

Best Friend

BURDEN

Catch 22 Series

MADISON BAILEY

BEST FRIEND BURDEN

(CATCH-22 SERIES)



MADISON BAILEY

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CHAPTER 1



MELODY

*B*ack when I left Texas, I told everybody that I was heading out to California to make my dreams come true. What I didn't anticipate is the first thing I would be doing is falling tits first into my high school crush.

I was early for a meeting and wandered into a small food court in a nearby park where I could scope out the competition. Almost immediately, I learned there was nothing to be concerned about. Gluten-free was in abundance, as were organic choices, but most menus had only one or two “plant-based” items, if they had any at all. And the ones that were there were pretty pathetic. In other words, my truck, The Vegan Vaquero, would be in a class of its own. Once I got the funding to bring it out here to Los Angeles, anyway, which was the point of the meeting.

I ended up getting an order of fries from a burger place called “Between Your Buns” — these food trucks loved the slightly risqué names, which treaded out from the realm of innuendo into flat out overtly sexual, which — I won't lie — is very funny. The fries were over-salted and undercooked potato sticks that barely qualified as food. Drowning them in ketchup added some flavor, but made them even soggy to the point of being inedible.

As I went to throw the rest away, I got distracted by the strumming of an acoustic guitar and turned towards the man who was playing it.

This guy was an artistic type, the kind that I melt for and always had, ever since high school, with that light facial hair

on his chin and the deeply serious look on his face. The sleeve of his t-shirt stretched tightly around the bicep of his strumming arm, which was covered in a collage of tattoos featuring musical notes and band insignia, including the silhouette of The Beatles' Abbey Road cover.

And he was playing beautifully.

The tune sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it until the performer started singing in his quiet, understated indie-rock voice that I had to focus on to hear. But when I did, it was very sexy. To be honest, it sent a chill down my spine and some heat between my legs.

He was singing an Adele song, one that I'd only heard on the piano, but he was making it work as a guitar piece, fingerpicking the notes with precision and delicacy. I stood in silence, listening to him, perhaps the only one in the area making a point to do so. Back in Austin, we respect our live music — here on the West Coast, people had their earbuds in and were ignoring him.

When he finished with his song, I applauded and he smiled at me, flashing perfect teeth and forcing my heart to skip a beat.

Good grief, I thought. You're not going to get very far in life if you're still letting a good smile have that kind of effect on you.

In my defense, this wasn't just a run-of-the-mill "good smile." This was like a nuclear strength good smile, so intense that it could drop all panties in a four block radius.

Or maybe it had just been a little while since I'd gotten laid.

Either way, I was stronger than this, and I forced myself to regain whatever composure I could.

"Thank you," he said.

I looked for his guitar case, to toss in a few dollars, but it was closed and off to the side. "Do you accept tips?" I asked.

He shook his head. “Nah, I’m not performing. Just taking a break from the studio. You get trapped up in there all day playing the same riffs over and over again, so it’s nice to get out here and have an audience. Even if they’re not paying attention.”

“Pearls before swine,” I said and laughed to myself. He was smiling knowingly and looking at me with those intense eyes. God, those eyes. If I had any less self-control, I would have jumped right on top of him right then and there and let him strum all my guitar strings.

Like the song, there was something familiar about those eyes, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

So when he said, “You don’t recognize me, do you?” I was taken aback and immediately felt nervous. How could I have forgotten this hottie?

“Here, I’ll give you a hint.”

He played a little rock riff on his guitar, and it instantly came back to me. I hadn’t heard the song in over a decade, but it was practically burned to the inside of my skull. An earworm I’d never get rid of and never wanted to, either. Just hearing it sent me right back to high school.

And I knew exactly who he was.

“Kiefer Ekland and the Lost Signals.”

He was a bit of a minor celebrity at our high school back in Texas, leading a band that would play concerts of cover tunes and a few originals. The riff he just played was from one of the originals, a little tune called “Stabbed in the Heart,” which my teenage brain fell in love with, with its dark, melancholy lyrics, but I’m sure I’d probably think it was silly now.

It was a good hook, though.

He nodded. “That’s right.”

“Y’all still together?”

He shook his head. “We broke up right after high school.” Then he smiled. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard anyone

say ‘y’all.’ I’m not careful around you, I’m liable to get my accent back.”

It’s true, his voice sounded different, almost stilted, as he adopted the accent of the region he was currently living in.

“Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing,” he said, his voice now just a bit deeper and having that flavor of East Texas. If he’d been singing like that, I would have recognized him instantly.

The voice immediately brought back a recollection of the one night the two of us made out in a game of Truth or Dare at a party. His strong hands on my cheek as our lips touched and he gave me just a little bit of tongue, showing restraint. My God, I don’t think I’d ever been kissed like that before or since. I was sure he’d long forgotten that, though.

Because other than that, we were just friends. Good friends, though. As close as friends could get. But I had such a hard crush on him that it would keep me up at night, wishing and hoping on every star in the sky for something that never actually came to be.

Although for one moment, in that silly little game, I got just a taste of what I was missing.

“What are you doing now?” I asked.

“Session musician for Cleopatra Records. I’m a bassist by trade, but bass isn’t as much fun to play for strangers at the park.”

He’d ended up a professional musician, just like he said he would. I couldn’t believe it. Or maybe I could. He and his band were pretty badass.

“You’re a rock star, then? Drugs, sex, and rock and roll?”

That he laughed at, though it felt forced. “No,” he said. There was a wistfulness in his voice that sounded like I may have struck a nerve. “Just trying to make ends meet and be a responsible adult. No partying for Kiefer anymore.”

Kiefer opened up his guitar case and put the instrument back inside.

“You need to head back?”

“Yeah,” he said, closing the case and picking it up, “but...”

He stepped closer to me, close enough that we were almost touching. I wondered if he was going to give me another perfect kiss like the one I remembered, along with a confession that he felt just as strongly about me as I did about him. Or, if not a kiss, he could at least ask me for my number so we could get dinner or something.

Neither happened.

“...do you know you have ketchup on your shirt?”

“What?!”

I looked down, and he was right. In squirting ketchup on the shitty fries, I must have gotten it all over me, and to boot, the smear looked a little like a small dick with balls, again just my luck.

“No, no, no!” I said, trying to rub it out, which only made it stain deeper into the white cloth, and it now looked like I was diddling a fiddle. “Do you have any water or...?”

He shook his head.

“I have a meeting I need to get to in about 30 minutes...” I told him. “It’s very important.”

I could try and make it back to the truck where my clothes were, but I had to park it pretty far away. If I ran, I could probably make it, but I’d come back to the meeting covered in sweat.

“Look,” he said, cool as a cucumber, “there’s a vintage clothes shop right around the corner. I bet we can find you something there.”

There wasn’t time to come up with a different plan.

“Let’s go,” I said.

* * *

Luck must have been on my side because we found a perfect white blouse almost instantly when entering the store. All I needed was a little bit more luck so it would fit well enough for me not to look like a complete clown in front of the investors. Because deep down, I feared they'd see right through me. I'd be a little girl in my mom's high heels, much too big for my feet, pretending to be a grown up.

Confidence, I reminded myself. *You can wear whatever you want, but without confidence, it's worthless.*

“Do you have a changing room?” I asked a teenager who worked there.

He gestured towards the back of the store without saying anything, then kept walking, not taking the two seconds to bother making sure I heard him and understood.

Kiefer and I made our way there, and the changing room was small. Very small. With one of those doors that swung back and forth with the slightest touch, like the entrance to a saloon in an old western. But it served its purpose, so whatever. Besides, it's not like I was ashamed of my body. Back in Austin, toplessness was legal and, while it wasn't typical, you could walk around practically naked, which I did one night on Sixth Street when hopping from bar to bar.

So I shoved myself inside the booth and put the blouse up on a hanger, knocking my elbows against the side of the walls in the process. I could have gone slower, but I was feeling the pressure of time and practically ripped my shirt off, tossing it to the ground. When I did, I accidentally placed one of my heels on the blouse. The heel slipped and I lost balance, then fell straight through the swinging barn doors, screaming.

It all happened in slow motion. I was headed straight for the ground, tits out and face first. It was fine — a Texas girl like me was tough enough to hit the ground and get back up — but Kiefer was also raised in Texas, where he was brought up to be a gentleman and wasn't about to let a woman get hurt on his watch. He had to be a hero.

His hands flew out, he cupped them to catch me, and catch me they did. I fell boobs first into his strong Texan hands,

pressing my semi-erect nipples into his palms, separated only by the thin fabric of the bra. And once he grabbed on, those nipples got so stiff, like handlebars on a bicycle, that they nearly shot through the cotton.

“Oh my God,” he said, still in slow motion. I could see the embarrassment on his face as he jolted back and let go, which sent me toppling to the floor with a thud. It hurt, but not nearly as much as the emotional pain inflicted by the embarrassment of being grabbed by my front cannons.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

I got up and ran back into the changing room before he could see that my face was as red as the dick ketchup stain.

“I swear,” he said, “I didn’t mean to do that.”

He was deeply apologetic. The least I could do was make a joke of it and try to laugh it off.

“Usually I expect a boy to buy me dinner before letting him get to second base,” I yelled from the changing room.

Maybe he couldn’t tell I was joking from behind the wall without seeing my face, or maybe I wasn’t really joking. Those countless nights back in high school, thinking of him as my hand moved between my legs — it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for him to take me out and show me a good time.

But I didn’t expect him to take my comment seriously.

“Okay,” he said. “How’s tonight sound?”

“YES!” I said, much too quickly and loudly. And my face got even redder.

CHAPTER 2



*** KIEFER ***

Life was supposed to be better than this. It wasn't so long ago that I'd gotten everything I'd wanted and my dreams were coming to fruition. Well, that wasn't exactly true. My dream was to become a rock star and tour the world, spreading the joy of music to audiences near and far, transporting the people at my shows to a mental state of nirvana.

But I made it through my 20s, and that didn't happen. So it wasn't ever going to happen. The odds of becoming a rock star after the age of 25 were pretty much nil. You'd never headline at Madison Square Garden or the Hollywood Bowl — the best you could hope for was a special performance in a retirement community. As such, I had to come up with a compromise dream. And I thought I'd had it.

I was hired as a session musician for Cleopatra Records, a record label that focused on young, hip, independent artists with true heart, doing interesting things. It wasn't that pop music is bad, per se, but it's hard to remain personal when you've got a billion fans. And, while it would be killer to lay down the bass line on a Beyoncé track, that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. With Cleopatra, I would get to be playing alongside the undiscovered geniuses and help them find their audience.

But Cleopatra got bigger than it should have. And money is as addictive as any drug and twice as dangerous. After they had a taste of success, suddenly discovering new talents wasn't as important as having the next big hit. Every once in a

while, we might find someone with true heart, but Ernie, our main producer and my boss, would suck all the soul out of them in an effort to get a single.

Maybe the most depressing thing, though, was that it didn't really bother me. Not as much as it should have, anyway. It was a stable job, and it brought in good money. The hours weren't bad and it provided me the freedom to focus on making my own music if I wanted to.

But I didn't want to.

Whatever motivation I had to become a genuine artist was gone, and I'd officially sold out to the man. And I didn't even care.

It was like that line in Spinal Tap, "As long as there's sex and drugs, I can do without the rock and roll."

Around this time, though, I also met Wendy. She was beautiful and sweet, in a girl next-door kind of way, and she wasn't so much into the drugs. We met online while I was beta testing a dating app my friend Mila had helped develop and hit it off almost instantly.

Unfortunately, I was drinking and using too much during the relationship and she made an ultimatum on New Year's, telling me that if I didn't give up the vices that were going to kill me, she was going to leave me. There was a big fight because I wasn't about to let someone else tell me what to do.

And so, true to her word, she left me.

She ran out the door, leaving me without a New Year's kiss. I figured she'd calm down in the morning and we could talk. But like a wish on a monkey's paw, fate had another horrible plan. A drunk driver hit her at 70 miles per hour going down Mulholland, and I had to go in and identify what remained of her body.

And so Wendy got her wish. My inner bad boy died too. I vowed on that day to never take another sip of alcohol or put any more narcotics into my body.

That was just over a year ago and, truthfully, after the first week of sobriety, it wasn't so hard. I stopped going to parties

with people way too young for me and focused on being a mature adult instead.

And, to be honest, I didn't miss it. Parties were loud and obnoxious. There was a comfort in the predictability of normal life that I appreciated. It wasn't particularly exciting, but I didn't want to do anything particularly exciting anyway. My heart beat at a steady rate throughout the day, elevating a bit when I went for a job and decreasing slightly when I went to bed.

I enjoyed it and didn't want to go back.

At least not until I ran into Melody.

Melody was bad news for me. Back in high school, we were the best of friends who brought out the worst in each other. But that worst wasn't always a bad thing. In fact, it was usually pretty fun. I got her drunk for the first time and she was the one who got me into partying harder. I always sort of had a thing for her, and we even made out once in a game of Truth or Dare, but nothing ever came of it because, at the time, I didn't have the swagger to actually make a move.

And, if anything about me has improved since high school, it's my swagger.

She looked even better than I remembered, with that irresistible smile that could just turn your insides to jelly and that body... good lord, that body.

Was I betraying Wendy by inviting her over? No, of course not. It was just a friendly get-together between two old friends — two old *best* friends — or at least that's what I was telling myself. Because secretly, deep down, I knew I wanted her badly. A year and change was a long time, and it still felt weird to wake up in the morning without Wendy beside me, but it was also long enough to at least consider trying to move on. It's what she would have wanted. After all, she was a selfless person without a jealous bone in her body. Yet another reason I felt like she was too good for me.

We even spoke once, the two of us, late one night in a post-coital spooning session, what would we want if the other

one passed. Wendy told me she'd want me to be happy, and she'd hate for me to be going through life alone. It made me realize how genuinely good a person she was because of the truth in her voice.

I mirrored the sentiment back to her, but I wasn't sure I believed it even though I was certain that she did. Part of me felt a little weird for not putting any effort across to find someone else, but I was too focused on making that other wish of hers come true: my sobriety.

Because those two desires were at odds with each other. Dating would involve going to bars, being around alcohol, and potentially even worse.

And Melody offered a similar temptation.

When I got back to my apartment, I went straight to my bathroom mirror to look at myself.

"Just a friendly dinner," I said, hoping that saying the words aloud would help them sink in. "We'll eat, catch up, and go our separate ways. She won't be staying over."

I stared at myself sternly, then repeated, "She won't be staying over." This time, I said it with a firm confidence, like a father establishing rules before he left his son home alone for the first time.

The buzzer from downstairs interrupted my pep talk, and I pressed the button to allow Melody up to the apartment. She came in and gave me an immediate hug, putting her whole body into it. God, she smelled good. And felt good, too.

"Kiefer," she said, "it's so good to see you!"

She didn't release the hug right away. Instead, she stayed there holding me tighter and tighter, leaving me to wonder if she'd ever let go.

Already, I doubted my ability to stick to the promise I made myself in the mirror just seconds earlier. If I got even the slightest indication of interest from her, I'd feel powerless.

It was just like the drugs, though, I was stronger than I thought. All I had to do was resist long enough and the desire

would go away.

Or at least that's what I was telling myself. Over and over again. How did we get through high school without ever hooking up?

"It's good to see you, too," I said, awkwardly patting her on the back like a weird, nervous robot man. *God, this was already terrible.* I changed the subject immediately and released her like an ejection seat from my body.

"You good with burgers? I was going to grill some on the balcony."

The smile dropped from her face, and I wondered what I could have said that was wrong.

"Meat burgers?" she asked.

"Oh right," I said. "You're vegetarian."

It was amazing how it had felt like no time since we'd seen each other, but it had been more than ten years and I'd forgotten something as simple about her as the number one thing she prides herself on.

"Vegan now, actually," she said, blushing. "I try not to make a big thing out of it. To try not to be one of *those* vegans, you know?"

"I don't know, no."

"It's an old joke," she said, "An atheist, vegan, and cross fit athlete walk into a bar. How do you know? Because it's the first thing they say when they walk in."

I'd had friends who were into cross fit. She wasn't wrong.

"I should have let you know," she said.

"It's okay," I said, pressing my brain to come up with something to cook that would fit her needs, coming up empty. Virtually everything I could make a meal out of had some sort of meat in it. "We can order something in."

"Let me pay," she said.

I shook my head. "You're my guest, I got it."

“No,” she said, pulling out her phone and stopping me. “It’s research. I could write it off as a business expense.”

She told me about her food truck she was bringing out to Los Angeles and how she wanted to try some other food in the area to see what she was up against. As it turned out, when the food eventually arrived — plant-based burgers — the competition wasn’t especially tough.

“This is bland,” she said. That was an understatement. We might as well have been eating cardboard covered toenails.

“What do you want?” I asked. “No meat. No dairy. No eggs. There’s only so much to work with.”

“That’s what you think,” she said, her eyes lighting up, “but flavor doesn’t need animal products. How often do people eat just plain chicken or steak? They don’t. There are spices and sauces that go into the cooking, all plant-based, and that’s where the taste comes from. The problem with this is that they don’t care. This isn’t food, it’s fuel. You’ll probably feel less hungry when you’re done, but you won’t feel satisfied.”

“And your food?”

“Oh, I guarantee when you get what I’ve got to offer in your mouth, you’ll be extremely satisfied.”

She blushed at that and started giggling.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That came out wrong. But my truck was very successful back in Austin. And my customers always left with big smiles, vegan and carnivore alike.”

“I look forward to trying it, then,” I said, effectively letting the cat out of the bag and offering to see her again. “When are you opening?”

“As soon as I can get investors. That’s what the meeting was about today.”

“How did it go?”

Her mood dropped a bit. “Not great. They weren’t sure that Southern Californians were interested in Tex-Mex, particularly in what they referred to as a niche market.

“But that’s the thing,” she continued. “The Vegan Vaquero transcends the plant-based community. If the food is good, people will come.”

I told myself I’d believe it when I saw it. Or rather, tasted it. Even the best substitutes always struck me as a pale imitation of the real thing.

“The issue, though, is location,” she said. “I don’t know this area at all and didn’t realize how expensive it was. And there’s nowhere to park. I eventually found a place to leave the truck out in Thousand Oaks and Ubered here.”

“Thousand Oaks?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she told me. “That’s where I’m staying for now.”

I was out in Santa Monica. Thousand Oaks was a solid hour away with no traffic. And Los Angeles always had traffic. That Uber ride must have cost her \$75.

“It’s not so bad,” she said. “I actually made a friend already.”

“Oh yeah?”

She pulled out her phone and started scrolling. “Yes, his name is Patrick, and he’s super cute.”

Great, I thought. *She’s already dating somebody*. There was some sarcasm to the thought, but, truthfully, it was for the best. I didn’t need her complicating my life.

“What’s he like?” I asked, just trying to make conversation.

“Well,” she said, “he’s a good listener, really sweet and hairy.”

Hairy? I thought.

Then she showed me the picture on her phone. Patrick, it seemed, was a raccoon. And it appeared he was eating pita bread.

“I gave him a little bit of my lunch the other day and now we’re besties. My first friend here on the coast!” She said with a smile.

I couldn't tell if she was joking or certifiably insane.

"See, living out of a food truck isn't so—hey, what's that?" she asked, pointing to the open door leading to the spare bedroom.

"It's an extra bedroom..."

I saw the look in her eyes. She didn't even need to ask the question, I knew what she was thinking.

And I know that I told myself she wouldn't stay the night. And that we would have our dinner and never see each other again...

But I couldn't say no. Even if she hadn't actually asked. After all, we were friends, right?

"Would you like to—?"

I didn't even get a chance to finish my sentence.

"Oh, yes!"

Melody jumped up and hugged me, just as she had when she said hello earlier, putting her body against mine, not in a sexual way, but in an expression of her pure joy. Of course, it was impossible for me to feel her body against mine without it being at least a little bit sexual. As much as I tried to push that idea out of my head, it wouldn't go away.

"It'll just be for a little while," she said. "You'll barely know I'm here. You know, I was worried I'd have to be commuting from out in the boonies every day, but if you ask nicely, the universe always provides."

She stopped herself.

"The universe by way of you," she said. "Thank you." And then she laughed, lightly punching me in the shoulder. "I bet you'll be an even better roommate than Patrick."

I politely forced a smile at that.

She looked so happy, with that smile all the way across her face, that I didn't know why I had that feeling in the pit of my stomach, like I'd just made the best or worst mistake of my life.

CHAPTER 3



MELODY

Staying with Kiefer was the best luck I have had since my move. Not only was I not having to live with a raccoon in my taco truck, but he was drop dead gorgeous and something I didn't mind waking up in the same apartment to every day. But my luck with investors wasn't as great as Kiefer's, and the meeting I was in was going over as well as a nun in a brothel.

Their three faces were stern and serious, like the kind of face you have trying to pull a major wedgie out of your caboose in public. These joyless faces were of men who cared only about money, who both had too much of it and who also clutched every single penny as if it were their last breath of air. They were, of course, potential investors, and no matter how enthusiastic my presentation or how much heart I showed them, they didn't care. All they cared about was a number that showed up in their spreadsheet column and how to make it just a little bit larger.

"The Vegan Vaquero was a huge hit in Austin," I said to them, pressing the button on my remote to pull up the next slide, displaying a graph with the money we made during the years I was there. "In fact, year after year, we never saw anything less than a 30% increase in revenue."

"What about profit?" said a man in the middle with a snide expression and an air of condescension. I wasn't sure if he was legitimately asking or if he was quizzing me, wondering if I knew the difference between the two of them.

“We also saw an increase in revenue,” I said. “Though, due to expansion and shared profits with the employers, it only went up an average of five percent per year.”

“Average,” the man sneered again, looking at the two of the other investors, who nodded. They caught my math trick, but I wasn’t expecting to fool them. While we did experience an increase in revenue over time, there were years with negative revenue, as I was putting the money towards building another location and paying the employers what they were worth.

“With property costs in Los Angeles,” one of the nodding men said, “we can’t afford to have such scant revenue. You’re coming here with what you describe as an investment opportunity, but we could just as easily make five percent on our money in the stock market.”

I had to bite my tongue because, for me, this wasn’t about dollars in pockets, but that was all these men cared about. This was about providing good food to good people, filling their happy stomachs, and putting smiles on their faces in the process.

It was an effort to speak their language.

“Understand,” I said, “that this was a food truck I was operating on my own without the help of business-savvy gentlemen like yourselves.”

That hurt to say, not just because I was giving an empty compliment or because I was speaking in terms of dollars and not happiness, but because I was, in effect, promising to cede control of the business, at least in a small part, to these soulless cretins who didn’t know the first thing about food.

The man in the middle looked back and forth between the two men to his side, who, again, responded with a simple nod, as if they could communicate telepathically.

“Do you have any market research data on the success rate of Tex-Mex cuisine in Los Angeles?”

Crap. This is where I was going to lose them.

“Not explicitly,” I said, “but...”

“We have a large Latino population,” he said, “who want authentic Mexican cuisine. They’re not going to have any interest in what you have to offer.”

“And vegan on top of that,” the man to his right said.

“Plant-based diets are on the rise,” I said.

“They were,” the man said, “but the trend is beginning to level out. The fad is dying.”

He was wrong. I knew he was wrong, but it didn’t matter because there was nothing I could say to convince him otherwise.

The man in the middle shuffled the papers in front of him and said, “I don’t want to take up any more of your time, Ms. Cruz.”

“Sorry?”

“I’m afraid we’re not interested, but we wish you the best of luck.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but he cut me off.

“Be sure to talk to Cecily on the way out so you can get your parking validated.”

By then, the three of them had their backs turned to me and were already halfway out the door.

I’d blown it. Another meeting wasted because these three men didn’t have the vision to take a chance on something new.

But could I blame them? I was describing food to them. How were they supposed to be won over just on a description?

It was so silly of me that I hadn’t considered it before — obviously the solution wasn’t a better presentation, it was to offer them what I’d be selling. One bite of a spicy jackfruit taco would send them to heaven as would the crunch of a tortilla chip dipped in my specialty queso, using a secret recipe so good that I’d been told it was better than the “real” thing.

If I was going to have any hope of winning these people over, I didn’t need to worry about a PowerPoint: I needed to

get in the kitchen and offer them some highlights from the menu.

* * *

There was a farmer's market only about a mile and a half from the office building. Unfortunately, in traffic, that still amounted to a solid half hour in a ride share with a man who leered at me through the rearview mirror without saying a word. If I had better shoes with me, I would have just walked.

Once there, however, I realized how out of my element I was.

Back in Austin, I knew who to trust in terms of my food suppliers. We were all on a first-name basis, and their reputations guaranteed they wouldn't give me subpar ingredients. This market left much to be desired.

It wasn't bad per se, but I was shocked at how mediocre the selection was in terms of quality, especially since California was known for its farming. The other shoppers didn't seem to mind, most of them too busy on their phones to take most notice of the produce. If there was one thing I'd learned from my time in the food industry, however, it was that actually talking to someone could get you what you needed to be faster.

A girl in sunglasses who couldn't have been older than 20 sat on a stool at one of the fruit stands, playing on her phone.

"Hey," I said, and she looked up at me with an expression that dared me to win her over. "Do you have anything that you haven't put out yet?"

"What you see is what you get," she said, gesturing to the pineapples, oranges, and lemons in the crates in front of her. Her voice was monotone and almost irritated that I dared ask her a question.

I leaned in and said, "Work with me, here."

Her expression didn't change, but when I pulled a twenty out of my purse and put it in her hands, her expression

lightened up.

“When does the fresh supply come in?” I asked, almost like I was participating in a drug deal.

The girl looked at the bill in her hand and back at me and realized I wasn’t a typical customer.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“Jackfruit.”

The girl nodded. “We have a truck coming in around 2:30,” she said. “The fresh fruit usually goes first. If you wait around a bit, I think you’ll be happy with what you see.”

I checked my phone. That would be in a half hour or so. I had nowhere else to be.

“What do you need it for?” the girl asked.

I told her about the food truck. When I brought up Austin, I got a genuine smile out of her.

“I was out there for ACL last year,” she said. “Man, I got wasted.” She laughed at that.

I nodded. “We had the truck out for Austin City Limits,” I told her.

The girl looked at me skeptically. “What was it called?”

“Vegan Vaquero.”

“Oh my God,” she said, “that shit was *tight*. That was the best hangover food I’d ever had in my life.”

“I prefer to call it authentic Tex Mex.”

“Yeah, well, nothing takes care of a night of heavy drinking like a good breakfast taco.” She trailed off for a second and then bolted back to attention. “Hey,” she said. “Are you looking for anyone to work the truck out here?”

“It’s going to be a few months minimum before we open,” I told her.

“Yeah, but when you do open, could I maybe...?”

Out of a sense of quality control, I had high standards about whom I hired. This girl must have seen the uncertainty in my face.

“I’m a real good cook,” she said. “I’m fast, and I don’t let shit burn.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “Follow the truck on Instagram. Reach out to me when we’re about to open. If you still need a job, I’ll give you an interview.”

“Kalle,” she said, extending her hand.

“Melody,” I told her.

“Melody,” she repeated. “I’m not going to forget this. You’ll be hearing from me.”

“I look forward to it,” I told her, fully expecting her enthusiasm to wane in the coming months. But, in case it didn’t, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to have her share some of her energy and excitement. Assuming, of course, that she could cook as well as she said she could.

“I’m going to look around for some other ingredients,” I told her, “but if you could hold onto three jackfruits for me, I’ll be back.”

“With pleasure, Melody,” she said, saluting me as I walked away.

* * *

I took my baskets of jackfruit, tortillas, garlic, tomatoes, onions, jalapeños, cumin, sugar, and chilis and brought them back to Kiefer’s apartment. From there, I put in my earbuds, turned on a Dallas-based band called Old 97’s as loud as I could tolerate, and got to cooking.

Granted, I was somewhat limited. Kiefer had a typical Los Angeles kitchen, which is to say it was small, and a typical bachelor’s ability to organize his pots and pans within the cabinets, which is to say that it was completely nonsensical.

Still, the joy of being back in my element was enough to push me through whatever difficulties I faced.

For me, cooking was a kind of dance, which is why it was essential to listen to music and drown out the rest of the world. I needed supreme focus in order to make sure I was giving every ingredient the attention it deserved. I ended up in what I referred to as “the zone,” a place where anything could be going on around me, and I wouldn’t notice because all of my attention was on the cooking.

As I pureed the tomatoes, garlic, and onion into a sauce, then cut up the jalapeños — the spiciest I could find at the market — and put it all in a pot, which I allowed to simmer. I began to sweat. Kiefer’s air conditioning wasn’t great and I didn’t want to set off the smoke detector, so I opened up a window. But it was pretty warm for March, and I was still in my presentation clothes for the meeting.

And they were hot. Also, I knew myself and my style of cooking. If I wasn’t careful, I was going to stain them. So I took them off until I was down to my skivvies and threw them on the couch, figuring I’d worry about hanging them so they didn’t wrinkle later.

This is what I meant about me being in “the zone.” If I had even a single brain cell not fixated on the task at hand, I might have remembered that I was not in my own kitchen. In fact, I was in the kitchen of an old friend with my coot hanging out. And I was dancing like an idiot to music so loud that I practically made myself deaf in one ear.

It was then that I dropped the spatula on the floor and leaned over to pick it up, while I was twerking my butt so hard along with the alt-country sounds pumped straight into my ears. I did a little shimmy backwards, pretty impressive moves if I do say so myself, into what I assumed was the wall.

It was not the wall.

In fact, I was one thousand percent grinding my pantied-ass right up against the crotch of the man who I had not seen since high school — the guy I’d once called my best friend — and who had been so kind as to let me stay with him.

The second I understood what was going on, I bolted forward and pulled one of the earbuds out, slipping forward and putting my hands forward just in time to stop the fall, watching the earbud fly out of my hand and below the counter. But I hadn't hurt myself, so I allowed myself a half second to breathe a sigh of relief before realizing I had my ass right up in the air downward doggin' it and basically presenting myself to him. I let the rest of my body relax and flopped flat against the floor.

“What the hell have you done to my kitchen?!” he yelled. It was impossible to tell if he was screaming only because he was furious or if he'd been yelling for some time and this was the first time I'd heard him.

“Oh, it's not so bad,” I said, but as I did so, I looked around.

He was right to be angry. It was an absolute disaster in there.

Me and my queso covered unmentionables could've crawled into a hole and died.

CHAPTER 4



*** KIEFER ***

As I was driving home, my phone rang. I glanced over, assuming it was going to be spam or a telemarketer or something about renewing the warranty on my car, but it wasn't. There is almost nobody on the planet who I will actually answer my phone for. My brother, Jackson, is the exception. For one thing, it's possible it could be important (though it almost never is), but for another, it always felt like my obligation as his older brother to be there for him no matter what.

And that's who was calling. I answered right away.

"What's up?" I asked.

It was noisy on his end, like he was driving or something, but he spoke loud enough that I could still mostly get what he was saying. "Not much," he said, "do you have a minute?"

Jackson was usually the one who didn't have a minute to talk. With his day job handling contract law, he was constantly drowning in piles and piles of papers that needed initials, signatures, and dates, along with amendments and edits. It all sounded tremendously tedious to me, but it paid the bills for him and allowed him to be self-sufficient to lead his wild life, jumping from one relationship to the next. It was the kind of dream that every twelve year old boy had, but most men grew out of by the time they reached their early to mid-20s. Jackson was 28.

"I'm stuck on the 10," I told him, holding the phone closer to my ear to drown out the sound of the traffic and honking. "I

have all the time in the world.”

I could have predicted the next four words. In fact, I did. I mouthed them as he said them.

“I need a favor.”

Of course he did. Why else would he be calling? Just to shoot the shit with his older brother? Nah, that’s what texting was for. A phone call meant he needed something.

“Okay,” I said, making sure to stay as neutral as possible lest I commit to something I didn’t want to actually do. Eventually, I was sure I’d end up doing the thing because that’s who I was to him, but I wanted to wait to hear what it was first.

“So I’m seeing this new girl.”

It took all the energy in the world not to let out an audible groan, but I rolled my eyes so hard that he might have heard it. There’s always a new girl. Jackson could never commit. He always fell hard head over heels and then got bored in a month or so. It’s not the way I worked, but it was his journey, and I tried not to judge. At least not too much.

“And she wants to break into the music business.”

“She a singer?”

“Yeah,” Jackson said. They were all singers. And none of them could hit a note to save their lives. But even if they could, auto-tune leveled the playing field.

“Does she play an instrument?” They almost never did. Or if they did, it was a ukulele and maybe some open chords on an acoustic guitar.

“Yeah.”

“Which instruments does she play?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“That wasn’t a yes or no question, Jackson,” I said.

“Not for most people, but it is for her. Name an instrument, she can play it. Keyboard, drums, bass, guitar, violin,

whatever. She's talented as all fuck."

He hadn't named any woodwind or brass instruments — there was no way this girl played the oboe or French horn — but I wasn't going to argue with semantics. The truth was, in my industry, you quickly became at least somewhat familiar with other instruments, but there were usually only one or two that you were comfortable recording with. For me, it was just the bass guitar. I could certainly play rhythm or lead, and often did so in a pinch, but there were better people out there to call.

So just because she could supposedly play all of those instruments, it didn't mean she was playing any of them at a studio level. That's what auditions were for.

"So what do you want from me?" I asked. "I can't get her a job at my studio. We've got our standard roll call of people."

"No, no, no," Jackson said. "I just need you to bring her in and give her a tour, show her what it's like. Maybe give her a few pointers about breaking in. You see, she wants to be in the music industry, but she's not sure she's good enough. But I'm telling you, she is."

Jackson had a tin ear. His assessment of the musical skills of a girl he was enamored with was worth exactly nothing to me.

"Yeah, okay, fine," I said. Professional musicians always take other people's opinions on someone's musical ability with a grain of salt, but it wouldn't be too much trouble to just show her around in between recordings if it'd help my brother get laid. "Have her come by the studio around nine a.m. tomorrow, and I'll give her a tour. What's her name?"

"Natasha Tau," he said. "T-A-U."

"Text it to me," I said. "I'll put her on the guest list and I'll meet her in the lobby. Tell her to bring ID and give her my number. Have her call me if she runs into any trouble."

"Thanks, bro!" Jackson said. "You're the best."

"Take care," I said, and hung up the phone right as I was exiting the freeway, nearly at my apartment complex.

It had been a long day. The one good thing about long days was looking forward to going home and having the apartment to yourself. I could chill out on the couch, watching a Lakers game. In the past, I'd have a beer and some pot along with it, but not anymore. Not having the tools to help me get to my mellow made things a bit more difficult, but I was able to do it so long as I had the space to do so.

It wasn't until I put the key in the lock to my door that I realized I wouldn't have such space. Because I had fallen victim to the curse of a pair of pretty eyes and allowed them to get the better of me — the exact trap that my brother had fallen into. I had surrendered a part of my space and my freedom because that's what pretty eyes could do to me.

When I opened the door. I did not see those pretty eyes because her back was to me.

What I did see was the curve of a perfect ass, in tight cotton underwear, wiggling to music I couldn't hear. I could see the sexy curve of her side, fully exposed below a black bra. And, as my eyes rose higher, I could see the source of that silent music — a pair of earbuds stuck deep in her canals, preventing her from hearing me come in.

And she was an absolutely terrible dancer. Her body flailed back and forth with no concern for any kind of rhythm or self-control. We've all been told to dance like nobody's watching, but for her, that would be terrible advice.

“Melody,” I said, obviously too quietly for her to hear.

Her nearly naked body almost prevented me from seeing the state of the rest of the kitchen. It looked as though a tornado had passed through it. Pots and pans were all over the place, with sauces spilled onto the counters and cut up peppers and onions scattered onto the floor.

“Melody!” I said, with some force behind my voice, all the while, getting angrier for just how bad she'd let it get on the day after I told her she could stay. A full twenty-four hours had passed between when I told her she could live with me and her completely demolishing the place. This wasn't a

simple mess — this was the kind of thing that would require hours and maybe even a cleaning crew to properly fix up.

She still didn't hear me. She dropped a spatula onto the ground and backed towards me with that shaking ass and I took a deep breath, about to scream her name when she did a kind of strange backwards Nicki Minaj bunny hop right into my hardening dick.

But she didn't stop there, she kept on grinding up against me for a few seconds before I shouted, "MELODY!" as loud as I could.

She jumped forward with a scream and took out one of her earbuds, before falling face first into the floor. Next thing I knew, that sweet ass of hers was right up in the air, just begging to be grabbed or spanked. Not that I would have done that, but I wanted to. Either way, following that, she fell flat against the floor, almost like a cartoon character. Her insane klutziness was so adorable. I have never seen someone fall this much in my life. She turned around, and her face turned bright red. She was so embarrassed that the redness moved down her chin onto her neck and even the top part of her chest where her bra struggled to contain those two gorgeous tits of hers with their piercing nipples.

God, they were even better than I remembered them being in high school.

I was furious with her, but at the same time, I wanted to tear what remained of her clothes off and rail her right there on top of the dirty counter, but I contained myself.

"What the hell have you done to my kitchen?!" I screamed and watched her sink in place, instantly feeling bad. I didn't mean to snap like that, but the mixture of a bad day, a strange sexual tension in my pants, and coming home to this horrible mess made me testy. Whatever my excuses may or may not have been, it was an overreaction, and I didn't mean it.

"Oh, it's not so bad," she squeaked in a tone that revealed she didn't believe it. "I guess I sort of lost track of where I was. I'm sorry." Her voice was meek, but loud. I knew exactly what the cause was.

“Did you seriously not hear me?” I asked.

“No.”

I shook my head. “You can’t listen to music that loud,” I told her. “You’re going to damage your hearing.”

“It wasn’t that loud,” she said, again, much louder than she needed to be.

“Melody, you’re practically screaming at me,” I told her. “It’s too loud.”

She looked at her phone on the counter and lowered the volume.

“Thank you,” I said.

All the while, she seemed completely unaware that she was in my kitchen, just a few thin layers away from being completely nude. This was the second time in so many days that I’d seen her with her shirt off.

I didn’t mind, but it also felt wrong. Just as it had back at the vintage store. Like I was staring at someone who I hadn’t even taken out to earn that stare. And it was impossible not to stare.

“Do you want to put something on?” I asked.

“Not really,” she said. Here she’d found a bit more confidence. “Are you telling me to put something on?”

“Kind of,” I said.

She looked down at herself and back up at me. “They’re just tits, Kiefer. You’ve seen them before.”

“Yeah, well, that was an accident, too. You fell out of the changing room.”

She laughed at that. “I wasn’t talking about that.”

I pretended not to know what she was talking about. She and I had never dated, not actually, but the way high school parties worked, our bodies weren’t exactly new territory for either of us.

There was the truth or dare game where we made out, and there was the other one where the boys got the girls to flash them so long as the boys returned the favor.

“How about instead of me putting something on, you get down to your undies with me?” she asked. “Free yourself from the tyranny of clothing!”

I couldn't tell if she was kidding or not. It sounded ridiculous, but there was no wink or anything to indicate that she understood how silly what she was saying was. And while Melody was a lot of things, subtle was not one of them. I didn't remember her humor being particularly dry.

“I dare you,” she said. “How about that? Or are you going to be chickenshit and take truth?”

So maybe she was exaggerating for effect, but she was seriously telling me to strip down to my underwear with her.

“I'm not playing a game,” I told her.

“The bad boy Kiefer I know would never say no to a dare,” she said. And she was right. Back in high school, the easiest way to get me to do anything was to dare me.

But we weren't in high school anymore.

“I'm a different Kiefer now.”

The smile dropped from her face.

“Here,” she said, “at least try some of this queso.”

She took a pot with a wooden spoon in it and walked right up to me, practically shoving it into my mouth, all the while pushing her body very close to mine.

“I don't want to taste whatever fake cardboard cheese you're making.”

“Oh, quit being a baby,” she said, pushing her body into mine and the spoon into my mouth.

I felt it in my loins. She was making me hard. Harder than I'd been in a long time.

I lightly pushed her away.

“Okay, that’s actually not bad,” I said.

“See?” she asked. “Not cardboard after all.”

“I need to go practice,” I told her. I needed to get out of this situation fast. But the practice part wasn’t a lie. There was an avant-garde jazz pianist coming in to use our recording space tomorrow, and he needed a bassist as a ringer. I’m a rock bassist, but I have enough basic knowledge of jazz language to keep up so long as I’m prepared. The problem was I wasn’t prepared.

“Uh huh,” she said, “so this isn’t just an excuse to get out of here before I see your boner?”

“I don’t have a boner,” I said. That, of course, was a lie. And she knew it was a lie, so I didn’t wait for her to call me out. I just turned around and walked to my room, closing the door behind me like a giant weirdo.

I was hoping for a bit of serenity in my own room, but there was still the awareness of Melody in the other room, dancing around in her underwear and daring me to take off my clothes. I knew this girl was trouble.

Meanwhile, my raging hard-on refused to relent, which made it particularly difficult to focus on practicing, but I pulled out my bass, and plugged it into the amp. I was about to turn it on and start practicing when I heard some minor commotion coming from behind my closed door. Nothing alarming, just distracting. I could work through noise, but it was the source of the noise that was giving me trouble.

I needed something that would calm me down and chill me out. Drugs were off the table, so that left only one option to get the job done and get it done quickly.

In my desk drawer, I kept a small bottle of lube. I grabbed that bottle along with a couple of tissues and got to work.

It was impossible to get the image of Melody in her underwear out of my mind, especially with that ass of hers so plump and beautiful in her panties, rubbing up against me. That wasn’t the kind of thing one just forgot. Instead of trying

to fight it, I was going to focus on it and hope the problem took care of itself.

CHAPTER 5



MELODY

What was I even doing? I was behaving like I was back in high school, except I'd never have had the cajones to try to get Kiefer to strip like I just did. It's as if I had the horniness of a teenager with the confidence of a woman in her late 20s. Which, you know, normally would have been great, but I needed a place to stay and, more importantly, a place to cook. And with the state of the kitchen (it was pretty bad — but my cooking is my art, and I treat my canvas like Pollock did), I was very much on thin ice, which I was afraid was already cracking underneath my feet.

When I finished my first batch of tacos, three different types. Some had the jackfruit shredded into imitation pork, others had a tofu chicken-like substitute I'd made, and the last with just standard veggies by themselves. I tried one of each and thought they were just fine, perhaps even worse than that. But I could be my own harshest critic, and I was curious about what an Angelino would think. Kiefer may not have been native, but he'd been out here long enough to qualify. And I needed some harsh feedback. If the grumpy guy whose kitchen I destroyed making the tacos could enjoy them, then anybody could.

I put a trio of the tacos, one of each, on a plate I grabbed from the cabinet and arranged them nicely and symmetrically. After all, most people don't realize it, but the first taste you get of any meal is with your eyes. Especially now with social media and online reviews. The first thing any customer looks

at is the pictures, and if my food didn't photograph well, then nobody would even try it.

I ran into the bedroom I'd taken over and put on a night shirt and sweatpants. Obviously, I was making him uncomfortable with my body, and while I almost never wore clothes in my own apartment, it was in his space and I wanted to get in his good graces. The best plan was to do what I could to follow his rules.

With all the bravery I could muster, I grabbed the taco plate and knocked on Kiefer's bedroom door. There was no response even after a few seconds, and that concerned me. What if he was truly so mad at me that he was just ignoring me?

No, I told myself. He said he was practicing. Since I didn't hear any thick bass notes coming through the walls, he must have been wearing headphones and couldn't hear me. Just like I couldn't hear him when he approached me in the kitchen. Maybe I'd lecture him about the volume of his headphones just like he lectured me.

Here goes nothing, I thought.

I opened the door and looked to the back of the room, but he wasn't there. Instead, he was right next to me, sitting at the desk by the doorway, smelling of lube and holding his throbbing dick in his hands.

"Oh my God!" I said out loud and put the plate down on his desk. "Here!"

In putting the plate down, one of the tacos rolled off the edge, right onto his cock, covering it (or at least part of it — these tortillas weren't nearly large enough to cover what he was handling). I literally tacoed his dick...

I avoided eye contact and slowly backed up out of the room like a bank thief.

"I'm so sorry!" I said, completely frazzled.

Then just to make things even more awkward, because that was a Melody special, before closing the door I bowed in

forgiveness like someone would do to the Pope. Then I slammed the door.

“Could you knock next time?” he asked from behind the door.

“I did knock!”

“Then knock louder!”

“Okay,” I said, trying to get the image of him jerking it out of my head. “I’m so so sorry.” But honestly, I wasn’t that sorry. Like I was and genuinely felt bad, but there was also a part of me (okay, nearly all of me) which was thrilled at the sight that I could forever keep in my memory of what my high school crush looked like while pleasuring himself.

I wished I had stayed in just a half second longer to see the expression on his face. Not after I’d startled him, but before that. Before he realized I was in the room. If such a time even existed.

My mind was rambling to itself and I was absolutely speechless.

“I’m sorry!” I said as if those were the only two words I knew anymore.

“I know,” he said. “I heard you the first three dozen times.”

“What did you need?” he asked.

“It’s not important,” I said. “It can wait. Do you need a minute? I could come back later.”

Before he could respond I realized what I’d said.

“Well, I don’t mean a literal minute,” I said. “I didn’t mean to insinuate that you... I mean, take all the time you need to...”

“It’s fine,” he said in a tone that indicated it wasn’t fine.

“I’m just—” I was about to tell him I was sorry again, but stopped myself. “I feel so bad. I didn’t mean to. Can I make it up to—?”

I put my hands over my mouth in embarrassment.

“Not like that, I mean,” I said, but of course, I would have made it up to him like that if he’d asked me to.

“You can make it up to me by pretending it never happened,” he said, opening the door.

He was wearing clothes again so I could focus on regaining a tiny bit of composure.

“Okay,” I said.

He sighed. “Okay.”

There was a solid five seconds of silence and awkward staring before he finally said:

“So, you want me to try these tacos?”

“Yeah,” I said. “There’s jackfruit, tofu, and veggie. Well, just tofu and veggie now. Unless you want to eat the jackfruit taco that was...”

“On my dick?”

I stopped myself from giggling at that. Maybe I’d call that taco the Jacking Jack Fruit after this as a private joke to myself.

“Yeah, you don’t need to eat that one,” I said. “Unless you want to. Have you had jackfruit before? It’s really good.”

“I’ll try the other two.”

I waited patiently as he tried them, wishing I could see the look on his face. What if he told me they were good just to be kind and he thought they were disgusting?

“Okay, first one,” he said. “Straight veggie. It’s... it’s better than what we had the other night.”

I was hoping for a follow up, but it never came. “The other one, same deal. Definitely better than the competition.”

“But it’s good on its own, right?” I asked.

“It’s good for vegan, I guess,” he said.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“You want the truth?” he asked.

“The brutal, honest truth,” I said. “If you’ve got it.”

“They’re bland as hell.”

Ugh, I knew it. It wasn’t just my Tejano taste buds. Kiefer wasn’t going for them, either.

“Where did you get the supplies?” he asked.

“It was a farmer’s market in Santa Monica.”

“Santa Monica?” he asked. “For Mexican food? That’s practically a crime. No, you want to go to Pershing Square. That’s where you get the authentic stuff.”

I ran back to my room to grab a pad and pencil, where I scribbled down the information.

“They’re not open now, are they?”

“Nah,” he said, “LA’s a big city, but everything but the bars close down by 9 or 10. Sometimes the movie theaters are open a bit later, but that’s it.”

“Tomorrow then,” I said. “In the meantime, let me take care of your kitchen.”

My heart sunk as I said the words. It truly was like a war zone in there. I wasn’t about to leave a mess, though. I created the disaster, so I was going to fix it. Starting with the counters, I removed all the cut up veggies and tossed them into the trash. When I turned around, I saw Kiefer had brought a broom and was getting to work on the floor.

“I’ve got it,” I said. “Seriously.”

“Nah, I’ll help,” he said. “Just this once, though.”

“You don’t have to,” I insisted.

“I shouldn’t have snapped at you like I did,” he said. “Consider this an apology. Sometimes I have a bit of a short temper. I’ll help you clean up. But just this once.”

“Okay,” I said, “but don’t start with the floors. Start from the top going down. Otherwise, we’ll knock more stuff onto the floor in the process and just have to do them over again.”

He moved over to the sink and began running the water.

“You know,” he said, “it’s funny because it seems so obvious, but nobody’d ever taught me that before. I sort of taught myself how to clean once I moved out. That’s the problem with self-teaching. You miss the obvious lessons.”

“You’re self-taught on bass, though, right?”

I seem to remember him saying that back in high school when we were close friends.

“Kind of,” he told me. “You know, everybody thinks it’s about the fingers, but it’s not. Playing an instrument, I mean. Your fingers will figure out what to do and where to go if you’ve got the ear and the heart for it.”

Looking over at his hands as he scrubbed the dishes, there was a clear dexterity to them. A precision and muscularity that most men didn’t have. He was the first man I had ever noticed something that detailed about. I knew what my heart wanted and what I wanted his fingers to do.

As I handed a pot over to him so he could scrub it, I intentionally brushed against that hand, hoping that it was light enough that he either didn’t notice or assumed it was intentional. It did so much for me, that brief skin on skin contact, but at the same time it wasn’t nearly enough.

That image of him in the other room touching himself wasn’t about to leave my mind anytime soon. Or at all. And I needed to take care of it before I did something stupid. Well, stupid but fun. And probably worth it.

Who was I kidding? It would definitely be worth it. Feeling his body below me as I rode on top of his cock, which was hitting me right where it needed to. I shivered with pleasure just thinking about it.

“You cold?”

“No,” I said. “Someone must have walked over my grave or something.”

But it would still be stupid. Very stupid.

“Anyway,” he said, “my dad taught me how to play standard acoustic guitar. How to tune it and stuff. My mom signed me up for lessons, but I didn’t want to play the classical exercises my teacher was giving me. Instead, I’d figured stuff out from listening to it on my iPod. But it was the bass lines that I thought were the coolest things and I was basically teaching myself to play bass on the nylon six string. My parents got me a real bass guitar when I turned 14 and the rest, as they say, is history.”

“So I guess your parents supported you?”

“It took time,” he said. “They didn’t really get the indie rock stuff I was listening to. Spoon, Hole, Smashing Pumpkins. That sort of thing. They wanted me to be more folksy like Arlo Guthrie or Willie Nelson. Or maybe Johnny Cash. But when they saw me play with the band, I think that was what finally convinced them that even if they didn’t get what I was doing, I had talent, and other people were enjoying it.”

“Yeah,” I told him. “My dad never really got what I was going for with the cooking. He just wanted me to be running a business and, even after trying the food, didn’t really get it. He’s the kind of guy who saw food as a way to refuel and just wanted something quick most of the time so he could move on with his day. Even when I had some success, it was never enough for him. He didn’t want me coming out here. To him, anywhere outside the Texan border might as well be Mars.”

Kiefer finished scrubbing the pot and put it on the drying rack. “Yeah,” he said, “but the good news is you’re your own person and you get to do what you want to do.”

“I’m just worried that he’s right,” I said, “that I won’t be able to make it on my own without his support.”

To that, Kiefer just shrugged. “Maybe he is,” he said, “but the only way to know for sure is to try. If you fail, you fail, but at least you’ll know.”

“Do you think I’m going to fail?”

He smiled at me. “Go to Pershing Square and get better ingredients. Then ask me again.”

There was a beat or two of silence, where I could see he was thinking.

“The queso was good, though,” he said. “You’ve at least got some potential.”

He flashed me that Kiefer bad boy smile and wink I remembered so well. It sent me right back to high school and our electric friendship, it was filling my stomach with butterflies and TKO-ing my panties in the process. And, in that moment, I knew my heart didn’t stand a chance.

CHAPTER 6



*** KIEFER ***

By the time I showed up at the studio, Jackson and Natasha were already in the lobby waiting for me. They immediately stood to attention.

I hadn't expected to see Jackson there, but it was no problem. Any excuse to spend time with him was okay by me. As a lawyer, he worked long hours, but those hours were pretty flexible so long as he wasn't actively meeting with clients. It wasn't unusual for him to step out of the office and go to the movies if things were quiet. I imagine part of the reason he showed up was that he was simply bored and looking for something to do.

I put my bass down on the ground and gave my brother a hug.

"Hey, man," Jackson said. "Thanks for doing this. This is my, umm, friend, Natasha."

"Pleasure to meet you," she shook my hand energetically. She was a tiny little thing, barely more than five feet tall next to my brother's 6'1" frame, with magenta highlights in her black hair.

But what she lacked in size, she made up in enthusiasm. The girl was almost like a cartoon character with her eagerness — I half expected her to bounce off the walls. She must have realized it, too, as she took her hand away from me and held it in place with her other, folding her body inward and becoming as still as a statue.

“Sorry,” she said, “I guess I’m excited. And maybe I shouldn’t have had the double caff latte before coming here.”

I put on my best smile.

“It can be tough for us, too,” I said. “Especially within a session. When you get a bunch of good musicians in here and we really start cooking, man, I tell you, it’s a good thing we’ve got that click track to keep us on tempo. I’m always having to slow myself down.”

“Are you recording today?” Natasha asked, gesturing to the bass case.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, and my nerves lit up. I remembered that I hadn’t gotten around to practicing for the session and this was a session that I really needed to practice for.

“It’s for a jazz pianist named Peterson Floyd.”

Natasha nearly squealed with excitement from that. “Oh my God, I love him!”

“You’ve heard his music before?” I asked. I tried not to make it sound condescending, but there was no way to avoid it. Floyd was not well-known outside of the inner circles of musicians, but within them, he was absolutely revered. This was not casual listening music. It required deep concentration to fully appreciate the magic of what he was doing and the sheer genius of what he managed to squeeze out of a musical alphabet built around only 12 tones.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I did a few transcriptions of some of his pieces for fun. He loves those nontraditional time signatures, doesn’t he?”

Floyd was inspired by Dave Brubeck, an old-time pianist who loved playing in unusual grooves. Very intellectual stuff. What Floyd was known for was loosening it up a bit and bringing the playfulness of someone like Art Tatum back into it.

“He sure does,” I told her and began to sweat. If this girl was doing transcriptions of Floyd’s music — meaning she listened to the recordings and could write down what exactly she was hearing — she was no amateur. Even musicians with

the best of ears would stumble during some of Floyd's faster solos. The way Natasha made it sound, it was just a fun exercise for her.

"Well, shall we?" I asked and gestured towards the inside of the studio.

* * *

I wished that I had told Natasha to come any other day. This was not a recording where I could stand people watching me. I knew I was on edge ever since last night when I snapped at Melody, and the more I thought about it, the worse I felt. Every time I thought I'd gotten past the worst of the side effects related to quitting all those substances cold turkey, I'd be reminded that there was still an addict deep inside me who needed pills and alcohol to function like a normal human being.

I don't remember ever being that short-tempered before. The issue wasn't that I was upset with her or even that I overreacted — though I did — but that I, for a brief moment, didn't feel in control of myself or my actions. It was somewhat ironic that it took being in an altered state in order to feel in control of myself, but it was also an illusion.

Sober, I could tell that I overreacted, but Wendy was constantly telling me about incidents I didn't remember that didn't fully sound like myself. She wasn't making them up — in many cases, she had the text messages to prove it. High or sober, I wasn't in control of myself all the time, but the latter forced me to deal with the consequences and have an awareness of my actions.

It made it nearly impossible to get out of my head.

And it made it nearly impossible to perform.

Ernie, the owner of Cleopatra Records and the man producing this particular album, must have noticed as he sat in the booth, fiddling with the dials.

“Let’s give it another try,” he said, preparing us for the sixth take on the track.

Unlike pop music, jazz was a live genre, and, as such, it felt like cheating to edit different takes together or correct things in post. We’d record the track from beginning to end and, if there were tiny mistakes, that’d be part of the charm.

To my surprise, I managed to keep up okay with Peterson, stumbling a little during the first two takes, but staying on beat and on pitch with him in the third (which was especially impressive as we jumped back and forth between 5/4 and 7/8 time signatures in rapid succession). But just because I was keeping up mechanically didn’t mean I was producing music.

Ernie signaled the technician to start the click track and counted us in. Again, Peterson wowed me with his tone and the ease he was playing these nearly impossible tunes. It just sounded perfect. And while a casual listener might have been impressed with the speed I was playing along with him on my bass, it just wasn’t right. It felt off, the equivalent of a clunky accent from someone who wasn’t completely familiar with the language.

“Let’s cut it there,” Ernie said. “Kiefer, you want to join me in the booth?”

I removed my monitor headphones and went back to the booth, where Jackson and Natasha were sitting quietly and off to the side.

“You’re doing really great,” Jackson said to me. Natasha just smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

I contemplated asking the two of them to wait outside. This was the part where Ernie was going to be cruel but direct with me and it could potentially be embarrassing, but this was part of the experience, and I figured Natasha could get something out of it.

“It’s all technically correct,” Ernie said, which was pretty close to a compliment from him.

“I know,” I said. “It’s just not musical.”

“It’s like it’s coming from a robot,” he said. “You’re hitting the notes, but you’re not exactly in the pocket. You need to loosen it up a bit and get out of your head. You used to be so good at this.”

I knew it. And I knew the reason, and so did Ernie.

There was a cocktail of pills I used to take before a recording session like this one. A combination of uppers like Adderall with relaxants like Xanax along with a THC gummy to get my mellow just right without taking away my focus. It worked like gangbusters, but made me yoyo back and forth between being so chill that nobody could even have a conversation with me and being an egotistical prick, or so others told me. In other words, it made me a great musician and a shitty human being.

Those pills were my life for so long until they took it all away. If it wasn’t for those pills and other drugs like them, I wouldn’t have had that fight with Wendy, and she probably would have still been there with me. In the months since her death, I’d gotten past the idea that I had killed her — something I told myself again and again — but I still couldn’t ignore the fact that I was responsible for her death.

“Do you need... help?” he asked, euphemistically. He wasn’t about to out me as a druggie in front of my family, though Jackson knew as much about my bad habits as anyone, but Ernie needed to get his recording done. Time was money and the longer we took to record, the more expensive this niche record would become.

“You know I can’t accept it,” I told him. “Let’s just call in a ringer.”

Ernie looked disappointed.

“You know, the budget...” he trailed off. “It would just be a lot easier for the studio if we could get this right. Right here, today.”

Jackson and Natasha were whispering to each other until she said, “No, Jackson.”

“Come on,” Jackson said, “at least offer.”

“What is it?” Ernie asked, frustrated.

Jackson started to speak but Natasha interrupted him, “It’s nothing.”

Jackson gently pushed her away. “Natasha can play the part.”

I looked at Jackson skeptically, but he was convinced that what he was saying was the truth. And, for the pushback he was getting from Natasha, none of it sounded like her saying he was wrong.

Ernie took a drag on his e-cig and looked Natasha up and down. “What are you, 14?”

“I’m 23,” she said, slightly indignant.

Ernie looked at me, giving me a look as if to ask, “Can you believe this chick?”

“What is it?” she asked. Her voice got a little bit louder and a little bit faster. “Is it because I’m young? Because Charlie Parker was four years younger than me when he developed Bebop.

“Or maybe it’s because I’m a woman. Like Sister Rosetta Tharpe. You know, the one who invented a little thing called rock and roll?”

Jackson leaned over to me and whispered. “She gets real pissed off when people judge her like this.”

“I’d never say that,” Ernie said. “I’d never say women can’t play music and don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m Chinese, then,” Natasha said, “and, you know, maybe you’d have a point there. There really hasn’t been a major Chinese jazz artist. Then again, maybe I’ll be the first.”

Reality must have caught up to her because her face immediately turned red. “Oh my God,” she said. “I’m sorry. I got a little carried away there.”

Ernie laughed and looked at Jackson then back at Natasha. “Girl, you have what my grandpa used to call ‘moxie.’”

Jackson nudged me as if to say, “Let her do it.”

Seriously? I thought, and he nodded in response.

I sighed and looked at Natasha with sincerity. “You think you can do it?” I asked.

The confidence of her speech seemed to have faded away as she took a step back. “I mean, if you couldn’t do it, you’re the professional, so maybe—”

I cut her off by waving my hands. “I have no ego,” I told her. “Do you really think you can play the part?”

A sly smile crept across her face, and she nodded.

“Let her give it a shot, Ernie,” I said.

Ernie raised his hands in defeat. “Go ahead.” He gestured towards the studio.

“You need to warm up or anything?” I asked.

Jackson stopped me. “Let her do her thing.”

“Lead sheet’s on the stand,” I said.

“The lead sheet’s up here,” she said, pointing to her head. “I can use your bass?”

“It’s all yours.”

She left and walked into the recording area, then put on the monitor headset. With Peterson, she checked the instrument’s tuning and indicated that she wanted a louder volume coming in through her headphones.

“You want me to actually record this?” Ernie asked.

“It’s digital,” I said. “Worst comes to worst, just delete it.”

Truthfully, at that moment, I didn’t know what to expect, but I told Jackson I’d help him out, and this was me giving his friend an opportunity. Maybe a once in a lifetime opportunity. She said she was ready and so I took her word for it. If anything, she’d at least demonstrate how challenging the part was so Ernie could understand why I was struggling so badly with it.

But she didn’t do that.

No, the click track counted the two of them in and Natasha didn't just keep up, she was pushing him forward. She was sending him musical questions that he was responding to right away. None of the recordings I'd done so far had lasted more than five minutes. Natasha and Peterson kept going for a full twenty minutes. All the while, the three of us in the control room watched with awe at this private concert we were getting.

The expressions on both the musicians' faces were pure joy, as if they'd forgotten we were even recording and had completely immersed themselves in the sound, effectively sending each other into a state of consciousness that I'd never been able to reach without narcotics.

When the piece finally ended — after both Natasha and Peterson took multiple refrains and allowed each other some of the most imaginative solos I'd ever heard in my life — all we could do was stare in silence, completely speechless.

Natasha removed her headset and looked over at us.

“How was that?” she asked. It wasn't in a showing off sort of way. It was genuine, like she wasn't even there to witness it. Because she wasn't. She was in that musical zone with Peterson. “Did I sound alright?”

“What's her name?” Ernie asked.

“Natasha Tau,” Jackson told him.

Ernie nodded and removed the vape from his mouth as he leaned into the microphone.

“Natasha,” he said, “I've never used the word ‘perfect’ to describe anything in the history of this studio.” He paused. “And I'm not about to.”

I could see the look of trepidation on Natasha's face as she waited for the follow-up.

“Because that was not perfect. Not even close.”

Her shoulders fell, and her expression dropped along with them.

“No,” Ernie said, “that was so good, it left perfection in the dust.”

And she absolutely beamed at that.

I wanted to be happy for her, and a part of me was. But there was a sense of disappointment in myself. I had gotten to a place where I thought I was pretty good. But next to her, I looked like a grade schooler fiddling around for the first time on a recorder.

For the first time in my musical career, I felt obsolete.

CHAPTER 7



MELODY

As I worked on the salsa that day, I made a deal with myself: I would try to be who I wanted to be and what I thought everyone else wanted me to be. And while that was certainly a great life lesson, I meant it specifically for the restaurant. I would never understand Los Angeles sensibilities, so rather than try to adapt my recipes for them, I would make the food I liked and hope that they'd adapt to the Central Texas cuisine, which would be as authentic as I could possibly get it using West Coast ingredients.

While I thought this would be freeing, it forced me to go up against my harshest critic: myself. The night before, I had put some food together, thinking that Kiefer had been gone from Texas for a while now, and it was good enough for California. That was wrong. It was condescending. And it was lazy. I was going to provide my customers with the most flavorful food I could create and, if it was too spicy for them, well, too bad!

The salsa I was making was getting close, but wasn't quite right. I'd been spending all day on it, and it was still missing that something to give it just the right amount of kick. While trying to come up with what I needed to add, Kiefer came in through the door and, with him, his brother, Jackson, who I hadn't seen since high school either, and a tiny little thing with a great big smile who introduced herself as Natasha.

"So what happened today?" I asked her after the formal introductions. It was clear she was just exploding with information to share.

“I thought I was just going in for a tour,” Natasha said. “I walked away with a job.”

Jackson was overjoyed, but Kiefer looked absolutely drained, like he was ready to go to bed and sleep for days, if not weeks. It’s something that was noticeably different about him now versus in high school. Sure, he had his emo elements, but there was a hope and optimism in him that had vanished during the decade we’d been apart, and its absence left a dark hole in him that I dearly missed as a friend.

“A job?” I asked her.

“Yep!” she said. “He offered the job and was going to call someone to put the contract together, but Jackson was able to have his office draft one up in an hour, and Ernie and I signed it before the end of the day. I’ll start right away as a studio musician, just like Kiefer. But now Kiefer can spend more time on orchestration and production.”

“That’s great!” I said, and gave this stranger a hug. She jumped up and hugged me back with so much energy that I nearly fell over.

“I imagine you came back here to celebrate,” I said, then looked at the kitchen, which was as much a disaster as it was the night before, if not more so. I’d managed to undo all the cleaning that Kiefer and I had taken care of and learned nothing from it. Oh well, it was just a mess. Messes were fixable issues. I’d be able to clean it back up and get it as good as new.

Still, it didn’t make the best impression.

“Sorry about the mess,” I told her.

“It’s no problem,” Jackson said. “We weren’t planning on staying long. Kiefer said to come back here and park so we could all carpool together somewhere together.”

“There’s this place out in West Hollywood called Raindrop,” Natasha said. “It’s super hip.”

Kiefer shook his head. “You know, I didn’t get much sleep last night. Maybe we could celebrate this weekend.”

He was making excuses, and I would not allow it. That inner grump I couldn't recognize was coming out and keeping us from spending time with Kiefer.

"What happened to the Kiefer I used to know?" I asked.

"Right?" Jackson asked.

Kiefer was not happy about that. "Give me a break," he said, then turned towards Jackson with a sneer.

Jackson put his arms up in the air in defeat. "Sorry, sorry."

I wasn't going to be defeated so easily. "Come on," I said to Kiefer, grabbing his arm and pulling him back. "Live a little. We'll go for a little bit and if you don't like it, you can head back."

Kiefer looked towards the kitchen and I stopped him, putting my body between him and the mess, hiding it behind me.

"I promise to clean the kitchen before I go to bed, okay?"

Kiefer looked to me and his brother and Natasha, then sighed. "Fine," he said. "Let me just change shirts."

* * *

It was less than two minutes after we arrived, and I already regretted encouraging Kiefer to join us. Well, that's not exactly right. I regretted inviting this soul-sucking party pooper who was living inside Kiefer's skin. Lit underneath the blacklight and strobes, he stood up straight with his hands folded in front of him, so as to take up as little space as possible, and had the sourest look on his face I'd ever seen.

"You know," I said to him, "you can at least try to have fun."

The glare he gave me shut me up real quick.

And, confession time, it also gave me kind of a naughty thrill.

Yeah, he was being grumpy and kind of an asshole, making it harder for us to enjoy ourselves, but there was a sexiness to it that was almost frustrating. In an emo teenage angst kind of way. The problem with hot people is that they can't not be hot, no matter what they do. Even when Kiefer was a giant dick-sour apple, I found him powerfully attractive.

I didn't know if I wanted to yell at him or make out with him.

"I'm going to run to the bathroom," I told him.

"I'll join you," Natasha said, picking up on my cue, and the two of us raced towards the ladies room.

The second the door closed, I asked "Do you know what his deal is?"

She shook her head. "I was going to ask you the same," she said. "I'm worried it's about me."

"Oh, I'm sure it's not."

"No, seriously," she said. "Like you should have seen the look on his face in the studio when everyone else was congratulating him. He was really upset."

"No," I told her. "He's been in a mood since I've been here." But it did seem like it was worse today.

"So what's your deal," Natasha asked. "Are you two like...?"

"We're old friends."

"Benefits?"

I shook my head. "No, just friends." I laughed. "I don't mean to toot my own horn, but no man I'm blowing would ever look that miserable."

Natasha laughed at that.

A young, 20-something girl was adjusting her make-up in the mirror and chimed in. "That insanely sexy tattooed 'you-look-like-you're-such-bad-news-you-must-be-good-for-me' guy, he's not with you?" She said with a big smile.

This girl was roughly college-aged, if I had to guess, and may have even gotten into the club with a fake ID. She was too young for Kiefer, but I held back my jealous instincts. He was a friend. I wasn't about to cockblock him. Although, all things being equal, if somebody was going to fuck the happy back into him, I'd rather it be me.

"We're not dating," I told her.

"So you wouldn't mind if I...?"

It was hard to imagine him being too receptive to the flirting of anyone in the mood he was in, but it probably would have been good for him.

"No," I told her, which was at least a partial lie. I did mind, even if I wished I hadn't. "Go for it. He's all yours."

There was a bit of fire inside of me. Sure, I wanted him to be happy, but rationally, it was a bad idea to suggest I be the one to do it. Yeah, I was flirting pretty hard the other day in my underwear with him, but that was just me in one of my moods, under the influence of whatever hot masculine pheromones he emitted. Would I have gone to bed with him if he'd been receptive? 100% yes. But that could make things awkward between us and with my needing a place to stay, it was best if I didn't press it.

Or at least that's what my brain was telling me. My body wasn't so sure.

The three of us left the bathroom together and little Miss Sorority didn't waste any time. She shuffled her way over to Kiefer, dancing along with the music. With her back to him, I saw her pop something into her mouth and then push her back against his in the process of dancing.

Kiefer turned around, and she was smiling at him. He just rolled his eyes and stepped away. The girl must have thought he was playing hard to get because she pulled the same maneuver again, this time saying, "Hi," and waving in a cutesy sort of way. "I'm Tar, want to do a shot?"

This girl was pretty. Very pretty in an obvious, traditional sort of way. Bleach blonde hair and big lashes. It would have

been judgmental for me to assume she had a freshly inked tattoo on her lower back, but if somebody offered, I'd bet money that she did. And after winning that bet, I would have gone double or nothing that it was of a butterfly.

And, from her persistence, I could only imagine that she wasn't very used to rejection.

Kiefer gave what looked like a half-assed attempt at a polite smile and said, "Not interested." Then walked away.

I couldn't believe it. This girl was practically throwing herself at Kiefer cooch-first, and he was pushing her away. What was his deal? Did he just not want to be happy? Like at all?

I ran after him.

"Kiefer, what is going on?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm going home."

I followed after him as he walked towards the exit.

"You're being a tight ass," I said. "You know that girl would blow you no strings attached, right?"

"She's not my type."

"Look at her," I said. "She's everyone's type. Or are you not into hot girls? You'd rather just jerk off in your room?"

He glared at me. I was supposed to forget about that or at least pretend to. "She's too young for me," he said. "I'm not looking for a hook-up. And I've got work in the morning. I'm a grown up."

"Like I said: tight ass."

"You like her so much," he said, "you take her home. I don't give a fuck. See you in the morning."

With that, he bolted out of the club, letting the door slam behind him.

"Fine," I said to the door. "Have a good night."

I turned around and Jackson and Natasha were standing there. Jackson especially looked shocked.

“What’s up with him?” I asked.

“You okay?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah.” My voice was louder than it needed to be, and I was obviously shaken by what had just happened.

Jackson gestured to Natasha to wait a second and took me to a quieter corner of the club. “Look, I hate to do this,” he said, “but I would really appreciate it if you could go after him and keep an eye on him.”

“Why?” I asked.

He shook his head. “When he’s ready to tell you, he’ll tell you, but you’re not going to hear it from me. Just trust me. He needs you right now.”

“But he was running away from me?”

“He doesn’t realize that he needs you, but he gets like this sometimes.”

It felt like a lot to push on someone who Jackson hadn’t seen in ten years. “Can’t you go after him? He’s your brother.”

“Kiefer and I are close,” he said, “and that’s how I know it’s not me that he needs right now. I could talk to him, but he’s not going to listen, and I’d just make things worse. He puts up these walls, and he’ll only reinforce them if I try to knock them down.”

He gave me a stern, serious look. “But I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He’s not able to keep them up for long when you’re around. Go on, you can do it.”

It was a frustrating thing about men. They were always on high alert around other men, particularly the other men in their lives they were closest to. It wasn’t just with Kiefer, I’d noticed it with other guys. Even guys who I didn’t think I was especially close to, they’d tell me things they hadn’t dared tell their closest friends. I remembered asking my therapist about it back in Austin, who told me it was obvious what was going on: I was a good listener. People can sense someone who’s genuinely listening to them and when they do, they’re more

willing to talk. My therapist recognized it because it was the very thing that made her so good at her job.

And listening wasn't just about listening to words, it was about listening to what wasn't being said and what was being insinuated. From the tone of Jackson's voice, I could sense serious urgency. This wasn't about Kiefer having a bad night. This was potentially about saving his life.

"Okay," I said. "You and Natasha'll be okay?"

"Yeah, we'll get an Uber home."

I nodded. "It was nice seeing you again."

"You too."

I gave him a quick hug and hurried out the door of the club, hoping I could make it to Kiefer before it was too late.

CHAPTER 8



KIEFER

I was angry. So angry that I wanted to go find a punching bag somewhere and just pound the shit out of it. And I'd never boxed a day in my life. I was a musician who expressed himself on his instrument. Except I rarely got the chance to do that anymore because I was always supposed to be playing what somebody else wanted me to play for someone else's song. I was practically a machine.

And earlier that week I'd learned I was the old version of a machine. An old phone ready to be replaced by the newest model.

None of that was what I was actually mad about. What I was mad about was that Wendy was gone, and no matter what I did and no matter how much I tried to make myself the person she needed me to be, she'd never be coming back, and temptation was everywhere.

I got to my car and was about to go inside when I heard the rapid sound of footsteps on concrete. For a split second, I thought I was about to be attacked, but when I turned around I saw that it was just Melody, out of breath and running towards me.

"Hi!" she said as if nothing had happened, her awkward smile broad across her face just the way I remembered it being back in high school. The woman never outgrew her awkward teenage phase, but it fit her. Truthfully, it was always her goofiness that made her so sexy.

“You don’t want to stay?” I asked. It was a question hiding the statement that I actually wanted to say, but couldn’t because it would sound rude: I didn’t want her to stay. Or, rather, I didn’t want her to be with me.

What I needed was some time to myself to cool off. Too much had happened that day and, sure, if I was a different guy, maybe I would have taken that girl in the club up on her offer and fucked her all night and into the morning in the hopes it would make me feel better. But that never worked. It always left me feeling emptier and more alone when it was over.

The thing about being sober is that everything was sobering, and nothing made it better. It was harder to hide behind the delusion of a clouded mind when you had to face reality every step of the way. And the most horrible fact of it all is that you’d remember your mistakes the next day.

“Nah,” Melody said, either not getting the hint or pretending not to. “That place was dead anyway.”

The club was loud, obnoxious, and overcrowded. It was the exact opposite of dead, and that’s why I needed to get out of there.

“Not as dead as my apartment’s going to be,” I said. “Nothing happening there tonight but a guy getting some much needed sleep so he can wake up early for work.”

“Correction,” she said. “A guy getting some much needed sleep and a gal cleaning up a disaster of a kitchen.”

She hopped into the passenger side of the car and was already putting on her seatbelt. Maybe I could have convinced her to go back into the club, but it hardly seemed worth the effort of arguing with her. We’d be home soon enough and I could go in my room, put my headphones on, and not have to be in the world until the sun came up the next day.

I started up the car and got on the road.

“Early bedtime and waking up for work,” Melody said. “What happened to us?”

“It’s called growing up,” I said.

“Come on, what would 18 year old Kiefer think of you?”

He’d think I was a loser. And he’d be right, but for the wrong reasons.

“I try not to do things based on what other people think.”

“He’s not other people,” Melody told me. “He’s you. No matter how much you try to run from him, he’s still there inside of you.”

That’s what she thought. Whatever was left of him I killed with pills and alcohol. Every once in a while, I listened to some old recordings I’d made of myself and was always amazed by the creative inventiveness I once had. In terms of technical skill, I was about as good as I ever was, at least in some respects, but in terms of fearlessness and heart, I was no match for the Kiefer of my youth. And that Kiefer was long gone.

“Hey,” she said, “this may be a bad time to ask, but can I borrow your car tomorrow?”

She was already staying in my apartment, and now she was asking me for my car?

“It’s just I have an important meeting and I’m bringing food, so I need to make sure there’s plenty of trunk space for everything.”

I was hearing the words, but felt distracted.

“I’ll pay for your Uber for you to get to work,” she said, “and I promise not to make this a habit. I was going to rent a car, but—”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Take the car.”

“Thanks,” she said.

But that left an awkward silence. I could tell it was doubly awkward for her, judging by the way she was tapping her hand against her knee. She was clearly trying to make light conversation by asking me for the car. It was nice to see her trying to break through my walls, even though I was being a dick. Eventually, the silence must have gotten to be too much, and she broke it.

“Tell you what,” Melody said, “let’s play Truth or Dare.”

I rolled my eyes.

“For old time’s sake.”

I didn’t respond to her.

“Truth or dare, Kiefer.”

I continued to stay silent, hoping she’d drop it, but she just repeated it louder.

“Truth or Dare.”

I could feel her eyes on me, staring at me, as if to say she could wait as long as I could. But I knew that was a lie. Like all awkward people, Melody had absolutely zero tolerance for discomfort.

“You know what I think?” she said. “I think you’re scared. I think you’re scared of what I might dare you to do.”

She paused.

“Oh, no, that’s not what you’re afraid of. You’re more afraid of what happens if you pick Truth. A guy like you who gets off on being mysterious and dark? That’s why you always picked Dare when we were kids.”

“Fine,” I said. “Truth.”

“Why are you so uptight now?”

“I’m not.”

She laughed. “The game is called ‘Truth or Dare,’ not ‘Obvious Lie or Dare.’”

Were we really going to go down this road? I guess we were. There was no use fighting it and, on top of that, there was something in me that wanted to get it off my chest. To actually talk to someone about what happened without letting it fester inside me.

“My ex-girlfriend,” I told her, “died a little over a year ago.”

Whatever laughter and mirth were in her voice immediately vanished.

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah,” I said. “And on top of that, it was my fault.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t actually your fault. What happened?” She said with deep concern in her voice.

“See, if I tell you what happened, you’ll think it wasn’t my fault. Because I didn’t kill her. Not directly. She was hit by a random drunk driver.”

“Just bad luck then,” Melody said, trying to say something to make me feel better.

“Yeah, but she wouldn’t have been on the road if it hadn’t been for me. We were at a New Year’s party, and I was completely wasted. And she was mad at me for doing that to myself. So she stormed out, and then next time I saw her, I was identifying her body at the morgue.”

“That’s awful.” I could see tears forming in her eyes.

It had been forever since I’d told anybody that story, but it was always the same reaction: strong discomfort. I could sense it. They wanted so badly to change the subject to anything else but didn’t know how to without coming off as dismissive.

“Yeah, well, it convinced me to get my life back together,” I told her, trying to present whatever approximation of a silver lining I could. “I only wish it hadn’t taken that to happen.”

“And you’ve been sober ever since?”

“Not one sip of beer,” I said. “Not a single pill of anything harder than aspirin. No needles except for the one for my flu shot. Pot’s legal here, but I’m staying away from that, too, just to be safe. Wendy sacrificed her life so I could be sober. I’m not about to let it be in vain.”

I tried sounding as strong as I could, but I was in a moment of weakness right now, and I don’t know what would have happened if Melody wasn’t with me. Would I have turned to alcohol? Or worse?

The fact was that I was a different person than the one I was back before the tragedy. And, in most ways, I was better. But there was one way I wasn’t better, and it was the one way

that mattered most: I didn't hold a candle to mind-altered Kiefer when it came to music. The old Kiefer would have found the right cocktail to stay up all night and get the part right before going into the studio to record it. And he would have nailed it.

Sober Kiefer was too in his head. I may have been a better person now, but I wasn't as good an artist.

"Yeah, but that doesn't answer my question," Melody said. "Just because you're sober doesn't mean you need to be joyless, you know?"

"Maybe not, but after what I did to Wendy, maybe I don't deserve joy."

She put her hand on mine, which was resting on the wheel, and I pulled it off instinctively. I immediately regretted it.

Thankfully she gently put her hand back on mine, "So you're sober because Wendy wanted you to be sober?"

I allowed her to touch me this time. It felt nice. Calming even.

"Yeah," I said.

"Would she want you to be miserable, too?"

I didn't have an answer to that. Of course Wendy wouldn't want me to be miserable. She would have wanted me to be happy. It just felt so strange to allow myself genuine happiness in a world she could no longer exist in.

"Truth," Melody said.

"Huh?"

"You answered my question," she said. "Now it's your turn. I choose 'Truth.'"

In other words, she wanted to move the conversation away from me, which was perfectly fine. The fact was, I had a million questions about her from back in high school. Wondering what she was thinking in a time where the coolest thing to be was aloof. But I had a hard enough time

remembering anything from back then, not that it mattered anymore anyway.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “Out in Los Angeles, I mean.”

“I’m opening my food truck,” she said. “I’m expanding after the success I had in Austin, you know, I’m—”

I cut her off. “No, no, no,” I said. “I gave you the truth. I want the truth back. Why not stay in Austin or go somewhere else in Texas? You want to be a movie star or something?”

“Nothing like that, no,” she said.

“Then why?”

She paused. Why did it always take so long to find the words for the truth?

“My dad,” she said. “He told me that no matter what I did, I had to stay in Texas and never leave. And the one way to get me to do something is to tell me I can’t do it. And, on top of that, he told me that I’d fail without his support. I had to prove him wrong.”

“But why Los Angeles?” I asked. “Why not New York or Chicago?”

“I’m going to give you the real truth in a second, but let me give you the practical truth first: Every other big city has its own cuisine. Nobody goes out to Los Angeles for the food. And that’s because the food out here is terrible.”

Terrible might have been too strong a word, but it wasn’t entirely unfair. Whenever I’d go back to visit family, I always looked forward to eating a decent meal. Everything in Los Angeles was about image. That was true about the people, and that was equally true about the food. It always looked great, but seldom lived up to its appearance.

“You’re not wrong,” I said, “but what’s the real reason?”

“My dad *hates* Los Angeles. Every time we watch a movie or TV show supposed to be set in Texas, but filmed in LA, he blows a gasket. He hates the palm trees and what he refers to as ‘sissy men’ actors who spend all their time in their cars but

still don't know how to drive manual. And he hates the fact that actors out here never age. He says it's partially the surgeries and partially because they'd never had an honest day's work in their life. He says everything out here is fake."

"What about you?" I asked. "What do you think about LA?"

She shrugged. "I'm still figuring it out," she said. "But so far, I think I kind of like it."

"Careful," I said, "this city has a knack for taking hold of people and not letting them go."

"Yeah, maybe," she said. "But it's tough to take the Texas out of a girl from Houston."

She laughed.

"Or maybe I'm wrong, and by the time I go home for Thanksgiving, I'll have a spray tan, bleached hair, and a new set of tits."

As an almost Pavlovian reaction, her saying the word made me look over at her tits. They were perfect just the way they were. In my view, any doctor who even gave her a consultation was guilty of malpractice.

"Nah," I said. "I'll keep an eye on you. Los Angeles won't be changing you. Not on my watch."

CHAPTER 9



MELODY

The way he said he'd keep an eye on me made it sound like a joke, but I knew it wasn't entirely a joke. And it was a glint of the old Kiefer I remembered back from school. He gave just a little bit of a smile and if he wasn't driving, I could have imagined him adding a bit of a wink. But it was comforting, too. That was the thing about him. Yeah, he was the bad boy guitar player who looked good in black, but you always felt safe with him. Like he was going to take you just to the edge of the cliff and maybe even dangle you over the edge, but you knew you'd never fall off so long as he was there.

A decade and change could do a lot to someone, but it was nice to know that there was still a hint of that boy still inside the man sitting beside me.

"Your turn," I said, as he pulled off of the freeway. "Truth or dare."

Already he had loosened up some. And, while I could understand why Jackson was afraid of what Kiefer might do when left alone, it felt like we were past the worst of it. Sometimes it just takes a little talking to calm someone down and get them out of a horrible place.

He gave me a side-eye.

"What's that about?" I asked.

"What's what about?"

"That look you're giving me."

“I’m thinking,” he told me. “I’m thinking that you expect me to pick Dare.”

“Well, I don’t think I’d ever seen you take Truth,” I said. “Other than just now, when I kind of dared you to.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll pick it on my own this time.” He smiled coyly. “Truth.”

I looked out the car window at LA, with its high contrast of bright lights and pure darkness. There was a kind of artificial quality to it, but that was where its beauty came from. Everything was fake, but it was fake in an intentional way, almost like a painting. Even being here, none of it felt real. It was like being in a movie, not reality.

“What do you do for fun?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, when you’re not beating yourself up... or off.” I paused, hoping for a laugh, but he ignored it. “What do you do other than work and regret life?”

“I play my guitar,” he said.

I made a buzzer sound. “Wrong answer! That’s for work. What do you do that’s just for you, for fun. Anything that has no purpose other than you enjoy it.”

“To be honest, nothing,” he said. “Well, except...”

He trailed off. “Go on,” I told him.

“You’re going to think I’m a total nerd.”

“I thought rock stars don’t care what other people think.”

He shook his head. “Nah, that’s just what they pretend. I’ve met a few of them. Huge names. They’re the most insecure people you’ve ever met. Like, this one time at a party, I met—”

“Nope,” I told him. “You’re trying to distract me. Name dropping might work on your LA friends, but they’re all just people to me. I want to know what you do for fun. You had something in mind.”

“It’s embarrassing,” he said.

“That’s the game,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. By this point, he was turning into the apartment’s garage. “Cardistry.”

“Cardistry?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“Card magic.”

He drove the car into his spot and put it into park, turning off the engine.

“Like card tricks?”

“Back when I was a kid, I wasn’t allowed to take a guitar everywhere I went, so I brought a deck of cards with me to, you know, work on hand dexterity. I spend all day on the bass now so I don’t still need them, but sometimes I pull out a deck and play with it just for fun.”

I wasn’t sure if he was serious or not. On one hand, he didn’t seem the magic type, but on another, why else would he tell me this?

“You any good?”

He shrugged. “Does it matter? It’s just for fun.”

We took the elevator up to his apartment. When we got inside, he closed the door behind him and looked into my eyes. For a while, he didn’t say anything, just stared with the two of us standing close in the doorway.

His face approached mine and said, “I suppose I should ask you Truth or Dare, right?” He used a soft tone, almost a whisper, but with enough strength behind it to still sound very masculine.

“Only if you want.”

He was moving in closer, and I could feel his breath on me as he kept his eyes locked on mine and put his hand on the wall behind me to lean against.

“Truth?” he asked. “Or Dare.”

“Dare,” I said, closing my eyes, ready for him to kiss me.

“I dare you to...” he trailed off and I could feel his lips just millimeters away from mine, but I refused to move my face towards him, as much as my whole body ached for it.

“...pick a card, any card.”

I opened my eyes, and he had a deck of cards in his hands. He shuffled the cards up and did a few impressive stylish cuts before fanning them all out in front of me.

Was he for real?

There was a goofy smile on his face. He was teasing me.

But a dare was a dare.

I pulled out the eight of clubs. “Do I show it to you?”

“No,” he said. “Make sure I don’t see it. In fact, here...”

He walked into the kitchen and pulled a permanent marker from out of one of the drawers.

“Sign your name on it and then put it face down on the top of the deck.”

I did so and kept my eyes on the deck of cards. “So we’re going to try something here,” he said. He took the card and put it on the kitchen counter, then grabbed my wrist and put my palm on top of it. His hand felt sturdy on mine. Again, it was that danger and comfort thing. He was strong and powerful, taking hold of my arm and putting it on the counter like that, but I felt safe like I could trust him. He wasn’t going to do anything I wasn’t comfortable with.

“Don’t move your hand,” he said. “Make sure I can’t get that card.”

I leaned onto the counter. And looked down at the card between my fingers. It was there, and there wasn’t any way he’d be able to grab it without me feeling it.

“I’m going to do the same as you now,” he said. He flipped the top card over: King of spades. Then he signed his name on it and in full view, held it up and turned around, then slowly put the card in his back pocket.

“You have your card and I have mine,” he said, “but if I give a little snap...”

He put his hand above mine and snapped his fingers.

“...they’ll switch places.”

Kiefer gestured towards my hand. “Take a look.”

I wasn’t sure whether to believe him or not. I replayed the actions in my head. I signed the card and he put my hand down on it. He signed his card and put it in his back pocket. I saw the whole thing. There wasn’t anywhere he could have switched it.

But I slowly lifted my hand and looked at the card below it. Sure enough, it was his king of spades.

He slowly began to reach behind him to his back pocket and then stopped himself. “You know what?” he asked. “Why don’t you grab mine and take a look?”

With a sly smile, he turned and presented his ass to me in those tight jeans.

“Go ahead and put your hand in there.”

He didn’t have to tell me twice. I reached into his back pocket and felt, indeed, that there was only one card. I also felt that he had a great butt.

“Pull the card out and take a look.”

It was my card: the eight of clubs with my signature.

“How’d you do that?”

He shook his head. “Magician’s code,” he said. “Not going to tell you.”

“Truth or dare,” I said, hoping I could get him to truth his way into revealing the secret.

He looked right back at me.

“Dare,” he said, his eyes closing in on mine, just as they had before.

We were back in the apartment doorway, like when we just entered. His arm was above me against the wall and he looked

down at me, letting me stand in his shadow. He felt so powerful above me like that. So dominating in the best way possible.

And he'd just said dare.

I wasn't going to waste this opportunity.

"I dare you to—"

But before I could finish my sentence, his lips were on mine, in a passionate kiss, the likes of which I hadn't experienced since high school.

CHAPTER 10



*** KIEFER ***

I couldn't control myself. I could only look at those adorable eyes and pursed lips for so long without doing something about it. We could have spent the night dancing around the issue, I suppose, but at a certain point, I just had to make the move and kiss her.

God, she was a good kisser. Some people were so mechanical with their mouths, like they were thinking about every move. Others tried to compensate for that by going as hard and fast as they could. Not Melody. Nah, she was in the moment, even if that moment caught her by surprise.

In its own way, it was like being back in high school. Maybe even before that. With so many women, kissing them was just a pretext for the main event. Back when we were younger, making out was the main event and, if you were lucky, you might make it to second base.

Holding Melody in my arms and feeling her lean into my body as I kissed her was a feeling unto itself. It was the first time I'd felt at all out of my head since going sober. I could truly relax and just let the music happen.

It was the exact opposite of being back in the club with that aggressive sorority girl. Things were quiet and intimate instead of loud and overwhelming.

Before too long, the two of us stumbled into my room and onto my bed, and that was the first time since our lips touched that I had a sense of awareness.

Prior to Wendy, I was living the rock star lifestyle, albeit on a smaller scale. Once you get to the level where you're performing for audiences of a couple hundred or more, you get the groupies. Something about holding an instrument in my hands made me irresistible to a certain kind of woman. There were weeks that went by where I never slept in my apartment.

It was fun, but ultimately empty.

And I wondered, in that moment with Melody, if I was falling back into my old traps. Was I treating her just like another one of my nameless one night stands?

She must have noticed something because she stopped.

"You doing okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said, smiling at her. "Quite a bit better than okay."

I took her shirt off and caressed her breasts, those beautiful breasts that had been hanging out of her bra in my kitchen and at the vintage store, begging to be kissed. Before I even knew what I was doing, I'd freed them from their bra and teased her nipples with my tongue, listening to the soft moans that came out of her mouth with every touch.

My hands grazed down her side, appreciating the curve of her figure. It was hard to look at Melody and not see how beautiful and sexy she was, but I had gained an even greater appreciation right now. Every inch of her body was filling me with an impossible combination of contradictory animalistic urges that I could only have fulfilled if I had several mouths and at least a dozen hands.

She put her hand on my chin and tilted my head up towards her face, where she wore that goofy, sexy smile and had a devilish look in her eyes.

"I dare you," she said, "to strip for me."

I stood up off the bed and practically ripped my shirt off.

"No," she said. "Not like that. Slowly. So I can enjoy it."

I pulled the shirt back down, only to slowly remove it, taking my time and keeping my eyes on her as I did.

She was lying in bed, topless but in a pair of tight jeans. As my shirt came off, she unzipped her jeans and pulled them off her legs, then placed her hand into her underwear, gently fingering herself.

“Keep going,” she told me and I wanted to repeat those words right back at her.

She'd gotten me so hard, I thought I might blow a load in my pants right then and there.

With my shirt off, I moved onto my jeans, slowly lowering them to reveal my tight briefs, hiding practically nothing — the outline of my dick was abundantly clear through the fabric, which was so tight up against me that I could even make out the vein.

All the while, Melody's hand movements got stronger and faster. Her moans intensified, and I could tell she was building towards something powerful.

I dropped my underwear to the floor, completely exposing myself to her, then grabbed onto her wrist. She was close. Very close.

And I pulled her hand out away from her, timing that edge perfectly so she just missed her orgasm.

I could see the look of thrilled frustration on her face as her hand struggled to go back and finish the job. But now was not the time for that. It was my turn to have some fun.

“Truth or Dare, Melody,” I said.

Her face had a similar expression to someone who had just woken up in a daze. She had processed that I'd said words, though was in no mental state to actually understand what they meant or know how to respond to them. It took a few seconds for her higher mammalian brain to turn back on.

“Dare,” she said.

“I dare you,” I told her, “to put those gorgeous lips of yours around my cock.”

“That's what you want?”

I nodded.

She took an elastic tie from her wrist and began wrapping her hair up into a bun.

“You sure? Because once I get my lips around you, I’m not sure they’re ever coming off.”

“Just a risk I’ll have to take, I guess.”

I could sense her excitement as she crawled towards me across the bed on all fours, then gripped her hand around me. She slowly put the tip in her mouth, giving it tiny kisses and licking the end.

With one last look up at me and a playfully sinister smile, she took me into her mouth, deeper than I thought possible. She moaned, sending vibrations up and down my shaft.

It felt so good, my legs nearly fell out from under me. I held onto her shoulders for balance just in case.

And, looking at her, I could tell she was enjoying it just as much as I was. She wasn’t kidding about not wanting to stop — from the looks of things, she could have gone all night.

Until the second that she stopped dead, like a freight truck into a brick wall.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked.

“Because it’s my turn now,” she said. “Truth or Dare.”

God, I wanted to charge forward into her, pinning her to the bed and sending us both to heaven and back. But that wasn’t the game we were playing.

“Dare.”

God, Melody, I thought. Dare me to fuck your brains out. Please.

“You were fantasizing about me the other day,” she said.

“That a question? Because I didn’t ask for a truth.”

She smiled coyly. I could pretend all I wanted, but she’d see right through it.

“Make your fantasy a reality,” she said. “Do exactly what you were imagining.”

“Well, I—”

“Not a single other word,” she said. “Just do it.”

My lips were sealed. I reached down around her waist and removed what was left of her clothing, then took in the image of her on my bed, her legs spread open wide, invitingly. Between the rubbing herself and the blowjob, she was plenty wet for me.

But there was no harm in getting her wetter.

I dove my face right into her pussy, toying with her most sensitive areas with careful and precise taps of my tongue, holding her hips down as she squirmed with delight, moaning in pleasure as I did so. She tasted unbelievable, and I couldn't get enough of her. My body was taking control of me, and I had to hold myself back, forcing myself not to press too hard until she was ready.

Her hands reached around my face and held me down into her, helping to guide me to where it felt best. When she found the right spot, she moved those hands to my shoulders and pulled me harder up against her as she drove those nails into my skin. It stung, but only slightly. And it felt good.

As her body loosened up and her moans became louder, those hands moved down to my chin, lifting my head up to look at her as she nodded, panting and slightly out of breath.

“I need you to take me,” she said, her voice thin and sensual. “I need you inside me.”

With that, I jumped up from my position, grabbed her wrists and held them down as I leaned over her body, putting my face right up to hers and watching her expression as I slowly pushed my cock inside her. It was a short gasp at first, but as I made my way deeper, it became breathier and longer, a sound of pure pleasure. And she was still teetering on the edge of that cliff I left her on. As I pounded into her, letting instinct fully take over, she grabbed onto my arm, digging her nails

hard into my bicep like she had into my shoulder. Damn, it felt good.

I kept going, listening to her body and giving it exactly what it needed. Melody wasn't exactly a tough girl to read. Even without words, I knew exactly what was going on in her mind and what felt good where.

It wasn't too long before I saw that glint of approach in her eye. I'd seen that glint only moments ago when she was rubbing herself — it meant she was very close to coming. And I was done with teasing her. It was time to give her what she wanted.

I was close, too. With our rhythm in perfect sync, we were approaching the holy grail: a simultaneous orgasm. I gritted my teeth and held back, ready to release the second she did, but those final seconds seemed to take forever. In the best way possible.

The way I felt it at first was through the hand of hers on my arm. It suddenly squeezed just a bit tighter, and then the moan of orgasmic ecstasy came screaming from the back of her throat. The moan didn't stop when I released into her. Instead, it got immediately louder and more intense. And it kept going and going and going until I was worried she'd run out of breath and might pass out.

She didn't, though. Instead, she fell back against the pillow, desperately trying to catch her breath. She tried to speak, but all that came out was slurred gibberish, which she laughed at.

“What was that?” I asked. “I didn't catch that.”

Melody closed her eyes to regain concentration and then opened them.

“That was, hands down, the best fuck of my life.”

I smiled at her. It seemed too trite to say, “Mine, too,” even though it was true.

“I think we both needed that,” I said.

I rolled over beside her and let her cuddle her body up next to mine. We didn't speak, just stayed there, appreciating the moment. It was impossible to know exactly what she was thinking, but I was wondering what my 18 year old self would think, looking at this moment.

He'd be ecstatic to see that this moment was in his future, even if he'd have to wait over a decade for it.

My mind immediately took a 180, though. Because what did I care what my 18 year old self would think of this moment? Had I just fallen into that same teenage trap of seeing a woman as a conquest?

Melody was already asleep, judging by her consistent breathing pattern. And I wondered what the next morning would bring. Was this the beginning of something serious between the two of us? Or was this another meaningless fling?

I hadn't had any alcohol or done any drugs that night, but I wondered if I'd still fallen back into my old bad habits. After over a year of working at becoming a better person and trying to do the right thing, had I even grown up at all?

And what about her? The sexy high school crush who undoubtedly just saw me as a conquest to brag about at the next ten year reunion? There were two ways for this to go, and neither of them was good. One was she ditched me in the morning, and I was left feeling even emptier than before. Or, worse, she stuck around and dragged me back into the wild life I'd worked so hard to stay away from. The scariest thing about her is that I knew she could tempt me.

CHAPTER 11



MELODY

I was taken aback by my alarm in the morning. It was quiet and distant, which was confusing to me until I felt the tattooed arm curled around me and remembered how the night before had gone. I couldn't help but smile to myself as I relived the evening that had been well over a decade in the making. It was weird to think that if I hadn't happened to want to move to Los Angeles or happened to have scheduled a meeting in downtown Santa Monica or not have happened to arrive early and stop for lunch in the area...

Well, if it hadn't been for a long series of events, it was very possible I might have just forgotten about Kiefer entirely. A boy who was my best friend and occupied the bulk of my thoughts during my later teenage years would have completely left my mind. And I wouldn't have had the most amazing sex I could possibly imagine.

I slid out from under his arm and closed his bedroom door before tiptoeing to the other room, where I turned off the alarm. This was an important morning, which is why I'd set the alarm so long in advance: I had to put together breakfast tacos for the meeting, and I was nervous.

Before, I could dismiss the rejection as a result of my poor business or presentation skills. If I screwed up today, though, it would be because the food didn't speak for itself. In other words, I'd have failed at the thing I was supposed to be good at.

With the new ingredients and some last-minute modifications, I'd managed to make something the night

before that I was comfortable putting my seal of approval on, though it would have been nice to have additional support from others.

Unfortunately, with Kiefer asleep and my unwillingness to wake him, I had to do the best I could, relying on my own judgment.

After thirty minutes or so of cooking — I'd get that time down significantly once I had the food truck up and ready — I put together a tin full of aluminum-wrapped tacos for my potential investors, and I prayed that they stayed warm and delicious, at least until it was time to present to them.

I left without saying goodbye to Kiefer and, as I walked down the hall towards the garage, I considered going back for a good luck kiss. As much as I wanted to, I was already running late, and I didn't want to seem too clingy.

As I drove out and sat in traffic, I couldn't believe what had just happened. My teenaged brain was blown. I just had the best sex of my life with Kiefer Fuckin' Ekland.

I smiled and even blushed a little. I always had a big personality, which was sometimes off-putting in relationships, so I did what I could to keep all those big emotions inside and try to hide how I truly felt.

I never got particularly good at it, though.

"It was more than worth the wait," I told my inner teen. "You won't believe just how good it is." I paused, remembering some of the awkward backseat hook-ups of my teenage years, with boys who fumbled with their hands and left saliva on my cheek and hickeys on my neck. Complete amateurs. The teenage version of myself would have settled for a guy who wasn't trying to hit my uvula with his tongue or a boy who grabbed at my nipples like they were twisting off toothpaste caps. I don't know what she would have done if she'd been in the hands of a master like Kiefer, who treated my body like... well, like one of his instruments.

I shuddered just thinking about it.

I could almost feel it all over again, being in bed with him with his tattoos up against my skin. God, it felt so good that I wondered why I wasn't back in there with him right now.

I could hear the younger version of me ask, "So, is he your boyfriend then?"

It seems odd to be startled by a question that originated from my own head, but I didn't know how to answer, and I blushed again.

Well, no... I said, though my voice trailed off in my head. *Is he?*

I realized how naive I once was. Before I'd been ghosted by a million guys who all seemed interested, but never returned my texts. Just because they acted interested didn't mean anything the morning after. For all I knew, I would come home and Kiefer would act like it never even happened. Or he'd tell me to move out. Or... well, predicting the future was never something I was especially good at, and there were more pressing things at hand, like my entire career and the whole reason I moved here in the first place.

I needed to make sure I was focused and didn't lose myself in Kiefer's world. I was here with a purpose, and that purpose was not having my vagina serviced by the best "mechanic" in L.A.

A blaring horn brought me back to reality; a car was honking at me because the light was green. I drove through and kept the speed slow as I looked at the sidewalk, trying to find a place to parallel park. The honking car drove past me and gave me the finger for good measure, but I just ignored him.

Eventually, I found a tight spot that I managed to get myself into. I grabbed the taco tray and made my way to the office building, where I had my next investor meeting.

I was a solid ten minutes early when I showed up in the lobby and checked in. The secretary, a young woman who had a chemistry textbook open beside her, mistook me for a caterer at first.

“Oh, no,” I said. “I’m presenting a business opportunity.”

“Oh yeah?”

Over the years, I picked up several bits of wisdom from my dad about working in business. Not the kind of things I would have learned in school, but more practical items that teachers without actual experience might not be familiar with. And one of the most important pieces of advice he gave me was to never piss off the secretary. Always make sure that you’re on her good side: she had a lot more pull than you might expect.

So I put the tin down on her desk and cracked the top off just a bit, then reached in and grabbed one of the tacos.

“Here,” I said, handing it to her. “I made a few extras just in case.”

The aroma clearly took her off-guard, and she sat up in her seat.

Another thing I knew was that people didn’t like when others watched them eat. So as much as I would have wanted to see her expression, I turned around and walked away, then sat on the couch and focused my eyes on my phone, glancing up briefly to see if she was eating it.

She’d pulled some aluminum foil off and inspected what I’d given her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Shredded jackfruit, Texas-style,” I said, playing up my accent just a hint.

Cautiously, she took a bite. And then another and another.

I bit my tongue, which was begging me to ask her how it was, but I forced myself to remain patient and appear uninterested.

“You don’t, uhh, happen to have another one, do you?” the secretary asked.

I smiled.

* * *

The secretary gave me a bit of necessary confidence before I walked into my meeting, but this was a tough crowd. None of the five men in suits looked like they'd smiled at any point during the last fifteen years or so.

“Miss Cruz,” said the oldest of the five men, “what have you got for us today?”

“A Tex-Mex vegan taco truck,” I said with as much positive energy and confidence as I could muster. “So authentic that you'll be able to taste the ‘Yee-haw!’ in every bite!”

Nothing from this crowd. Not a laugh. Not a smile. Not even the slightest hint that I said something that anyone could have construed as a joke.

I was doubting myself.

“Now I could talk to you about the growth of the vegan industry,” I said, “or point out the dearth of Tex-Mex options in your lovely, sunny city. I could give you numbers and figures about the success that we experienced in Austin, a town with demographics quite similar to those of Southern California. But, ultimately, we all know that there's only one metric that matters, and that's whether or not what I'm selling can make people say, ‘Yum!’”

Still nothing. It was as if none of them spoke the same language as I did. Fortunately, food was a universal language.

I opened the tin up and handed two tacos to each of the men along with a napkin. They eyed these aluminum cylinders with some curiosity, lifting them up and examining them, but nothing more. They looked at each other, and I realized they'd need some guidance.

“I gave each of you two tacos. One is shredded jackfruit — a kind of pork substitute — and the other has a soy version of chorizo. Give them both a try. My guess is that one bite is all

you'll need for me to gain your confidence that The Vegan Vaquero represents a good investment for you.”

Nothing. They didn't open up the foil and take a bite. It was as if they were robots, unfamiliar with the concept of food.

And then a thought occurred to me: Was it possible these men have never had a breakfast taco?

I'd have to show them.

I took a taco out and peeled the top of the foil off slowly, demonstrating it for them, then took a bite.

I'm modest about nearly everything in my life, but it's impossible when it comes to my cooking: these tacos were damned good.

After chewing and swallowing, I continued. “Now we'll have different levels of spice once we get going, ranging from mild to diablo, but these are all very mild just to play it safe.”

The old man who introduced me was the first to open up his taco, and the others watched him intently. He took a bite, chewed for a bit, and mulled it over a bit. Then he took another.

“What did you say this was?” he asked.

“Soy chorizo,” I said. “Traditionally a cured, smoked meat, though this is made with tofu.”

“Mmm-hmm,” he said as the others continued to look at him for further instruction. “Go ahead, boys, he said. Give it a try. It won't hurt you.”

Did that mean that he liked it?

One by one, the others opened up their meals and gave them a taste. While they were, the older gentleman pulled out the other taco and removed the foil from the outside.

“And what's this one?”

“Shredded jackfruit,” I said. “It's somewhat unfamiliar to a lot of people in the West, but it's a very meaty fruit that's often used as a substitute for pork or chicken.”

He nodded and took a bite of that one, too.

By this point, all of the men were chewing in front of me and exchanging looks with each other. Whatever was going on in their heads was clear to them, but it wasn't at all to me. I supposed I could take it as a good sign that they weren't spitting the food out in front of them.

The man in charge finished his jackfruit taco and licked some of the juices off of his fingers before dabbing his mouth with the napkin.

“Miss Cruz?” he said.

“Yes, sir?”

“I think we've seen all we need to see.”

Again, the ambiguity was driving me crazy.

But he removed the ambiguity when he stood up and offered me his hand.

“We'd be more than happy to go into business with you.”

And, honest to goodness, I saw a genuine smile emerge on that man's face.

CHAPTER 12



*** KIEFER ***

As my eyes opened at their own pace, I wasn't sure if the night before really happened or not. I was alone in my bed, though I thought I could still smell traces of her. Maybe it was all in my head. But as the memories became clearer, it became obvious that it wasn't all some wonderful dream. It happened. And that made things scarier because it meant there would be consequences.

The mind-reading was always the hardest part of a relationship for me. What did Melody want from this? Because I was too old to be looking for just another hook-up, I had been there and done that for the majority of my life. Now, if I was going to take someone to bed, I wanted it to be the start of something meaningful and lasting.

In my experience, that was the case about half the time with women I met. Some just wanted to get close to a rock star, or even somebody approximating one, to tell their friends about later. And others were looking for a man with a steady job or something. I don't know. But it was impossible to tell the morning after whether the woman was interested in a second date or would immediately delete my number from her phone.

Melody wasn't about to delete me from her phone. Not so long as she needed an apartment to stay in. But that only made things more confusing. I'd had friends with benefits type situations before and, invariably, somebody always got hurt in the end. It would almost have been better for us to cut things off immediately if she wasn't serious about this rather than

pull me along with the hopes of things turning into something more.

I pulled up my phone and realized the battery had died during the night. I plugged it in and waited for it to load up, then looked at the time and realized I was already a half hour late coming into work. After jumping in the quickest shower I could take and throwing clothes on, I made it out to the living room and kitchen area of the apartment. The kitchen was an even bigger disaster than it was the night before, and I was worried that it was going to attract bugs or vermin, but there wasn't time to deal with that. I'd have to get on Melody's ass about that later.

I figured that was probably a good sign, though. Hook-ups and friends with benefits didn't have fights — if I was going to have to give her a hard time about the state of the kitchen, that gave me strong serious relationship vibes.

It wouldn't be a huge fight or anything, of course. It'd just be a conversation where I put my foot down and told her that if she was going to use the kitchen, she'd better leave it in the same condition it was in when she started.

I made a promise to myself not to lose my temper or raise my voice this time. We were going to handle everything like adults. I learned with my sobriety that keeping my at home life in a controlled state made it easier to keep my addiction controlled. To some people a messy kitchen wasn't a big deal, but to me it helped me keep myself from spiraling. Keep my side of the sidewalk clean. That was something I learned and held on to for dear life.

When I finally made it into the studio — it took the Uber driver forever to get to me — it was like nobody even realized I was late. I could hear the sound of a funky bass line playing modal lines around the beat. Real hip stuff that was almost impossible to not tap your feet to.

Of course it was Natasha. With just a little bit of practice, she'd managed to outdo her performance from the day before — a performance that Ernie had already described as better than perfection. Maybe I could have played like she was

playing if somebody had given me a recording and asked me to study it, but the fact that she was improvising these licks was massively intimidating. And it was only made more so by her diminutive stature and unassuming nature.

She made it look so easy. And maybe that was because, for her, it was.

I shook the thought out of my head.

Especially in something like music, it would only bring you pain to compare yourself to others. The problem is I couldn't help myself, and the thought kept popping back in. It wasn't so much that I was mad I couldn't play as well as Natasha, it was that I knew I wasn't even playing as well as myself.

I stepped into the sound booth, where Ernie was sitting at the controls.

"She's unbelievable," he said. "Just like nothing I've ever seen. Or heard."

I nodded, but didn't respond. In the back of my head was the concern that with Cleopatra Records not doing as well as it once was, it wouldn't make sense to keep two bassists on payroll. Ernie always acted like my friend and like he liked me, but business was business, and it was all meaningless when it came down to the bottom line.

"She's good for this sort of thing," I said, "but Peterson Floyd is avant garde. She's wasted on a standard pop record."

Ernie picked up on the subtext I didn't realize I was dropping. "Buddy," he said, taking a hit on his e-cig, "we're keeping you around. She's not replacing you. She's a sensation on bass, but we'll still need you for rhythm and lead."

I bit my tongue. I hadn't heard Natasha play those instruments, but I would have put money down that she was just as good on them.

"Even if she plays as well as you," he said, practically reading my mind, "she can't play them all at the same time. You know I prefer doing everything live."

That gave me a sense of relief. At least for now, my job was safe, but for how long?

I'd been frustrated with my ability and creative energy, which continued to stagnate. And I knew exactly why.

Addiction was never a problem for me. The same strong will that let me practice for hours on end let me quit cold turkey and deal with the temporary side effects like headaches and shakes.

No, what I feared would pull me back into the drug world was listening to someone like Natasha and wanting to be at even a fraction of her level. Sometimes it felt like music was all I could offer this world and, without my chemical muse, I was useless. If I wasn't creating, then what was even the point of getting up in the morning?

"You okay?" Ernie asked.

"Just super," I said.

"Good," he said. "Let's get you in there for the next take. I think the track could use some electric guitar to give it more presence."

"Whatever you say, boss."

* * *

The recording session was mostly uneventful, with me more or less taking dictation on what to play. Apparently, Ernie and Peterson had been talking and had a clear idea of exactly what they needed. And if all they wanted was someone to play the notes, I could still do that. What I couldn't do was add my own voice to the track. But maybe that was for the best. At least for today. Sure, anybody in the industry could have replaced me, but I was the one on payroll at the studio, so I got to do my job.

And it's a good thing that it didn't require too much creative energy because I had too much on my mind at the moment.

In fact, I had so much on my mind that I chose to walk home instead of taking an Uber so I'd have time to think. When I got back to the apartment, I'd have to confront Melody, and I wanted to come up with exactly what to say and how to ask her. Through the walk, I came up with a long speech about how I was in an emotionally fragile place in my life right now and how if she wasn't serious about making this serious, it was probably best to end things before either or both of us got hurt.

It wasn't the best speech, but it didn't matter because I didn't get a chance to share even a word of it. The moment I walked in, Melody kissed me hard on the mouth, and I could taste her excitement. And the alcohol. She wasn't exactly falling over drunk, but she'd been drinking. And the taste of it on my lips was terrifying to me. But it wasn't just the alcohol that was tempting me, it was her, too. After a long day at work, I wanted her, and I could tell she wanted me. There was an intensity to her embrace that couldn't be forced. And it was contagious. For all that was going on in my mind, my dick had no problem immediately rising to attention, ready to perform.

I barely had a chance to notice that she still hadn't cleaned the kitchen. Flour was on the floor, dishes and bowls piled up in the sink, and pots and pans still sat on the stove, with hardening beans and imitation queso sticking to the sides.

"Guess what," she said. Her arms remained around my body and demanded I hold her closer as she looked up at me with a sparkle in her eyes. But I couldn't shake the smell on her breath.

"Did you have a drink?" I asked.

She ignored my question.

"The Vegan Vaquero has investors now," she said. "And I need a celebratory fuck. And yes, I had a couple of beers at a pub to celebrate. Is that a problem?" She said as she looked up at me with that smile.

I didn't respond. I should have said exactly how big of a problem it was, but how could I deny her anything?

Sure, I could lie and say that I hated the thought of it, but it wasn't like she brought the drinks home. I also didn't want to burst her bubble of excitement when she was so happy, and she looked damned good with that huge smile on her face and her body rubbing against me.

I was powerless to resist and decided to push aside the demon inside that was fighting to come out. I would have to find another way to keep it at bay.

So instead of a response we tore each other's clothes off, but as we did, in the back of my mind, I worried that this was a mistake.

A fun mistake, but a mistake all the same.

CHAPTER 13



MELODY

My heart had been racing ever since that morning when I'd gotten the approval, and I'd been running around trying to find something to do with the energy ever since. I thought having a beer or two would help, but that wasn't a proper outlet, and I'd have to wait until Kiefer got home. When he put his arms around me, I knew all I wanted was him. He was the only one I wanted to tell about my success, the only person I wanted to share my happiness with. I couldn't even believe the words coming out of my mouth.

“I need a celebratory fuck.”

It was almost embarrassing — a kind of auditory out of body experience, hearing me say something that sounded nothing like me. At the same time, it perfectly expressed how I felt. It wasn't the crudeness of the sentence, but the directness. I had no problem with crass words or racy subject matter, but I usually hid it behind innuendo or jokes.

This was purely me, mask off and telling him what my body needed.

And fortunately, he responded in kind.

Kiefer pulled my body into his in a comforting embrace as he kissed me with the kind of passion that most women could only dream of. He pressed me against the wall, and I could feel his massive cock from behind his jeans, begging to escape and enter me. I wanted him to rip my clothes off right there and have me. No need for foreplay — the entire day had been foreplay as far as I was concerned — I needed deep, hard

penetration and lots of it, all night long and into the morning until we eventually passed out from sheer exhaustion as we tried in vain to force our bodies to keep going past what was physically possible.

And adding to the feeling of pure impassioned desire was the fact that it was clear he felt the same towards me. His hands were touching every inch of my body, albeit through my clothes. Every time he grazed my skin, it sent a shock of pleasure through me. A kind of tremor preview of the massive orgasm that was to come.

He moaned with every kiss, biting my underlip just a bit as he pulled away, never pushing too hard against me as he sent me to heaven and back, filling my body with so much lust and tension that I thought it might tear me apart.

And leave me begging for more.

Kiefer pinned me against the doorway and growled in my ear.

“I want you,” he said.

I looked at the fire in his eyes and nearly melted into a puddle I was so turned on.

“Then take me,” I told him.

He lifted me up as though I weighed nothing and sat me on top of the kitchen island, then cradled my back as he lowered me down. I wanted to scream at him to stop being so gentle and hurry up, though the anticipation was delicious and I appreciated the affection.

His hand moved down the center of my chest to the button on my jeans and popped it off with ease, then unzipped me and pulled the pants off as I shimmied just a little bit to help him. My panties were absolutely drenched by this point, and I could see a thin smile of satisfaction as he rubbed his thumb over my clit through the cotton, enjoying the wetness.

It was the tenderest of touches and I'd never felt so good in my life.

He lifted his shirt off of his chest, revealing the tattoos across his chest. A bullet with butterfly wings on one pec and flaming musical notes on the other. A sleeve down his arm culminating in the cover of Abbey Road. I wanted to trace all the lines and follow them to discover all the hidden meanings, asking him when he got each one and why.

Instead, I sat back and looked on in awe.

He was seriously hot shit. And he knew he was, too. That subtle smirk let me know he was getting off on being the object of my desire. Fine by me, so long as I got to look at him.

But he wasted little time flexing those broad shoulders as he put his hands on my panties and dragged them all the way down my leg, leaving me vulnerable and open to whatever he had in store for me.

That smirk reappeared because he had the upper hand. He knew what was going to happen next, but I could only hope. I let out a sigh of surprise as his face dove deep between my legs, but it was almost painful the way he stopped before he reached my pussy. No, he was in complete control of me, kissing the inside of my legs and rubbing his soft, masculine stubble against me. This wasn't like the other night when he went right for me. No, he was in a teasing mood, and I almost hated him for it.

But I didn't because it was the best feeling in the world.

How could something feel so incredible and simultaneously be so torturous? That was the mystery of Kiefer. Ever since I'd first met him, I'd wanted him so bad that it ached. And now that I had him right here where I wanted him, it only ached more. And yet, I wouldn't trade that pain for any pleasure that anyone else could give me.

It was agonizing how close he was getting to me. I could feel the warmth of his face, but his lips and tongue remained on my inner thigh, tiptoeing towards my pleasure center to give me the release I so dearly needed.

And then, like the first ray of light at dawn, he made it there, and I let out a gasp so deep and intense that it made my lungs burn.

“Oh my fucking God,” I said. Or at least I think I said it. It sounded like my voice and it was coming from my mouth, but it wasn’t my brain that put those words together.

I pressed my palm against the counter, pushing down and angling my back to try to keep from coming right then and there. It felt too good to let it all out like that all at once. I had to make the moment last as long as I could.

With all the might I had, I held back that release.

Or at least I tried to. I barely made it ten seconds before releasing a scream as piercing as a train whistle. I couldn’t control it. It kept going until the edge of my vision began turning dark, and I thought I’d lose consciousness.

My arching back fell against the counter and I lay there, breathing deeply, unable to speak, as a tear of pure joy fell down my face.

When I finally had the awareness to look down at Kiefer, resting his head on my leg and looking back at me, I could see that same smirk as before.

“Let me know when you’re ready for round two,” he said.

I tried to respond, but words failed me as I was still short of breath. After taking in a little more oxygen, I shivered. Everything suddenly felt so cold. I said, “Can you move me to the bed?”

He picked me up and brought me to his bedroom, putting me down onto the bed and helping me out of my shirt and bra. My pants must have still been in the kitchen, where they could stay until at least tomorrow as far as I was concerned. I wasn’t going to have any use for them any time soon.

Kiefer took the thick blanket and covered me with it. I was still shivering, but he caught my attention as he removed his pants and boxers. He had the most incredible body that didn’t stop at his abs. His legs were powerful and toned, to say

nothing of the most beautiful cock I'd ever seen in my life, pointing straight ahead right at me.

It wasn't just large — plenty of men had big dicks and thought they were God's gift to women because of it — it was also perfect with that sexy vein across the top of it. Just looking at it was getting me turned on again, somehow finding the energy to keep going after the explosive orgasm he'd just left me with.

He crawled under the covers with me and brought his warmth with him. It was like being in front of a campfire. And then he covered me in his body and kissed me on the mouth.

How was I ready to go again so soon? Was the kitchen not enough for me?

He'd left me plenty wet and slid right into me with no resistance as he kissed my entire face and neck. His thrusts were powerful while remaining controlled and rubbing me right where I needed him to.

“God,” I said, “you're going to make me come again.”

He gave me that sly smile again as if to say, “That's the idea.” Kiefer always had something of an ego, and it wouldn't have been irritating if he didn't have the charm to back it up.

I looked at his body, those tattoos. And now I was close enough that I could touch them. I brought up my finger and traced the ink lines across his pecs — they were of images I probably wasn't cool enough to recognize — and that only turned me on more. His body was something to get lost in and, as I focused in more and more on his body, his rhythm synced with mine. I was powerless to resist the state of pure joy he was sending me to.

My mouth opened and I let out another gasp, so intense that it was practically silent. And, as I did so, I could feel him coming inside me, filling me with his warmth. More kisses and moans from the both of us as we finished together and, ultimately, he rolled off of me and took me into his arms.

It was somehow even better than the night before. I couldn't imagine ever feeling better than I did in that moment.

There were no words, just feelings, and I leaned my head against the pillow, feeling safe in his arms.

My eyes grew heavy and shut on their own. My mind began drifting off in the direction of sleep, though I was still very much awake, even if I was in such a state of elation that I probably couldn't have even remembered my name had Kiefer not said it to me.

“Melody.” His voice had a slight urgency to it. He wasn't just whispering sweet nothings in my ear. There was something he actually wanted to talk about. At a time like this, all it could do was ruin the moment.

“Shh,” I said back to him. “Let me have this.”

He shut up and I pulled his arms tighter around me. Whatever was so important would have to wait until the morning.

CHAPTER 14



*** KIEFER ***

I 'd never felt so rested in my life as I did when I woke up that morning. I was alone again, though this time felt different than it had the day before. Maybe it was because I heard the sounds of cabinets opening and closing coming from the other room. Either she was still here, probably cooking breakfast, or someone had broken in and was raiding the kitchen.

My body was comfortable in the bed. So much so that I didn't want to get up. Even though I wasn't tired, I felt as though I could have drifted back to sleep in a second. It was a strange, unfamiliar feeling that I couldn't recognize at first. But then I remembered what it was:

I was happy.

Maybe not in a long term sense — there was still the issues at work to worry about, as well as the repressed dreams of becoming a rock star, and of course, the devil on my shoulder who tasted that sweet nectar on her lips— but in a momentary sense, everything in my life that was stressing me out was so far away, that you'd need to take a rocket to get to it.

Right now, I was at home with a woman who I was severely crushing on in a way that I didn't think was possible for a man like me. And she was crushing on me too. And, as an added perk, she looked unbelievably good naked.

Eventually, I managed to work the bedsheets off of me and climb out of bed. I threw on some clothes from the floor and

walked out of the bedroom into the kitchen and living room area.

To my surprise, Melody was not cooking breakfast. She was cleaning the kitchen. And she was doing so without my having asked her. I'd wanted to ask her. I'd even tried, but she shushed me and I shut up, figuring it could wait until morning.

"Good morning," I said, fairly neutrally, and she looked up at me.

"Good morning!" she returned with glee and excitement, then ran over to me, hugging me and giving me a kiss. "Very good morning."

She giggled.

"You know what this is?" she asked, pointing to her face. "It's called afterglow. People spend however many millions, maybe even billions of dollars a year, on make-up to try to get something even close to this."

It was hard to deny. Melody was absolutely breathtaking, but there was an extra gleam to her appearance this morning. A little more pep in her step, too. Her energy was contagious, and I was already starting to wake up some.

It couldn't hurt to have some additional help, though.

"I don't mean to get in your way," I said, walking into the kitchen and pulling a mug out from the cabinet, "but I need my morning coffee."

"By all means," she said.

"Do you want a cup?"

"Nope!" she said. "I'm good."

As I put the pod into the coffee machine and got it going, I said to her, "You're cleaning up."

"Just like I said I would," she said. "I may not always get things done right away, but they do always get done."

"I guess so."

“Let me tell you something about me,” she said. “This’ll be helpful for you to know if... well, if I’m going to be staying here for a little while.”

Her eyes took on a semi-serious tone. I let her talk.

“I was seeing this guy back in Austin,” she told me. “Guy named Desmond. We were pretty serious, at least at first. He was a lawyer at a good firm, specializing in family law, but he also always made time for me and would send me little texts throughout the day. He wanted kids, and I saw him with his nieces — he was real good with them.”

I didn’t know where she could possibly be going with this.

“So he was the real deal. Any woman’s dream: good job, good looking, good with kids. My friends were telling me that he was marriage material.”

“What’d he do?” I asked. “Cheat on you or something?”

Melody shook her head. “Loyal almost to a fault,” she said. “He’d never dream of it.”

“So what was the problem?” I asked. “Why are you here and not there with him?”

“He’d tell me to do things, and I wouldn’t do them right away,” she told me. “Reasonable things like make sure the laundry was done or do the dishes if it was my turn to do them. He was a rigid guy in that sense. He lived his life to a schedule, and if things weren’t done on his timeline, he’d get upset.

“And then I’d get mad because he was trying to boss me around, force me to live by his rules. I don’t know, maybe I was the one being crazy, but I hate it when other people tell me what to do. He did it. My dad did it, too. Everyone always telling me what to do. And maybe they were even right about it, but I’m my own person. I’m a grown-ass adult, and I get to decide what I want.

“Maybe I’m going to make a mistake every now and then, but at least they’ll be my mistakes to make and not somebody else’s. I’d rather fail on my own than be someone else’s idea of a success.”

She was getting pretty worked up. I could see it in her face, which was ever so slightly red. And her hands were shaking too.

The coffee started pouring into my mug and I grabbed the handle, appreciating the aroma that I needed in the morning to get me going.

“Don’t be like them,” she said. “You need me to do something, let me know, but don’t press me about it. It’ll get done.”

“Noted,” I said, taking the mug and having my first sip, doing it slowly and quietly so as not to suggest to Melody I was ignoring her.

“I’m a free spirit,” she said.

“You certainly are.”

She was. You could tell by looking at her. Melody was someone who didn’t care what other people thought of her — she just cared about being herself. So many other people tried to be someone they weren’t, but she didn’t wear a mask the way the rest of the people in the world did.

It made her uniquely her, and it was maybe my favorite thing about her.

Other people were so often interchangeable, different versions of a given type.

Not Melody. She was herself. And I’d never met anybody else like her.

“Try to chain me down,” she told me, “and it’ll only force me to fly further away.”

I took in her words and processed them for a few seconds.

“So that’s why you’re out here, then, huh?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “At first, it was a pipe dream. Telling people one day I’d like to move out to Los Angeles. And every goddamned person kept on telling me to stay in Texas. My dad telling me he didn’t want me leaving the state. Desmond asking me how we were supposed to start a family if he’d have

to move out to somewhere else, learn a whole new set of laws, and pass a different bar exam.”

She shook her head. “Maybe I’m going to want some coffee after all,” she told me. “That smells good.”

“Not a problem.” I popped the pod out and put a new one in, pressing the button to brew up a new cup.

“Desmond wasn’t even wrong,” she said. “Maybe I was the bitch for not listening to him, but you know what? This is my life. And if being with him meant I couldn’t move out to California, then that wasn’t the life I wanted. I dropped him in an instant after he gave me a speech about how it was impossible. Nobody gets to tell me what is and isn’t possible.”

She looked at me and smiled. “Sorry,” she said. “That got real intense real quick.”

“It’s okay,” I told her. It wasn’t the worst thing to get to see her fired up.

“I just have a real strong reaction to being trapped in a box,” she said. “I know I need to clean up after myself. And I will clean up after myself. Just let me have the space to do it on my own terms.”

“I think I can manage that,” I told her, but wondered if I really could. It hadn’t felt like I was bossing her around or controlling her, just trying to get her to do the responsible thing and take care of the mess she made. Already, I was worried about pushing her away inadvertently. It was hard enough to find someone in this world that you liked enough to spend time with. Having to keep them from running away only made it more difficult.

For the time being, though, she wasn’t running. I could tell in her smile that she wanted to stay. At least for now. That big goofy smile I loved so much.

I’d hate to lose it.

CHAPTER 15



MELODY

Time always goes by so quickly when things are busy. The investors had me meet with their lawyers and sign all the usual documents. Kiefer didn't want me to get screwed over, so he put me in touch with his brother Jackson who ended up becoming a phenomenal lawyer, and he read through everything pro bono and made sure it was all reasonable. There were a few things that Jackson reiterated to me in layman's terms to make sure I understood what I was getting into, but there wasn't anything unusual and, in fact, he said it was a pretty fair deal.

I understood the importance of such things — covering my ass for any eventualities that might await me in the future — but it was all boring and dull to me. The paperwork was a means to an end, as were all the business components of the deal. I just wanted to cook and make people happy, and the sooner I could make that happen, the better.

Meanwhile, things were going great with Kiefer. Whatever it was we had, anyway. It didn't need a label, and I was happier for it not to have one. Labels were limiting and brought with them implications that I wasn't ready to deal with. The second anyone put a label on a relationship I was in, it felt like I was being tied down, and that made me antsy.

It was nice to have someone to come home to, especially someone as nice as Kiefer, whose body fit so perfectly into mine and who could drive me absolutely wild as easily as flipping a switch. Getting the food truck up and running was

going to be busy and stressful, but he gave me a release from all that negative energy and made sure I slept well at night.

Through all the negotiations, the investors and I ultimately agreed on a space in Larchmont Village, a young and hip part of Los Angeles with several good restaurants. But, even with the amount of quality food in the area, there wouldn't be much specific competition for The Vegan Vaquero, and the investors and I agreed we could carve out our own niche. At least potentially. Demographics and surveys could only tell you so much, and it was impossible to know for sure if success was in your future until you actually get set up and see what the customers want.

I took an Uber out to my truck in Thousand Oaks, where it was still waiting patiently for me. After spending a solid half an hour looking for Patrick, the raccoon, I couldn't find him, so I left an apple behind in the hopes that he'd find and enjoy it.

Then I drove out to Larchmont and parked the truck in the lot. It was still early enough in the day that none of the other trucks were open yet, and there weren't any customers. With nobody there, it was difficult to get a full idea of how things would look, but I still wasn't happy with how my truck appeared next to the other ones.

One of the other trucks, one specializing in grilled cheeses, wasn't quite open, but the owner was doing some checks and getting things ready for the day. I went over to introduce myself.

"Hey," I told her. "I'm going to be opening in a few weeks and wanted to introduce myself. I'm Melody."

The woman had a short pixie cut dyed neon blue that worked for her and revealed a skull and crossbones tattoo on her neck that wasn't enough to take away from her friendly demeanor.

She introduced herself as Chelsea. "We try to be as helpful to each other as possible here. I like to think of it as almost a family. Maybe community is a better word for it."

“That’s nice to hear,” I said. “It’s always a little scary introducing yourself in a place like this.”

“Why? Because we’re supposed to be enemies?”

I laughed. “I mean, we’re in competition with each other, right?”

Chelsea shook her head. “Nah, not really. Maybe on a given night, but the way it works is if any of us gets any kind of success, it tends to bleed over into the other trucks. We’re stronger working together than fighting against each other. Plus, it’s just more fun to be friends. We’re not out here to become billionaires, just make a comfortable living.”

She was speaking my language now. “And make sure the customers leave happy and full.”

She turned her hand into the shape of a gun, pointed it towards me, and made a clicking sound. “Exactly. I’ve got to get this propane tank replaced, but if you need anything, just come on by, and I’ll do what I can to help.”

With that, she grabbed the tank from the side of her truck and put it into her car before driving off. I was excited to make my first friend here, but also knew there was plenty that I needed to do and needed to focus on that.

I looked at my truck again and still didn’t like what I saw. My signage was washed out, and the truck itself seemed a little too beat up for this area. This wasn’t some run-of-the-mill food truck park — these were nice places, and The Vegan Vaquero stood out like a sore thumb among them. On top of that, I don’t know... the yellow display wasn’t working for me anymore. It seemed very old me, whereas now I wanted something with more contrast. Maybe a dark background with a red font, perhaps even neon lights.

I sat down at one of the benches and began scribbling down some ideas. Though I wasn’t much of an artist, I could come up with a rough design that somebody with an actual eye for this sort of thing could run with. As I was doing that, a shadow appeared overhead.

“Hello.”

I recognized the face before I could place it. And the recognition was strange because this was a new location, and I didn't think I knew anybody. But I did know this girl.

Then it clicked me.

"Farmer's market," I said.

She nodded.

"I saw on Instagram that you were planning on getting set up today," she said. "I figured you might need a little help."

I'd given her my information with the belief that she'd completely forget about me in less than a day, but here she was, eager to help. I didn't know how to tell her that I preferred running things on my own.

"Remind me of your name," I said.

"Kalle." She extended her hand, and I shook it.

It was strange. For someone who was essentially a stalker to my business, she didn't seem too happy to be there. She was dressed all in black and wore a blank expression.

"I'm a good worker," she said, "if I like what I'm doing. Can I work for you?"

"The thing is, Kalle," I told her, trying to be both blunt and kind, "is I wasn't really planning on having any help. Not right away. And the investors haven't worked in salary for any employees."

"Pay me under the table," she said.

I shook my head. "My lawyer wouldn't like that."

"Fine, pay me minimum wage and let me live off of tips."

She was nothing if not persistent.

"Why do you want this so bad?" I asked her.

"It's kind of a long story," she said. "How long do you have?"

I pulled out my phone. Technically, I had all day. I was on my own time, but I also wanted to get back at a semi-reasonable hour.

“I can give you five minutes,” I told her.

She sat down across from me.

“Here’s the number one,” she said. “The job at the farmer’s market sucks. I’m helping out a friend of my dad’s. She pays me shit, but my dad tells me I need to have a job or he’s taking away the car.”

I’d been in Los Angeles long enough to know that cutting off someone’s access to a car was akin to cutting off their oxygen. Sure, you could use ride share apps, to a degree, but they were expensive and limited. Cars meant independence and, if Kalle was anything like me, nothing was more important than that.

“My thing is I might as well be killing two birds with one stone, so to speak,” she continued. “I don’t want to work for anyone else so long as I can help it. But, you know, I’m 19, so I don’t have a choice right now. I want to start up my own business and I figure I could work for you, let you take me under your wing, and when I’m a little older, you let me fly away and do my own thing.” She paused. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to confuse two bird metaphors.”

I had to laugh at that. “Your selling point is that you want me to give you all my trade secrets so you can go off and be a competitor?”

Kalle wasn’t one to smile, but I thought I saw the sides of her lips rise just a little bit in response. “Or make me a business partner at some point if you don’t think you’ll be able to compete.”

Some may have been turned off by her arrogance. Without working a single day in the truck, she was already trying to negotiate a deal whereby she’d be a partial owner of the business.

Not me, though. Where others may have seen arrogance, I saw ambition. This was a girl who didn’t take no for an answer, who marched to the beat of her own drum. Someone who fought against the world constantly trying to fit her into a mold that wasn’t a match. A rule-breaker and independent

thinker who would make a series of stupid decisions in paving out her path for life.

In other words, she was a little version of me.

“You’re not very good at poker, are you?” she asked.

“Pardon?”

“I can see the cogs spinning in your head. When I first showed up, it was a definite no, but now you’re considering it.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” I told her, even though she was exactly right.

“Minimum wage is \$18 in California,” she told me. “What is that, like three tacos an hour? That’s three tacos so that you don’t have all the work weighing you down every day. Three tacos to sleep in on the weekend because you’ve got a kid coming in to do all the grunt work for you.”

“Minimum wage is \$15.50 in California,” I told her, and that’s when a genuine smile broke out on her face.

“Yeah, you got me,” she said. “So it’s even less than three tacos an hour.”

“You make a good case for yourself,” I told her. “Let’s start you at an even \$20 an hour, plus tips. How’s that sound?”

I extended my hand and she wasted no time in taking it.

“You won’t regret it, Ms. Cruz,” she said.

“Melody,” I told her. “If we’re going to be business partners one day, you better start calling me Melody.”

“You’ve got it,” she said and then forced my name out. “Melody.”

It would seem that it wasn’t even past ten in the morning, and I’d already made two friends. The day was off to a good start.

CHAPTER 16



*** KIEFER ***

I had to keep reminding myself that Natasha was not my enemy. For one thing, she was dating my brother and, who knows, if things continued down this road, she could end up being my sister-in-law. For another, she was never anything but thankful and kind to me. Deep down, though, I was jealous of her innate and natural talent.

I could go on a rant about how hard I worked to get where I was, but, in reality, I didn't work that hard. Sure, I put in the hours, but it almost always felt like play to me. Like I was goofing around. Until a year or two earlier, it even felt like that when I went into the studio. I'd come in, goof off with some cool people and give Ernie what he wanted, even when he wasn't sure what that might be.

That New Year's was a real turning point in my life, and I'll never know for sure which had the bigger impact: losing Wendy or stopping the drugs. But that was when my job stopped being fun. Everything stopped being fun. And it all became more difficult, too.

Maybe part of it was her youth. Natasha was still in her 20s, which wasn't a lot younger than I was, but it was enough. She was still on the up and up instead of leveling off like I had. She could risk being more creative and playful.

It had been a couple of weeks now, and we were on break when she started talking to me.

"What do you think about me and Jackson?" she asked. It was almost out of the blue, as if she had gotten bored of small

talk and niceties and wanted to actually get to something interesting.

“How do you mean?”

“Like, I don’t know,” she said. “Seems like we have a good thing going. Pretty chill.”

I could read between the lines. Maybe she wasn’t exactly sure what she was asking, but I knew. And I didn’t know how to tell her the truth without making my brother look bad. The fact was he was a player and always had been. Though I hoped he’d outgrow that phase, there hadn’t been any signs that he was going to. Not on his own, anyway.

Someone might have said the same thing about me a couple of years ago. I only hoped that it wouldn’t take Jackson the same kind of jarring change to turn things around.

“Why do you ask?” I said, deflecting the question back to her. “Do you want something more?”

“Maybe this’ll sound ridiculous to you,” she said, “but I’m not, like, a kid anymore. This isn’t college or high school, you know. I’m starting here, I have the beginnings of a stable job with a chance of advancement. I like him, but at the same time, I feel like I don’t want to put a label on anything.”

“Well,” I said, “the thing about Jackson is that he’s got layers. He’s always kind of just done his own thing. But, if he didn’t like you, I know for a fact that he wouldn’t be sticking around.”

I paused and hoped she would ask another question, change the subject, or do anything to fill the silence, but all she did was stare back at me with a blank expression that was impossible to read.

It made me think about what was going on between me and Melody. After all, things hadn’t started with us too long after it had with Jackson and Natasha. Should I have been wondering the same thing? Was this getting serious between the two of us?

Not that it was a problem. It’s just sometimes time passes by quicker than you realize, and suddenly something you’d

worried might be a one night fling turned into something serious without anybody putting any work in to make it happen.

But we weren't talking about Melody and me. We were talking about her and Jackson. Except we weren't talking. It was just silent, and I could tell she was thinking about her own relationship as well.

"But, with Jackson, that early energy and excitement will usually fizzle out."

That got a reaction out of her, and she spoke.

"What happens then?"

"Well," I said, realizing I was digging myself into a hole that was only growing deeper, but unable to do anything about it, "he loses interest, and he moves on."

I was talking about Jackson here, but I wondered if Melody was in the same boat. She was an excitable person with so much enthusiasm, but back in high school, she had a tendency to lose interest in hobbies. She had me over for a guitar lesson a few times and then just sort of forgot about it.

Was I going to end up in the corner collecting dust like that old guitar of hers?

"How long have you two been seeing each other?" I asked Natasha, trying to do the math in my head.

"Six weeks," she said.

"Hmm," I said.

"What?"

"I don't know that he's ever been in a relationship that's lasted this long. Usually, by the end of the first month, he's lost interest."

At this point, I was mostly thinking out loud and perhaps I should have done a better job of keeping my mouth shut, but that had never been my strong point. Especially when I was distracted thinking about Melody. I knew my brother's habits, but not hers. How long was her attention span going to last? At

the moment, she saw no signs of slowing down, but that was perhaps even scarier. Maybe, with her — as with my brother — it would be full speed ahead until she hit a brick wall, and all that affection and excitement just fizzled out.

Or maybe not. Maybe I was inventing problems where none existed.

“I guess what I’m saying is that this seems like the start of a great mutual relationship,” I told her. That seemed to be good enough for her, and I realized that overthinking things was not helping my situation either, so I changed the subject.

“Let me ask you something,” I told her. “How do you stay out of your head?”

She gave me a quizzical look. “What do you mean? I feel like I’m constantly in my head, second guessing Jackson’s actions and wondering what he must be thinking. If he’s telling me the truth or just what I want to hear or—”

“I mean in the studio,” I said, although I wasn’t sure I was. I was stuck in my head concerning Melody, but it also extended to the studio, where I was consciously aware of every movement of my hands. It made it so difficult to loosen up. “It was a few weeks ago you came in here and played alongside Peterson Floyd in front of professionals on an instrument that wasn’t even yours, and you knocked it out of the park.”

She blushed at that. “I wouldn’t go that far,” she said. “I did okay.”

“You’re selling yourself short,” I said. “I would have been shitting my pants and too stiff to play anything if I was in your shoes.”

“You played fine,” she said. “It was just...”

“Stiff,” I said. “Stilted. Forced. Not musical.”

“None of that,” she said. “Just you weren’t having a conversation with him. With your instrument, I mean. Like this right here, we’re talking back and forth. Listening and responding. You were doing your own thing.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Because I couldn’t keep up with him.”

She shook her head. “I’ve heard your recordings. You have the skill.”

“You’ve heard the old recordings. Lately, I feel like I’ve lost the magic.” Magic, in this case, was a euphemism for pills, but I wasn’t about to admit that to her. It seemed like I could no longer function without them. It was obvious in the studio, but it was also apparent to me at home. I’d never given relationships this much thought. I just assumed they’d move forward so long as nobody was rocking the boat too much.

And, on top of that, I knew sober life wasn’t the one for Melody. She drank from time to time and smoked weed, but was able to do so responsibly. I couldn’t keep her away from that stuff forever and, with me, it was like giving a mouse a cookie. One crumb, and I could fall right back off the wagon.

Judging by my playing lately, maybe it wasn’t the worst thing. I needed them to really play. But however necessary they may have been for me, Natasha seemed sober all the time. She’d managed to get out of her head without altering her mind to do so. What was her secret?

“It’s still in there,” she said. “My parents signed me up for tennis when I was in junior high. I was never great, but I learned a trick that would allow me to win every game. I’d go up to my opponent when they were a little bit ahead and comment on their return — ask them how they were doing that. It would get them to focus on their individual movements and do the exact kind of thing you’re talking about and then play badly. I psyched them out.”

She was telling me this like she was letting me in on a dirty little secret, as if she’d cheated. Maybe she’d felt like she had.

“How do you avoid getting psyched out, then?”

“Don’t focus on your hand. Don’t focus on your technique. Your brain’s already got that going on autopilot. The time to focus on that is when you’re practicing. But, when you’re

playing, you've got to ignore individual notes and, instead, just relax and the music will take you over."

I knew the feeling she was describing, but it was scary. Akin to jumping out of an airplane and hoping the parachute would open. But if I wanted a less scary career, maybe I should have gone into something more clear cut, like finance or something.

"That's the secret," she said. "When I went into that audition, I shut you and Ernie out. I didn't care who I was playing with or how famous he was, I just listened to what he was doing and let my fingers and soul take over, free of judgment. Because you're right, I couldn't have thought about what you, Jackson, and Ernie were thinking as I played. I had to just ignore the world."

She was answering the question, but also she was ignoring it. In describing what she did, she ignored the actual thing I was asking, which was, "How?" There wasn't a switch in my brain I could flip on and off. It was always going, whether I wanted it to or not. And when I wanted to do exactly what she was describing and run away from judgment and self-doubt, it would only make my brain distract me even more.

"I can tell you you're good enough a million times," she said, "but until you believe it and trust yourself, you'll be stuck operating your instrument instead of playing music, if you know what I mean. Like you're still up there pressing down the strings and plucking them, but the instrument is just a tool. If you gave Charlie Parker a kazoo, he'd still manage to make great music because that's who he was."

"That's true," I said. But there was also a truth that she was leaving out: Parker had been addicted to heroin ever since he was 16 and he died at 34. No doubt, the music was in him all along, but for some people, maybe it took a needle to get to it.

I thought I'd managed to beat the addiction, but between Natasha and Melody over the past several weeks, I realized it wasn't out of my system at all. I could fall back into that dark place with only the gentlest of pushes.

It terrified me.

CHAPTER 17



MELODY

The anticipation was killing me in the weeks leading up to The Vegan Vaquero's West Coast opening. Everything had to be perfect, which of course was impossible, but I had Kalle helping me out.

Over the past few weeks, it became clear that Kiefer and I would need separate cars. With the money from the investors providing something of a buffer (as well as money I was saving by not paying rent), I could eat into savings and buy a used Subaru that worked more than well enough to get me to and from the food court. It gave me a slight amount of independence and made me less reliant on Kiefer. While Kiefer had offered to just let me use the car whenever I needed it, I could see a sense of relief on his face when I did go out and buy my own.

And it almost immediately became clear how abundantly necessary the car was once I had it. We no longer needed to synchronize our schedules or leave work early for the other and could more or less come and go as we pleased. With the hours I was working on stuff for the truck, the Subaru ended up being a lifesaver for both of us.

As, of course, was Kalle, who helped design the new sign and give the truck a new coat of paint. I still handled basic social media presence, but she got the word out within local vegan groups that we were opening. I was appreciative of her getting there early in the morning to meet with the vendors and make sure all the ingredients had arrived in time for our opening. There was a bit of an issue with the peppers, which

were good, but not great, but she helped me get in touch with another distributor and managed to avert the catastrophe which would have delayed our opening by at least a week.

So we had all that taken care of and ready.

The problem was even if you had everything you could control under control, that was at most half the battle. There were other factors that were beyond preparation and, for those, all we could do was hope.

There wasn't much space to pace within the truck, but I made do with what I had, dancing around Kalle, who was running inventory. I could tell she was almost as excited as I was, though perhaps not as anxious as she wasn't risking anything. If the truck wasn't a success, she could just get another job. For me, I was on the line for \$100,000 for the investors, and nobody would trust me with another business ever again. I'd have to somehow make my way back to Houston with my tail between my legs as I apologized to my dad, begging for his forgiveness and for him to take me back.

He would, of course, say yes — I was his daughter after all — but it would still be humiliating. And any time in the future I ever argued with him about anything, he'd point back to this and remind me how he was right, and I should have listened to him.

“Can I open us up?” Kalle asked, interrupting my train of thought. Although, today, it didn't feel so much like a single train as a swarm of gnats.

I looked at my phone: 10:28.

“Give it two minutes,” I said. “We open on time. Not a second earlier. Not a second later.”

“Okay, okay.”

I got it. I wanted to open, too. In my imagination, a long line had already formed of eager, hungry customers, but it was much more likely a barren lot on the other side of the window. After all, it was a Monday, and people were at work, not yet on their lunch breaks.

There was a knock on the back door, and I opened it up. Chelsea stood there with a big smile on her face.

“Today’s the day!” she said. “You all ready?”

“Nervous,” I told her.

Kalle gave her a thumbs up. “Just waiting on the clock at this point.” She looked down at her phone. “It’s taking forever.”

“You think it’s going slow now,” Chelsea said, “It’s agony at the end of a ten hour day when there aren’t any customers.” She thought for a second. “Then again, it flies by during a rush, and you won’t be able to keep up, so it evens out.”

She took a deep breath and looked at me seriously, putting a hand on my shoulder. “Listen, Melody...”

“I know,” I said. “Anything I need, just come to you.”

She patted my shoulder. “You got it. Don’t be afraid to reach out. We’re stronger together. And your food is excellent, you’re going to do great.”

My phone vibrated and began beeping.

“You hear that, Kalle?” I asked. “You can open up.”

She pushed open the window and locked it into place.

We all looked out eagerly to the empty lot I’d predicted.

“It’ll pick up,” Chelsea told me. “Give it time.”

Easy for her to say. She wasn’t the one who had to build her reputation from scratch.

“I’ll talk to you two in a bit,” she said. “Good luck!”

She left and closed the door behind her.

Over the next half hour or so, Kalle sat at the window, starting out excited but quickly losing energy until, before too long, she was playing word games on her phone. I wasn’t about to be the kind of boss to get on her ass for doing nothing when there was nothing to do, so I let her.

Around 11:15, customers started pouring into the general area, though the first dozen or so paid us no attention, going

straight to their truck of choice. When things started getting a bit busier, we did get a couple who at least acknowledged that we existed and even nodded in our direction before moving on to the next truck.

Still, the noon rush began, and we'd had a grand total of zero customers.

“What do we do?” Kalle asked through gritted teeth.

I didn't know. I was supposed to be the expert, but I had no idea. There was an obvious answer, but it reeked of desperation to me and I wasn't sure I could do it without consulting the investors.

“Fuck it,” I said. “Let's start making some tacos.”

Once we got the oil in the pan and started frying up the vegetables, I definitely noticed a few more glances in our direction.

“What are we doing?” Kalle asked.

“I don't care if we end up giving food away for free,” I said. “We're going to get customers today.”

But I had a feeling it wasn't going to come to that. The smells from our truck started wafting around the outdoor area, with the flavorful spices and authentic TexMex stylings whispering into customer's ears by way of their nose.

Pictures and presentations could sell a meal, but nothing was more effective than the power of an aroma on an empty stomach. And, sure enough, curiosity got the better of one of the workers in the area looking for lunch — a man in maybe his early 50s, wearing a blue suit that he'd probably owned for more than a decade and needed an update.

“Hello,” he said, his voice loud but unsure.

Kalle took the register. “Hi and welcome to The Vegan Vaquero,” she said, with mild enthusiasm that wasn't exactly her style, but didn't feel forced either.

“What's good here?” he asked.

“Everything, of course,” she said. “What’s your tolerance for spice?”

His face turned a light shade of red. It didn’t matter what his answer was, I knew to keep things on the mild side.

“Not too hot,” he said. This was a lost man who needed someone else to make decisions for him.

I looked at the guy. “How hungry are you? On a scale of side salad to five course meal.”

He laughed at that, loosened up a bit. “Maybe a good size sub sandwich.”

“Great,” I said. “Any allergies?”

“Nope.”

“Kalle,” I said. “Ring him up for a breakfast taco.” That was the cheapest thing on the menu. I looked back at him. “Kalle’ll take care of you here, then go take a seat. I’m gonna make you something good.”

He paid what we charged him and didn’t leave a tip, then sat down alone at one of the benches and fiddled with his phone.

I heated up a tortilla on the comal, then flipped it when it was a nice, light shade of brown. As the other side was warming, I piled on some peppers, onions, and greens, then added some small fried tofu cubes and covered it all in a light oat cream and our mildest verde salsa.

Then I wrapped it up into a burrito, put it in some foil, and dropped it on a tray along with tortilla chips and a small cup of red salsa. I brought it all to his table together with a bottle of water.

“Buen provecho!” I said to him with a smile in the accent my father used to make fun of, then headed towards the trailer, wishing there were eyes on the back of my head.

“Don’t stare,” I said to Kalle as I passed in front of her and she averted her eyes.

I, of course, did not follow my advice, but at least had the good sense to hide in the corner and make sure my face was covered by a shadow.

It was a similar situation to back in the meeting all those weeks ago. The man started with the chips, dipping one gingerly into the salsa. He then took a bite and gave a little shrug as if to say to himself, “Not bad.”

I was not worried about the chips. Those were easy. If you couldn’t manage to make decent tortilla chips, you had no business offering food to anyone.

When he began unwrapping the burrito, however, my jaw clenched, and I could feel myself getting nervous.

By this point, I should have had faith in myself. We’d shared samples with other people in the food truck community, who all gave it rave reviews, and the investors were also very much on board.

But at this moment in time, it didn’t matter what any of them thought. All that mattered was what this man in the ill-fitted blue suit thought. Because that’s how my mind worked when it came to my food. The only customer I cared about was the one I was currently serving.

He put his nose up to the skin of the burrito, didn’t detect anything wrong, and then took a bite.

The next second lasted a lifetime as I waited for his verdict. Fortunately, I could see it almost immediately in his face. It was a success. I watched as he demolished that burrito, taking bite after bite in rapid succession, barely giving himself a chance to swallow between each one. Before too long, he was licking what remained of the salsa off of his fingers with an almost childlike smile on his face.

When the chips were gone and he wiped his mouth off with his napkin, I could see him pause for a moment before standing up and walking back over to our truck.

“Can I get another one of those?” he asked.

“Was it not enough?” Kalle asked.

“Oh, it was more than enough,” he said. “I just know I’m going to want another for dinner.”

“No problem,” Kalle said, then looked at me and whispered, “How should I ring him up?”

“Sir,” I told him, “we gave you a little opening day discount, and, umm...”

He shook his head and removed his wallet from his back pocket, then took out a twenty-dollar bill and put it in the tips jar.

“I’m more than happy to pay full price.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “And be sure to tell your friends.”

The uncertainty from before had completely vanished, and he laughed. “Of course.”

Maybe it was the way he said it, or maybe it was the way his tone completely changed after eating the meal, but from that point on — even though he was only one customer — I had a good idea in my head that our truck was going to do quite well out in California. We weren’t going to have anything to worry about.

CHAPTER 18



*** KIEFER ***

If I was someone else, maybe I would have been happy with the arrangement. I was showing up for work every day, and Natasha was essentially doing all the work that I would have done. There were days where I'd play on a track, but that was usually just to get something down and she'd go over what I did in a future take — after all, even if she could play multiple instruments, she couldn't play them all at the same time.

If I were someone with too much pride, I would have pushed back against this. But I was realistic enough to admit that her versions were invariably better. She would tell me it was because she had my track to play off and improve, but I knew that was just her being kind. As a musician, she was just better than I was. It wasn't a matter of opinion, either. Anyone with the least bit of taste could have heard it.

My recordings weren't bad, per se. They just died in comparison.

At the same time, I wasn't humble enough to be completely okay with the fact, either. I wanted to record at least one thing that Natasha couldn't improve upon. Day after day, though, throughout multiple takes, maybe even without realizing it, Ernie would ultimately choose her contributions over mine.

A calmer man would have accepted the obvious — that I just wasn't playing at her level. My job was safe in that I was working more in the capacity of a sound engineer alongside Ernie, offering suggestions for the production that he would

take or leave while balancing the levels and ensuring that the recording quality was both clear and pristine as well as not so crowded that it would turn to mud when played through crappy speakers or \$10 earbuds.

As the time went by, things got a little busier, so I became more necessary. But it was clear from the assignments where I stood. While Natasha got to play on the bigger and more complex releases, I was delegated to the bubblegum stuff aimed towards breaking into the Top 40.

There's nothing wrong with this, of course. But one can only play so many three chord songs before they all tend to blend together.

Meanwhile, I would still make a point of heading into the engineering room whenever Natasha was playing to revel in her brilliance.

Jackson stopped by the studio at the end of the day to pick Natasha up, but Ernie wanted her to stick around a little while longer to play a piano part on a track that wasn't quite working, hoping that would fill in the gaps and make it work.

"It'll just be another hour or so," Ernie insisted.

"Cool," Jackson said with a certain glow. I'd never seen him quite like this before and I couldn't explain it. "Hey, Kiefer, want to grab dinner with me?"

I looked over at Ernie. "You need me?" I asked, hoping that the answer would be yes.

But he shook his head. "We've got it under control," he told me and waved me and Jackson aside.

"Great," I said. That was a lie. It was not great.

* * *

I took Jackson to the food court right by the studio — the one where I first ran into Melody after all those years. It seemed like forever ago, but, in reality, what was it? Only about three or four months? I wasn't counting the days, but that seemed

about right. In that time, my love life had shifted into overdrive while my career was stalling. Maybe even stuck in reverse.

Why did life have to work that way? Why couldn't everything be working in all areas at the same time?

Then it hit me: Three months? Had it really been a full three months? Because that would mean...

"How long have you and Natasha been seeing each other?" I asked Jackson.

His face turned a light shade of pink I'd never seen on him before and you could tell he was like a fish out of water.

"I don't know, she is cool and I am cool with keeping her around," he said.

The reaction said more than words ever could. Jackson was a guy who'd never been in a relationship for more than a month, last I'd checked. If we were somewhere around the three-month mark and he was still coming by her work to pick her up at the end of the day, excited to see her, wow, this was huge for him.

"This is the longest relationship you've ever had, isn't it," I said with a goofy grin. "This isn't another one of your flings."

"Shh," he said, putting his finger up to his lips. "Don't cramp my style, you weirdo."

"There's a word for that, you know," I told him.

It was often a silly thing to expect change in this world. People tended to stay the same, and it was foolish to believe them when they told you things were going to be different going forward. Bad habits were hard to break.

But maybe things were different this time. Maybe she really was the one for him. I liked working with her. She had a good head on her shoulders and was obviously phenomenally talented, but more than that, I liked that she was good for Jackson. I liked seeing him like this. It was a sustainable happiness at this point, as opposed to his overwhelming bursts

of love and lust that were, honestly, exhausting even as a spectator.

It was selfish to think about it from my point of view, but it was difficult to keep up with their names and remember details about his current flings when we'd go out to eat together. I'd confuse the details. The worst was the time he got back together with someone, and I didn't recognize her. Even after she'd told me we'd met before, I still couldn't place her or remember a single thing about her.

The discomfort didn't last too long, though. She was out of his life again within ten days, and I told Jackson to warn me ahead of time if something like that ever happened again.

"I'll give you a hint," I told Jackson. "That word starts with an 'L.'"

"Stop it," he said.

"No, no," I said, teasing him. "I'm glad my brother is finally growing out of his frat boy ways."

"I was never a frat guy," he said.

"Nah, you just fell into lust every time you see a pair of legs with a head attached to them."

"Like there's anything wrong with that?" he said. "You're just jealous. You've got all those tattoos and the rock star image, but you're too old to even go clubbing."

"I'm only two years older than you!" I said to him.

"Age isn't about a number," he said. "It's a state of mind. What's the saying? You're only as old as the woman you feel?"

"You're lecturing me about age while quoting a saying that got its start during the Great Depression?"

He smiled. "Just trying to come up with a reference you'd be familiar with, grandpa."

I rolled my eyes. "Look, we all grow up some time, and I'm glad that you've found Natasha. She seems like she's really good for you."

“She is,” he said. “Hey, what about you and Melody? What’s going on there? Must be a little more than just smashin’ fronts because you two have been inseparable for months.”

I considered ignoring the bait so I could focus back on him, but he’d just try to shift the conversation again. Maybe he was right? Maybe it was one of those things that you could jinx if you talked about it.

“She’s doing well,” I said. “Her truck just opened up today. I’m sure I’ll hear all about it when I get home.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said.

And I knew that’s not what he meant. But I didn’t know how to put into words what Melody and I had. We were something more than friends with benefits, I guess, though we hadn’t had a conversation about labels or exclusivity. Not that it mattered. I wasn’t about to see anyone else, and she was pretty busy with the food truck. I couldn’t imagine she had the energy, mental or otherwise, to be wined and dined by a slew of eligible Los Angeles bachelors.

From what I could tell, she appreciated the simplicity of what we had and the lack of complications.

“We’re old friends,” I said. “I’m helping her out while she gets settled in.”

“I see the way you two look at each other,” he said. “It’s been a while, but I’ve seen that look on your face before.”

I ignored him. He was trying to be encouraging, but it was just upsetting me. And I had to believe part of it was that I felt something similar to what Jackson had said earlier: I wasn’t good enough for her. How could she possibly care about me when I was such a professional failure? Or the fact that I am just one drink away from being a complete basket case? I was probably just a warm body who offered her a place to stay during a time when what she wanted from life was something that came with no strings attached and minimal complications.

On some level, I understood that this wasn’t the case. Someone like Melody could find a guy to shack up with

without a problem. But she chose me, a friend from high school that she randomly happened to run into one day. Right around the area Jackson and I were sitting in now, finishing up our meals. But I didn't want to jinx it, because we were so much more than that, what was happening with us was true serendipity. So to avoid the potential jinx, I cut the visit short.

"We should probably start getting back," I told him. I had no idea if it had been a full hour or not, but I was about done with being out there and wanted to go home, relax and be alone with Melody.

After we parted ways, my mind was doing cruel things to me, insisting that I wasn't good enough for Melody. That I was a failure who didn't have an original musical thought in his head.

I put my hand in my pocket and pressed it against my phone comfortingly. All it would take was one text message to my dealer, and those thoughts would go away. I forced the idea out of my head, but I feared it would come back in again and again and, sooner or later, I wouldn't be able to resist it.

"Stop it," I said aloud. "We're not going there. We're going home where everything is in order."

Putting it into actual words somehow made it feel like more of a commitment, and I didn't take the exit that would have led to his place. Instead, I kept driving until I got to my apartment complex.

I parked the car and took the stairs up. As I walked down the hallway, I heard muffled bass through the walls — music, played too loudly. Somebody was having a party.

Wonderful, I thought.

But I'd just put in earplugs and ignore it as I fell into my bed and, if I couldn't sleep, at least lay there with my eyes closed until it was time to wake up again.

As I walked towards my unit, the music got louder. Almost in denial, I began to convince myself that it must be a neighbor throwing the party, but by the time I got to my door, I knew that the sounds were coming from within my apartment.

Of course it's Melody, I thought. It was her opening day. Of course she'd want to celebrate.

I opened the door and was instantly hit with the familiar smell of alcohol. There was a party going on my apartment and it was a party just like the New Years Eve I lost Wendy, and that triggered a kind of fear in me that I didn't know how to handle. It wrapped a feeling of temptation that I couldn't let escape, and feeling of pain I never wanted to relive. This is not what I wanted to come home to. This was not something I could handle, not in my safe space. This wasn't a bar or a restaurant. This was my home, and my home was the one place I couldn't just leave.

I knew I would be in trouble if I didn't take care of this immediately. My head was spinning, I felt like I was in the twilight zone, and after nearly a year and a half of complete sobriety, this was the first time where I felt like everything was completely out of control.

CHAPTER 19



MELODY

“We did it!” Kalle was absolutely beaming.

Once the first customer came by, the dam began to burst and, as the lunch rush grew larger, we got more and more people to give us a try. It was exhilarating and exhausting. It was more than we could have anticipated and, as a result, we ran out of jackfruit. By the time we closed, we were nearly out of tofu, too and though it was a full 10 hour day, Kalle and I both still had so much energy that we needed to do something with it. So I invited everybody from the food court over for an impromptu party.

I didn't expect so many of them to actually come by.

And, sure, in retrospect, things got out of hand, but it wasn't every day that you got to open your food truck and see that success was imminent.

As happy as I was, though, Kalle was over the moon.

“I knew the food was good,” she said, “but... I mean, no offense, but I didn't realize it was going to be that big of a hit.”

“Sometimes,” I said, “you just need to have faith and let the food speak for itself.”

It was almost a little concerning. People had a tendency to talk and tell their friends about good food — which is what we wanted, of course, but I didn't know if I could deal with every day being like today.

But I guess that's why I had Kalle to help me out.

Part of me wondered if her excitement would wane in a few months time after the honeymoon was over, but that was tomorrow's problem. Right now, we were on top of the world, looking forward to the future we dreamed of coming true and celebrating with our new friends.

Or at least that's what we were doing before Kiefer made it home. And, because I deserved it, I had a celebratory drink. Or possibly two. Maybe more than that, but who counts drinks other than alcoholics? I could handle myself and knew when to stop.

Sure, things were starting to get a little blurry, but I still had control over my actions. The world may have been in a fog, but my mind was still working at 100%. A little slower than usual, but it wasn't like I was a different person or something. I was still the same old Melody as before, and I wasn't doing anything that sober Melody wouldn't have done.

At least that's what I kept telling myself.

In retrospect, maybe I did have one drink too many, and I got more drunk than a responsible adult should have. But that was only in hindsight.

It's not like I was the only one who handled that situation badly.

When the door opened and Kiefer walked in, you could almost feel the air leave the room. Or maybe it was just in my head. Maybe nobody else even noticed him — though a guy like Kiefer can't go anywhere without people noticing him.

Even from the other side of the room and through my somewhat intoxicated state, I could tell he was in a mood. And when he was like this, nobody around him was allowed to be happy. It only made things worse for him.

I tried remaining focused on Kalle, hoping Kiefer would ignore everything and just go to his room, do whatever he needed to do to get in a better mood, then come out and join us when he was ready.

Of course, that's not what happened. Instead, it was exactly like being back at that club when we first got together.

Kiefer wasn't happy just being miserable. No, when he was miserable, he had to ensure everyone else around him was miserable, too.

To ensure his mission was a success, he made a beeline for me, practically jumping in front of Kalle, cutting her off mid-sentence.

“You need to get everybody the hell out of here,” he said. It felt like he was shouting, with each word a percussive blast at my face. His voice was definitely loud. Maybe he just wanted to be heard over the music. But he didn't need to be *that* loud. It pierced my skull like an icepick — each word more painful than the next.

I hate being yelled at. It tenses me up almost immediately and sends tears straight to my eyes as I quiver and freeze, as though somebody had flipped an off switch in my brain. There were times when I was younger when somebody yelled at me, and I couldn't even force words out of my mouth. It's like my body completely shuts down.

As I grew older, and after dating a serial screamer in my early 20s, I got better at dealing with men and their loud voices, but I never became completely comfortable with it and vowed to never put myself through that again.

“Right now!” he yelled.

I closed my eyes and focused, through the dense brain fog of both anxiety and inebriation. I'd trained myself to do this over years of dealing with shouters, and I found the inner strength I needed to respond to him.

“You can't talk to me like that,” I said. The words barely sounded like me. In pushing them out, they slurred so much that I wasn't sure he'd even be able to understand them. My East Texan accent always got thicker with a few drinks, but this was ridiculous. It practically sounded like another language. I repeated my words slowly, trying to make them clearer, but my mouth would only cooperate so much. “You can't talk to me like that!” I said, with each word feeling as viscous as syrup.

He didn't lower his voice. "You're throwing a party at my apartment without my permission, and then lecturing *me* on my tone?!"

It wasn't a lecture. It was a request. I truly didn't know the strength of his addition, and the way he reacted to it. Also the fact that his reactions triggered my own inner issues so much. But, if he cared about me even a little bit, he'd realize by my reaction how much he was hurting me and hopefully stop it.

"And there are drinks everywhere," he said. "You know I can't have that."

I didn't think he was wrong. I was being inconsiderate, but I didn't mean for it to get like this. I thought it would just be a few people and, sure, it got out of hand, but this wasn't the way to talk to me about it.

"Kiefer," I said, forcing myself to slow down so the words came out audibly, "you seriously need to calm down please."

His face was turning red, and I was trying to approach the situation as cool as possible with all the people around.

The words came out faster than my brain could comprehend.

"It's just a couple of drinks relax, it's a party."

Then I realized what I had just said, but I couldn't stuff the words back into my mouth.

"What did you say?" he asked, his voice booming as he towered over me. He was silent for just long enough that I wondered if the problem would go away.

Instead, he said nothing. He simply walked away from me, then over to his stereo and turned it off.

"Party's over," he said. "Everybody go home."

"Uh oh," said the guy who operated the Italian food truck. "Papa's home!"

"Out! Out!" Kiefer said.

It was horrifying to watch and I was embarrassed by it all. These were my new friends — really the only ones I had in

California other than Kiefer — and I wanted them to like me, but this would forever be the one of the first impressions I made on them. I had also just said the most stupidest thing I could have possibly said, and blew the situation right out of the water.

While this was going on, Kalle was looking on in shock, giving me a look as if to ask if she needed to get involved.

I knew Kiefer was, deep down, a good guy, and this wasn't representative of who he was 99.9% of the time. But he was also a big guy and could come off as intimidating. I appreciated Kalle's tacit offer to help, but I shook my head and gestured for her to leave. Her sticking around would only make things worse, and clearly we had both crossed a line with each other.

As she left — the last guest remaining in the apartment — she closed the door softly behind her with a deafeningly quiet click. And then Kiefer and I were alone.

“You didn't need to embarrass me like that,” I said, finally finding my voice. So what if the words weren't as crisp as they would have been if I was sober, it didn't mean he could be an asshole about it.

“Let me make this crystal clear to you,” he said. “Never, under any circumstances, tell an addict around drinks to relax. Ever.”

He was right. I should have never done that, but in the heat of the moment and my brain fog, the mistake was made.

“You might as well fire a gun into my head,” he told me.

“I think that's being a little dramatic, don't you think?” I asked, but I knew the answer. He was not being dramatic. But I didn't want to back down because he had stirred up deep seeded feelings that I couldn't ignore. I moved away from Texas so that shit like this wouldn't happen to me in my life, but it didn't matter that I was miles away because I seemed to have ended up right back where I started.

His hands clenched in anger in response, and I could tell he was holding something back. I was shaking, too.

He clenched his fists and turned away from me.

“What the hell were you even thinking?” he asked. “This isn’t your apartment.”

Still shaking, I forced my voice to be as strong as possible. “No, but it’s where I’m living for right now. If I want friends to come over, this is where they’ll be.”

“This is *my* apartment,” he repeated. “You think this is what I want to come home to after a shitty day at work? You know that this is my home, where everything is supposed to make sense.”

“It got a little out of hand,” I told him. “I’m sorry.”

“A little?!” he snapped. “This is like the kind of thing Marty Reiser would throw every time his parents went out of town.”

Marty Reiser was a kid in our class whose parents were rich and would always go on weekend getaways, during which he would throw these completely out-of-pocket ragers. At the end of the weekend, the house would be an absolute mess. I remember asking him once why he did it. His parents would find out, and he’d get a wallop for it. He shrugged his shoulders and said it was always worth it.

And now I really wondered because all Kiefer was doing was screaming at me, and this definitely wasn’t worth it.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “Next time I’ll text you ahead of time to know what’s up.”

That was the wrong thing to say. He exploded.

“There will not be a next time!” he said. “Do not ever do this again, do you understand?”

The guy from the Italian food truck had made a sarcastic comment about Kiefer being like a father, but now he sounded exactly like my dad, commanding respect just because he was bigger and louder than me.

That freeze switch in my brain was now flipped between fight and flight, and I wasn’t sure which it was going to land on.

“Do you understand?!” he repeated.

My dad always wanted me to submit to him and fall in step with his authority. What he should have realized was the best way to get me to *not* do what he wanted was to demand it. If he had thought to ask me nicely and treat me like a human being, well, I very well might still have been living in Texas.

I loved my dad, but our relationship was strained, largely because of stuff like this.

And I cared about Kiefer, too, but if this was how he was going to treat me, then I didn't need him in my life.

“Fuck you,” I said to him, and no matter how slurred those words have been, drenched in my accent, I knew he understood them completely. I walked right past him towards the door.

He grabbed me by the shoulder, holding me back, and I turned around and slapped him hard across the face. Perfect aim. Even with some drinks in me, it was hard to miss that sharp jawline.

The shock of the slap got him to let go of me, and I ran straight towards the door and headed out without looking back.

I was furious at Kiefer; how could I have been so blind? There were so many layers to both of us that had crept to the surface, and neither one of us even bothered to stop and think.

And then I remembered that I'd slapped him, and I felt horrible. How could I do that to him? He was yelling at me, but he'd barely even touched me, and he was right to be mad. I should have let him know ahead of time or maybe not invited *everybody* from the food court. Maybe it could have just been a small get-together with me, Kalle, Chelsea, and maybe one or two others.

But how was I to know so many people would want to go to a stranger's apartment on a Monday evening after a long day in the hot sun serving customers? And I wasn't the one who brought the drinks. In fact, I wasn't sure who did. It

wasn't my fault. Plus, it was a get-together among friends. Drinks were to be expected.

If he'd talked to me like a normal person, maybe I could have explained it to him, and he would have understood.

But that's not the way it happened, and at that very moment I realized that Kiefer and I were at two very different points in our lives. That our perfect little love bubble was just burst by our past demons that had been brushed under a blissful rug, and history was in fact repeating itself. Not only for him, but for me too.

CHAPTER 20



*** KIEFER ***

The second the door closed, I regretted everything I'd done. I snapped to attention and went after her, but she was making her way through the corridor too quickly. I turned the corner just in time to see the elevator doors closing.

“Melody!” I shouted as I dove forward, trying to get my hand between the doors before they closed, but I was a split second too late. Pounding on the call button did nothing. I'd have to wait for the elevator to bring her to her destination — almost certainly the garage — and make its way back up.

I ran through the hallways to the other side of the building to take the stairwell. She was long gone by the time I made it down to the garage. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I could have sworn that I could smell the lingering odor of her car's exhaust in the spot it had once been.

Out of breath, I made my way back up to the apartment. With each step, a nightmare scenario unfolded in my head. I didn't know how much she'd been drinking at the party, but it seemed like a lot based on how strong her accent had taken over. What if this was some cruel irony of fate, and she'd die just as Wendy had, after a big fight in a horrible accident?

I relived the moment when I had to go in and ID the body, but this time, it was Melody that the coroner pulled out, horribly bruised and lifeless on the gurney.

The rational part of my mind tried to comfort me by saying that just because it happened once, it didn't mean it was going to happen again. Melody drove all the way out to Los Angeles

from the middle of Texas without a problem. What were the odds that tonight was the night that something bad happened to her?

But she wasn't drunk when she drove out from Texas. And it was so bad that I could smell it on her breath. Some kind of vodka mixed drink with a ton of sugar. And I could hear it in her words. And see it in her eyes. She was in no position to drive right now.

I couldn't live with myself if she died. I was terrified for her, but also for myself. I knew I was in a rocky place with everything going on at work. The one nice thing I had to look forward to was that Melody would be at the apartment when I got home. And maybe that was a tad selfish, but I worried that it would be too much and I would fall into a relapse, especially with all that the guests had left behind. If I did — if I even took one sip of a beer — I worried I'd never be able to dig myself out.

No matter what it took, I had to get Melody back to the apartment and make things right with her.

I pulled out my phone and called her. It rang several times and went to voicemail. So I called again. And again and again until on the fifth try, it didn't even ring. She'd turned her phone off.

Or it had been destroyed in a horrific car wreck.

I couldn't think like that. There was no point in putting myself through the pain of having lost her until it was definitive.

What if my phone calls distracted her and that's why she crashed?

What if this or what if that? There were a million what-ifs of things that could happen but didn't. I needed to take a deep breath and do whatever I could to distract myself. Because she had nowhere else to go, right? She'd have to come back at some point, if only to pick up her stuff.

Unless she didn't, I thought, reminding myself that if things went where I feared they might, she wouldn't have any

use for her clothes or toothbrush.

I was nervous and scared and didn't know what to do with the energy I had. But I couldn't leave the apartment because what if she did come back? So I climbed the stairs, returned to my apartment, and began cleaning everything up. Yeah, it was her responsibility, but I needed to get all of this out of here as soon as possible, lest I do something stupid. Something I'd regret for the rest of my life. Just like losing my temper with Wendy.

My brain continued to fight with itself, one half saying she was fine and the other half telling me she was dead and I'd never see her again. Through that inner debate, I managed to clean up the bulk of the apartment. Truth be told, it wasn't that bad. It just seemed like it was bad when all the people were inside and the music was playing.

Perception and shock could do a lot to someone, making things seem worse than they were.

With nothing else to occupy my mind and a complete inability to sleep, despite it being well past midnight, I turned on the TV and pulled out a deck of cards. While watching an old movie, I flipped through the deck, practicing the cardistry tricks I knew. Anything to keep my hands busy.

Every sound that could have been footsteps from down the hall got my attention, hoping that it would be Melody.

But it wasn't.

At some point, out of pure exhaustion, I fell asleep. I awoke the next morning to cards all over the floor and the tv still going.

I could hear the keys in the lock and, when the door opened, I could see Melody was still there. Alive and well, though her eyes were bloodshot and her hair was disheveled.

Not only had she not slept much last night, she was hung over now.

"Melody," I said, approaching her to hug her, but she clenched her body up and pushed me away.

“No,” she said as she backed away. The words were soft, but clear. She may as well have shot me through the heart for the pain that one word caused, but so long as she was alive, she could say or do whatever she wanted for all I cared.

“Okay,” I said, “okay.”

I ran to the kitchen and poured her a cup of water.

“Here,” I said, “drink this. You’ll feel better.”

She looked at the water skeptically. I could see the inner workings of her mind, and they told me she didn’t want to accept an act of kindness from me at the moment.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

And then I bit my tongue, lest I allow any excuses to come out of my mouth. I’d apologized enough in life to know that less was more. I’m sorry. Period. Don’t try to explain it away. Just be sorry.

I looked into her eyes with hope. Hope she would accept the glass of water as a peace offering and hope that the apology would at least be a start.

She did take the water and drank as much of it as she could before sitting down on the couch.

When she did, I couldn’t help but say more, even though I knew I should have just left it at an apology. The words were practically forcing themselves out of my mouth. I needed her to understand the severity of what she did.

“When you left, I was afraid you died. I don’t think you can understand how scary that was for me,” I said. “because it’s had happened before.”

There was a look of recognition in her eyes, but she said nothing.

“I was hoping for a call from you and so I kept my phone on, but I was terrified that the next call was going to be from the...”

I couldn’t even say the words. She had to finish it.

“...the coroner’s,” she said.

“Exactly.”

She sat there, pensive, and I hoped my words were making an impact on her.

They were, but not in the way that I had hoped.

“I think,” she said, “that if we could do that to each other, then we’re not right for each other.”

No, no, no. I did not like where this was going. My heart rate shot up, and my breathing quickened as the world around me started to spin ever so slightly.

“And I hate that,” she said. “Because you’re hot. And you’re sweet. And you make me come so hard, it’s unbelievable.”

She forced a smile at that, but immediately looked away after she did.

“But if I can bring out a trauma response in you like that,” she said, “that’s not right. And I told you I don’t like being controlled. There can’t be house rules if I’m going to be living with you.”

“Fine,” I said. “No house rules going forward. Mi casa es su casa.”

She shook her head. “That’s not fair to you,” she said. “And the way you reacted last night... You think you mean it now, and maybe you do, but it’ll happen again. You yourself said it. You’re an addict. You can’t have any alcohol around you. And I’m not about to give up living my life the way I want to just because you’re afraid.”

With every word, I got more and more frustrated. Because I knew she was right.

“We’ve both got our demons, Kiefer,” she said. “So long as your demons are pulling you to addiction and memories of heartache, and mine are pushing me away from cages, this isn’t going to work. And we’re just going to resent each other. It happens to people in love all the time, and I am just not willing to put myself in one of those cages. I just can’t. I am sorry.” She turned her eyes away from me, trying not to cry.

And in that moment, I felt tears welling up in mine.

“Melody,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter what you say. My mind’s made up. Anything you do would just feel like a trap. Like you’re trying to trick me into doing something I know I can’t do.”

“God dammit,” I said.

“Tell me I’m wrong,” she said through tears. “Tell me, after what happened last night, that this is going to work out long term, that you won’t let your demons take control?” her voice laced with conviction.

I looked her in the eyes thought of being able to spend any more time with her. Even just a month. Or a week. Or even a day of getting to truly be together and appreciate it. I would lie to her for that.

But that felt wrong. Still, there was always the hope for possibility.

“There’s a chance,” I said. “Even if it’s only one in a million. We can somehow make this work. I’m willing to risk it.”

“Kiefer, I did something really stupid last night. I drove when I shouldn’t have been driving. I only drove down the street and parked the car and slept the night off, but still even driving out of the parking lot was not right. I’m not about to say it was your fault, but it happened because of the two of us, who we are, and our past. I promised myself I wouldn’t change myself for anyone ever again. Will this ever happen again if we stay together?”

That was it. She got me. I had nothing else to say.

“I survived the night, but next time I might not be so lucky.”

“You’re right,” I said, giving in. I let out a sigh. “What do you need from me?”

“I need you to come here and give me one last hug. I need you to know that I care about you, and this isn’t what I want, but maybe this is what was meant to be,” she said, with tears

forming in her eyes again. “Knowing now what we need to do individually to grow into exactly who we want to be, and that we met again so that we could set each other free.”

I kept looking at her while she spoke, trying to figure out a way to make all of her truths disappear. But she was very right, and there was nothing I could say or do to change it. So, I just stood there broken-hearted and listened.

“And then I’m going to go into my room to pack up my things. While I’m doing that, I need you to get ready for work and leave, knowing full well that when you come back home, I will be gone, and we can both grow into the people we want to become.”

I walked over to her and sat down on the couch, then wrapped her in my arms. She still smelled a little of whatever she was drinking last night, but underneath that, I could still smell her. And I wanted to kiss her, take her into my room, and make love to her all day.

She wanted the same thing. I could feel it.

“Goodbye, Kiefer,” she said as she squeezed me tightly.

I held on to the hug as long as I could, but I knew it was time to let her go.

“Goodbye,” I said with my heart feeling like a ton of bricks.

She stood up and walked away from me into the guest bedroom, then closed the door behind her.

It was the hardest thing I’d ever done in my life, but I did as she asked. I took a quick shower and got dressed, then left the apartment and drove off to work, all the while knowing I’d never see her again.

Now this was the second time I had to say goodbye to someone I loved, and it hurt just as much the first time.

CHAPTER 21



MELODY

I heard him leave. I heard it through the door of the guest room of his apartment. Everything was already packed — I just didn't have that much with me. Being a woman who didn't need too much to get by had its advantages.

On one hand, I didn't want to accidentally run into him on the way out. Or bump into him as he turned back around because he forgot something. On the other, I didn't want to stay in the apartment a minute longer than I had to.

That wasn't because I hated it there, but because every extra moment I spent there was another chance that I'd convince myself to stay. Kiefer said I didn't understand what he felt like as an addict, and I'm sure that was true, but the idea of temptation being too powerful to resist was something I identified with at this moment, and I knew it wouldn't have taken much to convince me to make the wrong choice and stick around.

After about fifteen minutes of waiting and not hearing him come back inside, I cracked the bedroom door open and peeked around to make sure it wasn't a trap. It wasn't. He was gone. I did the same trick with the front door and, when he wasn't there, took my two bags and went down the hallway as quickly and quietly as I could.

I made it to my car, and for a split second, I worried that it wouldn't start — any obstacle could have kept me behind and had me turn around to go back to Kiefer, but none came in my

path. The key turned, and the engine started without any problems.

Knowing I could get out now, I let out a breath of relief, but I didn't drive away. I needed a moment to just sit there in the reality of what had just happened and not try to distract myself any longer than necessary.

I leaned my head against the steering wheel and let the emotions flow out of me in the form of tears. It felt awful, but it also felt necessary. I allowed myself only a few minutes before sucking the emotion back in and putting the car into reverse. The longer I stayed, the more likely it was I was going to stay.

I know for some people this seemed like a small fight. Or maybe something that we could easily get over. But I knew myself, and that this is not something small. This is exactly what happens to me. I accommodate for people, especially men, I allow them to control my emotions, actions, and life. I wasn't going to trap myself, or Kiefer, in a relationship that was headed for heartache or resentment, and without both of our heads in check, that was inevitable.

As I drove out of the garage, I knew the hardest part was behind me. Now, I just needed to figure out what to do next.

Sometimes I'd go for a drive to clear my head. There was something relaxing about driving along an open road and I wished I could do it now, but early morning Los Angeles traffic wasn't my idea of relaxing.

What I could do, however, was go for a walk.

I drove out to Santa Monica pier and parked in the first lot I could find. Sure, it cost me \$15, but that seemed like a small price to pay to clear my head.

With the moment of peace where I didn't have anything else to focus on, I sat in the car and cried some more, letting those tears flow out of me like tiny waterfalls across my face. I may have sat there for a half hour before I forced myself out of the car and onto the path where I could walk and allow my mind to wander along with my physical body.

The air was cool, being by the beach, and it smelled of salt. Growing up in Houston, we didn't have that smell. The beaches always smelled dirty to me. In Los Angeles, they smelled so clean and pure. As miserable as everything else was, it was hard not to have the smallest of smiles on my face.

Granted, it was a smile through a slow and steady flow of tears that refused to stop, but the coast was so beautiful that it served as a reminder that there was good in the world, even on the saddest of days, and that I was on a path to find myself.

At a point that struck me as especially pretty, with the sound of the waves crashing against the sand and seagulls letting out their caws as they wandered the beach, I sat down on a bench and pulled out my phone. It still had a twenty percent charge, which was enough to pull up the Airbnb app and book myself a place to stay. I may have slept in my car the night before (to the extent that I slept, anyway), but I wanted an actual bed for the foreseeable future.

I found a place close to the food court where I worked and booked it for a week. With that taken care of, I breathed a sigh of relief and kept walking down the path. I knew there was a coffee place up ahead and, with a dull and persistent headache compounding my general exhaustion, I needed some caffeine.

I stood in line and looked around. At one of the tables, there was a young woman with a stroller, and I realized I'd been so distracted staring at her. Well, not her, exactly, but her baby. The one sleeping in the stroller.

His head leaned to the side, and he had a tiny tuft of hair on the top of his head. His mouth was slightly agape, with a bit of drool coming out of it. He looked like a tiny old man taking a nap in his favorite lounge chair in front of the TV, but much more adorable. Despite everything that was going on in my life, I felt a bit lightheaded with joy.

This was a cute baby, to be sure, but no more so than any other I'd seen. And yet, he was enough to distract my one-track mind from both the coffee I so desperately needed and Kiefer. Just looking at him made me feel more comfortable, as

if I was miles away from the existential feelings I'd been dealing with since last night.

Why?

It made no sense.

I brushed away the spark of an idea in my mind for fear it might take hold, but I kept looking at that sleeping baby. He shifted a bit and curled to one side. I watched in anticipation as his eyes slowly fluttered open, and he began to wake.

“Ma’am.”

The voice brought me back to reality.

“How can I help you?”

It was the barista, smiling, but clearly a little impatient as it was my turn, and I was holding up the line.

“Large oat milk latte,” I said quickly, as if I could make up for the time I'd spent distracted by spitting out my order as fast as possible. He rang it up and asked for my name, and then I paid and stepped aside so he could move on.

And, yet, as I was waiting, my eyes wandered back over to that mother who was too engrossed in a crossword puzzle to notice her little miracle slowly rising. He was a good baby, not crying or screaming. Just waiting patiently for his mother to look down at him. In the meantime, he moved his hand in front of his face and became fascinated by his fingers.

If only life stayed that simple.

He turned away from the hand and made eye contact with me, and I felt like a movie star. This little baby noticed me! His face was full of curiosity, frozen in wonder as he looked at me. I raised my hand and, in an exaggerated fashion, wiggled my fingers like he had, in a kind of wave. He lifted his hand towards me and mimicked my movement.

I let out an audible giggle.

“Melody!”

My coffee was already done? Had I spent all that time just staring at the baby? What was wrong with me?

Why would I be...?

Oh no, I thought. There is no fucking way.

I grabbed my coffee and ran out of the shop, walking with determination towards a drug store.

With all the commotion surrounding the opening of the food truck, had I not realized that I had missed a period?

I tried thinking back to the last week or the one before. Of course, it could just be stress, or maybe I had my period and just forgot, but the sign the universe was sending me was too strong for it just to be that. I can't believe I had drank the night before! Holy shit, but how could I have ever known? My stomach turned at the feeling of even the possibility of being pregnant and all the shit I had been through in the past 24 hours.

I chucked the coffee in my hand out, not like that was the biggest problem I had at the moment, but if I was pregnant, I wanted to make sure I put nothing else in my body that wasn't safe. As soon as I bought a test, I headed back to my car as fast as possible to drive to the Airbnb.

As if I didn't have enough on my emotional plate right now, with me breaking up with my would-be high school sweetheart and starting up a small business halfway across the country from any sense of support I'd ever had.

And now I'd possibly be responsible for the life of another human being?

Stuck in traffic, I contemplated calling Kiefer, just to let him know. But I almost instantly nixed that idea. It wasn't coming from a pure place. I committed to the idea that staying together because of a potential baby is probably the worst thing we could do. That's the ultimate trap.

It was already difficult enough for him to keep his distance. I didn't want to put him in that position. It wasn't fair to put that on him in the fragile state he was already in. It was better for right now that he didn't know, plus I didn't even know!

But if I was going to be a single mother, I needed to make sure I had everything in place. As soon as I made it back to the Airbnb, I ran to the bathroom and peed on the stick. I knew the wait would be excruciating, so I finished I sat on the couch and pulled out my laptop and started looking for a place I could live permanently, on *my* own or *our* own, whichever.

And, as it turned out, there was an apartment available to rent not too far from the food court. Was it a little pricier than I would have liked? Sure, but this was LA. Everything cost too much.

I clicked through and scheduled an appointment to take a look. It was really happening. I was really doing it. I was officially becoming an Angelino, but in the bathroom, there was a little stick that determined even more of my future than where I was living.

CHAPTER 22



*** KIEFER ***

On the way to the studio, I made a deal with myself to focus on work, letting whatever was brewing in my system come out through my music.

Perhaps it wasn't the best day for that.

We had a tween pop boy band that had recorded a rough demo of their new single. Our job was to create a more finessed backing track that they could then come and rerecord the vocals over. Because they were touring right now and because their time was expensive, the goal was to have them in studio for as short a period as possible. The cleaner the backing track we could provide, the quicker things would go when real money was on the line.

A lot of musicians and nonmusicians turn their nose up at these kinds of bands and, to their credit, there's good reason. A lot of them aren't very good. But The Beatles were essentially a boy band and, frankly, I never regret listening to BTS. Good music can come out of anywhere and it's a weak musician who phones it in out of disrespect for what the potential could be.

Ernie played the demo for me in the studio. It was rougher than usual. This was a recording made on somebody's cell phone while they were in the touring van. I could even hear the road noises. But the general idea was clear and, with the right production and engineering, this could be a real earworm.

"Natasha, can you take lead guitar on this?" Ernie asked.
"Kiefer, you've got bass."

Our resident drummer, Tommy Washington, was already at the kit when Natasha and I took our places. With our monitors in place in our ears, we were ready to go. Ernie counted us in and we began playing.

The chart for this tune was simple — a standard G - C - D pop song that added an E minor during the bridge. The hardest part was just not losing your place. It could get repetitive after a while.

I flipped my brain off, as best I could, and did as Natasha had told me before: just feel the music. With the song in my head (it was *very* catchy), I didn't need to look at any of the notes and could outline the chords on my bass.

After about thirty seconds, Ernie cut us off.

“Tommy,” he said. “Lay it back a little behind the beat for me, can you?”

“Not a problem.”

“And Kiefer,” he said. “Chill out.”

“Pardon?” I asked.

“You're going to drown out the vocals,” he said. “Fewer notes. Let the space between them be the music.”

I had committed the cardinal sin of musicianship — letting technical ability get in the way of musicality.

The fact of the matter was there was a reason clichés were clichés. It was because they worked. And while I could bounce off the wall, sending a million notes into a given measure — often just a few well-placed notes would be more powerful.

And so, rather than reinvent the wheel, I played what Ernie expected. A standard bass rhythm to go over Tommy's typical soft rock beat.

“That was perfect,” Ernie said at the end of the sixth take.

Yeah, I thought, *but was it any good?*

* * *

Jackson came by at the end of the day, and Natasha was going to stay late again, so we did the same thing we did the previous time: we got dinner.

“What do you think?” Jackson said as we walked outside. “Same place as before?”

I grimaced at the thought. Melody had just left the day before and I wasn’t ready to relive memories of her.

“I guess not,” Jackson said.

“There’s an Indian place up the block,” I said. “I’d rather go there.”

As we made our way there, I told him what had happened and finished by the time we were seated in our booth.

“And she just left?” Jackson asked.

I nodded. “Maybe she’ll be there when I get back home, but I doubt it.”

Jackson considered the thought. “I’m gonna be honest with you, bro,” he said. “I’ve never been on your end of things.”

There was a slight smirk as he said it, almost like a sense of pride.

Yeah, Jackson, we get it. Nobody’s ever broken up with you.

Fine, I’d let him have it.

“It’s not the end of the world, you know,” Jackson said.

“That’s easy for you to say,” I told him. Being an optimist was simple when everything in life was going your way. From what I could tell, he and Natasha were still happily together. She never came into work upset, and they always seemed happy to see each other at the end of the day.

“Yeah, well, it’s true,” he said. “There are eight billion people on this planet. She’s one.”

But she wasn’t just one in eight billion. Out of all the people in the world, she was the only one who happened to be

her. Jackson had to have understood that, but I couldn't spell it out for him. I didn't have the language to explain it to him.

"You don't believe me," he said. "I get it, but you'll realize it one day."

"Come on, man," I said. He was my younger brother. I didn't need this condescension from me.

"No, you come on," he said. "I learned this from you. How many times have I told you I met this girl, and you rolled your eyes even as I told you she's the one and all that?"

"Every time."

"And you didn't say it, but I knew what you were thinking."

"And what's that?" I asked.

"You were thinking that I shouldn't get my hopes up too high because any of a million things could happen and, when they invariably did, you knew I'd get back on my feet and find someone else."

Couldn't argue with that.

"And I say look on the bright side of things," he said.

"There is no bright side," I said. "It just sucks."

"You managed to find someone else," he said. "Someone who isn't..." he paused and whispered the name. "...Wendy."

Dammit, he was right. It wasn't that I hadn't thought about her — she was constantly on my mind — but for the longest time I worried that I was broken and would never love again. Melody proved that I was at least capable of it.

And Melody wasn't gone gone. Not like Wendy was. "Maybe she'll realize her mistake," I said, brushing aside Jackson's comment and pretending he didn't say it.

"Maybe," he said. "But you've got to let her realize that on her own. If it's meant to be, she'll come back to you. Until that day, you've just got to accept she's gone and work on moving on."

He was talking sense. And I didn't like it.

"You know you'd be telling me the same thing if I was in your shoes."

He had a point.

"Yeah," I said meekly, "you might be right."

"I know I'm right," he said. "And I think you know it, too."

That was when the server came by to take our order. It was for the best. The conversation wasn't going anywhere further than that. Just like I had to accept Wendy's death, I had to accept that Melody was gone. And while there was always a little bit of hope left in the box, the best thing for me to do was seal that hope and stash it away somewhere where nobody would find it.

CHAPTER 23



MELODY

As time went by, and I finally allowed myself a day off. What did I do during that day off? Move into my new apartment. By taking care of the background check paperwork as soon as possible and begging the supervisor, I managed to move things along very quickly. It wasn't an extravagant place, but it got the job done and while the bedroom wasn't huge, the kitchen more than made up for it. There was plenty of counter space and even an island to work on. I'd have room to experiment and make meals without having to juggle pots and pans.

And I wouldn't need to deal with the side-eye when I didn't clean things right away from a certain someone who I was trying not to think about.

Of course, it was impossible not to think of him. As the men delivered the bed and put it together, it was hard not to consider how lonely it would continue to be sleeping alone at night.

I shook the idea out of my head.

The fact was that life had been going great for me. The Vegan Vaquero was an outright success, and the financiers were happy with the results thus far. True, it hadn't been much time, but that was what made things even more impressive. Customer satisfaction was through the roof — we were already starting to have regulars.

Things didn't take too long to move in, and Chelsea came by to welcome me to my new place.

“This is nice,” she said as she came inside. I think she was being generous, but it was nice to hear regardless. We sat down across from each other on a couch I’d picked up from someone who had listed it for free online. It was a bit soft from use, but otherwise not too bad. There weren’t any unusual stains or smells, so I took that as a win.

It was hard not getting lost in my thoughts when I was by myself, which I think is part of the reason I invited Chelsea over.

“You know,” she told me, “you seem like a happy person in general. And it also seems like everything’s going your way. And, yet, you don’t look very happy.”

She spotted it right away. That something was wrong. That even if I was smiling, there were ideas I couldn’t get out of my head.

“I’m happy,” I told her. “It’s just a lot is going on.”

Chelsea looked at me in silence for a few seconds. “You know,” she said, “there are two ways for this to go. We can be work friends, where we see each other every day and don’t really know each other, or we can actually be friends. Now either is fine with me, but if you want the second one, you’re going to need to drop those pretenses and tell me what you’re actually thinking.”

She was right, but I didn’t really know where to begin. So I just picked something at random.

“I’m pregnant,” I said.

She shot to attention, and her eyes nearly bulged out of her head.

“I’m pregnant, and I just left the father.”

That was clearly too much too fast and I imagine she regretted trying to get that out of me, but as she stumbled to get the right words out, she eventually found them.

“That’s... well, you weren’t lying, I guess. A lot is going on.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and so I’m feeling a little overwhelmed by everything. And I’m worried what the future is going to hold.”

Was I putting too much on her? I worried I was pushing her away.

“But we don’t need to talk about that,” I said. “What’s going on with you?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Me and my partner are happy, and we live a comfortable life,” she said, “but let’s get back to you because that sounds much more interesting. What do you mean about the future?”

“Well,” I said, actually feeling scared to express myself verbally. These thoughts had been buzzing around in my head for the past week, and finally I had an outlet. Someone I could run them by who could offer a new perspective. I worried that once one word came out, the rest would follow in an avalanche and crush her.

“I guess I’m worried about still working the truck when I’m twice the size I am now,” I told her. “And how do I handle daycare when I have a baby to worry about?”

“You’ve got that kid helping you, don’t you?” Chelsea said.

“Yeah, but she’s still learning.”

“She seems bright and eager. She’ll be able to run it all on her own in three months. And you won’t need her to do that for another three months after that. Worst comes to worst, you close down for a little bit, and the rest of us chip in a bit to help you out.”

“You mean, like give me money?” I asked.

“What else could I mean?”

“Oh, I could never,” I said. “I don’t like accepting charity. Especially from strangers.” Just the very thought made me uncomfortable. As did sitting here on the couch with her, talking to her like she was my therapist or something. I shouldn’t have been saying any of this. It was my mess that I

found my way into, and I'd be able to get myself out of it like I always managed to do in the past.

“It's not charity, it's a buffer. You need a little help now, but someone else may need it later, and you'll help them. I've said it before, but we're like a family.”

Chelsea was contemplating something. I could see her toying with an idea and perhaps struggling to put it into words.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I'm just...” she paused. “I'm not sure how to ask this, so I guess I'll just do it directly. The baby daddy, is he... dangerous?”

I almost laughed at that, it was so ridiculous. Kiefer wouldn't hurt a fly. Yeah, he always had that bad boy image going on, but I'd never heard anyone speak ill of him. Still, it was stressful when he was yelling. I was afraid of him, even though I knew there was nothing to be afraid of. Loud voices could do that to me.

“No,” I said. “He just has demons like the rest of us. And besides, he doesn't know he's the baby's daddy. He's not in the picture. There's nothing to worry about.”

“Okay,” Chelsea said, one eyebrow raised, “but if anything changes and you need somewhere to crash, you just give me a call, okay? We couldn't have anything happen to that cashew queso of yours.”

She winked and lightly punched my arm.

“Of course,” I said and smiled back at her.

When she left, I was shocked at how quiet it was. I almost longed for the noisy old AC unit in one of my old apartments back in Austin. The one that would occasionally drip and the landlord refused to repair. It was obnoxiously loud, but at least it never felt as alone as this.

I went over to the bed, newly built and sturdy, and put the sheets on it. It looked so quaint in the middle of the room; when I laid on top of it, it was enormous. I could look to my

left or my right, spread out like I was doing snow angels, and there would still be plenty of room.

It was awful.

I should call Kiefer, I thought. Give us a second chance.

But then I remembered the screaming and the short temper. And the lack of freedom. And our respective issues that didn't play well with each other.

Maybe if it was just me, I could see giving him another chance. People deserved second chances, and the way he looked at me when I came back in the next morning, with the puppy dog eyes? I wanted to forgive him. I truly did want to believe that he was the person I needed him to be.

I just couldn't risk it with a baby on the way.

In this world, the only person you could truly count on was yourself. As long as it was just me, the baby would have a good parent, and I would raise her the right way, with love, compassion, and patience.

There was no guarantee that Kiefer would be able to offer the same thing.

CHAPTER 24



*** KIEFER ***

Every night without Melody became harder and harder for me. The first night, I could tell myself it was just that she needed a little time. By the second night, I knew she was serious and making a point. By the time a full week had rolled around, it was hard to believe she'd be coming back.

I know Jackson had told me there are plenty of fish in the sea and all that, but I didn't want just any fish. I'd gotten stuck on her. It wasn't just that I wanted her back in my life. I also wanted to know if she was okay. And I wanted her smiling face to be there when I got home from a tough day at work. At this point, I would have even been okay if she had a bunch of friends over. So long as she was there.

It made me feel ridiculous. Why had I exploded at her like that? Why couldn't I just have just let her have her day in the sun and then talked to her about it the next day? She hadn't meant to upset me or do something wrong — things just got a little out of hand, and she didn't realize what was at stake.

After a weeks of misery, lying in bed and struggling to find enough energy to get up and feed myself, I looked forward to the obligation of having to go to work on Monday. I'd just go in, do my job, no more and no less, and then go home, feeling accomplished.

When I showed up, Natasha was waiting for me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Do you have a minute?”

Time was not the issue. What I lacked was motivation.

“For what?”

If this was going to be about her asking about Jackson, I just didn't want to hear it. I was as happy for the two of them as I could be, but if there was even a hint of drama, I didn't want to be the go-between for the two of them. It was on them to work things out, and I would stay out of it.

“It'll just take five minutes,” she said. “Well, four minutes fifteen seconds, to be exact.”

She blushed and looked down at her shoes. I didn't know what this was, but it didn't seem to be about Jackson. This was something else.

“Sure,” I said, and she led me to a small sound booth.

“Now I want your honest opinion,” she said, plugging her phone into the mixing board. “This is just a rough mix, and nothing's final.”

She was going to play me a song.

“It's sort of an outline of a sketch that came to me over the weekend, and I got it down as quickly as I could in GarageBand. Think of it as more of an idea than a fully realized—”

I cut her off. “Natasha, just let the song speak for itself.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay.” And then she pressed play.

I closed my eyes so I could focus.

I could tell what she meant about the roughness of the cut. The vocals were recorded through a laptop's built-in microphone and so came across as sounding somewhat tinny. The instrumentation was slightly cheesy and lifeless, owing more to the samples included in the software she was using than any particular choices she was making.

But none of that could disguise the soul of the song, which was pure and came straight from the heart.

One thing about songwriting that almost nobody ever tells you is that most of the best songs were thrown together quickly. You can't force a masterpiece — you just need to be there when it comes to you. And trying to force genius out of an uninspired idea almost never happened.

It may have helped that I knew Natasha and understood where the song was coming from. The opening verses were soft and delicate, almost meek, as she spoke of a “silken love,” but when she fell into the chorus, her voice pushed itself into its upper registers and was in danger of breaking; that's when the song moved from touching to outright devastating as she sang of the “uncertainty of a new beau” who could “turn into my true foe.”

The bridge, often a weak point for even the best songwriters, added a flavor of optimism to the song that was clearly about the fear of heartbreak and the uncertainty of a new relationship, ending with a line that hit me harder than I expected:

Don't make me love you

And pretend

If, in a week or two,

It's 'let's be friends'

After which, it returned to that chorus and faded out.

I opened my eyes and saw her eager face and quivering hands. I wanted to answer her, but my mind was processing, and I wondered if it was just because I was in an emotionally difficult place that the song hit me so hard. This was the kind of thing I could see myself listening to on repeat back when I was in my emo phase, but that was nearly fifteen years ago. Songs didn't hit me the same way anymore because they all felt so mechanical.

And while I could appreciate the mechanics of the song — particularly her use of unusual chord choices taken from a jazz vocabulary — it hit me right in the gut in a way that mere chord changes or note choices couldn't explain.

As such, I nodded. “It's really good.”

“Really? You’re not just saying that?”

This was the problem with dishonesty in the music business. When you’re genuinely blown away by something, nobody knows whether to believe you or if you’re just being polite.

“Seriously,” I said. “*Really* good.”

“You mean that?” she asked. “Because I’m thinking of letting Ernie listen.”

“No!” I said, so quickly that I almost startled myself.

“Oh,” she said, looking defeated.

“Not because it’s bad,” I said, “but because it’s good. You give this to Ernie, and he’s going to make it sound like Taylor Swift.”

“I like Taylor Swift…” she said.

“So do I, but was that what you were going for?” I asked. “Musically, I mean?”

“No,” she said. “I was thinking more like Queen by way of Billie Holiday.”

“Yeah, and I heard some Radiohead and Hendrix in there too.”

She blushed. “Maybe a little.”

“The first thing Ernie’ll do is take all of that out in an effort to make it a single. And then it’s going to sound exactly like every other song out there that’s trying to be a single.”

If she wanted her original vision, she could have shown up at the studio a couple years ago, but Ernie had become more cynical since then. It’s hard to come up with something genuinely new that doesn’t scare away new listeners, but it’s what all the great artists have managed to do. You can get a good single out doing an imitation of someone else, but to have real staying power? You need to have a truly original voice.

“So what then?” she asked. “What do I do with it?”

The words came out before I had a chance to fully think it through, but this may be the only chance for me to do something right with my life, “We produce it together.”

She blushed even more. “I don’t know,” she said. “You’d do that for me?”

“Natasha, it’s genuinely good,” I said. “The only thing shitty about it is you’re having the computer play the instruments for you. I can work the mixing equipment here, and we can play pretty much anything between the two of us.”

As the words came out, I realized I was excited but also terrified for at least two reasons.

The first was I didn’t know if I was worthy of Natasha’s musical genius. She was working on another level from me, or at least that’s how it seemed, coming up with musical ideas I could never dream of. But, then again, I wouldn’t really have to if I was just handling the production. I would just be bringing out her ideas and helping her to express them.

But the second reason was more serious. This was something I’d dreamed of doing for forever, but had told myself that I couldn’t. Even when I dreamed of becoming a rock god, I never thought I’d be handling the production and choosing how to orchestrate my tracks. I had some sketches in my head of how some things would go, but always figured I’d have to kick them up to whoever was in charge of orchestrating and mixing.

I was a guitarist and a bassist who had some familiarity with other instruments. I’d never seen myself as a musical producer. Not professionally, anyway, but if I was going to change I needed to do it now before this too was something else wonderful I lost for myself.

“Do you have any other songs?” I asked her.

“I’ve got a double album’s worth,” she said. “Some aren’t fully developed, but in total, I’d say I have about thirty or so that are ready or close to ready to be recorded.”

This was really happening. A full-on album that I’d be producing.

“If you want someone else, just tell me,” I said, “but I want to do this.”

She paused for a second, contemplating before putting her hand forward.

“Okay,” I said, “we’re in this together. But when all is said and done, they’re your songs. And don’t forget that.”

“Of course,” she said.

We shook hands.

“Let’s get Jackson to draw up a contract,” I said.

“Sounds like a plan,” she said.

“Oh,” I said, “and until we’re done, not a word to Ernie.”

She mimed zipping her lips shut. “Of course. Not a peep.”

I’d gone the whole weekend depressed and still felt a bit empty inside, but at that moment, I felt a sense of purpose. Maybe this is what I needed, this was me finding myself. For once in a very long time, I felt like I was doing the right thing.

CHAPTER 25



MELODY

I was thankful for the cool weather. Or what everyone told me was cool weather. Everywhere I went, I felt hot, thanks to whatever baby Olivia was doing to my body. How women dealt with summer pregnancies, I'd never know.

I can't believe how fast the time went. Now, at nine months pregnant, my body felt like a ticking time bomb. Plus, the things going on physically – no one can truly understand until they are growing a tiny human inside of them. There were times when I caught myself sitting on the floor of the taco truck in front of the minifridge eating cheese out of the container, wondering if I would ever be able to shave my cooch again. Times were tough.

And when I could no longer see my feet, Kalle was more than prepared to handle the day-to-day operations of The Vegan Vaquero. It was impressive, too. Even with bigger crowds, she kept her cool and managed to get people to move speedily through the line. Hungry people had short tempers but she ensured that they never had to wait too long to get their meals.

Most of the time, I stayed home and rested on the couch throughout the day, ordering groceries to the house and, if I didn't feel up for cooking, would even get a meal or two delivered. It made me feel a little bit lazy, but I was in the final weeks of bringing life into this world, and so I could be forgiven for a bit of laziness.

I would still go check in and visit the truck to ensure things were running well — though, truth be told, it was usually just

an excuse to get out of the apartment because I was bored. The one day where I absolutely needed to go to the food court was the day that I was especially not feeling up to it.

Still, I was nothing if not persistent, and I dragged myself out of bed, put just enough make-up on my face to give the appearance of giving a damn and then got dressed and drove out to the truck.

Channel 5 had scheduled an interview with me, and they were already setting up when I arrived. The reporter introduced herself to me as Ellen.

“Is this going out live?” I asked.

She shook her head as if I was stupid. “No, just live to tape,” she said and then added sharply, “but we’re not doing any editing, so don’t count on there being another take.”

“Got it.”

I recalled being interviewed back in Austin for the truck, and despite being in the world’s entertainment capital, this wasn’t much different. It was still two people — a cameraman and a reporter — neither of whom was smiling, just doing a job as quickly as they could before moving on to the next one.

“You ready?” she asked, although it wasn’t a question. She was going whether I was ready or not.

“Sure,” I said, but the cameraman had already begun his countdown from five.

It was in that instant that I had a brief tinge of fear in my stomach, right around the corner from where Olivia was blissfully resting. What if Kiefer ended up seeing the report? By this point, I’d assumed he’d forgotten about me, which was fine. It was for the best. I just worried that, if he did see me on television, he might try to reach out. And I didn’t know what I’d do.

At that moment, I wondered if I was being too hard on him. If working at the food court had taught me anything, it’s that we get by with a little help from our friends. And there were two sides to that. For one, Kiefer could have stuck around to help with day-to-day things — it never hurts to have

another person to reach out to when you need them. But for another, maybe he needed me during that time, and I'd blocked myself off from him.

And for what?

I could barely even remember. Something about him losing his temper, which I was prone to doing from time to time, too.

With Olivia on the way, I was scared of what it would mean for me and my life. Would I really be able to handle being a full-time mother and business owner on my own?

Then again, could I trust Kiefer to help with that? With the addiction beast hidden inside him?

Part of me wanted to. And was trying to convince the other half to reach out to him — he'd learned his lesson by now, right?

Of course, in that time, he'd almost certainly moved on. A good looking guy like him? He could have whoever he wanted. It was hard to imagine him having too many lonely, sleepless nights over me.

“We're here with Melody Cruz,” Ellen said, snapping me back to the real world, “the owner of LA's newest plant-based food truck, The Vegan Vaquero. Melody, what kind of food do you offer here?”

She was smiling now, putting on her news persona, filling every word with excitement as if this was the week's most important story. Nay, of the year.

“Well, Ellen,” I said, doing what I could to match her energy, and adding a hint of an artificial Texas twang that I found was popular with the customers, “what we've got here is authentic Tex-Mex cuisine. Tacos, burritos, enchiladas, and, of course, queso.”

On cue, Kalle came over with a tray of some of our more popular options for Ellen to sample. I grabbed a bowl of chips and another of queso, presenting it to her to try. She didn't reach at first.

“It looks amazing,” she said, “but I thought you said you were plant-based. How do you make fried queso without dairy?”

“That’s something of a trade secret,” I said. “You’re not allergic to cashews, are you?” I winked.

“No.”

“Then go ahead and give it a try.”

There was a bit of a cautious look in her eye, as there often was among omnivores when giving us a try for the first time. I’d seen it before, many times, and found that the easiest way to deal with it was to be politely insistent. The recipes were solid, the ingredients top-notch, and Kalle knew exactly what she was doing.

“One taste,” I said, “is all it takes to become an instant convert to the power of the plants.”

Ellen dipped a tortilla chip in the queso and had a bite. Out of the corner of my eye, I made sure that the camera was focused on her so everyone at home could see her reaction.

“That’s absolutely delicious,” she said. “May I have another?”

“Please,” I said, gesturing to the tray. “Of course, we don’t just have queso. We have a saying here that if you can name it, we can find a way to make it vegan. Through a combination of high-quality ingredients, careful cooking, and downright magic, we dare you to compare our food against anything else out there, vegan or otherwise.”

Ellen grabbed a taco and took a bite. “What is this?” she said. “It tastes like real meat. Are you sure it’s not real meat?”

“No ma’am, that’s our soy chorizo.”

This was the fun part — watching the instant converts go from being cautious to experimental, wanting to try everything.

“I want to eat it all,” she said. She gestured to the cameraman, “Harry, you’ve got to give this a try.”

He laughed, and she walked towards him, giving him a bite of the taco.

“It’s good!” he said, almost instinctively, but then paused. Then the flavor kicked in. “Wow. That’s *really* good.”

I laughed. Ellen continued to poke around on the tray, but then must have remembered that she was in the middle of giving an interview.

“I’m sorry I got so distracted by this amazing food,” she said as she stood up and faced the camera. “Now, it also looks like you’re expecting. When are you due?”

“Just a couple of weeks,” I said. “At that point, Kalle over there is going to essentially handle things full-time for a little while, but don’t worry. You’re all in good hands.”

“I’ll say,” Ellen said.

She asked a few more questions about the history of the truck and the origin of the recipes — all things I’d rehearsed over and over again — and as a result, my mind drifted again, imagining Kiefer out there somewhere. As much as I wanted to, I couldn’t get him out of my head. What was wrong with me?

“Any final words for our viewers?” Ellen asked.

“Sure, Ellen,” I said. “Even reducing meat consumption by one day a week can make a huge difference in terms of greenhouse emissions, animal welfare, and your own health. Give us a try, and I guarantee you’ll never look at plant-based eating the same way again.”

“There you have it!” Ellen said. “This was Melody Cruz and The Vegan Vaquero, out in the Larchmont Village area of West Hollywood. And, for Channel 5 news, I’m Ellen Sparks. Back to you!”

The cameraman turned off the light and thanked me for my time.

“You mind if I take this with me?” Ellen said, pointing towards the tray.

“Of course not,” I said.

It was amazing how quickly my dream had come true. I'd come out to Los Angeles in the hopes of bringing my food truck to a new group of people. Within a year's time, I'd become enough of a success to support myself as well as earn the attention of the local news. And, if the spreadsheet data was correct, we were still on the upswing in terms of popularity.

And, on top of that, I was about to be a mother. The doctor said all signs pointed to a healthy baby being born right on time.

Yet, despite it all, there was an emptiness inside me that I couldn't quite explain, but it felt hollower whenever Kiefer came to mind.

I wondered if maybe it was Olivia's way of telling me that she wanted to have her father in her life.

Well, I thought, that's on him and the universe.

CHAPTER 26



*** KIEFER ***

Most of the time, I could go through my days and focus on work. It was really good for me that Natasha had me working with her on her project because it meant that I was effectively putting in 16-hour days, which meant almost no time to think about Melody. And yet, at the same time, as unconventional as it was, we were still putting together a pop album, and every song had a habit of reminding me of Melody.

Even that was fine, though. Because I could channel the energy into artistic output and use it to make the music better. It was a funny thing, Natasha and I working together on this album. While she was on the upswing of a relationship, I was dealing with the heartache of a breakup. It created an interesting dichotomy that added some layers to the music.

Ernie must have suspected that something was up over the last several months. The two of us always arrived before he did and left afterwards, but so long as we were doing our jobs, he didn't seem to mind. Ultimately, though, we knew that the day would come when we'd have to tell him about what we were working on, and that day was getting awfully close.

Natasha and I were driving around town — not to go anywhere, mind you, but to make sure that the album still sounded good through a sub-par car sound system. Would the little details turn into mud through crappy speakers? Or would they add atmosphere like they were supposed to?

“I'm nervous,” Natasha said when we finished listening to the most recent song we'd worked on, a power ballad called

Mosquito.

“You don’t think it’s good?” I asked her. To my ears, it sounded fantastic. I was actually impressed by what we were able to get out of my car’s system. It wasn’t as good as what we’d been hearing in the studio, but it was better than anything I’d heard on the radio lately.

“No,” she said, “I do. That’s why I’m nervous. When something sucks, you can keep working on it and hide it in the shadows. If it’s good, and finished, that’s when you need to put your ego on the line and show it to someone.”

One might think that I’d been working in the industry long enough to be over that feeling, but I know what she meant. A while back, I’d just come to terms with the fact that most of what I played on wouldn’t be great, but I’d do my best and cash the check, and that would be that. For the first time in a very long time, I’d been a part of something I could be proud of. And not just that, it was something personal I could be proud of.

And that was a little bit terrifying.

“I know what you mean,” I said. “I think we should probably show it to Ernie. I think it’s time.”

“I don’t know,” Natasha said. It’s what she always said. “I think we should work on it a little bit more.”

“We’ve worked on it,” I told her. “It’s there. Could stuff be fine-tuned? Maybe, but it’s minor tweaking at this point. I think he needs to hear it so we can work on actually getting this out into the real world. I think we’ve got a few potential singles here.”

“That’s the last thing I want!” she said. “Success is terrifying. And if one of these becomes a hit... I’m not sure I’m ready to hear people doing bad renditions of Stone’s Throw or Firefly at karaoke bars or open mic nights.”

I laughed. “Is that true? Do you really not want to do this?”

“I do,” she said. “It’s just that right now, I can be who I want to be. Once you put something out into the world, it becomes theirs, and you lose control of it. It’s a scary thing.”

She paused and thought for a second.

“But what I’m really scared about is Ernie messing with it,” she said. “I don’t want to be a pop princess. And I’m worried that’s all he’ll be able to see in this.”

I pulled the car back into the parking lot.

“Here’s the thing,” I said. “You’ve got me backing you up, and I’m not going to let him do that. He does something like that, and we’ll both quit. On top of that, once we get him to agree to help out, Jackson will draw up an airtight contract that ensures you maintain control of the final release.”

We sat in the car for several minutes in the early morning sunrise. Ernie would be heading into the studio at any minute, and it was better to catch him at the beginning of the day, right after he’d had his coffee.

“You really think it’s ready?” she asked.

I nodded. “As ready as it’s going to get.”

The words came out with an almost unexpected sadness. I’d enjoyed working with Natasha, and had rediscovered my love of making music through this album. And I managed to do so without drugs or alcohol. If it was over, I’d have to return to the drudgery of my everyday life.

But was that so bad? Millions of people out there weren’t happy, did I think I was better than them? There was a satisfaction in being content enough with life. Wanting to be genuinely happy was asking too much.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s go get it set up for when he comes in.”

* * *

Ernie listened to the whole album in one sitting, as we watched his face for any kind of reaction. Other than the occasional drag on his e-cig, there wasn’t much to read off of him.

When the album finally reached its conclusion and faded out, he put that vape pen on the console and leaned back in his chair, keeping us in suspense as he mulled it over.

“What’s that track, the one with the raindrops?”

He hummed a few bars.

“Storm’s a Comin’,” Natasha said.

That’s the song that Natasha and I spent the most time on. And it was the one that, from my perspective, was the most about Melody. I figured Natasha knew that even if we didn’t ever talk about it explicitly. She more or less let me take over on the lyrics, changing a word here or there. But those changes made a world of differences. Even if it felt extremely personal to me, it was still very much a collaboration, and it wouldn’t have been nearly as good without her input.

Ernie nodded. “That’s the first single. We can market that as sort of an alternative singer-songwriter type thing. Maybe get it into a teen TV show or something like that.”

He was thinking like a businessman, and what we wanted was something simpler.

“Ernie,” I said. “We just spent some eight months working on this in secret, pouring our heart and soul into it. We’re not thinking about how to sell it. We want to know if you like it.”

His eyes looked up at us, serious for a moment, and then he let out a laugh.

“You know what?” he asked. “That didn’t even cross my mind. I’ve been doing this so long, manufacturing what listeners want, that I couldn’t even stop to consider if I liked it.”

He nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “It’s good. It’s real good. And there’s nothing else out there like it.”

“Ernie,” Natasha said, “I’m going to be upfront with you about this. If you’re thinking of changing this to make it more palatable to the average listener, that’s not happening.”

He shook his head. “It needs a little bit of mastering, but I think we keep it more or less as is instead of trying to turn it into something it’s not.”

“I’m going to hold you to that,” I told him.

We shook on it. This was really happening.

* * *

That night, we went to a lounge out in the Valley. We figured we wanted to get away from what we were used to and go somewhere special for a special occasion. It was the three of us: me, Natasha, and Jackson. The two of them may not have been in love, but they were at least in strong like, and I was envious of that. Strong like didn’t take control of your life. It just gave you something to feel good about. We should all be so lucky.

“I told you,” he said to me. “Remember, I said she was *that* good, and you were like, ‘Oh, well, I guess we can give her a tour.’”

I nodded and laughed along with his terrible impression of me. He was right, and I was a big enough man to admit when I was wrong.

But things had changed significantly since I’d first met her. Back then, I was envious of her talent. Now, I was envious of what she had with Jackson. I was jealous that she and Jackson had each other, and I was all out on my own.

I didn’t let that feeling show, though. I maintained a smile because now was a time to be happy for them and happy for Natasha... and also happy for myself. It was Natasha’s name and probably her face that would be on the album cover, but I had a large part in making it, and I was proud of what we’d put together.

All at once, as we were eating, I saw the smile drop from Natasha’s face.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

It wasn't nothing, especially since Jackson's smile dropped almost immediately afterwards.

They were looking at something behind me and as I started to turn, the two of them tried stopping me, but it was too late.

There was a TV on over the bar with Melody on it. She was giving an interview.

And she was extremely pregnant.

CHAPTER 27



MELODY

I wasn't sure what to expect from the interview. It was perfectly possible that nobody would see it and we wouldn't have any more business and, honestly, that's what I expected. On the other hand, a part of me was scared the food court would overflow with people, and the other food truck operators would get jealous.

As usual, the answer was somewhere in between. Business was a little bit better the next day. But then the next day was even better than that. And so on until, just a couple of weeks later, Kalle called me in because she needed help.

It was, by far, the best day we'd had since coming out to California. In my current state, I was able to stay on my feet and take orders, though I didn't feel comfortable doing any cooking. It was okay, though, because Kalle just needed a small amount of assistance. She only had two hands and two feet and could only be in one place at a time. I offered just enough help to keep things moving steadily.

Even with the limited work I was doing, I needed to take breaks when things got too hot. I'm sure I could have pushed myself through, but I'd been handling the pregnancy responsibly up to this point, and I wasn't about to drop the ball at the five-yard line.

"If this keeps up like this," I told Kalle, "I'm going to need to get another assistant to help out."

So long as I was there helping out, all the tip money went to her. It seemed rude to be taking tip money from her, with all

the work she was doing and how little I was paying her for it. If there was another employee, they'd need to split that jar 50/50.

It wasn't her decision, of course, but I thought to myself that if I did hire an additional employee, I'd give her a raise to make up for it. After all, I couldn't imagine handling all of this on my own. An extra set of hands could make a world of difference.

I looked down at my belly, thinking about my baby's tiny hands, and that one day those little hands would be helping me out in the kitchen and that I wouldn't be alone. I couldn't help but think about Kiefer. I know keeping this from him was a shitty thing to do. I should call him and do the mature thing, instead of waiting for the universe.

But just like divine intervention does, it surprised me, and he just showed up at the food truck. I didn't see him at first. Kalle thought he was a customer.

"Sorry, we're closed," she said.

"That's okay."

The soft voice sent goosebumps to the back of my neck, just the same way it used to do whenever he would growl in my ear. Though it was cool outside and the grill was off, I began to sweat.

"Oh," Kalle said, "it's you." She must have recognized him from the party. He's not an easy guy to forget.

"I'm here to see Melody."

I turned around and saw him there. In my head, I had a mental image of him, tall, broad, and powerful, but it was a completely different thing to see him in person and experience that strength.

To say he looked good was an understatement. He was so handsome that it was hard to believe he was real. Part of that was the backlighting from the streetlamps, and some of it was how I built him up in my mind, but most of it was purely him.

"Can we talk?" he asked.

Kalle looked over at me, seemingly as curious about his answer as he was.

“Yeah,” I said. “You got everything under control here?”

Kalle nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” I told Kiefer.

* * *

Parts of Los Angeles were surprisingly quiet at night. It wasn’t a big, bustling, noisy city the way that New York or Chicago were. There was serenity on the side streets as everyone else remained either stuck at home or in heavy traffic on the 101.

You could sometimes even hear the crickets, and that’s exactly what was happening as we walked in awkward silence.

Then Kiefer broke the silence. “I’m going on tour,” he told me. “I’ve been working on an album with Natasha, and we just released our first single on streaming.”

“Congratulations.” I said.

The light turned green, and we began to cross the street.

“Thank you,” he said. “It’s doing pretty well here, in the indie circuit, anyway, but it’s actually picked up a lot of traction in Japan, and Ernie wants the two of us to go on tour to capitalize on the success and build up some hype.”

I was starting to connect the dots. He wasn’t here to get back together. He was here to say goodbye.

“I’m really excited for you.” My voice betrayed no emotion. He could take me at my word or he couldn’t. In truth, it sounded exciting, but I was more concerned about the subtext. “And also for Natasha. When would you be leaving?”

“Four a.m.,” he said. “Tonight. Or, I guess tomorrow morning. Burbank to Tokyo.”

I refused to respond to this information with the true emotions I was feeling inside, so instead I tried to remain as cool as possible.

“Burbank?”

He laughed. “You live in Los Angeles long enough, you know to never take a flight into or out of LAX if you can help it.”

“How long are you going to be in Tokyo?”

He sighed. “We’re thinking a minimum of six months. We’re opening for another band, which is going on a European tour afterwards, and if things go well, we’ll join them. Maybe we’ll come back to the States and tour here after that. It just depends on the record pre-sales and the success of the singles. But that all depends. I came here because I saw you on the news...”

Inside, I was a little disappointed, but ultimately happy for him. He was living his dream. This is exactly what I told him to do. But for some reason, it had been nice to know he was out there in the same city as I was this whole time. But this was what was best for him, and I’d hate for Olivia and me to take that away from him. The last thing I needed was for him to feel like he needed to stay out of some misplaced obligation because I was pregnant.

So, the lies began.

“Well, it’s not yours,” I said.

Lie number one.

“It’s not?”

“Timing didn’t work out.”

“Oh,” he said.

Was that disappointment in his voice, or relief?

“I’m only at about six and a half months.”

Lie two.

He nodded. “I thought you said it would just be a few weeks on the news.”

“Did I?” I asked. “I must have misspoken. I meant months.”

Lie four.

Anyone with eyes and even a passing knowledge of pregnancy could tell I was deep into the third trimester.

“So, who is the father, then?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure,” I said.

Lie. Lie. Lie.

“You know how LA is. Unless you’re fighting it, it’s not difficult to fall neck deep into dick.”

It was childish thing to say, but I always used terrible humor in awkward moments. I figured this would solidify his decision to leave and take this opportunity to do what he was meant to do. This is exactly why I didn’t tell him about Olivia to begin with. I didn’t need to manipulate him into sticking around. Forty years from now, he’d regret not going.

“Oh, yeah, okay, I guess,” he said, looking at the ground as he walked.

We stopped at a stoplight, and he pressed the button for the crosswalk. No cars were coming. We could have just kept going and chanced jaywalking, but I wasn’t in the mood to waddle out of the way of an oncoming car.

“Shouldn’t you be packing right now?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Probably,” he said, “but I figured there was time for a goodbye before I left.” his voice was laced with confusion and sadness, the worst way I had ever heard his voice sound.

As we were walking, I couldn’t help but notice I was leading him in a circle back to the food court. It was unconscious, but I could have made another turn if I really wanted to. The fact was that I just wanted to be done with the conversation because all of this hurt too much.

We arrived back at the court, and I felt like my heart was pounding out of my chest.

“Well, goodbye, I guess,” I said, not knowing what else to say.

We looked at each other, staring into each other's eyes. There was so much talking without any words actually being said, but neither one of us wanted to be the one who said things first.

So, we didn't say anything more, and that let me know that he understood all he needed to from our interaction. Sometimes a question didn't need to be a sentence. It could just be an action. And I gave him an answer, even if it wasn't the one he would have hoped for.

"Goodnight," I said.

"Goodnight," he said with sadness behind his eyes, and with that, he walked away.

Kiefer was gone from my life for at least six months. As far as I was concerned, that was an eternity.

CHAPTER 28



*** KIEFER ***

I had an old shop teacher in high school who used to say, “I may have been born yesterday, but, hell, I stayed up all night,” and his voice repeating that mantra filled my head as I drove back to my apartment. How stupid did Melody think I was? There was no way she was only six months pregnant. But why would she lie about that?

The only reason I could think of was that she didn’t want me to think I was the father. Did that mean that I was for sure the father? Maybe not, but I had a strong hunch. People change over the course of a decade, but not that much, and I had a pretty good sense of who Melody was.

If she immediately jumped into a relationship with someone else, she would have told me that. After all, it wasn’t like she was shy about saying that she’d been sleeping around (and I wasn’t sure I believed that — her face turned just red enough, and she paused just long enough for me to get a strong impression that she was lying). No, she wanted me to think that the baby wasn’t mine because she was certain it was mine.

I felt like Sherlock Holmes for coming to that conclusion, but once I did, I tried to mentally talk myself out of it.

And this internal monologue continued as I got home, where Jackson was waiting for me.

The second I walked inside, he paused what he was watching on TV.

“How’d it go?” he asked. I didn’t need to respond. He saw the expression on my face. “Oh.”

I walked down towards him and collapsed next to him on the couch.

“Is the baby yours?” he asked.

“She said it wasn’t,” I said, “but I’m pretty sure she was lying. She’s never been much of a poker player.”

He was speechless. I suppose there wasn’t much to say to that.

“Am I a bad dad for abandoning my son?” I asked.

“Or daughter.” he corrected me.

“Or daughter,” I said.

Jackson thought for a moment. “If she says it’s not yours, you need to accept that, even if you don’t believe her. What are you supposed to do? Demand a paternity test to prove it’s yours?”

“No,” I said, “I just... I know it was mutual that we called things off, but I can’t help but feel like I’ve done something wrong. I’m doing something wrong by leaving them both behind.”

“You gave her the opportunity to ask for help. She certainly doesn’t need it, and it sounds to me that she may not even want it.” He said.

That hurt. I don’t know why it hurt, but it felt like rejection. Like she was breaking up with me all over again.

“You can reach out again when you get back,” he said.

“Yeah, but that’s six months from now,” I said. “That’s forever in the future.”

“It’s going to fly by,” he assured me. “It’s the frustrating thing about life. Everything ends eventually, and, for the good things, it’s never enough time. You’re going to have a blast in Japan and before you know it, you’ll be on your way back home with pictures and memories and stories to tell.”

The eight months since I’d last seen Melody both felt like forever and a blip. Working on the album had kept me so busy that I didn’t notice the passage of time, but the idea of us being

together was so distant in my mind that it almost felt like a dream or somebody else's life.

"You may be in a different place six months from now, too," he said. "You may meet someone out there."

Not likely, I thought.

"Or she might meet someone else here," Jackson said. "That's how life goes sometimes."

That seemed more likely to me.

"You know, it's like with me and Natasha," he said. "We had almost a full year together, and we're ending things on good terms because it's what's best. Am I happy about it? Of course not, but life will go on, and we're better off for it. She'll be back in six months' time or, I don't know, maybe she won't be.

"What it comes down to," he said, "is that if it's meant to be, it's meant to be. And if not, well, we'll still get to hold on to those happy memories."

The sentence came out of his mouth like an icepick through my heart.

Because it wasn't so simple as he made it out to be. I could choose to stay. I didn't need to get on that plane. I could go back to Melody and tell her I know that I'm the father of that baby and, even if I wasn't, I wanted to be.

An entire lifetime flashed before my eyes. The baby being born. Us getting married. Us raising the baby, and me teaching it to play piano.

I'd become a boring old dad instead of following the rock star dream I'd intended to so many years ago. All I had to do was not get on that plane.

Except that wasn't the case. Because Melody did not want me back in her life. Right?

"I guess you're right," I said, though I didn't have to like the fact.

“There are billions of other girls on the planet,” he said, half-defeated. The words were true, but they felt empty.

CHAPTER 29



MELODY

I couldn't sleep that night, instead spending the time tossing and turning in my bed with my mind racing and wondering what I was even doing. This was all childish. Like it or not, Kiefer was an important part of my life until we went our separate ways after high school. The universe managed to put us back in touch with each other after so many years, and I'd be stupid to ignore that kind of chance coincidence.

Because there was no such thing as true coincidence.

And the universe sent me a baby that was half him and then, because I suppose I wasn't taking the hint, sent Kiefer to the food court to confront me directly.

Or maybe that last part was just Kiefer and not the universe.

But I just blew him off, refusing to let the conversation start. And I lied to him. At the very least, he should know that the baby was his. Then let him make his own decision from there.

That would have been the mature, adult thing to do. I kept thinking I knew what I was doing, that I know what I'm doing, but the truth is I hadn't the slightest fucking clue. All I knew is that Kiefer was special, and he deserved to know that he has a tiny human that is half his. I should have said that 8 months ago, or at least talking to him tonight. And now Kiefer was leaving for Tokyo, and I had no way to get in touch with him.

Well, I thought, there is one way of getting in touch with him.

I shook the thought away. It was drastic and dramatic and... well, if I ever wanted to see him again, I couldn't count on the universe to make it happen. I would have to do it myself.

He would be at the airport for a flight leaving at four am or so, at Burbank airport. It was just after one am now. If I rushed and hurried over there — and if he didn't get through security too early — there was a chance, maybe only a small one, that I could run into him.

I had faith in the universe. If I did the heavy lifting, it would carry me the rest of the way. All I had to do was get there and hope. And if it was meant to be, then it would be.

Perhaps I should have come to the conclusion earlier, but as I threw my clothes on and ran out of my apartment, I was hoping that he and I were, in fact, meant to be. Once I lifted the stubborn blindfold I'd been wearing all these months and saw him right in front of me, I realized that I wanted him back in my life.

That is, if he wanted me back in his. And after tonight and the way I'd pushed him away, I wasn't sure that he would.

But there was only one way to find out, and it involved getting out to Burbank before he did.

* * *

I was scared of driving too fast. That was tempting fate. With Olivia almost on her way out, I couldn't bear the thought of losing her in a traffic accident. So I stayed under the speed limit and made extra sure when I was merging that there wasn't anyone in my blind spot.

It was a little after two when I pulled into the long line of cars. Burbank was a small airport, but that didn't mean it couldn't have traffic. No, anywhere in the greater Los Angeles area could have traffic if it wanted it bad enough. As I drove

through, I looked into the airport windows, hoping to get a glimpse of Kiefer, but I saw nothing. I pulled into the nearest parking garage, grabbing a ticket on the way in, knowing perfectly well that it was probably going to cost me \$50 even if all I did was walk into the airport and discover that he wasn't there.

I didn't care. I had to do everything in my power to catch Kiefer before he left or I'd regret it, probably for the rest of my life.

After pulling into the first open spot I could get (mostly ending up between the lines), I hauled my body and a half into the building and waddled past the desks for each of the airlines, hoping I'd see him waiting in line with his luggage.

No luck.

As I continued to run (I guess you could call it that) towards the security area, I saw a large acoustic guitar case on someone's back.

My heart jumped a bit as I looked on in anticipation. The man was halfway through the security line, but I couldn't see his face from where I was standing.

"Kiefer!" I shouted, not even caring about embarrassing myself if it wasn't him.

But it was him. And he turned towards me, looking surprised. He smiled at me and started shuffling back through the line towards me, excusing himself along the way.

He gave me a big hug when he finally made it to me and I held him tightly against me, taking in his scent that instantly brought me back to eight months ago or so when we created Olivia. I didn't know the exact night it happened, but it didn't matter because each one was magical in its own right.

Just like she would be.

"Kiefer," I said.

"Shh," he said, still holding me.

"No," I told him, "it's important."

“Shh.” His voice was calming. He was the one who had a plane to catch. If he wasn’t in a rush, then I could wait. I had nowhere to be.

Except I did have somewhere I needed to be.

At first, I thought I’d peed myself and couldn’t make sense of it. Was I that happy to see Kiefer? Like an excited puppy?

But it didn’t stop, and in what felt like slow motion, my mind finally realized what was going on.

“My water just broke,” I said. And then I repeated it. “My water just broke.” And as the idea sunk in once again. “Olivia is coming!”

The expression on his face was a smile with a bit of confusion as the words sunk into his brain, much as they must have in mine.

“Right now?”

“Right now,” I said. “I’m going into labor.” And then, because I realized I’d forgotten to tell him. “She’s yours.”

“I know,” he said.

He took me by the arm and dragged me outside as he pulled out his phone.

“You know?”

“You’re not a good liar,” he said.

I blushed. He kept on pressing buttons on his phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m getting you to the hospital.”

“But your trip?”

He pressed a button on the phone. “Five minutes,” he said. “The Uber will be here in five minutes.” Then he looked up at me and registered the question. “My luggage will have to make it to Tokyo without me.”

“Wait, why not an ambulance?”

He shook his head. “The Uber’ll be here right away. The ambulance will take an hour and charge you \$1,000. We could take my car, but I don’t think we’re going to make it all the way back to the garage with you like this.”

He was right. Uber was the fastest way. In L.A., believe it or not, many people took Ubers to the hospital before ambulances all the time.

We must have looked ridiculous, the two of us waddling over to the rideshare area, him with his giant guitar bag on his back and me, as pregnant as I was going to get, leaning against him.

“Do you need to do the breathing thing?” he asked.

“Lamaze?” I laughed. “Not until I’m dilated.”

“Okay, okay.” There was excitement in his voice, along with the nervous energy. He clearly had no idea what to do — why would he? He hadn’t attended the classes or read any of the books. He’d only just found out for sure he was going to be a father a few hours ago at most.

“Then what am I supposed to do?” he asked. “What do we do now?”

“We get to the hospital,” I told him.

He looked at his phone. “Two minutes!” And there was a big, joyous smile on his face.

“We’re going to have a baby!” he said.

Yes, we were.

CHAPTER 30



*** KIEFER ***

I held her hand all the way to the hospital. On the way, her expression quickly shifted from excitement to pained. Was this what was supposed to happen? Was this normal?

I had no clue.

I wasn't a doctor, I was a bassist. If only I'd had more time to prepare and go to the prenatal checkups and know what to expect, then maybe I'd at least know if I should be worried.

Oh, who was I kidding? Someone could have told me that this happened with every pregnancy, and I'd still be worried.

For the first time in forever, I had hope. When I saw Melody come towards me at the airport like some kind of big, sexy penguin, my spirits were instantly lifted into the stratosphere. Sure, I was looking forward to being a rock star in Tokyo, but it wasn't my dream anymore. She was my dream. And I wanted to be with her, and I knew her coming to me meant that we were in fact meant to be. I would have traded all the fame and fortune in a second if it meant that I could spend my life with her.

"Squeeze my hand," I told her. "I've got you."

She didn't respond verbally, but she did what I said, squeezing me with all her might through what was a very strained expression, cutting off all the circulation in my hand.

Fine, I thought. Squeeze all the blood out of it until it falls off, and I can't play a guitar ever again. I don't care.

God, I would have done anything to take the pain away from her and hold it inside me for a while, just to give her a break. I wondered if maybe I should have called an ambulance instead of an Uber, but before too long, we made it to the hospital. I ran inside and screamed as many words as I could without resorting to actual sentences.

“Baby!”

“Pregnant!”

“Pain!”

“Help!”

“Emergency!”

Eventually, the staff came running over with a wheelchair, thankfully understanding that I needed immediate insistence and wasn't some random crazy person. I pointed them in the right direction and tried helping Melody into the wheelchair when one of the nurses pushed me aside.

“Sir, we'll take it from here,” he said in a firm voice. “Just follow us.”

I ran after them when the Uber driver shouted at me.

“Mister!” he yelled. “Your bags!”

I didn't care about the fucking bags. He could throw my bass on the ground and run it over for all I cared, because right now I was the happiest and most concerned man alive. But I knew that wouldn't be the logical thing to do. So, I grabbed my stuff from the back of his car and ran inside after the nurses, who were spouting medical mumbo jumbo at a rapid tempo, much too quickly for me to even parse too many individual words from their technical vernacular.

But the ones I could pick out were alarming.

“Rapid heartbeat.”

“Blood pressure extremely high.”

As I ran behind them, another nurse came beside me with a clipboard.

“Sir, I need you to answer a few questions for me. What is the patient’s name?”

“Melody Cruz.”

“And what is your relationship to her?”

I paused for a second. Were they going to kick me out of here if I said the truth — that we were friends from high school who’d hooked up years later, fell in love and then broke up, but now realized that we were meant to be? But then the answer clicked in my head. “I’m the father of the baby.”

The nurse looked at me quickly and I tried to judge what was going on in her head, but she scribbled something down and moved on with a series of other questions, most of which I could only guess at the answer and felt like a bad friend as a result. What was her medical history? Nothing, so far as I knew. Did she have any allergies? Not that I was aware of. What was her weight? How would I even know that? Especially now in the extremely advanced stages of her pregnancy.

If nothing else, the nurse with the clipboard distracted me so I could stay out of the other nurse’s way. She led me into the room where Melody would be, where another nurse took me aside.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Her pulse is through the roof,” he told me, “we had to give her a propranolol injection, which...”

“How will that affect the baby?” I interrupted him.

“...is perfectly safe for both her and the baby,” he said, clearly anticipating my question. “She’s in labor, and the baby’s coming out. It’s too late for an epidural, but we’ll do everything in our power to make this as comfortable as we can for her.”

“Sir?” another nurse said, pulling a chair up beside Melody. “You’re the father?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Sit here, take her hand, and talk to her.”

I ran over to her and took her hand. She turned her head to me and smiled through the pain.

“I probably look so ugly right now,” she said.

She always did that, using terrible comedy to make light of a difficult situation. The thing was, she didn't look ugly at all; she looked absolutely radiant through the beads of sweat on her forehead and lines of exhaustion on her face, which was pale and yet so full of life.

“I've never seen you more beautiful,” I told her.

“Liar,” she said with a laugh that became a pain-filled moan.

Of course, I wasn't lying. But I didn't want to argue with her.

What I was truly thinking at the moment, though, I didn't dare say. With the concerned medical staff and all the color drained out of her face, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if she didn't make it.

After all, I'd been here before. Maybe not this exact same situation, but close enough, where I fell face first into love only to lose it forever. I couldn't bear to have that happen again.

But if it did, I would not allow them to take that baby away from me. I'd raise her as well as I could, ensuring that Melody would be looking down from the stars above, proud of both of us.

Stop it, I thought to myself. *She's going to live.*

“I'm sorry I yelled at you,” I said.

“It's okay,” she said back.

“No,” I said, “let me do this. You worry about having the baby. I'm sorry that I raised my voice, and I'm sorry I lost my temper. I have my demons, but I can deal with them. I'm not going to let them keep me from you. If you let me back into your life, I'll make sure those demons never show their faces to you or especially to baby...”

I paused.

“Olivia,” she told me. “Baby Olivia Cruz.”

“Not Olivia Ekland? You don’t want us all to have the same last name?” I asked, only realizing what I’d asked after I’d said it.

“Really?” she asked with a smile. “You’re choosing now as the time to propose to me?”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking...” I trailed off. “Yes,” I said. “I’m proposing to you. I could give you a big old, planned engagement with a ring, but it would be meaningless.”

“Oh?” she said, her voice strained as she felt another contraction coming.

“Because that’s not who you are. You’re a spontaneous, exciting person who likes to jump into things not knowing exactly how you’ll land. And I want to be that person with you. Now is the moment that I decided I wanted to marry you, and so now is the time I’m asking you if you want to marry me, too.”

“Time to push, Ms. Cruz,” the doctor said.

“You don’t need to give me an answer right away,” I said. “I know you’re in the middle of something right now.” I tried using the same comedy style as she did, but she didn’t respond. It looked as though she was on a different planet with a mission I would never understand. I knew what I was saying right now was completely ridiculous, and she couldn’t even fathom an answer. But I was just talking to help her through the pain the best that I knew how because I was running on adrenaline and love.

“Very good,” the doctor said. “Just a couple more pushes should do it.”

And, before I knew it, there was a beautiful, screaming baby in the doctor’s hands.

That was our baby. That was Olivia. And nothing would ever be the same.

“Congratulations,” the doctor said. “You’ve got a healthy baby girl.”

The doctor turned towards me.

“Would you like to cut the umbilical cord?”

Yes? No? At the moment I wanted a million things. I wanted to hear a yes out of Melody’s mouth. I wanted to hold Olivia in my own arms. I wanted to know that everything was going to be okay.

But none of those were what I was being asked.

“Yes!” I said, overcome with emotion.

A nurse handed me a pair of sterile scissors and guided my hand to cut the cord. With a quick snip, the physical connection between Olivia and Melody was severed, and she was now officially on her own in the world.

“Let me go get her cleaned up for you,” the nurse said and took her from the doctor.

As I watched the nurse move to the other side of the room, I felt a brief emptiness as if a part of me was gone too, even though she was a few steps away.

Part of it was how much calmer the room had become now that there was no more chaos going on.

It was the same feeling I’d get after a big concert with a good, raucous crowd. I’d return to the green room, and there’d be a low as I came off the high of all the adrenaline and dopamine flowing through my system from doing what I was put on this earth to do.

It was that same low feeling I’d get when the pills I’d taken would start wearing off.

That was the low I felt right then immediately after the birth of my daughter.

Fortunately, that low feeling was extremely transient.

Because barely five seconds passed before Melody said, “Yes, I will marry you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. There’s nobody else I’d rather spend my life with.”

“Me either,” I told her, then leaned down and kissed her. At that moment, I felt an immediate high greater than any drug I’d ever taken. What’s more, this drug never managed to wear off. From that moment on, Melody and Olivia ensured that I never once felt another low ever again.

EPILOGUE



MELODY

Having a baby usually means people's lives change a bit, but nothing could have prepared me for what came along with Olivia when she came into this world. The day after she was born, I had a talk with Kiefer about rushing into things, and though I accepted his proposal to me while I was drugged up and recovering from giving birth, I had to retract the acceptance.

It wasn't that I didn't want to marry him. I absolutely did, but it would have been a silly thing to make a major life decision at a moment where we were both in very strange positions emotionally. He'd already given up a trip to Tokyo for me, so I wanted to be sure that he knew what he was doing and had fully thought it through before he proposed again.

And six months passed without that happening.

It was, in some ways, for the best, though. We could genuinely appreciate the time we had together without having to worry about planning a wedding. We could focus on Olivia and I could continue to give at least some attention to The Vegan Vaquero.

With all the business we'd been doing, it made sense to go forward with the next big thing, which was to open a physical location. The investors were enthusiastic about the idea and fronted me more than enough money to make that happen.

With Kiefer able to stay home with Olivia, it gave me time to invest in putting the restaurant together. It wasn't quite

ready to open, but it was well on its way and would give us the ability to add much more to the menu and try new things.

It was extremely exciting.

Kiefer still, of course, went in for work, but we set up a mini home studio for him within the apartment (really not much more than a bedroom with foam on the walls for better recording) so he could self-produce without having to go into Santa Monica every day.

I asked him if he was ever upset about giving up on his dream of becoming a rock star, and he gave me a definitive no. He chose to be with me and Olivia, and he didn't regret it for a second.

After Natasha came back from her tour — the early buzz for the record was positive and one of the singles even crept into the top 40 — Kiefer did join her on stage for her local performances, including one on a late night TV show, which I was barely able to stay up long enough to see. But he was there in the background, absolutely beaming and having the time of his life.

He still got to be a rock star, he just wouldn't be able to travel as much doing it.

For the record release, I suggested we throw a party for Natasha at our apartment, and when I suggested that we keep the party dry, he asked, "Why?"

"Well, because..." and I trailed off.

"Of my sobriety?"

I nodded.

"Put a bottle of the finest beer in front of me or the greatest cocktail of pills you can imagine," he said. "So long as I've got the two of you, I'll never be tempted by that again."

I worried that it might be more difficult when he actually had the physical distraction in front of him, but by the time the party came, he completely ignored all the alcohol as if it wasn't there. The hardest thing he had to drink was a Coke Zero.

At one point, he nodded, then stepped to the center of the room and cleared his throat.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Excuse me!”

The party quieted down.

“I want to thank you all for being here to celebrate Natasha on the release of her spectacular new album.” He gestured towards her, and the party-goers gave her a bit of a cheer.

“And I hate to do this, but as the host, I’m going to ask you for your attention for just a few minutes, because I have something of a surprise. Melody, can you go get me my guitar?”

“Kiefer,” I said, “come on, this is Natasha’s big day.”

Where was Natasha? I looked around and couldn’t see her. And then the door to the other bedroom opened, and Natasha came out. I wondered what she was doing in there until about two seconds later when Jackson followed her out, buttoning his shirt back up.

They were both glowing. Old habits die hard.

“Oh, Natasha,” Kiefer said and she blushed, practically caught in the act. “Would you mind helping me out?”

I was confused, to say the least.

“Not a problem,” Natasha said quickly, then grabbed a keyboard bag from the side of the room.

“The guitar’s in the bedroom,” Kiefer told me.

I tiptoed into the bedroom, where Kiefer’s guitar was. It was also where the crib was and where Olivia was sleeping, at least for the time being. We both wanted to keep her close. Eventually we’d move her into her own room, but neither of us was ready for that.

I had hoped she was still asleep, but she wasn’t. She lay there calmly in the crib, staring at nothing and smiling at me. It wasn’t fair for her to have to stay in there while the rest of us were partying. I picked her up and carried her back into the living room with the guitar. By the time I’d gotten there,

Natasha was already set up. I handed Kiefer the guitar. He put it on and asked Natasha for a few notes so they could be in tune.

Ernie came over to me, “They’re really great together, aren’t they? Really amazing team.”

And they were. Kiefer loved being up there playing music, and I knew he especially enjoyed playing with Natasha.

“Can I hold her?” Ernie asked, addressing Olivia.

“You know how to hold a baby?”

He laughed. “Melody, I have seven grandchildren. I’ve held more than a few babies in my day.”

Of course he had. I laughed and handed Olivia over to him. He made a face I’d never seen before, full of delight. For a man who was usually so stern and serious, it was amazing what a baby could do. Particularly one as adorable as Olivia.

And Olivia was obviously very comfortable in his arms. She made a few cooing sounds at his funny faces and clapped her hands.

“I’ve been home with Olivia,” Kiefer said, “and when Olivia sleeps, she sleeps like an angel, and there’s not a whole lot I could do. So I started playing around with my guitar again. Actually playing, instead of working. And, funny how these things happen, the playing turned into something kind of interesting.

“So I present to you, friends and family, the first live performance of a new Kiefer Eklund original since... well, in nearly a decade.”

“What’s it called?” Ernie asked.

“I’ve got a few working titles,” he said, then he looked towards Natasha and cued her to begin.

It was a ballad with light piano touches. I never was one to describe music. It was always more of a feeling than anything else to me, but this struck me as particularly pretty. And it was one of those songs that knew it was a song. Very self-aware. He kept singing about music stuff and I didn’t really get it

until everyone looked at me, and I realized I was missing something.

The chorus!

I was so silly, I completely missed the wordplay in the chorus. The song was about me! And when he got to the bridge, he put down the guitar, leaning it against the wall, and let Natasha handle the background music.

To lose even a note of you

Would be the only thing scary

Which is why I'm down on one knee

And asking you to marry...

“Me?” he said, no longer singing, as he’d fallen to one knee and brought out a ring. All the while, Natasha kept playing her piano part, and it was like a big, dramatic scene from a movie. This was even cheesier than any taco I could have ever made, and I loved every second of it. Nobody had ever written me a song before; tears filled my eyes and I couldn’t form words.

I was light on my feet and nearly fell over — I was always falling and tripping over myself for no reason — but Kiefer caught me. And, unlike those other times, I wasn’t topless and having him catch me by my boobs or something embarrassing like that.

No, I fell right into his arms and looked up at his eyes, and there was only one word that could come to mind.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, yes, yes!”

And before I could let out any more yeses and embarrass myself further, he saved me again by kissing me. And I kissed him back.

It transported me back in time to that game of Truth or Dare in high school, when I’d had the best kiss of my life. And now I knew it was the only kiss I’d ever be experiencing again, and I knew all our dreams had come true.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading Kiefer and Melody's happily ever after. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I loved writing it!

Are you looking for some more swoon worthy reads?

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And if you can't get enough Bailey, you will love my **FREE** book **Fake Date Disaster**. Colton and Courtney are two unlikely best friends, that have one disastrous fake date, and end up in one very small twin bed...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thank you all so much for reading my books. Being able to write for readers who love the same toe-curling romance novels that I love to create is beyond a dream come true!

I got my love for writing romance novels when I was 13 years old and found my mother's stash of harlequins. Ever since then, washboard abs, forbidden love, and-if-looks-could-kill men have been etched in my mind. When I ran out of books to read, I began to write my own and as the fates would have it, became a published author.

My favorite books to write are witty page turning romances, with grumpy, brooding, irresistible men who make you want to take extra-long showers. When I am not lost in the written word, you can catch me by the pool with my family, reading a book, and eating something delicious that someone else cooked for me.

I hope you keep enjoying all the panty melting, heart racing, love stories I revel in creating. Stay sexy babes!

How To Connect With Me

Want more Bailey?

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[Who doesn't want a little Bailey in their life? Hope to connect with you soon!](#)

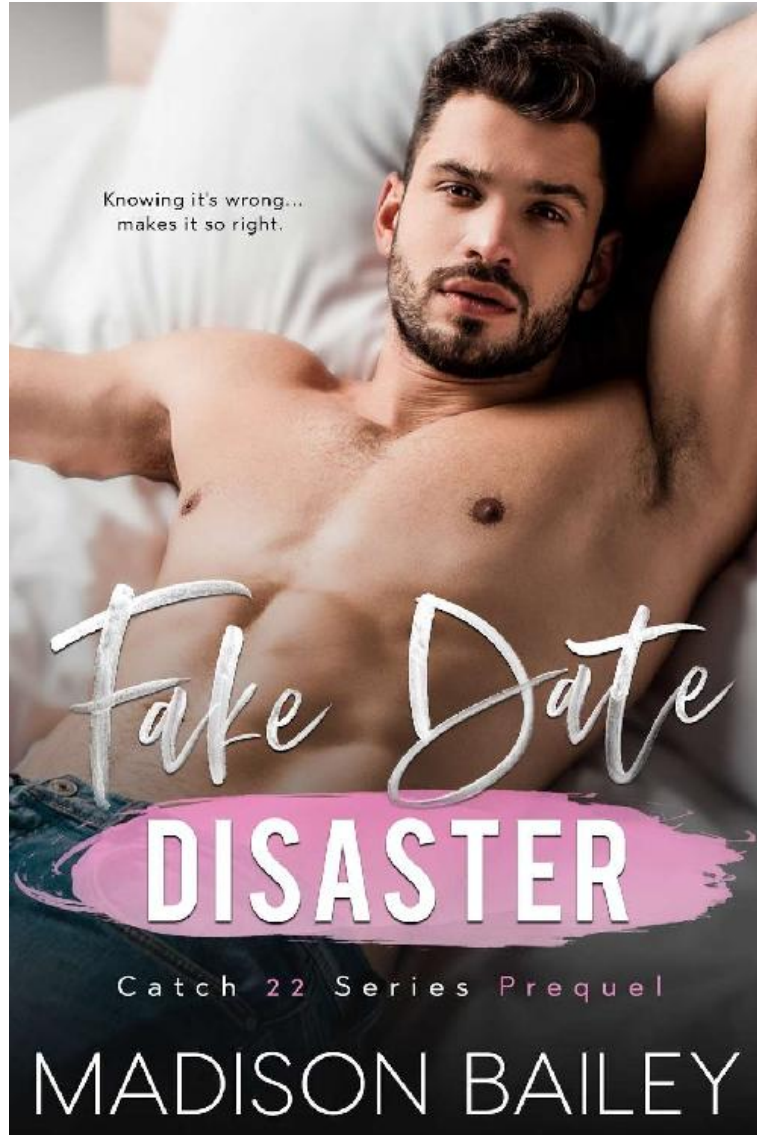
Stay sexy,

Madison Bailey

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