual, sexual, downright fucking naughty smirk before he leaned down to whisper in my ear, "With the way you just looked at me, I'll be balls deep in your kitty by midnight."

I said it once—I was not a blusher. I didn't get embarrassed easily, generally didn't give a shit what people

thought about me—but Judah was my dream in the flesh, my protector, my broken beacon, and he wanted to fuck me senseless? I didn't bother denying it, just let the smirk stay as I rolled my eyes. "Whatever."

"Whatever?" The question fell out with a laugh. "What happened to 'I'm not fucking you, Judah?" He tried to mimic my voice, but failed miserably enough to make me laugh.

"Just take the win, okay? Don't rub it in."

Fuck it.

Fuck the doubts, the fears—fuck it all.

I was no match for Judah Colt.



I SPENT the next six hours binge watching Netflix and eating my weight in snacks with Judah and his friends, who accepted my presence easily. I was welcomed and treated as an equal, which I shouldn't have been so surprised about, but I was nonetheless. No idea when it happened, but at some point in the evening, I relaxed enough to end up sprawled across Judah's lap as he played with my hair. I was comfortable, warm, calm…happy.

Horny?

"All right." Judah yawned, stretched, and motioned for me to sit up. "We're headed downstairs, y'all do whatever."

Everyone was lost in an episode of *Criminal Minds*, so all he got by way of answers were non-committal and unintelligible responses as we untangled limbs and stood from the couch. My muscles were a little sore, my belly was full, but I wasn't quite sleepy and my high had faded—so basically, I was ready for time alone with Judah. I had a strong ass feeling he was ready for the same.

He maneuvered around me to grab my bag from where he threw it up against the wall earlier as I headed in the direction of his room, not bothering to wait.

I needed a quick moment to gather myself before he locked the door with the two of us inside. It was a big move now that everything was...out there. One that would shape our

relationship going forward, because there was a huge ass possibility that if I fucked Judah tonight, he'd be done with me tomorrow. That was his—along with most of the artists—reputation in this industry, this type of music. It was all in the songs—"fucked her once and let her go." No feelings, no bullshit. And I was down for that...with anyone but Judah.

I spent the last eight years fucking without feelings and I considered myself a damn near professional, but he wasn't just anyone and I was more nervous than I expected to be.

"Wait up," Judah called from behind me as his long legs ate up the distance between us faster than I liked. "Where do you think you're runnin' off to?"

"Didn't feel like waiting." I shrugged, going for honest. "Just needed a minute."

"For?" He drew the word out.

"For space. I don't know, to clear my head, get my thoughts in order," I responded, finding his eyes as soon as I glanced to the right. Two solid glaciers looked back at me as something swarmed between us. He looked away first—which was unlike him, but he simply nodded and walked ahead of me, now in the lead to his room.

I didn't bother questioning it, having learned my lesson. If he wanted to talk about whatever he was feeling, he would. Just like if I wanted to talk about it, I could. It seemed that the ball had been split in half, and now one side rested in each of our courts.

The energy was muted, hushed, as he pressed a finger to the panel just inside the door of his room, turning on the lights. His room felt more familiar than it should have, seeing as how I only spent one night in here.

Judah set my bag down in the closet, but came out of that room and headed right into the bathroom, ignoring my presence. The silence was getting tense for some reason, and I began to wonder if I'd missed something in the last ten minutes.

Pulling out my phone and checking the time, I decided to change into more comfortable clothes and see if Judah wanted to sit outside for a bit. It was almost midnight, and we could talk and hopefully clear whatever fog had settled over us. I wanted to ask more about his relationships with the guys downstairs and figured now was a good time. If they were a part of his life, then they'd be a part of mine too now.

I brought more shit with me this time, including my iPad and sketchbook, just in case something like this happened and thank fuck I did. After putting on a pair of Adidas sweatpants, one of Judah's hoodies, and my slippers, I walked back into the room to find Judah already outside. He was sitting at one of the tables, shirtless, in just a pair of SpongeBob pajama pants as he held a blunt to his lips with a pen in his other hand. Bent a little, he hovered over a... notebook?

Was he writing?

It looked to be a composition notebook of some kind, but I was still too far away, stunned by the wild difference between the guy I was just hanging out with and the one making art on the balcony. Judah was concentrating with his eyebrows drawn in and bottom lip clamped in between his teeth.

Not gonna lie, I'm a little wet.

I didn't want to startle him or even let him think I was paying too much attention, so I just bundled my supplies and held it all to my chest, walking outside as quietly as I could. Keeping an eye on him, I sat down in the chair opposite his, taking inventory of all the things I managed to read on his face.

Despite his concentration, the signs of anxiety, fear, even desperation were written on his features.

Something triggered him.

Not wanting to set him off, I sat still for a minute, trying to remember or guess what it was that flipped his switch, but I couldn't think of anything that would directly relate to this type of behavior. He didn't even look at me, but I wasn't offended, I was more...worried.

But of all people, I knew first-hand what it was like to need a moment to stay angry, let it all out in words or sound or even silence. So, I set my shit on the table and picked up the dented pack of cigarettes he had lying out between us. Right next to the cigs was a neon green lighter with an alien head on it, reading, "stay weird" with psychedelic font. I smirked, loving the vibe, but kept my mouth shut as I lit up.

Then, I drew. For what felt like hours.

I made a new flash sheet for the shop, since this week with Kenji had been all about finding my personal style, figuring out what I wanted to ink and how. It wasn't until I heard the lighter flick to life that I realized I'd been so focused on my task that I hadn't seen Judah get up.

But he was up.

He was up and burning a piece of paper over a trash can.

Wait. He was...

Why was he setting a piece of paper on fire?

Glancing down, I registered that his notebook was open on the table before I looked back up at him. For five whole seconds, that's all I did. I glanced from the notebook to him, over and over, before I realized what he was doing.

He was burning his lyrics.

"Judah, what the hell?" I gasped, standing up and rushing over to him. "What the fuck are you doing?"

I couldn't tell you why, but I was pissed, and something about the heartbreaking tic in his jaw had me so outraged that I couldn't control my voice. It was too loud, too confrontational, but it was also too late.

"Don't, Phoenix," he growled low and deep.

"Don't what, stop you?" I grabbed his arm and ripped the paper from his fist, blowing it out as I peered up and into his eyes. What the fuck happened? "Why are you burning this?"

No answer, even as my eyes danced between his, so I searched the paper in my hand instead, trying to find any

evidence of lyrics in the mess of ash and smoke, but it was impossible. He burnt it upside down so all that was left was the bottom of the page, which was fucking blank.

Still, he snatched the remaining paper from my hands, crumpled it, and chucked it into the trash can. "Let's go to bed."

Uh... "No?" I questioned, confused as hell by what I saw. "What did you just do, Judah?"

"What does it look like I did, *Phoenix*?" he asked, rolling his eyes. His tone was supposed to sound bored, but he was too pissed off to hide the bite within it.

I knew what I should do at that moment. I knew how I should've acted, what I should've said, but I was only four and a half months into this new lifestyle and I wasn't fucking perfect.

So I did the worst thing I could have done, I grabbed his arm as he passed me.

"Stop it," I demanded, voice firm. "Tell me what's going on."

With a firm tug, he snapped his arm out of my grasp and shoved past me, heading back to the table where we were sitting. The night was warm, quiet, and about to be interrupted by our volcano because I wasn't letting this go.

Before he could reach his notebook, I ran for it, snatching it from the table and opening the cover. My breath got caught in my lungs.

It was...empty.

He burned the last page in the notebook. The rest of the pages had been ripped out.

"Give it back." His voice was barely audible.

"No." I shook my head with pinched eyebrows, just staring at where the paper used to go, trying to count how many he'd ripped out. I probably looked insane but I just...I pinned him with my stare, holding it up. "What is this, Judah?"

Gone was my skyscraper. In his place stood the damaged devil himself. His eyes lost their blue brilliancy and formed into ice chips sharp enough to kill. "It's none of your fucking business, is what it is."

"Bullshit!" I threw the cardboard at him, fuming at the double standard. "You wanted me here, fuck, you *begged* me to be here. I told you my shit, laid it all out for you, but you thought your childhood was enough? It's not. Not when you've got *this* hiding in your closet!"

"What the fuck do you care?" he sneered, stepping toward me and throwing a hand to the side. "You wanted nothing to do with my career two days ago, and now you want all the bloody fuckin' details?"

I laughed sarcastically. "Hell yeah, I do. Especially since you got exactly what you wanted! You got me here, got me to let my guard down, fuck—I just spent the last six hours around all your famous friends, I'm in deep now, baby boy! Give it up!"

I was pissed, fucking raging, and the only reason was because he wasn't willing to share. All of a sudden, there was a wall between us, but one that Judah put up himself and clearly intended on keeping there. That wasn't going to work for me, not if I was in the public eye for him, if I was giving up my general peace and privacy for him, I better get all the gory details.

"You aren't deep in *shit*." He waved a hand in my direction, brushing me off. "You'll have a panic attack and bounce in a few hours. Guaranteed."

"Wow! Want to test that theory? I'm down!" I plopped my ass in the chair I was seated in before. "I'll just chill here until you decide to pull your fucking head out of your ass."

"Whatever, I'm going to bed." He walked the fuck inside.

He really did it.

I breathed a long breath out, trying to calm the storm in my veins and figure out who the fuck he thought he was. He didn't

get to drag me into his life and then hide it from me when shit got hard. How was that fair?

Knowing I couldn't go in there without a solid argument, I grabbed a half smoked blunt from the ashtray in the center of the table and lit it up, taking a few hits while I pulled up my music app and searched Judah's name.

I scrolled to You've Been Uninvited, checking the date the album was released.

Almost a year and a half ago.

He was definitely trying to write his next album.

And clearly, failing at it.

Shit.

This was going to be a long night.



SHE DIDN'T GET to say a goddamn word.

She knew *nothing*.

It wasn't about her anyway, so what the fuck did she even care?

I just wanted to organize my thoughts a little, jot down the tsunami of emotions that hit me all at once as my little bird settled into my nest with my people, my friends, my family. I knew she'd fit, I fucking knew it, but I got too happy, too excited, and then it all got fucked because I got worried, stressed, upset that she was so fucking cool.

They'd take her from me, all of them. They'd all try it.

"Judah," her voice called from behind me, igniting sparks in my chest. I was standing in the bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror, hating what stared back.

Coward.

No one fucking cares.

Whine to someone else.

Are you really that self-obsessed?

You don't have anything else to fuckin' write about?

We get it, your demons keep you awake. Blah blah. See a therapist.

Fuckin' pussy. Handle your shit, or you'll never make it.

"Judah." It was harder this time, her voice—huskier. Hotter.

I didn't turn around.

Fight me, baby, push me.

Refusing to look away, I held my own eyes, trying not to focus on her blurred shadow in the background. She was beautiful, transcendent, everything I didn't deserve. She was good, she needed someone stronger than me, someone more stable than me, someone who could write a fucking song and had the balls to record it, put it out there, let it get ripped apart again.

"So, it's going to be like this?" she asked, turning the heat up. "You're going to pretend like you can't hear me? Like I'm not standing right here, ready to talk through this with you?"

I don't want to fucking talk.

"Let me guess, you don't want to talk." She laughed a little. "I get that. I don't like talking, either, when I'm like this." She paused, and my ears perked up, searching for what distracted her, but when she spoke again, her voice was *right there*. "But...do you want to yell?"

Sex. Pure fucking sex.

"You want to scream, don't you?" she pushed, making my dick twitch. I fought the urge to close my eyes. Drop my head back. "You had the nerve to tell me that I was trapped in my head when in reality, you've been trapped for months, yeah? All those words but no fucking balls."

No fucking balls.

No fucking balls.

No fucking balls.

I broke, my voice rose higher. "You know nothing!"

"Then tell me!" she demanded at my back, knowing just how to get me fired the fuck up. Then her voice dropped to a new tone, one that had the power to turn me into liquid fire. "What's wrong in your head, huh? What's got you burning lyrics, Judah? You gonna let them win like that?"

Stop it.

"You gonna let them walk all over your feelings?"

Yes.

"You're just fucking cool with that?"

Yes.

"What is it, Judah? What kind of power do they have over you?"

All of it.

"They own you?"

Yes.

"How do you get your voice back? Where is your sound?"

Fucking gone, doesn't exist.

"Where are your words?"

Burned. Garbage.

"Open your mouth!" she bellowed.

"I can't!" I roared, spinning around quicker than she anticipated to wrap a hand around her throat. I advanced, backing her ass into the glass door of the shower as my head throbbed and my heart threatened to beat straight out of my chest. I got in her face, taking it all out on the little bird. "I've got all these fucking things to say, all these feelings, all this shit to deal with. She left, you know? My mom. She left, Phoenix, and I'm the fucking pansy who still wonders why I wasn't enough." As I let go of her neck, she winced, and I stabbed a pointer finger into my chest hard enough to bruise. "I'm the one who has to play scenarios over and over again in my head, listening to his voice in my ear. I can still feel his fist hit my face in the middle of the night. My life is a fucking nightmare." I was spitting, foaming at the mouth, while she stood her ground with angry tears in her eyes as she listened to me fall apart. "Then they, the critics, the fans, people who

don't know shit about shit ripped me to fucking shreds, Phoenix! For telling the truth! Now what? How do I keep writing, recording, performing, when they don't even want to hear what the fuck I have to say?!"

"You just do," she stated simply, as if it was that easy. She still held onto her fire, picking up right where she left off. "It's your art! Your sound! You fight for it, Judah. For yourself, for those who are in the very same position as you, for the people who need to hear your pain to help them deal with their own. You—"

I shoved off the glass. "Fuck all that."

Not bothering to wait, I headed back into the room, but didn't make it far before she shouted, "That's it then?"

I gritted my teeth.

"You tryin' to tell me you're just *done* now?"

Yes. No. I—

"You're gonna take all that hard work, all those nights you spent writing, all the money, the cars, the clothes, the pussy—the fucking house in the Hills—you're gonna throw it all in the trash because you've got some people who hate you?" The bitch laughed. Fucking laughed. "You *are* a pussy then, aren't you?"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up!" Grabbing the closest thing to me, I wrapped a white knuckled fist around the lamp on my nightstand and chucked it clear across the room, out into the night air, and straight into the railing outside. Glass exploded, sounding like hail against the concrete.

"There he is." She smirked, tilting her head as she examined me—like I'd done to her multiple times since we met. "The big bad, broken devil. You wanna hurt me? Wanna take it out on me?" I was out of my mind, had no fucking idea where the girl in front of me came from, but fuck if she wasn't hot as hell. "You got problems, Judah, more than I can count, but I never pictured you to be the type to give up."

"I'm not giving up," I ground out, hating that I was lying.

Too calmly, she pointed to the trash can. "You just burned a song in front of me."

"That doesn't mean *shit*." I glared, hating that I did want to hurt her. She was fucking right. I wanted to shove my dick down her throat and watch her choke to death. Just to bring her back to life with my tongue and do it all over again, until everything stopped hurting so fucking bad.

"It doesn't?" She moved to pick up the notebook she threw earlier. "Where are all the songs, then, huh? If you're not giving up, you got a demo for me to hear?"

I flipped the script. "I think we're done talking about me. How about we talk about you?"

"Uh, no." She laughed. "Nice try. Where are the other songs, Judah? Are you on a deadline?"

"Why the fuck do you care, Phoenix?" I was grasping at straws, I knew why she cared. I forced her to—it was all my fault she was twisting me up right now.

"How can you ask me that?!" She looked insane, wild. Her hair was a mess, her makeup half gone from all the time she spent curled up in my lap. She was unhinged, and I got her there. I pushed her to this point, and I fucking loved it. I wanted to grip those hips, squeeze her flesh between my fingers, and let her hit me as I did it.

"Don't pretend like I'm irreplaceable to you." I turned around, heading out onto the patio. Stopping at the table, I grabbed a cig from the box and stuck it between my lips, talking around the filter. "You're just here to see if you can fix the *sad boy*, but you can't, so fuck off."

"I can't?" she asked, watching me with a plan in her eyes. "You wanna try that again?"

"Oh, what? Now you're some almighty powerful therapist who can fix the wires in my brain? You can't fix *shit*, Phoenix, you can't even fix yourself," I spat, finding the perfect mark. "You're too busy worrying about if you'll blow your own brains out one day, there's no way you can help me."

For the first time, she didn't fire back a comeback right away. Instead, her brown eyes seemed to harden, solidifying into something so cold, it froze my blood.

"All right, fine," she said low and slow, standing in the doorway between my room and the patio. "You wanna play like that? You wanna get petty and pull out all the fucking cards, Judah? Fine—what am I doing here then? If you're gonna burn all your songs, push me away, and do everything in your fucking power to prove how much of an asshole you can be, then you can do it alone."

Hold the fuck up.

No.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I demanded, my tone laced in panic as she spun for the closet. She didn't answer as she grabbed her bag. "Phoenix, what are you doing?"

If she left right now, I would lose my fucking mind.

She was still silent as she dropped the thing on my bed and proceeded to grab the rest of her shit from the table outside. She was packing.

She was leaving.

I was losing her.

Not in this lifetime.

"You said you wouldn't." My body was shaking now, so worked up, I couldn't see straight.

"I thought you were a different person," she deadpanned.

"Excuse me?" I was headed into a territory that both of us weren't ready for.

She spun around, her gaze sharp enough to stab me in the chest. "I said, I thought you were a different person. I'm good without all this." It wasn't the words she used, it was the way she waved her hand in my direction, as if I was just too much to explain in full detail.

"All this?" I started to lose control of my breath as she zipped the bag. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means I have my answer," was all she said before pushing past me, trying to get to the door.

Nope, not today, baby girl.

I grabbed the strap on her gym bag, yanked it off her shoulder and threw it in the same place I threw the lamp, listening as a crack sounded throughout the room. I sneered, "Try again."

Her mouth dropped open. Stunned, she stood there gaping at me.

"My fucking... You just..." She couldn't form a sentence, and we'd finally reached the moment I'd been waiting for since the night we met. I wondered what she would do when she inevitably came face to face with the devil inside me.

I just broke her iPad. She loved that thing.

And guess what? I smiled. "Wanna try and leave again?"

Three heavy seconds, and then...

She slapped me clear across the face.

One minute, she was staring at her bag with glittering tears barely hanging on her lower lashes, and the next, she was on me. With two palms against my chest, she shoved. The adrenaline in her body had her stronger than she normally would be, so I actually stumbled back a good foot, but she kept coming, clawing me backwards. "You're a fucking mess, you hear me? You drown yourself, bury yourself, burn your words, and then break *my* shit? For telling the goddamn truth? Just like everyone else, yeah? Isn't that what they did to you?" A sick smile turned her lips upward, my girl had gone full psycho. "You get off on that though, don't you? You kinda like the self-pity bullshit."

She grabbed at my chest again, but I gripped both her wrists before she could do any more damage and pulled up, upsetting her balance and forcing her body to fall into mine. Getting right in her face, I glared, making sure we were nose to nose. "I like the self-pity?" A laugh fell from my throat for the first time in this conversation. "You think I'm the only one who gets off on this shit?" Her expression faltered as she

realized where I was going with my next thought. She couldn't pull this shit and win. Not with me. I tilted my head, letting my eyes fall to her lips. "Awww, Little Bird, is that what we're doing now? Pretending like you aren't dripping wet?"

A harsh breath disappeared from the air and into her lungs, so I took that as my sign and wrapped two hands around her ribcage before I lifted and threw her onto the bed.

She was fucking perfect.

"Yeah." I smirked, looking down at her all spread out on my sheets, panting, shaking. "I think it might be time I find out for sure..."



WAS | WET? Fuck yeah, I was. Did I want it rough, dirty, fucking bloody? Yeah, I did.

But I wasn't going to let my inner demons get the joy of fucking Judah for the first time. I wanted every sound, every sensation, every touch all to myself. I had no interest in sharing headspace with hate right now, not yet. We could do that later—the hate-fucking.

For now, I needed to figure out how to bring us back to the center, because this was going downhill, fast.

Somewhere along the way, I locked the rational, healthy, sane version of myself in a plexiglass cage in the back of my mind, and now I couldn't figure out how to let her back out. Judah's refusal to tell me what had him so worked up triggered that petty, jealous bitch who couldn't hang, and now I was shaking—physically, mentally, spiritually—even as he loomed over me, smelling like a night of pure distraction and filthy emotional revenge.

We knew we'd be explosive. We knew that once we both jumped in the ring, we'd fight until we couldn't anymore. A lamp, my fucking iPad—he wasn't stable, but I pushed him. I got him this worked up, and now I was regretting it, because I didn't want the first time I got him naked to be like this.

I had to get him to chill out for a second, but that meant I needed to be reasonable, needed to calm myself down first,

and I was struggling to find that switch.

Just as his hand was about to grip my thigh, I kicked up and jumped from the bed to put some distance between the two of us. "We aren't doing this," I started, spinning to eye him seriously while trying to mask the shaking in my voice. "We aren't going to be that fucking couple who tears each other to shreds, then fucks it out like we can't solve this shit another way."

"Here we go," Judah mocked, rolling his eyes and running his hands over his face.

I didn't need to ask what he meant—he was beginning to hate when I put the stop to our toxicity but, "If I fucked you right now, our first time would forever be tarnished because we can't talk like normal people. I don't want that, and I'm fucking shocked that you do."

"That's not what I want, and you know it," he barked, crossing both arms over his eyes. "I need a fucking blunt."

A blunt, right.

What better way to calm down two stoners?

"Good idea," I agreed. "Let's go."

Unable to look at him, I made my way out to the patio, but instead of sitting down where I normally would, I headed for the railing that overlooked the pool built into the land behind the house. I needed a moment to just watch the lights, listen to the sounds of the night, ask the sky how it managed to shine, even in the darkness.

How was I supposed to help him if I couldn't help myself, if I lost control every time he hid something from me? Because I wasn't dumb, nor was blind—there would be more situations just like this one. All because Judah's pride wouldn't let him admit that he was ashamed, afraid of something, and pride led to lies, sneaking around.

But was he worth it?

I got my answer right away, didn't even have to think about it as he stepped up behind me, using one arm to cage me

against the railing while he held an unlit blunt in front of me with the other, placing it between my lips.

As my heart beat too fast, as my body melted and molded itself to his, I dropped my head back against his chest and clamped down on the end of the blunt, waiting for him to light it. As he dug in his pocket for the lighter, he also gripped me—right in the spot where my neck met my shoulder blade, squeezing with just enough pressure to have my clit throbbing in my shorts. Finding it, he held up the lighter and flicked the flame to life, bringing it to the edge and setting the paper on fire while I took a deep drag, burning the green to a perfect cherry.

I closed my eyes as Judah dipped his head, bringing his face to my throat, dragging his nose against my flesh. He broke the silence, whispering huskily, "You're a mean little bird."

I wasn't innocent. I smirked. "Only when you lie to me."

"Mmm," he murmured, stepping up to my back, walking me right up against the railing. His dick was hard, resting in between my ass cheeks, and it set off a bomb of heat in my stomach. "I didn't lie. I didn't want to talk about it."

"Yeah, well," I started, taking another hit as I ground my ass against him, arching my back just enough to add pressure where it was needed. A hand flew to my waist and squeezed, leaving my breathing labored when I continued, "Omitting the truth is just as bad as straight up lying, and you don't have the luxury of doing either."

Not if he wanted me around.

A chuckle escaped as I lifted the blunt for him to take. He plucked it from my fingers and immediately pulled a deep as fuck hit, hiding the smoke so far in his lungs, holding it in so long, that when he blew it out, the cloud didn't look nearly as dense as it should have. "I live in luxury, baby, what makes you think this would be any different?"

"What makes you think it wouldn't be?" I volleyed, talking slower than normal as his hand traveled from my neck,

down my back, around my hip and up to my abs, where he curled his fist around the fabric of my hoodie and pulled me closer. My eyelids fluttered as I tried not to moan—he felt so fucking good. But... "I have no connection to this world aside from you, Judah. No other reason to be here. You want me to stick around? Then keeping shit like this from me won't fly."

I swear he growled.

"You want all the dirty details, Little Bird?" His mouth was at my ear, his teeth grazing the edge. Just as he reached one of the three piercings I had there, he continued, "Fine, I'll give you the details, but you don't get to pussy out on me. You came at me tonight and proved you're a fucking wildfire. You're my match, my person, my little half-breed."

"Half-breed?" I whispered on a moan, heating too quickly to stop it.

"Hmm, at first I thought you were my guardian angel—someone sweet, pure, saintly, but now?" Using the grip he had on my waist, he pulled, twisting me around to face him and slowing the momentum with a firm hand around my jaw. "After tonight's little performance, I'm willing to bet an angel fucked a demon and you're the result. You're a sickly sweet menace to my mental space."

I was anything he said I was, falling the fuck apart in his arms.

"I burn my songs because no one fucking cares." His eyes were on my lips, his gaze on fire, almost as if confessing was easier for him with the distraction of our chemistry. "I put my heart and fucking soul in these songs, Phoenix. I rip myself apart trying to articulate why I haven't killed myself yet, how I still want to, how sometimes the pressure gets to be so much it suffocates my sound, how industry professionals will set you up to fail, just to prove a point, gain a leg up. How we're told to keep our mouths shut about things that matter to us, because it's not good for our motherfucking *brand*." The angrier he got, the tighter he held my jaw. I let him get it out, savoring the pain. "Don't even get me started on other artists. We shit on each other for publicity, choose sides where there shouldn't

even be any, and here I am, just wanting to use the music to get it all out of my head..."

I understood, finishing for him, "And they use it against you. The people who don't understand, the one's on the other side, take your words and twist them."

He nodded and lessened the pressure on my jaw, still watching my lips, but this time, he placed the blunt against my bottom one, demanding me to, "Hit it."

I did. As our faces were only inches apart, I pulled the smoke in my lungs, hoping I was right about where this was headed. Sure enough, as I held my breath, letting the weed do its job, he pulled the blunt away and lowered his face to mine, hovering just half an inch from touching, then whispered, "Give it to me."

I blew out the smoke in a steady, straight line as he inhaled our impending high from the air between us. His eyes rolled closed and finally—doing something useful with my hands—I reached up and held the sides of his face, standing on my tippy toes to bring us closer, and said, "I don't care what you destroy, I don't care how you react, I don't care how long your tantrum lasts, or how big our fight is. But you don't hide shit from me, or *you'll* be the one to ruin us." His eyes remained closed as I lowered myself to the ground, but I wasn't done. "Judah, look at me."

When he peeled his eyes open, there was a cauldron of feelings written in his stare, causing my heart to cry out. Like a dramatic ending to a movie or a sad fucking song, we were destined to fail, but I couldn't help it—I needed to believe I could change fate if I tried hard enough. "I don't like that place. I don't like pushing you to the edge, because I don't want you to fall over. I don't want to lose you, but at the same time—"

"At the same time, you know you get off on being the only one capable of pulling me back. You like being the only one who can stop me from not just falling, but *jumping* over the edge." His eyes blazed as waves of toxic waste rolled between us.

He was right. "Regardless of what turns me on, it was *your* music that saved my life." The heat in his stare didn't die out, it just changed—blazing hotter, wider, as it built like a circle around me. Judah's possessiveness was on full display, and it stoked my fire, gave me the confidence I needed to continue. "You don't get to stop writing. You don't get to burn your words. Not with me around, not with how much they mean to me and how much I know they mean to your fans. You need a reminder, someone to pull you out of your head and back to reality, but I can't do that if you don't let me in, Judah. If you don't want to keep fighting for your art, your voice, that's fine, but I can't want this more than you do."

He stuck the blunt in his mouth in favor of reaching down to grip the back of my legs, demanding, "Jump, baby."

Jump?

With another pat to the back of my thigh, I understood what he wanted, so I placed my hands on his tall ass shoulders and jumped. He caught me quickly, bringing my chest to his, lifting his face to mine, and said, "You're asking a lot."

"More than you asked me?" I raised a bratty brow.

"No," he admitted gruffly. "But that doesn't change the facts."

He was inching his way toward flirting, so I took the lead. "What can I give you to sweeten the deal?"

A growl left his throat. "That's more like it." I tightened my legs around his waist, linking my ankles together behind his back, when he lifted a hand to my cheek. "Give me those lips, and I'll see what I can do."

Fuck me. The bees were back.

I smirked, leaning down until we were nose to nose.

This was happening, I was doing the one thing, making the one move, that would seal my soul to his, but I didn't have any room left for fear, not right now. I wanted him too badly, his body up against mine made sense, felt too good, too right to be bad.

Lowering my face further, I lined up my lips with his, and just as I was about to give in, Judah slammed his mouth to mine.

And I was home.

Soft as hell, his lips were demanding, wet, and just a little out of control as he kissed the shit out of me. I could have cried as his tongue hit mine for the first time, and his clean, unique flavor had my taste buds exploding as I tried to memorize the feel of his lips.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he groaned, pulling me tighter against him, slipping my hips low enough so his dick hit my fabric covered pussy. He switched his grip, and now both hands were buried in the flesh of my ass, kneading, playing, while I ran my hands over his shoulders, up the back of his neck and into his hair, pulling on the strands while I got my fill.

There was no stopping the sounds falling from my mouth —I moaned as my tongue danced with his, wanting to cry out every time his dick hit my clit as he ground against me. My hands made their way back to his face, loving the feel of his cheekbones against my fingers, the way his jaw moved as he devoured my mouth. I ran my thumbs along his eyebrows, my index finger down his temple, wanting to memorize his features just in case he was taken from me too early.

"I'm fuckin' it up tonight," he growled against my lips. "You ready?"

Was I ready? I laughed out a moan. "Make it hurt tomorrow."

One of his hands left my ass in favor of gripping the back of my neck. As he tilted my head in the direction he wanted it to go, his breath hit my collarbone, his tongue licked a line up the exposed center, his fingers squeezed my pressure points. "Oh, sweet girl, it'll hurt for a whole lot longer than that."

Then we were moving, dangerously distracted by the feel of one another as he walked us confidently, quickly, back inside. I was just about to move my lips to his neck, pull the thin skin between my teeth, when he let go of my thighs in favor of gripping under my arms and throwing me onto his bed. I landed with a small squeal, surprised and out of breath, but my shock morphed into intoxicating anticipation as he set his sights on me.

Gone just as quick, leaving me panting on the bed, he grabbed the little remote on his nightstand and switched the lights to blue, casting the entire room in indigo darkness.

When he turned back, he looked about ready to eat me alive. Eyes blazing, his chest rose and fell roughly, and it was blatantly obvious that I was about to get everything I wanted, everything I wasn't ready for.

His blue eyes were both hot and cold—made of icy blue flames, as he demanded, "Give me your foot."

My foot? "Why?"

"I don't want to hear your mouth," he snapped, holding out a hand. "Give up the control, P, you don't have any here."

Oh...this is gonna be fun.

"Keep talkin' to me like that and you can have whatever the fuck you want." I lifted my foot with a saucy grin, placing my ankle in his open palm. Immediately he closed his hand around it, yanking me toward him, so my ass was almost at the edge of the bed.

Using the angle, his height, and the fact that I'd willingly surrendered, he bent down and slammed his lips to mine, digging his fingers into the waistband of my shorts at the same time. In one swift move, he had them off my body and across the room, wasting no time getting an inked hand in between my legs, and sticking his tongue down my throat seemingly all at once. He cupped my pussy affectionately for only a second before he jammed three fingers in and *up*, going straight for my g-spot.

Holy shit.

Gone.

I threw my head back on a cry as my hips bucked, as my ass left the bed, unable to control myself as he fucked the shit out of my insides.

"Holy shit, Judah," I whined. Pretty sure I was crying as I tried not to squeeze my legs together, but the sensation was too fucking much. Still, he didn't let up, not even a little, as he used his other hand to lift my hoodie from my stomach, working himself inside to yank down the cup of my black lace bralette, leaving one of my tits free. My nipple was puckered and angry, ready for attention, but he couldn't actually see anything and that wasn't going to work for me.

I sat up as best I could, pulling the hoodie off and leaving me in nothing but lace.

Those blue eyes flashed, drowning my body in his sweltering gaze as he muttered, "Flawless."

Then all bets were off. He dove back in, finger fucking me to delirium, using his mouth to ruthlessly suck on my tit—hard enough to leave thick hickeys around my nipple like we were in high school.

I didn't care. I wanted it harder, louder—I wanted him in me already.

Too lost to the sensation, I wasn't expecting it when he pinched my clit, causing me to *really* cry out. His name fell from my lips in a near sob as my nerve endings shot hot pleasure through my hips and deep into my cunt.

His mouth popped off my tit so he could flash me a lust fueled grin. His tone was all fuckboy as he said, "Good to know you're just as vocal *in* the sack as you are out of it."

I was learning why rappers bragged about who and how they fucked in most of their songs. All Judah did was put three fingers in my pussy, and I was already ruined for the next guy. If this was how it always was...

"How you holdin' up, baby?" He smirked as I squirmed beneath his slowly pumping fingers. I wanted more, harder, faster, and he knew it—just refused to give in. Leaning over me, he took his time trailing his mouth down my body.

"Come on, J," I growled, right on the edge.

"You want more?" he taunted, speeding up just a little. "You sure you can handle it?"

"For fuck's sake!" I yelled, causing him to laugh darkly.

Then he gave me what I wanted.

He picked up speed instantly. His tongue licked, his teeth bit, his mouth sucked on both nipples as he finger fucked me into oblivion, sending me crashing my way through an almost-release before he stole it all away again on his way to eat my pussy. He wasted no time pulling his fingers from my cunt and lifting the slick digits to my lips, demanding, "Suck."

Fuck yes. I latched on, sucking his fingers until my legs shook and all my juices were gone.

I was in a goddamn frenzy.

It had been a long week of fucking my vibrator in shame, pretending like I didn't want this badly enough to lie for it, so the fact that all my fantasies were about to come true? That alone almost pushed me over the edge again.

But then he stopped with his head hovering between my legs, his eyes on mine. In a rasping, confident tone he demanded, "Watch me."

Watch him eat me out?

"No fucking way I'll be able to—" I lost my breath as he blew a stream of cool air on my exposed clit. "—even keep my eyes open."

"Better fuckin' try, huh?" he asked, sliding two rough hands down the outside of my thighs, before pushing his head against my left leg and breathing in my scent. I became a fucking puddle as his eyes rolled back and he muttered against my skin, "Goddamn cherries."

With tight squeezes, he pushed, kneaded, and guided his hands to the space where my thighs met my hips and said, "You stop watching, I stop sucking, got it?"

I used the top of my foot to pull his head to my pussy. "Just do it, for fuck's sake."

As he chuckled, that air hit my clit again, but closer this time. My body responded almost too quickly, forcing me to arch my back, dig my hips further into the mattress as a cry of frustration flew from my mouth. His tongue was still hidden in that delicious mouth, and I was going to kill someone.

"So impatient." He smiled against my pussy lips, but then finally put me out of one misery...and threw me straight into another as his soft, silky, big ass tongue hit my clit and beat it the fuck up.

He lapped at my cunt, sucked my clit into his mouth, and fucked me into a goddamn void with only his mouth, using his fingers to squeeze my hips, my ass, he even wrapped his hands around my ribcage, making me feel small, delicate, worshipped as he let go and moved his hands up to my tits. He must have realized my bra wasn't all the way off because he stopped everything in its tracks and lifted his head, bitching, "Take this off," before going right back in.

I couldn't take anything off, couldn't even fucking focus with his mouth devouring me whole. All I wanted was to close my eyes, get lost in the feel of him, but I couldn't deny that seeing his upper lip glistening was sexy as all hell. Not to mention the piercing pleasure I felt in my cunt as I stared at the pad of his tongue just before it touched home, as I studied the feral way his mouth rocked against my opening, obliterating my chances of get dicked down by someone else and enjoying it.

I moaned, letting my head fall back, my eyes flutter closed.

"Phoenix," he growled against my opening.

"I can't," I cried, hips seeking out his face, I was right fucking there. "Come on, J, make me come."

A pause.

"Fuck," he groaned, defeated by the affectionate tone of my voice, the way I shortened his name, made everything more real. I'd weakened him into giving me what I wanted, so as he licked a line up my slit, he looked me dead in the eye and growled as he reached the top, "You're gonna pay for that."

"I'll return the favor, just fucking do it." I sounded ridiculous, like a goddamn hussy, but I was *that* desperate for release. As his tongue worked miracles on my pussy, that orgasm was building, slowly but surely in the background. I cried out, nearly in tears as it got bigger, louder, more dangerous to my psyche.

I might not survive.

Judah seemed to notice the change in my breathing, the rate at which my hips were fucking his face, begging for friction because he gave me more—two fingers in my cunt, a third dancing around my asshole. As soon as that third finger hit its target, I detonated, clamping his face between my thighs as he continued to suck the orgasm right from my body.

Sparks, stars, fireworks exploded behind my eyelids as my body shook its way through the earthquake, stretching my heart, my will, my desire to please him into a thin, extremely breakable line. I was completely naked and splayed out on Judah Colt's bed, and for a moment, I almost fell into insecurities, but he quickly remembered that he played me like a fiddle and there was no way he didn't enjoy it.

As I came down, shaking, sweaty, and ready to be fucked, Judah stood up, wasting no time pulling off his joggers and taking his boxer briefs with them, leaving me no time to prepare for the sight of *him* naked.

Jesus H. Christ.

Hair sweaty, lips swollen, cheeks red from my thighs, he was so beautiful. But all I could do was gape at the nine-inch rod staring back at me. I always wondered if his tattoos covered every inch of him. Turned out, his dick was free of tattoos but pierced right at the tip. "You're fucking kidding."

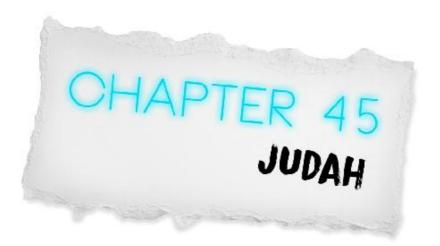
"Not even a little," he grinned, holding out a hand. "Up."

I was still coming down, but there was nothing on this fucking planet that could keep me from touching the

masterpiece he'd been hiding from me. His dick was *everything*—sexy, angry, pulsing as it stood straight out, but Judah didn't touch himself, didn't even try to ease the pain, which told me everything I needed to know.

He wanted to be tortured.

It was my turn to smirk. "You're gonna want to lie down for this."



I KNEW she'd be good. I knew our sex would be hot, I knew I'd be totally and completely fucked after all was said and done, but one thing I couldn't have anticipated? Being totally and completely fucked before she even laid a finger on my cock.

She fell apart in my hands after actively chasing her orgasm, and now the roles were reversed. I was melting straight into putty for her—she could mold me, move me, force me to do just about anything, and I wouldn't think twice

Stoked as hell, I grinned down at her. "Where do you want me?"

She stood then, pulling off the little lace bra that held her firm C cups without any padding. As the garment cleared her head, she stated, "Middle of the bed."

Her tone was sexy and confident, showing off her experience. Too anxious to see what the fuck she had up her sleeve, I avoided reaching down to relieve the pain and get the blood moving in my dick. I wasn't about to bust early and ruin the whole night.

Falling back onto the bed, I stretched out in the middle with my hands behind my head and a smirk on my face, like a total asshole. Her pretty lips glistened in the dark room. Her tiny, curvy, body was on full display, making my mouth water.

"You better suck it before you ride it. I want both experiences tonight."

She chuckled, climbing on the bed with her tits dangling lightly from her chest before she straddled my calves and leaned all the way forward, nearly covering the entire bottom half of my body with hers. Her brown hair was a wild nest of waves, falling over one shoulder as she ran two delicate fingers up my thighs, over my hip bones, and all the way into the dusting of hair I had shaved close to the skin at the base of my cock. She didn't stop there though—because that would have been too easy, too unlike Phoenix Royal.

No, she kept going, dragging a digit up the length of my dick, following a particularly thick vein with hungry eyes, and I was about to fucking lose it. "Phoenix."

"Shhhh," she cooed, torturing me right back now that the roles were truly reversed. I wasn't exactly regretting it now, but I definitely understood her frustrations.

I bit out, "Fuck it or suck it, Baby Bird, before I lose my goddamn mind."

"So impatient." She clicked her tongue, which was visible in her mouth from my vantage point. I wanted to reach inside and grab it, pull her forward, and bite down on it, but I tried to hold still as I anticipated her next move.

Seconds later, she ended her teasing too quick to prepare for.

In one swift move, she wrapped a fist around the very base of my dick and squeezed so hard, I roared through the room, eyes slamming shut as every hair on my body stood at attention. Then came her voice, sounding like pure honey as she moaned out, "Ah, there he is."

"Fucking hell," I snarled, breathing hard.

She kept the pressure, suffocating the life out of me as she dragged her fist up, taking any extra skin with it, stretching, pulling, treating my dick exactly the way I needed her to.

How did she know what I wanted? How I liked it?

I had no fucking idea, but I was too far gone to question it. Especially when she unlocked her jaw, lowered her body and sucked me down her throat.

"Holy shit." I threw a hand over my eyes and used the other to grip the sheets, white knuckling the black comforter as she picked up the pace.

There was no fear in her grip, no insecurities in the way as she lifted up just enough to circle the tip of my cock with her tongue before she threw me a wink and refocused her attention on swallowing me whole.

My little bird was giving me the best head I'd ever gotten and *fuck my life*—I'd gotten a lot of head.

Aaaaand in that moment—I didn't like it so much anymore.

Because I realized that in order for her to be this good, this experienced, she had to have been taught by someone else.

She learned all of her skill on another dick, probably more than one.

Not. Fucking. Cool.

Needing to mark my territory, punish her for not finding me sooner, I slammed my hand down on the back of her head, forcing my cock to the back of her throat, as deep as it would go. One of her hands flew to grip my thigh as she gagged, choking on a mouthful. Her throat pulsed around the head, squeezing, suctioning, punishing me right back before I let go and let her up to breathe. As she pulled back, her livid eyes met mine and saliva dripped from her mouth, landing on my skin. I nearly drooled at the sight before I realized Phoenix was glaring at me.

I couldn't help it, I gloated. "What?"

"A little warning next time." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, sneering at me. "I'm not a fucking porn star."

"Sure about that?" I asked, knowing that if I kept pushing her, she'd flip her lid. She could only take so much before the spoiled brat would make an appearance, and that's who I really wanted to play with. Eyeing her with purpose, I slid my gaze along her tits, up her throat, landing on her lips, just as I suggested, "You certainly suck like one. Should we see if you fuck like one too?"

Giving her no time to answer, I did a quick sit up, grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her down on top of me, leaving her little body splayed fully across mine. She caught herself with her hands on either side of my head, and then I was right where I wanted to be. Skin to skin, heat to heat, she was everything I imagined her to be. More. Everything.

Winding a hand through the curtain of her hair and an arm around her waist, I held tight and flipped us so that she was flat on the mattress while I was hovered over her, my dick right where it needed to be. I ground out, "Birth control?"

She nodded before raising a judgmental brow. "STDs?"

I shook my head. "Holly makes sure I'm clear. Don't ever fuck without a condom."

She laughed out a moan as my cock hit her slit. "Why would you ask about birth control, then?"

"Because that changes now." Giving her no warning, I slammed my dick home, burying every inch to the fucking hilt, pulsing immediately, ready to fucking blow as the walls of her cunt clamped down on my too sensitive flesh. I groaned out, "Mother of *hell*."

Her answering scream was loud.

Loud enough that if Pharaoh came down the stairs to his room, he'd hear her, even through the soundproofed walls, and know exactly what we were doing. The thought spurred me on, so much so that I drove my hips faster, harder as I took in the sight of her all sweaty, lost to our connection. Her hair was sticking to her face in some spots, spread out on the pillow in others, eyes closed in ecstasy as she let me command her body.

My little bird was a fucking sight.

So beautiful it physically hurt—her tits were sun kissed and devoid of a single tan line. My voice was raw, foreign, as I

told her, "Even your fucking nipples are perfect."

They were, too—pretty as hell.

Slightly darker than her skin tone—not too big, not too small—and just sensitive enough that when I leaned down to lick one, she bucked her hips to meet mine. "God, you're so fucking responsive."

As if answering, I felt walls of her cunt clamp down around my dick again, causing me to roar out another string of expletives that would surely wake the neighbors.

"Dickmatized," she panted. "I'm so fucked."

Thank god for genetics.

"Yeah, you are." I smirked, adjusting my grip on her legs, pushing them wider so I could see my dick disappear inside her. "But hold on tight, Baby Bird, we ain't done yet." Then I took her breath away.

Literally. She sucked in a breath, bit down on her bottom lip, and gripped the sheets as I fucked her *hard*.

I slammed my dick so deep, I was willing to bet her cervix would cramp for the rest of the night. My hips rocked as I pounded into her—as fast and as brutal as her anatomy would allow, over and over again, in more than just this position.

Fucking Phoenix was always going to be amazing, there was no way our connection would allow it to be anything else, but the reality was...out of this world. For every thrust, she gave it back. With every squeeze of my hands, she fell further into ecstasy. Tonight, this moment, our sex proved she was mine because she was here with me—she flirted with her cunt squeezing my cock, smiled with her eyes closed as she let me do whatever the fuck I wanted. But she was here. It was real—I felt it in every sound, tasted it on her skin.

"Stay here," she begged, realizing I tuned out for a moment. "Don't get lost up there and leave me alone. Stay with me. Fuck me, J."

Jesus Christ. Your wish is my command.

Suddenly too overwhelmed to say anything, I flipped her over, dragging her hips back until she was in a kneeling position on the bed, perfectly accessible as I stood behind her. Both my hands landed with a smack—one on each ass cheek —before I stroked the half-globes, squeezing, stretching, spitting directly on the puckered hole between her now spread cheeks. I ground out, "Ass cool?"

She chuckled a breathless sound. "I'm surprised you asked."

"Me too," I replied honestly, slipping a finger straight in, causing her to let loose a guttural moan, so sexy, my toes curled against the carpet.

I had planned to fuck her ass rather than just finger it, but I couldn't wait any longer and I knew it wouldn't be gentle, so I left my finger but added another, going straight for gold.

"Fuck, Judah," she choked out, dropping her head as her limbs practically liquified beneath my fingers. She was nearly spent.

I didn't care. Skin met skin, louder now as the sloppy sounds of rough sex filled the room once again. The bed shook, the headboard hit the wall. I lost all control and didn't hold a single thing back.

I gave the little brat everything I had.

"Oh my god," she sobbed tearlessly, gripping the bedsheets until her knuckles turned white as I pounded into both of her holes. As soon as I added a third finger to her ass, she pulsed, squeezing my dick with just the right amount of pressure, and I went off like a fucking bomb. Nuclear, wiping out everything in my path.

"Motherfucker," I roared, spilling myself inside her as my free hand gripped her hip. My legs struggled to hold me upright as I kept going, driving, crashing my hips to hers, enduring wave after wave of mind-numbing pleasure as it coursed through my body, lighting my nerve endings on fire.

Coming down was hard, brutal, exhausting as Phoenix continued to let out adorable little moans with each exhale.

"I need a fucking cigarette," I huffed, chest rapidly rising and falling as I pulled out. My dick was still pulsing, jumping at the sight of my cum dripping a slow line out of her pussy and onto the bed, nearly sparking the need for round two. *Fuck my whole life*. I fisted one of her tan ass-cheeks, steadying myself. "Goddamn, P."

"Can't," was all she said, collapsing onto the bed face down before slowing rolling herself on to her back with her eyes closed.

Everything stopped, my heart included, as I took in the sight of her spread out on my bed—shamelessly naked, completely comfortable, and covered in all the evidence of our fucking. Red marks dotted her flesh, a few of them were even turning purple. Hickey's along her tits, a nice wet spot between her legs.

"I'd say you were thoroughly fucked." I nodded in approval, even though she couldn't see me.

Despite her exhaustion, she busted out laughing—filling the room with her sweet sound, settling my soul in the process. Her voice was whispered as she laughed, "This is insane."

"You got that right," I agreed. It had been a long time since I'd been properly fucked like that—since I actually gave my full attention to the girl I had my dick inside. Not my best admission, but the truth nonetheless.

"You're a little freak," I accused, smiling as I leaned over to pick up my joggers.

"I need a nap," she sighed contentedly, turning on her side.

I gave her naked ass a nice slap, the sound echoing through the room as she jolted up, "Ow! Judah!"

"Cig first, then bedtime," I called over my shoulder, not bothering to wait for her to follow me. I did, however, turn my chair to just the right angle so I could watch her get dressed through the open door.

Phoenix Royal would be the end of me, that's for sure.

Especially when she did shit like disappearing in the bathroom naked as hell and coming *out* of the bathroom wearing my clothes from earlier in the day. My Metallica Tshirt looked like a dress on her, reminding me of the one she and Frankie made for the concert she didn't even get to experience. I'd have to fix that soon—have her in the audience. It would no doubt change things for me, knowing it was her I was entertaining.

Showing off was my specialty, but something told me I hadn't truly performed until I performed for Phoenix.

Unaware that I was watching, she was oblivious to the cracking of my heart as she focused on pulling her hair up in a messy bun at the top of her head. It almost hurt too much to look at her. She was too perfect. Too...jaded and flawed and feisty and mine, and what if I lost her?

That's all I could think as strands of brown fell around her face, as she pushed them away and went about her business. At any moment, she could come to her senses and realize I was a piece of shit and I could lose her. Leaving me completely alone with only the memory of her scent, her taste, the feel of her skin beneath my fingers. The sounds she made as she came.

As best I could, I fought the visceral panic, shoved it down and pushed it away, as she walked into the closet and bent to look for something. The only difference in her appearance when she emerged were the fluffy white slippers she had on her feet.

My girl and her fucking slippers.

There went my cock again, stirring in my joggers.

"I'm gettin' gray hairs over here, baby," I called into the night, startling her as she rounded the side of the bed, looking for her phone. "Come on, already!"

She shook her head with a small, happy smile, settling a piece of my soul, even as that fear, that panic came back. It was so intense, so real, that it almost made me want to ruin it all, quit while I was ahead.

Why did falling in love hurt? Was it supposed to be this way?

I was one kiss away from fucked for her, gone for good.

"I needed to clean up. Someone got me all gross," she finally replied, walking outside with a bratty smirk before it faded as she shivered and looked around. "Damn, when did it get so cold out here?"

"When the adrenaline started wearing off," I replied as casually as possible, patting my thigh. "Get over here."

To my surprise, she did, grabbing the pack of cigs off the table before climbing in my lap and curling up against my chest. Holding out the open pack, I pulled two cigarettes out and placed them between my lips, wrapping one arm around her waist as I reached for the lighter in my pocket. I lit them quickly and handed her one when I was finished, settling back in the chair, pulling her body closer as we smoked.

Neither of us spoke as we slowly came down from the ride we just took, relaxing further into each other with every hit. By the time we finished, her head was tucked into the crook of my neck, her eyelashes fluttering against my skin like a butterfly's wings.

"You work tomorrow?" I whispered, running a hand through her hair, smoothing out the tangles.

She nodded against my skin. "Have to leave at ten."

Nope, fuck that.

"Don't wake me up," I joked, keeping my voice low. "What are you doing tomorrow night? When you get off?"

She froze up, going stone still in my arms.

"Don't do that," I growled, hating that fear was always her first reaction. "Don't you dare."

She was quiet for another moment before she sighed. "I'm off at eight, but it takes me about an hour to get home, so I'll be free around nine."

I could have told her I'd be at her place when she got off, but what was the fun in that? "I'll see what my schedule looks like."

"You'll see?" She lifted her head, narrowing her eyes. "Why did you ask if you weren't free?"

I lifted a brow. "I can't ask what you're doing when you get off work?"

"Well..." She shrugged with a little roll of her eyes. "Never mind."

"Never mind is right," I muttered, squeezing her thigh. "Kiss me, then it's bedtime. Beauty sleep and all that shit."

When she lifted her arm and placed a warm hand on my cheek, my ribcage tightened with affection. She added a little pressure, letting me know she wanted my eyes, my lips, all my attention on her. I planned to give it to her, but took control first, lifting her body to straddle my lap before winding my hands deep in the roots of her hair and fusing my lips to hers.

She tasted like cherries too, just the right amount of sweet.



WAKING up the next morning was strange.

I was in a house I wasn't used to, in a bed I wasn't used to, and then I had to tiptoe around Judah's room to get ready because he made it seem like waking him up this early—which wasn't actually early at all—would be a big no-no.

But it wasn't those things, specifically, that made it strange. It was all of the above no longer made me anxious. I felt totally comfortable as I hopped in Judah's massive shower, as I did my business and got ready in front of his mirror—the same one he stared at his own reflection within yesterday, before he rocked my whole fucking world.

By the time I was finished and leaving the room, there was a foreign, excited energy buzzing in my stomach. Happy.

I was happy.

Not wanting to wake him, I avoided going near the sleeping Judah, not bothering to say goodbye but deciding instead to go upstairs and see if he had anything decent to eat for breakfast.

I made my way up the stairs and into the bright living room as the sun assaulted my eyes through the windows, nearly blinding me. Blinking a few times, I glanced away from the light and scanned the living room, finding sleeping bodies scattered on all the furniture. "Oh my god," I muttered out loud, biting down on a laugh.

It was adorable. All the guys stayed the night and fell asleep almost exactly where we left them. Ricco and Kavan were both passed out in the two loveseats with their heads on one arm, and their legs dangling over the edge of the other. Silas was passed out on the floor with his hands behind his head, resting on a discarded couch pillow. Pierce and Keon each took up the available space on the couch, spread out on their respective sides. None of them had blankets or pillows and I wondered how the fuck they managed to feel good enough to tackle a day after sleeping like that. Sage had gone home before we went to bed, so the only one unaccounted for was Pharaoh, but he was most likely in his room downstairs.

Making my way into the kitchen, I faintly heard the front door click shut upstairs, the alarm beeping shortly after. Frowning, I left my bag on the counter and walked to the bottom of the stairs to investigate, but it was only Holly making her way in my direction, holding a cup of coffee with a thick looking messenger bag over her shoulder.

She didn't see me at first, too busy focusing on her descent, but when she did, she nearly jumped out of her skin. "Fucking hell," she whisper shouted, slamming to a halt as coffee spilled from the little hole in the lid.

"Shit, I'm sorry." I cringed, keeping my voice down. "I'm the only one awake, and I didn't know who was coming in the house since it seems like everyone is already here."

Nodding her head and breathing harder than normal she explained, "Yeah, that's not unusual, which is why I'm here so early. I check in with everyone as they wake up." Then she smiled, having recovered from my startling her. "Phew, morning! How are you? What are you doing up?"

I moved out of her way, heading back to the kitchen, saying over my shoulder, "I work at a tattoo shop in Santa Monica, so I have to leave around ten to make it there by twelve."

"Fuck," she sighed. "Yeah, that sucks. Fucking traffic."

I laughed, busying myself in the pantry while Holly got right to work on the coffee maker, filling a whole pot and adding the grounds. Finding a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, I grabbed it and turned to Holly, "I need a plastic baggie, where does he keep them?"

She lifted her chin toward another cabinet. "I can do you one better."

I followed her curiously as she moved to open a door to the right of the stove. As soon as she did, I saw that it was full of to-go versions of snacks. Holly reached in, dug around a little, and pulled out a round plastic canister full of my cereal, looking back over her shoulder to confirm, "This all? He's got a ton of shit in here that I'm forced to keep track of, so if you want anything else it's free game."

Didn't have to ask me twice.

"Fuck yeah, move over," I joked, stepping up beside her. She laughed as I pulled down Cheez-Its, mini Oreos, and those bomb as fuck animal crackers in the red box with the string. Then I got curious. "Do you assist all of them?"

"No." She shook her head, but there was undeniable affection in her eyes as she looked out toward the full living room and continued, "Just Judah. But they're all so close, it seems like if I'm assisting one, I'm assisting them all."

Jealousy curled in my stomach, threatening to sour my mood, but I was able to shove it down easier than I normally would have because, well, something had changed for me last night.

Judah was mine, and I could physically feel it.

Yes, this girl loved them, I could see it clear as day, but there was something else in her stare that had me asking, "Do you like your job?"

A sarcastic laugh fell from her mouth before her shoulders dropped on a sigh.

"Do I like my job?" she repeated, looking me in the eye. Hers were a very pretty shade of blue, darker than Judah's but lighter than Frankie's. "No. I don't. And not because I don't

like assisting, but because I'm always the assistant. Not only to Judah and his friends, but also to my boss. The guys don't fully trust me, and they shouldn't," She paused, shrugging her shoulders. "My job? My loyalty? It isn't only to Judah. I work for the label. I have a board to answer to and bills to pay, so I can't fuck this up. But at the same time, I hate living with one foot on the outside at all times." The sincerity in her voice was impossible to miss. "I try not to be around every day, because I think the guys like a break sometimes, you know? From having to worry about doing or saying something around me that I might report back. Which I'd never do...but how are they supposed to know that?"

I frowned. "Yikes, I never thought of it that way. But it's obvious that you care for them..."

"Oh, I do." She smiled warmly. "They're great fucking guys, I just wish I could do my job without a backing from the label."

As I loaded up my bag with my new snacks, I stopped in front of her on the counter, feeling a sick kind of satisfaction that there was a wall between her and the guys—which I recognized was gross as hell, but it was the truth no matter how toxic.

I tried not to let it show, though, as I said, "I think you underestimate how smart Judah is. He knows you're down for him, girl, he's just—"

"You get him already, don't you?" she asked, interrupting me. "I didn't mean to cut you off, I'm sorry. It's just that I've never seen him be so casual about his place or his friends before. It's obvious that you guys have something going on, I just didn't realize it went so deep, so fast."

I laughed. "Yeah, neither did we." Lifting my phone to check the time, I cringed a little when it showed up. "Okay I really need to get to work so I have to go, but I'll probably see you soon?"

She waved me off. "Absolutely, go. I'll see you soon."

Smiling, feeling bad that I was running out on her but not having the time to fix it right then, I grabbed my shit and hustled up the stairs, almost forgetting that the paparazzi might be waiting for me.

"Motherfucker," I cursed, bending down quickly, rummaging through my bag to find the black hoodie I brought. Finding it, I threw it over my head and whipped the hood up, covering my face as best I could, and pulled out my Gucci sunglasses to hide my features further.

This is annoying as fuck.

No wonder celebrities stopped trying to fight it. This was exhausting, and I was just a commoner.

I managed to keep my head down as I walked through the front door and heard no sounds around the property as I slid into the front seat of my Jetta.

Sighing in relief, I plugged in my phone, letting it charge while the Bluetooth synced.

As soon as everything was set to go, I called Frankie, knowing she'd be coming home from hot yoga right now, and I needed to update her, just in case I didn't get a chance to tonight.

"Fucking finally," she exclaimed as soon as she answered. "Tell. Me. Everything."

So, I did.

???

TEN AND A HALF HOURS LATER, on my way home from the shop, I was exhausted.

Emotionally, mentally, physically.

Pretty sure Judah did serious damage to my cervix the night before, and I felt it all day long. Not that I was complaining. It had been years since I was fucked like that. And Judah was only my second experience. I felt like I could call it an *experience* because that's exactly what it was. But

Judah was better than my last, not only because his dick lived up to the hype in his songs, but because after he dickmatized me, he sweetened the deal and tucked me in to his body, making me the little spoon. When I was where he wanted me, he put one arm under my head, and the other held me close with his big ass hand splayed across the center of my chest. The placement was so intimate, I fought tears in the dark.

When I shakily asked him what he was doing, he replied sleepily, "I just want to feel you."

I'd been trying to figure out what to do with that all day.

No matter what I said to myself, no matter how wary I was, Judah Colt gave a fuck about me. He...needed me. He'd said multiple times since we met that he claimed me and I claimed him. He was right in the way that I had no choice. My soul chained itself to his when he saved my life. But beyond that, I knew him, and despite my jealousy issues, I trusted him to not ever fake it. If he was mad, I'd know it, if he wanted me, I'd know it. I was the one who was hesitant all the time. I'd put the brakes on us, which made him spiral, but he'd been a fantasy for so fucking long, I needed time to adjust. To fall in love with the real version, to trust our connection. It was there, we both knew it.

We just hadn't tapped into it yet.

So I spent the day...reevaluating.

Not my relationship with him, but my role as his person. His twin flame.

We talked about it Saturday night in my driveway but that was that. Everything with Judah was such a whirlwind, it felt like I hardly had any time to take a moment and gather my thoughts, especially since whenever we were apart, he consumed my thoughts as if he were there with me.

But I couldn't let myself fall so deep into him that I lost sight of my goals, because now that I had them, I refused to give them up. I could see myself better when I was alone. Around other people, it all got too muddy.

Judah and I were still at the very beginning, standing on the precipice of the rest of our lives. He wasn't the type of guy you just moved on from. He was the guy you held on to with broken arms, crawled to on bloody knees every time he let you down. But I wanted this relationship to last as long as it could, so I needed to be strong for him, get him to see that toxic is fun but it doesn't last forever, so we needed a true foundation. A friendship, real, soul-deep trust.

Now, driving home, I had a pit in my stomach and it was shaped like the ashes of burned lyrics.

I understood why he was doing what he, did but at the same time, he absolutely didn't need to. Suddenly, I was thinking my way through hundreds of songs, sifting through the catalogue of lyrics in my head to try and pinpoint what made Judah different than every other artist out there. Judah didn't respond well to pressure, or negative comments, right? Well, every artist gets them, and pressure comes with the territory. So how was I supposed to help him?

Not really knowing the answer, I started from scratch and grabbed my phone, scrolling through my playlists until I found the one where I stored all of Judah's music and pressed play on "Heartless Romantic."

"It's all been shit since fucking birth

but don't ask why if you don't care."

From the very first line, he sucked me in.

As it kept playing, it all hit me. Since we met, I hadn't really listened to his music. Didn't need to, I had the real thing. But all the answers to my questions were buried in the lyrics, some of them hidden between the lines. That didn't matter, though, they were there, and all I needed to do was listen. I started getting to know him when I first heard this song, but I knew him even better now. I could actually do something about his pain, address the things I heard. I just needed to get him to trust me enough not to push me away or get defensive to the point where an argument bubbled. I was just as much to blame as he was, but getting him to hear me would be difficult.

It would take vulnerability. Real, genuine, heartbreaking vulnerability.

Grabbing my phone, I started the song over and turned it up as loud as it would go without blowing the speakers. And for four minutes and fifty-three seconds, I listened to his life story all over again.

The first verse broke me—when he talked about his father's fist and all the nasty things it did to him back when he was a kid. The second verse split me further as he rapped about the industry, getting discovered, the pressure, and what it did to his head—how it woke up his demons.

But the last verse...that was the one that always did me in.

Judah got even more real by the third go round, he didn't hold back as he told me about the bottle of pills on his nightstand and how he'd pick it up just to put it back down again.

In a voice made of liquid fire, he explained that he'd do that over and over, until one night, he finally took the lid off and spilled the pills in his hand. I saw it all in my head like a fucking movie as he counted the number of pills and compared them to the number of happy moments he could remember. Turned out, there were more pills than there were memories, and that wasn't okay with him.

All around me, his energy flared to life as his cadence picked up, as he admitted that he wasn't scared of death, but rather more afraid of dying before he made a name for himself. Before he left his mark on the world. With each lyric, Judah explained to me how he came to the decision to press pause on ending his life and live recklessly, take risks, and feel each and every emotion instead. Because why the fuck not? He'd die eventually anyways, why not live until he absolutely couldn't anymore?

Even now, that hit home harder than I expected it to. It had been months since my run in with death, but now that I had achieved some of those things, now that I was taking some of those risks and trying to feel each and every emotion, I understood what I had to do.

It was an odd feeling, like he was talking to me, pumping me up, as I drove down the ramp, exiting the highway.

I wanted happy memories. I wanted to leave my mark on the world. All because he did.

If Judah Colt could fight his demons and win—after all he'd been through, after everything he confessed—then so could I.

He made me believe that with just one song. One fucking verse.

Problem was, there were people in the industry, in the general public, that didn't give a shit about his problems, didn't care about his childhood, or that he was legitimately suicidal. Because why would they? It wasn't an easy topic to talk about, wasn't a fun song to listen to, so they tore him down instead. Took his life story, his pain, his fears, and reduced it to something they could actively hate on. Even now, almost a year later.

His plans, his goals, and his will to survive had been made into jokes, torn apart, and belittled by people who didn't understand what it was like to live with damage like ours. Now here he was, trying to write a new album with more insecurities, fears, and anger than he had before, making it too hard to see through the hateful things people said about him.

The good news was, he was still writing.

The bad news was, he immediately lit those words on fire.

Not anymore.

I had a few paths I could take at that point, but I knew what I needed to do. It was blaringly obvious once I broke it down.

We fucked, crossed that line and many others, but I knew better than anyone, Judah Colt wasn't going anywhere. He was in me, all around me—in my heart, my mind—I felt him in the marrow of my bones, and despite how hard I fought it, I liked it that way. I liked that he clung to me, gave me something to take care of. Something that was…mine.

He was mine.

Just like that, I understood why he was so possessive. Especially as the feeling spread through my chest, up my shoulders, and down to the tips of my fingers. I was the only thing capable of holding him together, because the other people in his life were so focused on not falling apart themselves, that they didn't have the time nor the headspace to check in on Judah and all his feelings. But I did.

I was so used to loving Judah from afar, I almost forgot that I could love him up close—for real this time.

I just needed to remind him that he had a gift and help him see that his music was fucking necessary. It saved lives. It saved my life—the girl he fought so hard to keep. I needed to do a little research, get my ducks in a row, but I was going to talk to him tonight. I wasn't letting it go.

He couldn't give up on his music, because I wasn't going to let him.

???

AFTER DRIVING AROUND for longer than necessary and pulling over to do some Instagram stalking, I needed to stop for gas when I turned onto the Sunset Strip. Driving one and a half miles through the liveliest part of the city, where nightclubs like The Viper Room and Whisky a Go-Go were located, I felt liberated. Ready. Nervous as hell.

I wasn't even sure why, since no one had answered my goddamn text messages all evening, so I had no idea if I was even seeing Judah tonight. It had been two and half hours since I texted both him and Frankie, but I had yet to hear back.

I wasn't far from home, so once I finished, I drove a little faster than necessary in that direction, drumming my fingers on the dashboard in front of my steering wheel the whole time. But as soon as I pulled up to the house, my stomach sank, my heart soared, and I wanted to strangle Frankie Skyes.

They were here. All of them.

Judah, Frankie, and apparently, a few other people, if the cars parked on the grass and in the street were any indication.

"You've got to be kidding me," I half grumbled half laughed as I got out of the car, wondering how pissed my neighbors were when they saw the three luxury vehicles parked at the end of the street. The road was narrow, since West Hollywood was a lot like the Hills in the way that most of the streets, homes, and roads were jammed together as close as possible without it looking horrible. I thanked the universe that we lived on a dead end, so my house wasn't a total eyesore.

There was an Aston Martin parked on my front lawn, for fuck's sake.

Making my way inside, I tried to prep myself for anything, but no one was around as I shut the door behind me. Why the fuck hadn't anyone told me?

I could hear laughter, shouting, and the sound of "WHAT'S POPPIN" by Jack Harlow playing through one of our Bluetooth speakers. There was the scent of weed wafting through the house as well, of course, but from what I could see, the kitchen was empty.

Then I walked further inside, and everything came into focus.

"What in the hell?" I asked out loud, taking in the scene before me.

Ricco and Kavan were posted up on the very edge of my grey couch, intensely focused on the video game they were playing while Frankie was stretched out on the love seat, fucking around on her phone. Looking to my right, Pharaoh was out on the back patio, smoking a cig and texting.

"Phoenix?" Frankie called, not bothering to look up.

"Uh, yeah," I responded, confused as hell. "What's all this?"

She sat up then, an equally puzzled expression on her face as she stared at me. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean?" I laughed. "Why are they here?"

"Hi, little P," Pharaoh said as casually as he slid open the door leading out back. He kissed my cheek as he passed, while my eyes widened in Frankie's direction.

"Why are they—" She was looking at me like I was insane, clearly confused about why I was confused, until a voice interrupted her.

"Sorry, Francine," Judah started, announcing his presence as he appeared from around the corner into the living room, coming from the direction of my bedroom.

Wait a fucking second.

My eyes roamed his frame, starting from the top of his blond head, passing a pink T-shirt with white lettering that I didn't read, down to the black jeans covering his lower half, finally landing on...his bare fucking feet.

Stunned, I just stood there.

Judah Colt was walking around my house, barefoot, when I got home from work.

Like he lived here.

When he didn't even bother to text me back?

Why am I not mad?

Why am I wet as hell?

I scowled as his smirk grew.

He started walking toward me, answering Frankie's question as he did. "I lied about the whole 'Phoenix knows we're coming over' thing. She didn't know."

"What?!" My best friend shouted, glaring at my...Judah. "I thought she knew! That's why I didn't—" She cut herself off to look at me. "That's why I didn't text you back. Well, I forgot to text you back at first, then Judah told me that you knew they were coming, so I figured I didn't need to tell you the plan anymore because he did!" She jabbed a finger at the guy in question, who wasn't far away now.

"You didn't even bother texting her?" He laughed over his shoulder. "You're the idiot who trusted me."

"I trusted you because you said you were bringing dinner!" She threw her hands up. "Which you didn't have—shocker."

"I don't have it," he began, coming to a stop in front of me with a sexy as fuck grin on his face. He brushed a piece of hair behind my ear, then continued, "Because I didn't know what the little bird would want to eat."

Annnnd, I'm a useless puddle of mush.

"You're in trouble." I smirked up at him. "Why the fuck didn't you text me back? What's the game this time?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged, lifting his hand to grip my chin. His eyes were laser focused on my lips as he asked, "Where's my kiss?"

Did he have to be so fucking hot?

"You don't get one." I gave him a bratty wink before pulling away. "Liars don't get kisses."

"That's my girl." Frankie clapped once, sitting back down in the love seat, looking satisfied with my response. Picking up her phone and continuing to scroll, she said, "I don't care what we eat but I'm starving, so someone needs to start thinking of ideas."

"I'm just going to change and then we can order something," I responded.

"I vote sushi," Kavan called out. "I'll Uber Eats it. I doubt any of us feel like driving."

Everyone waved a hand or called out an agreement noncommittally as I headed around the corner and down the hall with a Judah shaped shadow. My heart beat rapidly in my chest as I hit my bedroom door, finding it already open. I turned a little, and asked, "Spend some time in my room, did you?"

He shrugged again, following me in and going right for my bed, flopping back on the pink comforter while I got lost in my closet. His voice came with me. "You weren't home, I was curious. Not like you have anything to hide."

I didn't, but still. "You've got balls, I'll give you that."

"I asked what you were doing after work, *you* said you were free."

Stripping my clothes off, I replaced them with a purple and white tie dye sweat suit with a cropped hoodie and my slippers. Coming back out, I stood at the end of the bed. "I did say that, but that's normally where we make plans *together*."

I wasn't mad, not even a little. In fact, there was a big ass smile on my face as I took him in, all spread out on my mattress like he owned it. There was something about his need to be close to me that acted as a sort of glue to my heart. Piece by piece he was putting me back together. My smile slipped a little as I realized how much time I wasted fighting him. He'd been struggling for months—years, really—and no one was listening. There I was, fully capable of being that person for him, but I fought it the whole way through.

Him being here meant that I got to have my conversation with him tonight.

The nerves were very real but I knew I had time to kill, so I pushed them aside as I climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged in the middle, making eye contact with J as I settled. His blue eyes were bright, full of flirty mischief, and the giddy energy in the room kicked up the longer I stared.

When neither of us said anything, he grinned and nudged my leg with his own, saying, "Hi."

I laughed a little, feeling too many fuzzy feelings at the sight of his happiness. "Hi, baby boy."

"Hmm." He wiggled his eyebrows with a devilish tint in his eye. "She has a nickname for *me* now. I like it."

"I'm not surprised." I tilted my head, still grinning.

With the same smirk, he nodded his chin at me. "How was work?"

"Fine," I responded, not caring about anything but his lips and how badly I wanted to kiss them. While staring at them I asked, "How was your day?"

"It was fine," he replied as his smile grew.

"That's good." I nodded slowly, trying not to laugh.

Then the sweet tension broke and he pounced, reaching for me so fast that I let out a little squeal as his big hands cupped my cheeks and his lips touched down on mine.

He kissed me, hard.

My heart exploded as he smiled against my lips, nipping the bottom one before diving his tongue inside, sweeping my mouth, exploring my taste, and memorizing our chemistry.

When he pulled away, we were both grinning like fools.

"You look stupidly happy." He laughed like he couldn't help it. "Not sure what to do with knowing I made you that way."

"Who said it was you?" I sassed, flirting with him.

He sassed back, "The wet spot in your thong."

I shook my head in mock shame. "So confident."

"Gotta be, baby." He winked, bopping me on the nose. Then he got right to business, holding out an inked hand in my direction. "All right, let's smoke out and get some food in you. Then we can rent a movie or something. Sound good?"

Well fuck, that sounded like a solid Thursday night to me.

"Let's do it."



LATER THAT NIGHT, Judah and I fell asleep on the couch while watching TV with Frankie and the guys.

After our sushi arrived, we all smoked, grabbed drinks, and started searching for something to watch. Turned out, Frankie had set the DVR to record the latest season of *World of Dance* and all bets were off. Ricco and Kavan lost their minds, saying they hadn't had the chance to watch it with their schedule being so crazy the past few months.

Right before Silas' party, they'd been traveling around the country teaching classes in major cities. Now they were back, taking the summer to teach locally in LA, catching up on the shit they missed while they were gone. It was all mainly work stuff but watching this season was one of the things they made a point to do together because a kid they used to teach had made it and won.

So that's what we did. We binge watched a few episodes—which really meant we had a night full of Ric and Kav taking turns saying "wait, I wanna try that!" every time a dancer did something they'd never seen before. At one point, Ric tried to get Frankie to do some insane lift, spent twenty minutes trying to convince her to let him hold her above his head for ten seconds before he would drop her "artfully" to the ground.

She told him to fuck off.

Now it was about midnight, and I'd just woken up with Judah still sleeping in my lap.

Somehow, he got the most comfortable deal out of the two of us—I was jammed up against the end of the couch, while he slept cuddling my thighs.

Yawning, I ran my fingers through his hair, waking him up gently, knowing he'd want to smoke again before we actually went to bed for the night.

"That feels good." His voice was muffled against my leg, bringing a grin to my face.

"I bet," I whispered, not wanting to wake Kavan, who was passed out in the love seat with a blanket thrown over him. "You wanna go smoke?"

"Hmmm," he murmured. "I wanna move right now about as much as I want someone to kick me in the dick. You're too comfortable."

Warmth spread through my body at his words and the casual, sleepy way he said them. I ran my finger down his temple. "Yeah, well, you're adorable, but my back is killing me."

At that, he sat up with narrowed eyes, realizing I was still in a sitting position up against the edge of the couch. "Jesus, babe. Why'd you let me sleep on you like that?"

He shook his head, stretching as he stood. His mouth opened on a nice, loud, dramatic yawn, making my belly flutter because, well, I was obsessed with him and all the little things he did.

Sighing, he ran a hand down his face, then extended a hand in my direction. "Come on, let's get you to bed."

Placing my palm in his, I knew we wouldn't be sleeping for a little while longer. Not until I talked to him. Even though it was late, and I had to work in the morning, I needed to get it off my chest or I'd go nuts. While I drove around tonight, I listened to the whole *Uninvited* album, and when I stopped to search Instagram, I was scrolling through his fan accounts.

They blew my fucking mind. I had a lot to say.

Together, we made our way through the living room and toward my bedroom, passing a sleeping Kavan. I didn't know where Pharaoh or Ricco were, but Frankie was missing too, so I figured they were probably in her room watching the TV in there since we all zonked out.

The tricky part about having this conversation was going to be trying to keep Judah calm enough to listen to me. Fighting was like foreplay for us—some kind of twisted mind game we both got off on—but there were real demons in our arguments, and if I we were going to do this, then his demons were mine and mine were his. I wanted to tackle them with him, show him how good it could be.

Judah needed a friend, someone to lean on, and from what I knew about the guys, I didn't get the impression that they were really all that close on a personal level. Sure, they hung out nearly every day, but nobody talked about anything real. I doubted any of them were willing to be vulnerable with each other. Pharaoh might have been the only exception, but he grew up with Judah, so they had history. Even still, Judah talked about feeling alone in more than one of his songs, so all the evidence I needed was right in front of me.

We already agreed that we were twin flames, spent real time discussing it, so both of us knew that this was real. We just had yet to tap into that connection.

It was time we did.

"We going outside?" Judah asked, crossing the threshold into my room.

I nodded. "Yeah, we can smoke."

"Cool, I'll meet you out there."

I opened the door while he grabbed a blunt for us. The air was warm and dry, making me feel like I was cocooned in a blanket. Cold weather made me anxious, caused my body to tense up, while the heat settled my spirit.

I needed as much help getting settled as possible, especially as Judah came out, sinking into the wicker chair

across from me at the table.

Right away, he started patting the pockets of his black and purple pajama pants, his face scrunching up in confusion. "Baby, you got the lighter?"

God, the way he talked. I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I got it."

Tossing my Zippo to him, I watched as he caught it and flipped it around, popping open the lid with a casual kind of swag. His hands were my becoming my favorite thing about him. He used those long fingers to fuck me better than anyone I'd messed around with before, plus he had rough callouses on his palms from drumming and playing guitar that lightly bit and scratched my bare skin whenever he touched me. And the way he handled his blunts? I was addicted to watching him flick the flame to life.

His movements had a specific kind of finesse as he burned the end and leaned back in his seat, tilting his head in my direction as he blew out his first hit. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

He knew me too well already.

Here we go. I bit my bottom lip before asking, "Are you in a good mood?"

His chuckle was sleepy and sexy, as he drew out the word, "Yesss?"

"Okay good." I nodded, *really* nervous now. "That's good

He smirked, cutting me off with, "Uh oh, does my little bird want to talk about something?"

I groaned, laughing a little. "I really suck at this."

"No, you don't," he brushed me off. "You're good once you get going. It's getting you to start that's the issue."

"Thanks for that." I dropped my face into my hands and spoke through my fingers. "You aren't going to like this conversation."

"Baby, look at me." His tone was soothing, as intimate as his hold last night. When I did as he asked, I noticed he put the blunt out and now sat with his elbows on the table, watching me with concern in his eyes. "What's going on?"

"It's nothing bad, don't worry." I sighed, sitting back. "I just need to get something off my chest, but I'm nervous you won't want to talk about it."

"Uh..." He narrowed his eyes, sitting up straighter. "If you've been thinking about something, then tell me, P. Are you afraid to talk to me?"

"No, no, it's not that I'm afraid," I corrected him. "I'm just...not used to caring about anyone the way I care about you, and I'm not sure that I know how to do it. I don't want to say the wrong thing and trigger you somehow."

"Trigger me?" he questioned, looking horrified. "What the hell? No, cut that out. I don't give a shit if I don't like what you have to say, I don't ever want you walking on eggshells around me because you're worried I can't fucking hang."

"Whoa, okay, okay," I cooed, changing the tone of my voice to a softer volume. "It's all good, J."

Just like that, I was already starting to play my part as his twin flame, his person. It was instinctual, and I needed to trust myself, trust that I knew how to handle him.

"Then get over here and tell me what's in that head of yours," he demanded, sitting back in his seat.

Fuck. "Okay." I stood up, swallowing my hesitancy as I straddled him, positioning myself as close as possible. I needed him to feel me through this, not get lost in his head before I could even finish talking.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not, there was a big possibility he would get defensive and try and fight with me. I needed to keep him calm, but it was going to take a whole lot of honesty on my end. I would have to show him with my tone, my hands, my eyes, that I had his best interest at heart and he was safe, he could talk to me.

I'd never done this for anyone before, so I wasn't even sure I knew how, but I was still going to try.

I had to.

Taking a few steady breaths, I traced the lines of ink on his bare chest before clearing my throat and looking up at him. He was still so much taller than me, even like this, it made me feel small, protected, safe enough to go for it. "I'm just going to get this out, alright?"

With worry in his eyes, he kissed my forehead and said, "You got me all nervous, but yeah, baby, go ahead."

"You don't have to be nervous," I whispered, even though I was. Winding my hands around his neck, I let my fingers tease his hairline as I started. "I haven't stopped thinking about you burning your lyrics last night."

His eyes flashed with anger but he fought it, I could see him working through the emotion as he held my eyes. The blue color seemed to darken, harden, as I stared.

Rather than let him say anything back, I kept going. "It reminded me that ever since we met, I stopped actually listening to your songs, I stopped paying attention to TheColt, I actually pushed away that side of you. I shouldn't have."

I blew out a breath, fearing that I was going to put it all out on the line—my heart, my hopes—only for Judah to reject my offer and crush me. But I had to try, if not for me, for the millions of people out there that felt the same way I did about his music.

"I really did fall in love with you on the day I tried to kill myself," I admitted, holding his stare. "I felt it almost instantly —whatever this is. It was like your voice woke up a part of me that had been sleeping for twenty-three years, because before you, I didn't have a single dream, I didn't want anything special for my life. I was just sitting around, waiting to lose my mind and end up like my father."

His hands ghosted up my sides, but he stopped at my ribs, holding me as he intently studied my eyes. I kept going. "You and I can talk about suicide like everyone else talks about

football because we spend every day holding hands with death. We welcome it. It's always there as an option, waiting to drag us down and away from all our bullshit, and because of that, we're no longer afraid of it. Instead, we face our demons on a daily basis, and not many people understand what it's like to live like that—to look at your past every day, remember all the horrors you lived through, and not be able to shut it off without the help of things that could hurt us." I shook my head, looking at the sky for a moment. "Because we can't do it any other way, you know? At least, I couldn't for a long time. I see my father whenever I look in the mirror. I see my mother too, and how am I supposed to avoid thinking about her life being cut short at the hands of someone who was supposed to love her? That's fucked with me for ten goddamn years, J. And it wasn't until I heard 'Heartless Romantic' that I felt seen."

His breathing picked up a little so I put my hand on his heart, moving my thumb along his skin as I continued, "When you stepped up to the mic and recorded that song, you introduced yourself to me without even knowing it. You had no idea, but you were speaking directly to me when you talked about how lonely you were, when you showed me how beautiful your fractured heart was just by having the courage to put it out there in such a public way. With one song, you proved to me that I wasn't alone because *you* were out there somewhere, feeling just like I did. Judah Colt wanted to swallow a bottle of pills, just like me." My voice cracked on that last sentence, causing his hands to grip my hips hard enough to bruise.

"But I'm *here*, J. I'm here, in your lap, because of *you*. Because you stood in front of the mic and told me how you stopped yourself. You gave me reasons why I should stop too. Told me life was still worth living, even when you're fucked, 'cause then you just do it differently, see the world differently than everyone else. You taught me that I could be free if I wasn't afraid of living, but rather afraid of dying without leaving some sort of legacy behind. You made me see that I wasn't done yet, that I hadn't done anything good for myself, for the world." I fought past the giant boulder in my throat, remembering how I felt that night. The hope he injected into

my veins. "You rocked my world, gave me something to believe in. You called me back home—to LA, to Frankie, and four months later...to you."

I was starting to shake, on the very edge of breaking down into a fit of sobs, so I stopped talking for a moment as we both took deep breaths under a blanket of stars. He dropped his head to my shoulder as his hands made their way up my back, holding me close.

This was the part I was afraid of. What I had to say next could send him spiraling into his own head, but I hoped he could hear how serious I was about him, about his gift. "Before I came home tonight, I looked at some of your fan accounts." His whole body tensed, his leg started to bounce beneath me. I could feel his energy shifting into rage. "Judah stop, please. Hey, look at me."

When he lifted his head, I did the only thing I could think to do, I grabbed his face in my hands and kissed him, giving it all I had. He responded immediately, harshly, as his hands came up to hold my face in return, taking over.

It was exactly what he needed to feel strong again, like he was in control.

His tongue demanded entrance, so I let him in, earning a growl of pure male dominance. His lips were so fucking soft, but not too soft, either. They consumed and worshipped my mouth, making me feel desired, needed.

Sliding my hands to his chest, I slowed my kisses, bringing him back to the conversation.

Pulling back, his gaze was hot, pained, terrified. When he didn't say anything, I explained, "You have fans, Judah. Millions of them. But they're not the popular kids. They're like you and me—they're broken. Alone. Most of them don't have access to anything but drugs and sex to help them numb the pain. They're misfits. They're the kids who lie in bed at night and pray that someone will hear them, understand them, but while they wait, they turn on your music. Because you have a fucking gift, you hear me? And I know that your life has been hell, but your demons aren't going anywhere. So why

let them win? Why not just let them out instead? Why not turn them into your empire?"

"Who the fuck really wants to hear that shit, P?" He wasn't shouting, but his voice was loud compared to my previous tone. "They all fucking hate it."

"No, they don't." I shook my head and grabbed his face again. "Listen to what I'm saying, focus on my voice, not all the others in your head. The industry hates your music, your sound, because it can't be replicated. It can't be faked, Judah. It's your life. Only yours! And since they can't turn you into a trend, they try and shut you up before you grow too far past their control. The industry can't follow your lead because you're not even trying to be a leader, you're just trying to stay sane and do it in a way that makes you happy. Music lights you up, I can hear it and so can they. If someone tried to replicate your sound, they'd fail because it wouldn't be authentic. And that pisses them off."

When he didn't say anything, so I got worried. "You with me, J?"

He nodded but still stayed silent, just ran his hands up and down my thighs.

"You can't let them keep you here, Judah. You have to keep going. Keep writing and recording, for *yourself*, for your own sanity. Because that's what 'Heartless Romantic' was, right? You didn't write that song for anyone but yourself. It was a pep talk from you to you, and guess what? That pep talk saved my fucking life."

I'd say it as many times as I need to.

A handful of seconds later he admitted, "I hear what you're saying, I swear I do. I just..." when he lifted his face to mine, his expression tore me in half. "I still don't know how to see the bright side of this. The negatives are too loud, the comments, the hate, the other rappers and all the comparing that we do."

"I know," I said as my heart cracked in my chest, as I reached up to run my finger along his jaw. "But that's what

I'm here for. That's my job, as whatever I am to you, I—"

"Everything," he cut me off, his voice hushed, words whispered as he brushed my hair behind my ear. "You're everything to me, Phoenix Royal. I lived in actual darkness before you. I couldn't even see straight most of the time. Whenever you're around—touching me, yelling at me, being exactly who you are—you shut them up. You're the only thing that quiets the noise. Your voice is my favorite sound."

Fucking hell, my heart.

Both halves of our shared soul were out in the open, hovering right between us, trying to sew themselves back together the right way. Without the fighting, without the defense mechanisms and deflecting.

I let my eyes well up, not bothering to try and stop them from spilling over. It was no use, I felt every ounce of our connection as we each gave in, little by little.

"If I'm everything to you, then share with me. Talk to me. Let me in. I think you planned to give up after *Uninvited* but you can't, not really, but if you're looking for a reason to keep going...check your fan accounts again. You'll find that a lot of them have come out with stories like mine. They've started talking openly to each other about their pain, Judah, because of *you*. They've created an online community where they all bond over their obsession with you, their love for you. They support each other with your music as the foundation." It brought me to fucking tears when I saw them earlier. They *loved* him. These kids, teens, they lived for his music, his lyrics, his whole vibe. They worshipped him, and he wasn't even paying attention.

I finished with, "I want to be your best friend, someone you trust and lean on, someone you can bitch to in the wings of a show, just like you said. I'll even let you fuck me raw in the bathroom when they adrenaline gets to be too much." I gave him a watery wink, earning me a sad, fractured smile. "But in exchange, write this album for me. Just for me. Don't think about anyone else. Pretend like I'm the only one who'll ever hear it, and just...don't give up. Don't walk away because

people don't like your truth. You don't like it either, but that doesn't mean you can make it go away, so why should you stop? I say continue turning your pain into art that makes other people feel heard and understood, because unfortunately, we aren't the only ones who live with nightmares." I gripped his chin this time, making sure I had all of his attention as I said, "Lighters are for blunts, cigarettes, and candles, not lyrics. Your lyrics are gold, baby, don't set them on fire. Light me up instead."

He watched me intently for a full thirty seconds or so, his eyes melting into tender pools of arctic blue as he finally spoke. "You really give a shit, don't you?"

A tear slipped down my cheek. "You have no idea how much."

"And you'll be there? The whole fucking time?"

"Every minute," I replied.

"You'll draw while I write?"

I smiled a little. "That's a good idea."

He nodded, looking off to the side while the wheels turned in his head. Then out of nowhere, he looked to the table and grabbed the blunt from the ash tray and the lighter right next to it, handing them both to me. While I lit it, he said, "I have ten days to write a single. I need to be in the studio recording the demo the day after your birthday."

I blew out a cloud, careful to avoid the smoke hitting him directly in the face. "Is that enough time?"

He plucked the weed from between my fingers and said, "It's gonna have to be."

"All right." I cleared my throat, shocked as fuck that this conversation worked. That he was opening up to me. "Well then, we start tomorrow."

As he hit the blunt, his eyes held mine. There were so many things he wanted to say. I could see them all clearly, but it was probably too hard for him to articulate at the moment. To sum everything up into one sentence. He was tired, I was

tired, but for the first time, I actually felt true peace, like I had all of him, not just a piece or two.

Now that the conversation was over and I'd gotten him to hear me, I rested my head on his shoulder as he smoked. After about five minutes, his voice cut through the silence. "Hey, Little Bird?"

"Yeah?" I whispered, eyes closed, breathing him in.

"Thank you."

Moisture pricked my eyes again as I answered, "You're welcome, J."

I loved him, and I was pretty sure I just proved it.



I FUCKING DID IT.

We fucking did it.

She did it. Phoenix.

It was all her.

She scared me into listening to her ten days ago, with her backbone all straight and an air of terrified determination in her eyes. I was forced to do it her way. Between the timing, the fact that I was running out of it, and the very real, very visceral struggle I went through trying to write it alone...she showed up exactly when I needed her the most.

She held me down, talked me through each and every breakdown.

I was contracted to drop a single before we left for tour at the end of the month, which meant we were cramped as fuck for time.

Phoenix was true to her word. She made me pick a subject, a theme for the song, then she grilled me. She asked leading questions—some that pissed me off, some that ended with me sticking my tongue down her throat because she was so fucking confident, I couldn't resist focusing on anything but making her scream. She was changing, right before my eyes.

Every day she got stronger, every day she held me higher, pushed me harder, but she was right there to pick up any pieces that fell. She put them back where they belonged, but let me have my breakdowns too.

It was a long ten days, but I was headed into the studio for the first time in over eight months, and she was coming with me. I didn't ask her to, but she told me two days ago while we were sitting on the beach after dark that she didn't want me going alone. Not when neither of us knew how it would go. Especially if she wasn't there.

She made it seem like it was all about me, but she asked more than a few questions about what the studio was like, and how long it took to put a song together. I explained how I'd be calling Sage in to help me with some vocals, and the two of us would jam for the night, working on the sound. Her eyes lit up, her smile was bright and genuine—she was invested. She cared.

It lit a fire under my ass.

I wanted to make her proud.

In the evenings, while I worked on the lyrics, fine tuning them day by day, she made progress on her drawings, ending up with plenty of flash sheets to store for when she actually got her license. She had four months left to go before she was set to launch her business, and while she offered to come to the studio with me, she hadn't said a word about the tour. I planned on asking her to come with me, just wasn't sure when the right time was. If she agreed, she would have to put her apprenticeship on pause while we were gone and pick it back up when she came back.

That was a lot to ask.

But I didn't let myself dwell on it because we had plenty of time, and today was going to be a fun as fuck day.

It was June thirtieth, the morning of P's birthday, and we were going to celebrate.

"Did we really have to get up this early?" Ricco bitched as we all slid into G-dog. "There's no way she'll be awake yet. We left the girls' house at like three in the fucking morning."

"We should have just stayed there and had Holly bring the donuts," Kavan supplied.

It was eight AM, and everyone was cranky. None of us liked getting up this early, but we had thirty minutes to pull it the fuck together. "Yes, we needed to be up this early. We got things to do. We'll hit Starbucks on the way, but for fuck's sake, it's her birthday. Get it together."

Ric, Kav, and Pierce all squished themselves in the back while Pharaoh and I took our usual seats up front. The five of us were on our way to pick up Phoenix's favorite donuts from a little shop in Santa Monica before we showed up at her house to wake her up.

All morning, I'd been running through the to-do list in my head.

I didn't want to fuck it up, I'd been planning this day for almost an entire month, and if I did it right then...well, I just needed to do it right. Phoenix deserved this.

"Damn you." Kavan clicked his tongue. "Actually, damn *her*. I wouldn't even be up this early for a girlfriend, dude."

"Me neither." Ricco sighed, closing his eyes and leaning up against the window. "P's so cute, though. The little hyena."

"Hyena," Pharaoh repeated, trying and failing to hold in his laugh. "Nah, she's more like a honey badger."

"Do not compare my girlfriend to a fucking honey badger," I cut in, giving him a sharp look.

"They're fearless." Pharaoh shrugged.

"They're ugly," I deadpanned.

"She already has an animal. She's named after a bird," Pierce chimed in, yawning. "Why are we even talking about this?"

"Ricco started it," Kavan muttered, and before anyone else could say another word, I turned the music up as loud as it would go.

I was nervous, excited, and didn't need to be annoyed when we got there.

After a pit stop for coffee, sliding through the donut shop, and filling up the gas tank, we arrived just on time. The girls would still be sleeping, but it wasn't much earlier than Phoenix usually got up for work. I was too excited.

"I take it all back," Ricco grinned from the back seat as he leaned forward to look at the girls' house. "Good call on waking her up. This is gonna be fun."

"See? All it took was three iced coffees and a smack upside the head for you to see the light, but we got there." I winked at him, opening my door and heading around the back to the trunk—which was stuffed with twenty-five pink, white, and silver balloons. One extra, just in case one of us guys popped one. "All right, each of you grab a handful and leggo."

The guys and I moved much faster now that we were awake, and all of us had permanent smirks on our faces as I used the key Frankie gave me to open the front door. She knew we were coming, but that was it, we hadn't told her much else of the plan.

When Phoenix figured out what I had planned, she was absolutely going to kill me.

My smirk grew into a full-blown grin. I couldn't wait.



"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU, happy birthday to you." A chorus of voices broke through the silence of my dream and assaulted my eardrums. "Happy Birthday, Little Biiiiiiiird—"

"Noooooo," I groaned, rolling over to grab the edge of the blanket and pulling it up over my head. "Too early."

"How do you even know how early it is, Little P, you haven't opened your eyes," I heard Kavan remark, sparking laughs throughout the group of guys standing around my bed.

Wait.

Why were they standing around my bed?

I unburied myself a little, peeking open an eye to see Judah holding up a box of...Sidecar Donuts? While the rest of the guys stood around him holding bundles of pink and white balloons...

Slowly, I sat up, blinking the sleep away.

"What the hell?" I croaked. "What are you—?"

"She's not super good with being woken up," Frankie yawned, coming into the room through my bathroom door in her fuzzy light blue robe and cheetah print slippers. "Kinda like when she's stoned—a lil' slow to catch on." Her hair was a mess on her head, making me reach up to check mine. Yeah, we looked the same. When she got to my bed, she didn't sit down, didn't casually lift the covers, no, she fell face first into

the bed and mumbled, "Happy Birthday, baby girl," into the pillow she landed on.

"Uh, thanks." I chuckled, confused as hell, but...too grateful for words. My eyes found Judah, trying to process the fact that all of the guys were here.

In my room.

Early as fuck in the morning.

I didn't need to know the exact time. My internal clock told me that it was before ten AM, and none of these guys were early risers—for Judah, it was basically four AM. And yet, here they were with donuts and balloons and smiles on their faces. All to wish me a happy birthday.

"There it is!" Ricco whisper-shouted to the group, eyeing me with a smirk. "She's totally about to cry."

With watery eyes, I grinned, one hundred percent about to cry. "You're an ass."

"And you're twenty-four!" Kavan lifted two fistfuls of balloons. "Woo!

Everyone busted out laughing, breaking the ice and settling warmth through the room as we all came down from the joke.

Locating my skyscraper right in the middle of the group, his expression was both heated and tender as he nodded his chin toward me and smiled. "Happy Birthday, Baby Bird."

"Thanks, Skyscraper," I whispered, overcome with too many feelings. *Good feelings*. I tilted my head, saying, "You guys—"

"Nope," Judah cut in. "Sorry, there's no time for 'you guys didn't have to do this'—we know we didn't. Now get up." He smacked Frankie's foot, causing her to kick up, trying to hit him but failing because she didn't even attempt to lift her head. He chuckled and caught her ankle in his hand before it smacked the center of his chest, saying, "We have plans, and you two are lookin' like a hot mess."

"Rude," Franks muttered, snatching her foot back.

I smiled, asking, "How much time do we have?"

Pharaoh pointed a finger at me, "You have seven minutes because we're starving, and these donuts aren't gonna eat themselves."

"Fuck off," Frankie lifted her head to glare at him. "You can wait. I don't think I've ever done anything decent in seven minutes."

"You never played seven minutes in heaven?" Ricco asked.

"Enough," Judah interrupted, before that question could be answered. "We aren't doing this right now, or we'll never leave. You have like half an hour, but make it a quick half an hour because for real, we're hungry."

"I need a full hour." I ran my hands over my face. "Sorry, but I got no fucking sleep last night, and it's going to take some serious work to look presentable, so throw a pan of cinnamon rolls in the oven while you wait. There's dough in the fridge."

"Fine," Judah grumbled, coming over to the side of the bed to lift my chin and press his lip against mine. When he pulled back, he was scowling down at me. "But if I get bored, I'm coming to hang out."

"Deal," I agreed, as the bees in my belly woke up too. But before he got too far, I caught his arm and tugged him back. When his blue eyes met mine, I made sure all the things I felt were clear on my face as I said, "Thank you, J."

The devil in him made an appearance in the form of a smirk. "Don't thank me yet, Little Bird. It's gonna be a long day."

???

AN HOUR LATER, I was drinking coffee and eating my favorite donuts with six people I genuinely grew to care about over the last couple of weeks. Somehow, I had almost everything I wanted when I left New York. I was on my way

to achieving a goal, I had a fucking *boyfriend*? It was crazy to think about, but as I looked around our kitchen, I saw all the evidence. I'd done it for myself. Ricco had Kavan in a headlock while Pierce recorded him trying to shove a donut in Kav's mouth. It was going right up on Instagram. While Frankie and Pharaoh argued over the last of the orange juice in front of the fridge. It was chaos.

It was home.

My mind was still a mess, not much had changed in that department, but I wasn't overwhelmed in groups of people anymore. I could spend all day with Judah or Frankie or everyone all at once, and not feel the need to hide in the bathroom just to catch my breath.

In the last ten days, Judah and I had formed a sort of routine, and I think it helped both of us more than I would have expected. I was learning that with less stress and more communication, it was easier to battle the thoughts in my head and control my temper. It was sort of addicting to solve my own problems, because I wasn't doing it because a doctor told me to, I was doing it because I wanted to. I actively chose to get better all on my own, and I was learning fast, while talking Judah through it at the same time. I felt liberated, excited, happy to get up in the morning, whether I was in my own bed or Judah's.

I didn't need music to sleep anymore, though blunts would always be in the picture, and as long as I got a solid six to eight hours, I felt rested when I woke up.

I hadn't figured out if it was because I had Judah, or Judah had me, or if it was a combination of all the changes that took place in such a short amount of time, but it didn't matter. I adjusted, Judah was headed into the studio tomorrow, and I was going to get to see him bring the song he wrote to life.

It wasn't easy—the writing process—we fought a lot, but I stayed as strong as possible. Tried not to fall victim to the hellish sort of foreplay we both loved so much, because this first song was important to him, to the fans. To me.

I was nervous, anxious, and happy as all fuck.

"We have to hit the road." Judah clapped his hands together, scaring the shit out of all of us, and moved to grab his keys from the counter. He was on a mission in his ripped up black jeans and equally ripped yellow T-shirt, his tattoos poking through the gaps in the fabric. Blond hair a mess, black bandana rolled up and tied around his head, with black Timberlands on his feet...yikes. My libido was going to be on fire today. "We're on a schedule, and I'm not tryna be late. You guys ready?"

"Yes, Dad." Frankie mock bowed with her hands in prayer formation in front of her chest.

"You're the worst, just go get your shit." Judah rolled his eyes, then turned to me. "P, we good? You have everything?"

"Just need my phone." I looked left and right, trying to think of the last place I put it.

"I got it in my pocket," he announced. "Let's get a move on."

He had my phone?

"God, you're bossy today." I laughed, actually a little shocked. "What's up your ass, baby?"

When I reached him, he grabbed the front of my Colt T-shirt and pulled me into his space, bright happiness in his eyes. My breath vanished as he grinned down at me. "Nothin's up *my* ass, but my dick'll be up yours tonight."

"Hmm..." I smirked, nearly sweating and already wet, standing on my tippy toes to line my lips up with his. "You say that like it's a punishment."

"To anyone else," his bottom lip grazed mine, "it probably would be."

Okay, I need to move this along, or we won't be going anywhere.

After surprising him with a quick peck on the lips and a wink, I pulled away and sauntered to the front door, running into Pharaoh on the way. He gave me a sideways glance, his lip tilted up in the corner. "Happy Birthday, Little P."

Fuck, the bees.

"Thank you," I replied, meaning it.



"OH, SHE'S GONNA KILL YOU," Frankie joked from the back seat as we passed the Beverly Hills sign. "You're taking us to Rodeo, right?"

Judah had a shit eating grin on his face next to me in the driver's seat. "You'll see."

"Please." I smacked his arm. Narrowing my eyes on his tall frame, I pointed out, "You're way too fucking smug right now to pretend like we're going anywhere else. What are you up to?"

"Nothing, baby, chill," he replied, glancing at me, his eyes roaming over my bare legs before he shifted in the seat and reached over the center console to wrap his hand around my inner thigh. I was wearing black cut off shorts and one of his *Uninvited* tour T-shirts, and though he didn't understand why Frankie and I begged for merch in our size a week ago, he had been extra clingy whenever I wore his name out of the house.

If we went out though, it was at night.

None of the paparazzi had found out my identity yet, and for the time being, we had wanted to keep it that way, but it was looking more and more like plans were changing as he—sure enough—made a right turn onto Rodeo Drive.

Chanel, Fendi, Saint Laurent, Céline, Prada—I knew most of the names of the stores in this part of town, but even with the money I had in my bank account, I never dared spend so

casually on shit like this. Sure, I shopped brands that cost more than the average, but I never made it into true luxury aside from perfumes and makeup—things I used every day—unless Frankie bought them for me.

My best friend had been spending her dad's money since she learned how to and had a blast while doing it. She wasn't into useless buying though. She wore outfits more than once and only bought what she genuinely loved. On top of that, she appreciated what she had, and I chalked that up to what we'd seen during our high school years.

The two of us had money. Our friends didn't.

"Okay, if we're doing this, then what is the plan for the paps?" Frankie asked. "I'm not worried about it for me, personally, because this will spike my attention online, but we don't want the wrong name attached to Phoenix. We want your relationship to come across as a good thing, right?"

"Uh..." I laughed in the passenger seat as Judah drove up the little ramp to a parking garage. I twisted around so I could see her. "Yeah, it would be nice if this got leaked and it wasn't bad shit."

"I mean, I'm just making sure," she replied, innocently holding her hands up. She looked beautiful in her Colt merch and cut offs, just like me. Her blonde hair was curled in wild waves around her face, her makeup natural, those blue eyes rich with color. "Thing is, if you don't just come out with it, your name could get mixed up with someone else, and then everyone would lose their minds for no reason. But if you went out there and didn't bother covering up, you could just get it over with."

"Well, wait." I turned a little in my seat again, looking at Judah's profile and putting my hand on his, which was still in my lap. "What are we doing? Are we going to be out in the open all day?"

"Not all day, no," Judah replied, squeezing my fingers. "But we'll be here for at least five or six hours. So she might be right."

Frankie sucked in a dramatic breath. "Well fuck me sideways, did he just say I'm right?"

Judah rolled his eyes but ignored her while everyone else snickered. "It's not a bad idea to just come straight out with it —give them what they want but on *our* terms. This story is the kind that makes paparazzi aggressive, especially with how long we've kept them waiting. The payout is high for whoever gets the name of my bird first, and I'm concerned that they'll use force to get it if they have to. Most of them are not afraid to do whatever they have to do to get what they're looking for. That being said, I think we should just get ahead of the story—take a picture now, in the car, and then I'll tag you and all of my followers will know before the paparazzi start chasing us down for the headline." He shrugged confidently. "If we break the news first, it ruins all of their fun and gives us some physical privacy."

That wasn't a half bad idea.

"We can tag you too," Kav pipped up in the back. "We all should, we should just take a bunch of pictures and blast them today. Everyone will know, and it'll be old news by the end of the weekend."

"Plus," Pharaoh added, leaning across Frankie and Ricco, "what better way to make an entrance? It's your birthday, Little P. Let's do this."

Let's do this.

They wanted to do it with me.

Here I was again, in a position where these guys proved they were down for me, for Frankie. Making it known that they didn't give a shit what the two of us did for a living or that we couldn't relate to their everyday stresses. In fact, they almost seemed to celebrate it.

"All right, let's do it. But the first one is mine." I grabbed my phone from the center console and opened Instagram, heading straight for my story and opening the effects tab. Everyone was hushed as I found a dope ass, retro looking filter and got everything all set up. "This is so exciting," Pierce whispered to someone in the back seat.

"Okay, bring it in," I called out, holding up the phone as far away as possible so everyone could fit in the frame.

Frankie and I had almost identical smiles, while Pharaoh slapped a hand on the top of Frankie's head and made a crazy face with his tongue out, and the others sported those serious as fuck faces that guys only adopted in photos. Except for Judah, who leaned over and proceeded to lick the side of my face and stick his middle finger right in the center of the frame. Then, of course, Kav made a stupid comment and caused us all to burst out laughing as soon as I took the picture, so it turned out a little blurry, but it didn't matter. The deed was done.

"My little bird is about to break the internet," Judah purred from over my shoulder as he watched me tag everyone.

"Yeah, right." I laughed, brushing him off when I was finished. "Are you gonna take another picture with me or not?"

He pulled his phone out and rather than holding the phone up in front of everyone to take the picture, he held the front facing camera toward me and said out of nowhere, "Say cheese!"

And that is how Judah's little bird was introduced to the world.

A photo of me, cheesin' hard in the front seat of G-Dog, with a caption that said, "Spotted: a Little Bird on her birthday."

???

JUDAH HAD it all planned out. The whole afternoon.

The weather was a perfect eighty degrees with a completely cloudless sky. The slight breeze kept us all cool enough to enjoy the time we spent outside under the tall palm trees. And for five hours we shopped, took stupid photos,

drank expensive smoothies, and talked shit about the random famous faces we saw throughout the day. While the tourism crowd wasn't awful, it was bad enough that Holly actually called ahead for both Chanel and Saint Laurent, making an appointment for us so we had black curtain access to the store, its product, and staff, where no paparazzi or fans could be let in.

Judah proved that in the small time we'd known each other, he listened when I talked.

Though we fought, though we were a mess most of the time, everything I said, he heard. He remembered that I mentioned wanting a new scrunchie, a nice one since they were back in style, so today he took me into Fendi, where they had a whole display, telling me to pick however many I wanted. He said I needed a new tote for my iPad—which he replaced the day after our fight. It was sent in a box, directly from Apple. Now, he said, I needed somewhere to store it.

I told him I had a perfectly good handbag already, but he wasn't having any of my protests. He dragged me through the glass doors of Dior by my elbow, walked me straight up to the wall of bags and pointed to the black one. He said, and I quote, "You need something to use every day, and the bag you have right now is like a hundred years old."

It wasn't. It was three seasons old and it was Louis Vuitton, but I let it go because he looked so fucking excited.

After that, I let him go crazy, even though I bitched about it for at least twenty minutes before every swipe of his credit card. Eventually, he learned that I didn't want a bunch of random shit just because some designer's name was all over it. If he was going to spend his money on me, I wanted whatever he purchased to be useful, meaningful, and worth it.

It wasn't just Judah though, the other guys tried to buy me a bunch of things, but I put an end to that real fast. All in all, I ended up leaving with another bottle of Chanel's Coco Mademoiselle, my favorite perfume, a new pair of light pink Louis Vuitton slippers—fluffy of course—and a light blue leather, Yves Saint Laurent Lou camera bag.

Judah and the guys on the other hand, they didn't bother holding back, buying anything they saw and liked, sometimes not even just for themselves. None of them were greedy with their money, they were constantly picking things out for people I didn't know, sparking conversations between the group of them, while Frankie and I wandered throughout the stores arm in arm.

She was considering Pharaoh as someone she could fuck around with for the next month, having had a bit of a dry spell since Jordan. I guess Phar had been texting her lately, but neither of them had brought up anything sexual, which was odd for Frankie, and I could only assume it was odd for Judah's best friend too.

The six of us took turns adding photos to our story, though we collectively updated all day. Frankie and I took selfies, Judah actually recorded a video of us shaking our asses in Versace's dressing room mirror.

My phone had been blowing up all afternoon as Judah's fans freaked the fuck out—following me immediately, slipping into my DM's to try and find out information, sharing my pictures to their stories in order to discuss the nature of our relationship with their friends. In the six hours we'd been out and about, I'd gained hundreds of thousands of followers.

Judah was loving the fuck out of it, and I had to admit, I was too.

Judah himself was in the best mood I'd ever seen him in. He was flirty, sexy, funny as hell. He used stupid excuses to touch me, made up random things he wanted to "shop" for, just to get me alone, where he'd steal kisses around corners and up against dressing room mirrors. He was happy, and it was contagious.

I had no idea that his happiness would bring me this much peace, but as the day came to a close, I couldn't deny that it felt like I was floating. Like I was on a lone, pink, fluffy cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky.

What a birthday.

"Pap to your left," Ricco announced in a smooth, rich voice.

All day, we all took turns pointing them out, just so everyone knew we were being watched. As a group, we kept our volume down so we didn't tip them off or give them material they didn't need to use against us. Anything we said was up for grabs, anything we did was free game to be memorialized on film and sold to *TMZ*.

Fucking insane.

"What now?" Frankie asked, holding her bags.

"Now," Judah started, switching the bags from his left hand to his right, then throwing the free arm over my shoulder. "I take my girl home and spend some time alone with her."

"Wait, so that's it?" Ricco asked, looking put out. "What the hell? We didn't say we'd be done this early. What are we supposed to do now?"

"How about you spend time at your own place?" Pharaoh asked in a bored tone.

"Says the guy who has his own room at J's," Pierce threw in.

"Okay but for real, what is the plan then?" Kav asked, sliding his phone back in the front pocket of his dark blue skinny jeans.

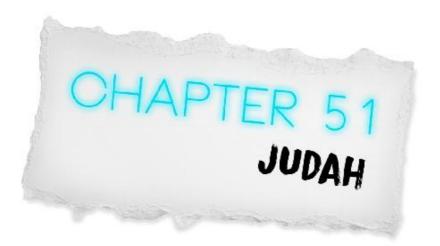
"You assholes can come back to my place," Frankie offered, exhausted. "It'll be just me, and it sounds like P's bed will be open."

"I call dibs!" Kav yelled out first, making me laugh.

"We'll see about that," Pharaoh rolled his eyes, earning him a funny look from Frankie.

They could have my bed.

I was sleeping in the Devil's lair tonight.



WE'D JUST WALKED through the front door of my house when Phoenix grabbed my wrist and pulled me to a stop. Turning to looking at her, those pretty brown eyes were shining as she glanced up at me with more bashfulness than I'd ever seen from her. My stomach twisted with worry, but it only lasted until she whispered, "Thank you for today. It meant more to me than you know."

Brushing a piece of hair behind her ear, I let my hand fall to the side of her face, happy as hell that today went exactly as planned. "Don't get all sappy on me now, baby. I have one more thing to show you."

"Oh right, the blindfold." She rolled her eyes playfully.

"Yup, the blindfold," I mocked, setting down the bags from our shopping trip I still carried in my other hand before reaching in my pocket for the pink *Colt* bandana I had made for her. Wiggling my eyebrows suggestively, I waved it in front of her face. "Turn around, Little Bird."

"Hold up." She plucked the fabric from my fingers and studied the intricate designs with my logo and name that made it look like a paisley pattern. "Damn, this is fucking sick. Why am I just now seeing it?"

I gave her a blank stare. "Because it's your birthday, and it's a gift?"

Her little nose scrunched up adorably. "Right."

Chuckling, I took back the bandana, saying, "Turn around."

She did as I asked while I refolded the fabric to act as a blindfold. Once it was thick enough where she couldn't see through it, I tied it around her head. Finished, I put two hands on her shoulders and leaned down to whisper in her ear, "All done. Ready?"

"No." She laughed a throaty sound. "I can't believe I'm trusting you to walk me down these stairs while I'm totally blind."

"I'm offended," I said dramatically, guiding her forward.

Despite her concerns, she went easily, but still said, "Please, you're more likely to punk me than help me, so you can't blame a girl for being nervous."

"On any other day, that would be a valid reason to be nervous, because I would, and will eventually punk you. But that's not what tonight is about," I admitted as we reached the steps.

I went first, letting her walk down toward me so I could see where her feet were landing. I really could have done this once we entered the living room, but something about doing it this way seemed like more fun.

"Oh?" she asked, eyebrows rising above the bandana. "What's tonight about, then?"

"You," I offered. "And your last gift. And the shower we take after."

"Oooo, shower sex?" she asked with anticipation, then tilted her head. "Hold up, there's no bench in your shower, which is fucking odd for a guy with a sex drive like yours."

I hadn't been gentle over the last week and a half, I was in her every chance I could get. Her body was my safe haven, my favorite place to explore. Every time she took her clothes off, I went on an adventure, did some more research, determined to press every button, feel every scar. I wanted every orgasm to myself, every slap of her ass to be memorialized. How hard could I make her come? How fast?

How long could I draw it out? How deep could she take it?

Fact was, Phoenix Royal could handle *all* of me. The savage, the lunatic who broke her shit just to prove a point, the guy who needed no words, no eye contact, just raw, guttural fucking.

My girl was a champ.

"I hate shower sex." I shrugged, even though she couldn't see me.

"You...hate shower sex?" she asked in a surprised tone. Finally realizing she could help herself, she reached out to hold the glass edge next to her as we made our way down. "Why in the world do you hate shower sex?"

"Have you seen how tall I am?" I asked, incredulous. "I could hold you the whole time, but holding you up kinda messes with the pleasure side of things. I'd rather eat you out in the shower, get my hands in all the cracks and crevices, then make you scream on dry land. Dirty you up all over again."

She smirked, clearing the last step into the living room. "And is that the plan tonight?"

"Depends on how pissed you are after you see your last gift."

"Oh no." Her voice dropped. "What did you do?"

"Spent money."

"You spent money?" she asked, confused. "You do that every day. How much money, and on what?"

"Yeah, I'm not telling you that." No way, she could see for herself. "Just hold your questions for a few more minutes and watch your step."

I maneuvered her through the main floor and to the stairs leading to my bedroom. With each step down, I got more anxious. I'd done a big thing today, behind her back, and on top of that, I had an even bigger topic to bring up at some

point. She would either be totally cool, or lose her fucking mind. Wasn't sure which yet, but I could get down with either.

"We almost there?" she asked, making it to the last step without any issues, just a lot of handholding.

"You bet." I nodded, guiding her to the door of my room. "Alright, now don't freak out before I can tell you why I did what I did."

"This'll be good." She chuckled, but didn't say anything else as I pushed opened the door and led her through my room, walking toward the closet.

Holly should have had everything all set up, because she texted me to let me know she was leaving about ten minutes before we arrived.

When I opened the door, I sighed in relief, seeing that it was all there, but then froze up when I realized it was time to show her what I'd done. She was either going to fuck me or kill me, one of the two and no in between.

"Okay, baby." I stepped up behind her and reached for the blindfold, trying to keep my voice even. "You ready?"

"You're making me fucking nervous." She shook out her hands a little. "Just do it, already."

"All right, all right." I laughed. "Now I'm the one stalling."

Not anymore.

I took it off.

Phoenix blinked, then blinked again. "You didn't."

"I did." Fuck, she was going to kill me.

There was a small pause, before she whispered, "Why?"

I couldn't tell if that was a curious question or an angry question, but I planned to answer this question either way, as best I could.

Wanting no space between us, I stepped up to her back as she took in the small wardrobe I bought for her today. Letting both my arms fall over her shoulders, I rested my chin on the top of her head and explained, "I hate that if you decide, while you're at work, that you want to come to my place when you get off, you have to go home first to pack a bag. I hate that you have to carry your slippers back and forth between houses. That you have to go all the way home to change if we decide to do something different than we planned. Now you have a wardrobe here, one you can use whenever you want, and you don't have to lug a bag around with you."

For a whole minute, she didn't say anything at all, just stared at the clothes she tried on today, the outfits I loved, as well a few I knew she'd look good in no matter what. Pajamas, joggers, hoodies, jeans, graphic tees, cocktail dresses. I had Pierce go back and buy everything she liked and pay for it to be delivered here without Phoenix even noticing.

"Is that the six-thousand-dollar dress I told you I'd cut your dick off if you bought it?" she asked.

"Sure is." I nodded against her head.

"You're the worst," she whispered.

"Sure am." I squeezed her waist.

"But...thank you," she started, turning around in my arms. With confidence, she reached up to grip my jaw and pull me down to meet her lips in a short, small, teasing kiss. "I want to kill you right now, but I understand that you're a crazy person and I should just expect shit like this."

I smirked against her lips, pulling the plump, pink, bottom one in between my teeth and releasing it with a pop. "You one hundred percent should."

Lifting my hands to cradle her face, I kept her as close to me as possible as I kissed her again, but for real this time. Hard, passionate, and with everything I had—I poured my whole soul into that moment, because what came next was going to destroy us.

I wasn't confused.

I was addicted, sure. In love, most definitely. Blind? Absolutely not.

A new single, the second, European, half of my *Uninvited* tour coming up at the end of the month, her tattoo apprenticeship, the fact that I couldn't function without her around to hold me up? This was going to be a fucking mess, and both of us were pretending like it wasn't.

Phoenix was pretending like all my problems were solved and they'd stay fixed once I dropped "Fu*kUp."

They wouldn't. They'd probably get worse.

But I wasn't going to warn her, because why should I? She was in it for the long haul now. She promised she'd stay, said she wouldn't leave, even if we fought.

I believed she meant that, I just didn't think she was prepared to put it into action.

I needed to bring something up though, because both of us needed time to prepare.

Judah Colt was no longer capable of living without Phoenix Royal.

It was done, set in stone, and she needed to prep herself, because if she planned on playing the half-assed game...she was in for a rude awakening. Tour was a free for all, especially across the ocean. Four filthy months full of drugs, sex, and sleepless nights.

Mix all that with my everyday bullshit? With my demons and the industry snakes? With a new single out and a full album due once tour was over?

We were screwed if she didn't come with me.

Pulling back, I licked a line along her bottom lip, savoring the silky texture of her flesh, the clean taste of her mouth. "I got a question for you."

The room seemed to freeze. Even her breathing stopped.

She knew. Fuck, she knew I was going to ask her this.

Did she have an answer?

She cleared her throat. The sound was too loud. "Go ahead."

I dove right in. "You're coming on tour with me, right?"



I KNEW IT WAS COMING.

I swear I did.

But no amount of preparation could have helped me in that moment because it felt like when he pulled off the blindfold just minutes ago, he pulled off the rose-colored glasses too.

He was leaving for tour in a month. A four-month long European tour. And he just asked me to go with him.

"Judah..." I started, staring up at him with more than a little conflict on my face. "I have Kenji and the shop and—"

"I know it's a lot to ask," he started, cutting me off and reaching around me to pull down a pair of pajama pants from the top shelf. "But you and your boss are friends, good friends, and he would understand if you needed to pause while we're gone. You can come back and finish as soon as it's over."

I said nothing, knowing that whatever came out of my mouth next would start a fight. It felt like he believed my goals, my dreams, weren't important enough to put before his feelings but...to me, they were.

My happiness? My safety? My ability to wake up every morning and function in society was too important to me to just throw away because Judah needed hand holding. He needed me like that, but I needed him in a different way. I needed him because he understood the demons, the memories, the nightmares, and my need to fight or fuck it out every once in a while. He let me scream at him when the voices got too loud, but I was learning how to cope.

Little by little, with each passing day, I was learning how to cope in a healthier way.

I couldn't fight with him about it, not now, not today. Not when we had an entire month until any decisions needed to be made and quite frankly...Judah wasn't going away anytime soon.

If I didn't go on tour, he'd be back in LA in four months. Now, he'd be pissed, petty, and ready for revenge, but he'd never let me run far. So, I needed this time—the next month—to decide my next move. Figure out how to keep him safe, sane, and happy, while ensuring that I got everything I wanted as well.

"How about this?" I started, switching my tone to seduce him into pushing this conversation off. Leave it for another day. Our problems would still be there tomorrow. "I'll keep it on the table, and we can see how this month goes."

His eyes found my lips for brief moment, before he met my eyes. Challenge lived within them as he repeated, "You'll keep it on the table."

"Yes." I nodded. "We have plenty of time to discuss this."

"I'm not sure how much discussion there needs to be, but whatever." He shrugged, eyes returning to my mouth. "I'll bring it up again tomorrow, and we can fight about it then. For right now? Bring those lips over here."

Crisis averted.

I did as he asked, lifting up on my tippy toes to press my lips against his.

And that's how the night went. I let him kiss me, fuck me, hold me until we fell asleep that night.

Little did I know that two weeks later, his side of my bed would be cold, my texts and phone calls would go unanswered, and my heart would be shattered.

July

THE MONTH STARTED off so fucking good. Judah, Sage, and I spent a full forty-eight hours in the studio, starting the day after my birthday, and with the help of Adderall, energy drinks, and a whole lot of delirious goofing off, Judah had a demo for the label.

Two weeks later, "Fu*kUp" dropped and hit the Billboard top one hundred list in a matter of hours, before making it into the top ten the very next day.

Judah wrote about his life before me, about his mental state and the darkness he lived in on a daily basis. Deep, rumbling bass, high, crashing waves of sound supported the honest and raw lyrics, but the final production was full of swag and Judah's unique style.

It was a whirlwind after that.

The label chewed it up and spit it out onto the radio faster than any of us anticipated, and while it went extremely well... Judah couldn't see it. Somewhere along the way, we lost him to the monsters in the comment section of every major social media platform.

See, his competition had demons too. He wasn't the only artist in the industry suffering for their sound, and they weren't afraid to blast him all over Twitter, saying he was a pussy whipped momma's boy with too much time and no talent. All so that they didn't have to share their fans, their money, their success, with someone who was more honest than they were willing to be.

Therefore, more relatable to the listener.

It was one low, below the belt shot after another, and I knew why. I knew that it wasn't about Judah doing something wrong. But rather, what he was doing right.

He nailed that song, and not only gave his fans what they wanted, but also attracted new listeners who'd never heard

him before. The fan made Colt accounts were going insane—spreading the word, fangirling over his sad eyes and broken spirit. They wanted to fix him, just like I did. They wanted his attention, his love. They adored him, and while the industry was full of awful fucking people, it wasn't all bad.

He had respect and admiration coming from all corners but he. Couldn't. See. It.

He was blinded by the hate, embarrassed by the comments, spinning in his head because he wasn't normal. Not really. He wrote from his heart, and he was being shit on by people, critics, assholes who didn't give a fuck about his mental health.

If he were Silas, he'd be fine.

But he wasn't, and I was left clueless about what the fuck to do.

It was late, eleven PM, and I was supposed to be at the airport in four hours.

Instead of packing, I spent the last four hours at Judah's talking to Pharaoh about what we were going to do. He knew I wasn't going with them on tour and that Judah was going to lose his fucking mind when he found out, but he told me two weeks ago that this behavior was typical coming from my skyscraper.

Pharaoh said that Judah spun out like this after every single, album, or music video like clockwork, but the tour would made it all worse and the timing was awful.

Tour was one big giant party—an overdose waiting to happen.

And Judah still thought I was going with him.

I hadn't found the nerve to tell him otherwise, secretly hoping his behavior would improve, that he'd come back to me and be *my* Judah again. Not the guy he turned into over the last couple of weeks.

"What did Pharaoh say?" Frankie asked from her spot next to me on the couch. "That he was at a party with Sage, somewhere in North Hollywood," I replied with zero emotion, feeling numb as fuck.

"North Hollywood?" she questioned with disgust in her tone. "Fuck, he really is a mess. Whose party are they at?"

"I didn't ask." I didn't want to know. I was tired, worried, and all cried out.

My Judah was gone.

As soon as he read that first shitty comment on his Instagram post where he announced the song dropped, I saw it.

Right before my eyes, he shut down. With clouded, heartbroken eyes, he looked from the phone he held in his hand to me, sitting next to him on his couch. I felt his stare as it burned my temple. Just like that, his brain had him convinced that all of this could just be my fault.

That was the easiest way to handle it, right?

"Phoenix," Frankie started, sitting up and turning toward me so she could look me in the eye. "I've watched him break you down over the last two weeks, and I know I should be telling you drop his ass and walk the fuck away...but I can't. You guys are twin flames, and I believe that with every fiber of my being, but he's not done, and you need to prepare yourself."

She wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know.

"I don't know how," I admitted, already having thought about all of this. "I don't know what I could possibly do to prep myself for whatever happens next."

"Yes, you do. You know what will happen as soon as you tell him, you just don't want to look at it. Which I completely understand, but you can't show up there with any kinks in your armor, babe, or he'll eat you alive." Even as she said it, she lost her fire. She knew that was impossible for me—my armor had more kinks than she could count.

I was no match for this version of Judah Colt.

"I'll be fine, Frankie," I answered in a defeated tone, sitting up and scooting to the edge of the couch. "I'm going to go grab an hour of sleep before I have to leave."

"Right," she nodded. "Okay. Just...are you good?"

"No," I said honestly. "But I'll be better once he's in the air and out of my reach."

No one in the room believed that.

Me included.

???

LYING in bed and trying to sleep made it hard not to think about how fast two months had gone and how stupid I'd been to think that one song would fix Judah's issues. That I was enough to hold him together.

That we wouldn't face something as real as this.

A tour.

Four months gone.

A whole world between us.

It didn't matter how well the single did on the charts or how much money he made. Not when there were demons in his ear telling him he was too weak to fight through his insecurities, his self-hate and doubts, that he should just live in it instead. Stay there because it was safer than being brave about his shit and facing it head on.

Judah spent the last two weeks spinning himself around and around in his head, and now there was no chance of me getting through to him, not without him *wanting* to fight it. Currently, he was doing everything in his power to blame *me* for the reason he felt like shit. It was easier than looking himself in the mirror and seeing that he was letting stupid fucking morons ruin his soul. He was destroying what we had because it was easier to put all the blame on me. Especially since he believed I'd stick around no matter what, no matter how poorly he treated me.

He had no reason to believe otherwise, though, because for the past two weeks, I'd been a rock.

I answered the door every time he stumbled up my driveway at four AM, crossfaded and sipping lean from a Mountain Dew bottle—a mixture of codeine and soda—high off his ass and mumbling about how much he needed me.

There was no fucking reason to fight the voices in his head, because his plan was just to drown them out with liquor and psychedelics, and I was allowing him to do it. I was enabling him, because I couldn't leave him out there all alone, not when I knew how serious his condition was. If I didn't let him in, if we fought and I left him alone...lean wouldn't be enough. He'd add more and end up dead.

He could drown and drag me down with him, because I kept answering. I kept calling when hours went by with no word from him.

Except, every time he showed up bloody from a bar fight or texted me that he almost fucked someone else, I broke a little more. I was tagged in paparazzi photos of Judah out at bars or in clubs, by his fans who wondered where I was, why he was out alone or pictured with some random bitch instead of me.

Little did they know, I sat at home while he ignored my texts about the very same photos.

I was a crumpled up piece of paper that he threw in the corner every morning but unrolled and smoothed out every night. Wrinkled, torn, and used beyond repair, I was at my lowest now that he'd stopped kissing me playfully and settled on fucking me into the mattress and falling asleep without a word said after.

Weed almost wasn't enough anymore.

There wasn't enough green in the world to cloud the horrors in my life, the pain in my heart, the incredible ache in my chest. The jealousy, the rage.

I couldn't figure out how to turn off my feelings, how to turn the volume down on my love for him. I just wanted Judah's pain to go away, wanted my pain to go away. Wanted to talk to him, get him to listen to me, to want me again—all of me.

But he only wanted what he wanted, when he wanted it.

That was TheColt.

He'd become the savage.

The devil himself.

Pretty sure it was all the coke he was doing.

I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. I didn't see him spinning this around on me to make himself feel better. To validate his drug abuse, his piss poor, vindictive attitude.

We were a mess again, but this time, there was no foreplay involved. All that was left was hard fucking and silence.

But it wasn't over, not even close.

This was just the beginning, the break in our foundation.

Because it didn't matter that he hated me right now, that he blamed me for how he felt about himself. I refused to allow him to stay here, in this place, in this negative shitstorm he had brewing around him. I had to save him before it was too late, but in order to save him, I had to be stronger than him.

I had to set boundaries and show him he couldn't have both.

If I went on tour with him in my current emotional state, with my baggage still being so heavy, I wouldn't be able to do anything but make it worse. I'd fall *with* him into the storm instead. I'd crash and burn, and we'd both end up dead.

No, I needed time.

I needed to achieve my goal, keep living my life, prove to myself I could function without him because he wasn't reliable enough to lean on. I had to find a way to block out Judah's noise and find my own sound, become my own person. Because even though I wasn't going on tour, even though he'd be pissed and there would be multiple tantrums thrown

between now and when all was said and done...Judah would come back for me.

He'd be back to visit, too.

For Christmas and New Year's. He even mentioned coming back for Halloween, because it was my favorite holiday and he knew I'd want to spend it with Frankie.

Even if I stayed here, he'd still come home to crash my plans one way or another. Just to torture me.

My resolve would bend and snap, then he'd leave me again, and I'd have to rebuild.

But that's just what it was for right now, until I could figure out how to get my Judah back, until he was my skyscraper again. Until I could find a permanent solution to his problem and my own.

At the end of the day, Judah Colt was inside me. All around me. Everywhere and too loud.

But I loved him, even in the depths of our toxicity, and if I had to break his heart in order to do this the right way, I would

Even if he hated me for it.

???

THE EARLY MORNING air was dense with smog, making my skin feel sticky and gross as I made my way across the tarmac and toward the jet parked with the door open, waiting for Judah and his band. Holly made sure I had clearance to get through the gate, and I was grateful because my head was a fucking disaster and I wouldn't have been able to form a full sentence if I had to explain to the guard at the front what I was doing here.

Breaking up with my heart and soul.

Saying goodbye to the only person capable of chasing away my nightmares.

Hoping to all fuck I could figure out a way to get through to him while he was gone so that when he came back, we could...

"There she is." *Fuck*. His voice was dark and filthy, sending goosebumps racing down my arms. I was afraid to turn around, afraid to see what he looked like after three days apart.

Yeah, it had been three days since we slept in the same bed. But it had been longer than that since he kissed me with affection, since he lit a blunt for me or stole a cigarette from my fingers because he finished his before I finished mine.

It had only been two weeks, and I was already in hell.

But I couldn't stall this time, so I turned, just to give myself the proof I needed, and came face to face with my worst nightmare.

Hair a mess, clothes that were definitely days old, deep purple bags under his dull blue eyes. My skyscraper was gone.

I choked on a sob as the red around his eyes pierced my heart. "Oh my god, J—"

"Oh stop," he interrupted with a hard laugh, brushing me off. "Don't start. Don't pretend like you're shocked, Little Bird."

Fuck, here we go.

I took a deep breath and let it out, staring at the broken man before me. Strung out and all fucked up, he was wired and high for sure. Probably drunk too.

I started. "You're a mess."

"Aww, I know," he tilted his head and took a step toward me, "but, you love me, yeah?"

Did I love him? *Fuck me*. "We're not having this conversation right now."

"Oh, we're not, huh?" His tone was manic, bordering on insane. "I think we should. I think you should just tell the truth right here, right now."

The truth. As if I'd been lying this whole time. "I don't need to tell you *the truth*, J, you already know it. You're just refusing to see it because you don't want to be given any reason to stop what you're doing. You like your fucking disaster."

I needed to calm down, to not get worked up so early in the morning in front of his team, his crew.

"Of course, I do," he replied too loudly, a sick smile shaping his lips. "I'm just biding my time, waiting until your tornado ends up right next to mine."

Stunned, my body locked up. I ground out, "What the fuck does that mean?"

He chuckled, stepping closer to me. "You did this, darling. You pushed me. You shoved me into writing again, gave me a nice speech about me doing this shit *just for you* but you're leaving right now, aren't you? You're here to tell me you aren't coming on tour, right?"

I held his icy stare. "No, I'm not. And you want to know why?" I crossed my arms to try and hold my chest together. Everything was breaking. "Because you know how I feel about you, and you're still doing what you're doing. You're killing yourself to numb the pain I was supposed to help you get through, but your pride is all in the way. You're embarrassed that someone called you out, that they don't get your shit, they don't care, and you're afraid of your own shadow. I'm sorry about that, but none of that is on me. We were supposed to handle it together, but you bounced and now I don't want any part of it." I shrugged, challenging him to man the fuck up. "You want me to love you with no backbone? Why? I'll love you either way, J. If I'm here and you're there, if you're home and I'm away, if we're together or apart, it doesn't fucking matter. I'll still love you, but I don't have to be a doormat while I do it."

A shocked laugh left his mouth before he sucked his teeth and pounced, his hand at my throat right where I liked it, as he snarled down at me, "I'd kill for your ass, end my life to save yours. But I think you'll kill me first, Little Bird. Because you'd rather bite your tongue off than give me what I need. So fine, keep the useless thing you call a heart. I'll just come back and get it the hard way—I'll rip it from your fucking chest if I have to." I was shaking, on the verge of losing it completely as he sneered down at me before a wicked grin took over his features and everything shifted in his gaze.

Just like that, the next four months flashed before my eyes.

My skyscraper was ruined, cracked, struggling, and he blamed me because he couldn't untangle the web in his mind, and I was the closest thing to take it all out on. But rather than talk to me, be with me, trust me—he was going to return the favor and take me down with him. Because who wanted to suffer alone?

I'm so fucked.

I saw it all in his stare. The warning signs, the red flags, all the things I didn't pay attention to over the last two months. He was capable of shredding every ounce of my self-respect, he had no problem ripping my progress apart in order to get what he wanted—me. Bloody, broken, ruined. He didn't care, he'd spin me around until I caved.

Girls, drugs, posts on social media just to make me jealous.

The late-night drunk texts and "I hate you" phone calls from different time zones.

It was coming.

The taunting, punishing, screwing around until it was all so fucked that neither of us would be able to see straight anymore. He had a plan. He knew this was coming, he chose not to warn me, because he was just too fucked to care about what I wanted. Too desperate for escape but too afraid to do it alone, his goal was to push me to edge. He wanted me to meet him in hell.

He was leaving.

I was staying.

With a dark, twisted, heartbroken look in his eye, he brought his mouth to my ear and whispered, "Let the games

begin, Baby Bird."



"FU*KUP" was a fucking smash.

It really was.

Twisted lyrics in a dark, haunted house type vibe. It was sinister, crazy, and everything I felt inside. Especially now. But when I wrote it, it was supposed to represent what I was like *before* I met Phoenix Royal.

But no. It was today. It was just now, as she walked away.

We had the gritty start, the bitter middle, with a whole lot of sweet mixed in, but as far as the ending went?

She walked.

That was what she did, you know? She just...walks. Whenever it got hard for her.

She heard my soul crying out, she saw me breaking into pieces right before her eyes, but she didn't come with me because she didn't fucking care, not really. She had all this motivation to fight for her happiness, which was cool with me, except that she was willing to drop me like a bad habit to make it happen for herself.

Not that it was only about her, it wasn't. She wanted me to do the same, but I wasn't that guy. Because happiness? It was fleeting. A feeling shouldn't be an end goal, and even if she wanted it to be, long-term peace wasn't possible for someone like me. Nah, she had it all twisted.

She wanted me to be someone I wasn't, someone I couldn't be, because fuck if I knew how.

I was blind as hell, broken as fuck. Damaged and dirty in all my filthy nonsense.

But it was fine. All of it.

She could go for now, but I wasn't done with her.

She knew it, too.

No one else was prepared, though. None of our friends were ready.

Those guys wouldn't know what hit them.

Tit for tat, the distance would make us petty, desperate. But both of us knew what was coming. It was why neither of us brought it up until it was too late. Until saying goodbye was the only option, because she wouldn't budge and neither would I. Until further notice.

I wasn't sure what my game plan was just yet. All I knew was she made me write that song.

She made me love her.

She made me need her, crave her.

I actually wanted to bleed for her, all over her. Just to show her I would.

That was my baby.

My girl.

My little bird.

Together or apart, she was mine. She could sit on any dick she wanted, but she'd still crave me.

But the fun part would be figuring out our new normal.

Would she answer my texts?

Could I fuck her when I came back on breaks? Get back on the jet with her taste still in my mouth?

We'd have to see.

The next four months would be a hellish kind of wonder, and the drugged-up maniac inside of me couldn't fucking wait.

As I buckled into my seat on the jet, I felt sick and insane.

"Pharaoh, you got the fuckin' blow?" I called across the plane to where my best friend was sitting, scrolling on his phone. At the sound of my voice, he lifted his head and shot a hard glare in my direction. I rolled my eyes. "Save that shit for someone who'll listen. Where's the coke?"

Shaking his head, he said, "You're gonna fuck this all up, and when you ruin her, don't you fucking *dare* come cryin' to me." He was fired up for Phoenix, because he loved her too. They all did. But he was still too loyal to give up on my sorry ass. He continued with, "However, I'm still your homie. You're my fuckin' bro. And if we're doin' a little blow on the flight, then fuck it. I feel like I'm breakin' up with that girl too, if I'm honest."

"Don't say shit like that," I bitched.

He didn't laugh. "Why the fuck not?"

"Because she's mine," I snapped.

"Not if you keep this up," he warned, reaching into his pocket for the baggie full of distraction. Pretty, euphoric confidence all wrapped in plastic.

"You don't know her like I do," I said in return as he threw the bag in my direction. Catching it midair, I met his eyes. "Her rock bottom doesn't look much different than mine. She'll be here soon."

My baby left me, but I wouldn't let her go far.

Sick and insane.

She was still mine.

Let the games begin, Baby Bird.

TO BE CONTINUED.....

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fuck.

Hi.

How are you doing? You okay?

No? Me neither.

That being said, I have some people to thank for keeping my head on straight while I wrote this.

First and foremost, it takes a village. Brianna Jean Books does not run without my village and I'm so fucking serious LOL.

To my Betas: ...you guys...just...y'all rock my world.

Brit. Your feedback, the intense attention to detail, and your belief in me is unmatched. Thank you for our talks, the mutual respect, and being my "woman to woman" friend. Love you longtime.

Roxiee. You know how I feel about you, I say it every couple of days. You love them like I love them, you hype organically and never stray from being exactly who you are. Thank you for being you, you are so loved.

Zoe. My little baby. You felt connected to this story from the moment I slid into your DM's and told you about it. You were primed and ready to take my babies early, fresh on the page, and help me polish them up. Your soul, your spirit, you get me and you get them. I love you.

My PA! Saaaaaaaaavy!

Giiiiirl, you put up with so much shit from me, I don't even know how you're still here. I'm all over the place, I never know what I'm doing and you're always down to do whatever you can to keep me organized. You're my career savior, for real LOL. Love you big.

Dee Garcia. Lol, what's poppin'? *brand new whip just hopped in*...betcha didn't think I'd call you out like this buuuuuut, here we are. You're the genius behind the marketing, the brilliancy behind the graphics, the artist behind the cover. Our friendship is my favorite place to escape to. I can be loud, annoying, over the top and you're down. I think my longest voice message was forty-five minutes and that right there, you deserve an award for listening to. You held me accountable, got up at the ASS CRACK of dawn for two fucking months to write with me. I mean, come on, who even are you? The best ever, that's who you are. (makes no sense, just roll with it.)

I love you. Thank you. For real.

Mr. Fucking Maxwell. Phew, it was rough there for a while, yeah? *cringe*

I owe you like...a million Melting Pot dates and a whole lot of video game time.

But for real, thank you. For all the nights you figured out dinner, all the times I told you I'd "be right there" and took an hour to come through. All the Daddy & Harley time you spent keeping her distracted and entertained while I snuck to the cave for a few hours. Running a business of your own, being a dad, helping me, you do it all. Thank you. I love you.

My Alpha, Bee, deserves just one more moment of recognition.

Now that you've read this story, you can only imagine what this girl had to go through while I wrote WAYH.

Let me give you some insight: 3 AM voice messages about plot, breakdowns galore, nights spent talking about my fears, anxiety, and afternoons completely fucking

panicking over everything and nothing at all. We changed shit, flipped details, threw information from one book into another, switched gears left and fucking right and not once did she leave me hanging. Not once, in the entire four months it took me to produce a final draft, did she leave me alone. She was there every goddamn day.

Bee, my dude. My homie. My light. These plots, these characters...they consume me, and you let them consume you, too. You fangirled, sent inspo, got me organized, and reminded me to eat. You talked me through my personal life, held me up when I couldn't do it for myself. I was never alone. Not once. And I can't explain what that means to me even though you know I try to every day.

I love you, thank you.

To my mom: You show up at just the right time, every time. Crisis mode, averted. I owe you so huge, thanks for giving me my creativity with your genetic code and listening to me ramble about my struggles because of it. And, of course, for reading it last fucking minute because I'm a crazy perfectionist. Thank you. I love you.

To my Misfits: y'all make me cry. My books would go nowhere without you. Thank you for all the edits, sharing, hype, and excitement you bring to the table. You light up my whole life.

To the bloggers, readers, and every person who has told someone else about my books...thank you. Without you, none of this would be possible. You make my dream come true every single day and I can't possibly say it enough.

Okay I'm all done now. Just a one more thing:

Tell your friends you love them, be kind, and remember that Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ+ community deserves the same rights as you, and love is love.

Oh, and start preparing now for YSYW because after that ending...yikes.

See you soon.

AUTHOR LINKS

JOIN MY READERS GROUP: https://bit.ly/2N4yjpl







