

*Bold*

**RHYTHM**

RIVER VALLEY REBELS

**GABRIELLE SANDS**

# BOLD RHYTHM

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A ROCK STAR ROMANCE

GABRIELLE SANDS

*GS*

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Royal Blood - "Boilermaker"

Nothing But Thieves - "Particles"

## **MOLLY**

LINDSAY and I sat on the living room floor amidst a patchwork of hastily scribbled notes and scuffed-up textbooks. It was Saturday, a day most people heaved a sigh of relief and unwound from a long week of work. Clearly, those people weren't college freshmen preparing for exams.

The clock ticked past five pm, which meant my housemate and I have been cramming for the dreaded economics final for at least six hours.

Lindsay pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders. "We need to call the landlord about the insulation, Molly. How is Boston still so cold when it's nearly May?"

A vicious wind rattled the glass panes of the ancient Colonial we'd moved into at the start of the year, sounding much like the chatter of monster-sized teeth. It would have been an ominous soundtrack if we weren't so used to it by now.

"No point," I said, shaking my head. "Exams are done in three weeks, and then we're leaving for the summer. Given the speed of progress on fixing the leaks, you really think he's going to jump on this?" Our landlord was a middle-aged Italian man named Vince. He ran a pizza spot in town and had an overinflated opinion of himself as a handyman.



Two months ago, the pipes burst in one side of the house, flooding our other two housemates' bathrooms. They chose to move out when it became clear Vince was in no rush to hire someone to fix it. They'd asked us if we wanted to go with them to their new place, but the rent was much higher there than what we were paying here. Lindsay was at Northeastern on a scholarship, while I was here largely on my sister's dime. Neither of us had money to spare.

Lindsay rubbed her arms. "You're right. I read somewhere the cold keeps our brains more alert, so maybe that's the silver lining here. I could use all the alertness I can get at this point." She shot a dirty look at my tall stack of textbooks. "I don't know how you're handling six classes when I'm barely scraping by with my four."

As if I needed that reminder. I bit on the end of my pen to suppress a groan. My grand plan was to graduate in three years instead of four to save on the astronomical cost of tuition. It had seemed doable when I first got here back in September, but with each passing month, keeping up with my course load became more and more difficult. No amount of caffeine was going to fix the fact that I was running out of steam. After I wrote my exams, I planned on sleeping for a few days straight, followed by a few more days of doing nothing at all. I had a week of rest before my summer job began, and I was going to take full advantage of the break.

"We're almost at the end of it," I said as I rubbed my aching back muscles. There was no way it was healthy to spend so much time sitting hunched over a bunch of books. "I can't wait for the year to be over."

"I still can't believe you're not spending the summer in LA. If my sister lived somewhere cool like that, I'd be on the first flight out."

My heart squeezed painfully. God, I missed Ade.

"I would have gone if it wasn't for my job," I said. It was just a gig at a small local marketing agency, nothing special, but it was also my first chance to have some money of my own. Every time I went to the bank to withdraw from the

account Ade had opened for me at the beginning of the year, I felt a pang of guilt. My sister had sacrificed a lot to get me to Northeastern. After our parents died when I was in my sophomore year of high school, she became my guardian at nineteen. Overnight, she took on more responsibility than anyone her age should bear, and yet she never complained about it. Not once during the two long years when she had to work late shifts at the bar and pick up random side jobs to save for my tuition. My sister had been born to be a musician, and she'd put her dreams on the back burner to do what was best for me.

She was my rock. My protector. My guardian angel. When her big break appeared in the form of Bleeding Moonlight, a heavy metal band looking for a new guitarist, I'd thanked the universe for doing me a solid. Finally, Ade could have the life she deserved. Still, the weight of what I nearly took from her would never disappear off my back.

When I left for college, I vowed I'd never be a burden on her again. I was done with feeling helpless. That meant getting myself on an accelerated path to adulthood and proving to Ade I was just fine on my own. If that meant sacrificing my summers, then so be it.

"My folks are making me spend the summer at my uncle's dairy farm," Lindsay grumbled. "I'm pretty sure I'll be elbow deep inside a cow a few hours after I arrive."

"Thanks for the visual," I said, scrunching my nose. Lindsay came from a big family of farmers, and I'd managed to learn more about cow insemination in the past two semesters than I ever wanted to know.

I reached for my study guide, and as I flipped through the pages, a couple of photographs slipped out.

Lindsay plucked one off the ground. "Is this one of the pictures you took last week at the park?" She lifted it up to the light. "Wow. It's gorgeous."

A warm feeling spread through me. "Thanks."

"The way you captured the light here is just incredible."

I fidgeted with my pen and tried not to be too bolstered by her praise. “It’s alright.” Photography was a hobby I’d picked up earlier this year—somewhat unwisely, given how much time I’d spent on it since. It started with a used SLR camera I found at a secondhand store on sale for twenty bucks. The store clerk told me it was a good deal, so I bought it on a whim. That weekend, I hunted down a roll of film, watched a YouTube video on how to load it up, and spent the rest of the day taking pictures around campus. The rest, as they say, was history. The people at the campus photo lab all recognized me by now given how frequently I reserved time there.

Lindsay glanced up at me. “Seriously. You have a gift for it. I can’t believe you only started photographing this year.”

“It’s not that hard after you watch a few videos about the basics,” I said. “And I probably took about twenty crappy shots before I got a good one.” Photography was fun, but it was also very time consuming. If I didn’t keep my priorities straight, I’d spend entire days messing around with my camera. Even now, I felt an itch to get out for a few hours and take advantage of the setting sun, but I needed to stay focused on studying.

Lindsay turned over another photo that had slipped out. “Love this one. Have you showed it to Mason?”

I looked at the picture and shook my head. It was from a walk we’d taken together many months ago. Mason was looking at me over this shoulder, laughing at something I’d said. How did that one get in there? It must have gotten stuck between the pages.

“I don’t think so.”

“Why don’t you hang out with him anymore? At the beginning of the year, you two were together all the time.”

“At the beginning of the year, he was the only person I knew on campus.”

“So it was just out of convenience?”

I nibbled on my bottom lip. It had been a lot more than that, but I’d never gotten into it with Lindsay or anyone else.

“It’s complicated,” I said on a sigh.

“That’s how you know it’s a good story. C’mon, I need a break from studying. Tell me what happened.”

Nothing happened. That was the problem.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. “Back home in River Valley, Mason would always flirt with me, so I thought he was interested. He wasn’t subtle about it, like at all, and my sister would always warn him off. He’s two years older than me, and she’s protective. Plus, they used to play in the same band. Anyway, I expected him to ask me out when we got to college, but he never did. It just became awkward after a while.” I sniffed and looked at my nails. “We’re still friends, I think. But it’s for the best we’re not close. We’re into way different things.”

It took me a while to get here, but now I was sure the fact that nothing ever happened between us was a good thing. Mason and I were incompatible on many levels. I was a straight A student, and I planned to keep it that way. Mason, on the other hand, probably hadn’t seen an A the entire year. After graduating from high school, he took two years off, during which all he did was play music and throw parties. There were rumors the only reason he went to college was because his parents gave him an ultimatum—college or get cut off from their family fortune. That threat may have gotten him to Northeastern, but as far as I could tell, studying was still low on his list of priorities.

I knew his grades weren’t great, at least in the classes we shared. Every time I offered to help, he sidestepped and said he was handling it. He wasn’t though. I was sure he’d failed the last economics test given how distressed he’d looked when we got the grades back. He hadn’t shown up to that class since, and it had been two weeks.

“That sucks,” Lindsay lamented. “It’s his loss that he blew his chance with you. Then again, I haven’t seen him with anyone else. Maybe he’s intimidated by you?”

I leveled her with a skeptical look. “Are we talking about the same person? Mason is not intimidated by anyone.” He

radiated a natural confidence most guys would give anything to have. He was easygoing, good looking, and it was obvious he didn't take himself too seriously. The combo was magnetic. Mason could make friends with just about anyone, which is why, for the life of me, I couldn't understand how he'd ended up with Kaz as his best friend.

Mason's tall dark-haired bandmate was as charismatic as a brick. He liked to glare at people, chain-smoke cigarettes, and probably killed puppies as a hobby. He was the kind of guy your parents warned you about before leaving you on campus. *Don't talk to that boy. He's trouble personified.*

The first time I met Kaz was when Mason invited him to join us for a lunch. It was the third week of classes, and I was only starting to make friends. Lindsay and I had just progressed to having breakfast together.

Somehow, in the same amount of time, Mason and Kaz had started a freaking band, and they'd become inseparable. Mason played the drums, while Kaz played guitar and did vocals. They'd already written a few songs together. When Kaz showed up to our lunch, they exchanged a special handshake. It was as if they'd known each other all their lives. They even finished each other's sentences.

In the beginning, I had an open mind about the guy. If anything, I wanted him to like me so that he'd tell Mason to ask me out already, but it quickly became clear Kaz had no interest in getting to know me. He said a curt hello before turning away from me and talking exclusively to Mason. I'd been rudely cut out of the conversation, as if I weren't even there. Eventually, we followed him to the other side of campus, where he suggested we break into a small library that had been closed for repairs.

"I heard they've got sick art on the walls," he informed us as he worked his credit card into the slot between the doors. "Would be cool to check it out." His arms were covered with tattoos of foreign writing. I wouldn't have been surprised to discover one of them translated to *rules are for losers*.

I guess I was a loser, because I was not going to risk getting caught breaking and entering. I told him I was leaving. He smirked at me and asked if I always ran away when things got interesting. I told him I had better things to do with my life, said a hasty goodbye to Mason, and vowed to never hang out with Kaz again.

Being at Northeastern was a goddamn privilege, something neither Kaz nor Mason seemed to appreciate. For them, college was a playground. For me, it was an arena in which I had to prove myself. The prize for doing so was independence. A good career. A life where I didn't need to rely on anyone.

I wasn't going to throw this opportunity away.

“Well, screw him.” Lindsay concluded. “Guys are really dumb at this age.”

I shook my head. “It's fine. I'm not mad about it, but to answer your question, that's why we've drifted apart.”

“Good thing there are plenty of other choices on campus,” Lindsay said, taking a sip of her coffee. “I swear, I get a new crush on a weekly basis.”

“Trust me, I've noticed,” I said with a laugh. It was amazing how quickly my housemate caught feelings for guys she'd never even had a conversation with.

She wasn't wrong, though. Northeastern teemed with handsome freshmen, many of whom were exceptionally smart and would no doubt be a perfect fit for me on paper. But the few dates I'd been on after it became clear Mason and I weren't going to happen had all fallen flat. My heart ticked at a steady rhythm. My palms remained dry. Not a single butterfly fluttered in my stomach. Around Mason, it was as if a flock of them took up residence inside my gut.

He'd always been handsome in a boyish kind of way, but he was a late bloomer. It wasn't until this year—the year he turned twenty—that he'd really grown into his own. He could be an Abercrombie model if the store sold distressed jeans, band T-shirts, and leather jackets instead of their preppy fare.

The fact that he was musically talented and fun to be around magnified all his physical attributes by at least a factor of ten.

I had been equal parts fascinated and terrified. Terrified, because he made me discover something truly frightening about myself. There was a foreign thing that lived inside of me. I called it the wild thing, but I may as well refer to it as Bad Molly. It itched and swelled and struggled to take control of my body and make decisions that were not only bad for me, but also bad for the only other important person in my life. My sister, Adeline. It wanted to mess around, go to all-night parties, drink until my vision blurred, and make out with blue-eyed, blond-haired boys.

It was the antithesis of Good Molly, the person who was in complete control whenever Mason *wasn't* around.

Mine and Lindsay's phones buzzed with an incoming message at the exact same time.

"A party at Brock's house," Lindsay read. "Tonight. Oh my God, we have to go." A wide grin unfurled across her face. Among her numerous crushes, the one she harbored for Brock, a quarterback, was on an entirely different level. I had no idea what she saw in him. He seemed to experience difficulty stringing more than two words together. He also happened to live with Mason, Kaz, and their fourth housemate, Noah.

I shook my head. "Can't. I need to keep studying."

"We've been at this since the morning," Lindsay whined. "C'mon, we need a break, and they're right down the street."

"A break, I can do. But going to a party? What about our test on Monday?"

"We won't drink," Lindsay countered. "And we'll only go for an hour. Please, Mol? Be a good friend? This might be one of my last chances to see Brock before we all go home for the summer."

I pressed my lips together. It would also be my chance to check up on Mason. We may not be close anymore, but I couldn't help but worry about him. Why hadn't he come to class the past two weeks? What if he was sick with only his

three idiot roommates there to take care of him? Kaz's idea of medicine was probably feeding him a shot of vodka every morning.

"Fine." One hour was enough for Lindsay to do her thing and for me to ensure Mason wasn't on his death bed.

She shot to her feet. "You're the best. I'm going to shower and start getting ready. We might only be there for an hour, but we're going to make an impression."

I watched her gallop up the stairs before following suit.

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Lindsay came down the stairs in a black mini dress that hugged her curves. I'd chosen something a bit more tame—skinny jeans, a bright-red tank top to match my heels, and a fluffy cardigan that would hopefully keep me somewhat warm.

It wasn't that strange for me to want to check up on Mason, right? I couldn't imagine missing two weeks of class. Exams were literally right around the corner. What was he thinking?

My sister had known him since he was fifteen and she was seventeen. They'd started a cover band together with two others in our tiny town in rural Pennsylvania.

It was weird to think that River Valley is no longer my home. We'd sold the house when Ade officially joined Bleeding Moonlight and they asked her to move with them to LA. It didn't make sense to keep the house when I was going to college five hours away and she had no other reason to return. I think for Ade, even more so than for me, the home had been a painful reminder of the life we'd lost when our parents passed away.

Coming to Northeastern had been a new beginning, and at some point, Mason had become the one connection to my past. Maybe that's why something about him reached into the very depths of my soul.



“Let’s do this,” Lindsay said, opening the door to our house. We linked our arms, pressing into each other for warmth, and hurried in the direction of Mason’s house. It was only a three-minute walk, but by the time we got to our destination, our hands were ice cold.

The party was already in full swing. All the usual trappings of a college party were there—a beer keg, red solo cups, half-finished bags of chips, and bottles upon bottles of liquor.

“Can’t believe I put on heels,” I muttered as I encountered something sticky on the floor with my first step.

“Whoa,” Lindsay breathed, taking it all in. “Is it just me, or are there a lot of people here?”

“What’s the occasion?” I asked. “Someone’s birthday?”

“Not sure. I didn’t ask.”

By the time we managed to push through the crowd gathered by the front door and say hello to a few people we knew, I was sweating. Nothing managed to warm up a house quite like the bodies of a hundred drunk and horny teenagers.

I peeled off my cardigan, leaving Lindsay talking to Noah, and ducked inside a nearby hallway to find somewhere I could stash it. I didn’t want it getting drenched in beer.

The first closet I found was filled with a few empty hangers. Seriously, this would never happen in a house full of girls. Empty hangers were as valuable as gold at our place. I grabbed one and hung the sweater up.

When I returned to find Lindsay, she was still chatting to Noah, but her face seemed a few shades paler. She shot me an alarmed look. “Hey, Mol! Guess what I just found out? This is a party for Mason and Kaz.”

My mind immediately jumped to their band. Had something good happened? Maybe they’d been picked as an opener for a show in town?

“Oh?” I looked to Noah. “What’s the occasion?”

“Haven’t you heard? They’re dropping out of Northeastern. This is their last night here.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ha ha. Funny.”

“For real. It’s their going-away party. We wanted to send off the boys with a bang.”

It was as if I’d been doused with icy-cold water. My stress response kicked in, making my heart pummel against my ribcage. “What the hell?” I hissed. Lindsay wrapped her palm around my wrist. “We’ll see you around, Noah,” she said quickly.

She dragged me in the direction of the kitchen. My mind raced. Why would Mason decide to drop out with that idiot? He was throwing his future away. And why was this the first I was hearing about it?

I wrenched my arm away from Lindsay. “I need to talk to him.”

“I can’t believe it,” Lindsay said, shaking her head. “Are you okay?”

“Fine. I’ll be right back.”

Mason’s room was close by. I’d been there once before, very briefly, during another one of his parties. He wanted to play me a song he and Kaz recorded, and it had been surprisingly good. Despite all of his flaws, Kaz had a nice voice.

I barged into Mason’s room, not bothering to knock, even though he could be in bed with some girl. He wasn’t. He was sitting on his bed, hunched over his phone. He looked up in surprise when he heard me enter.

“You’re dropping out?” I demanded. “Are you insane?”

He stood, his six-two frame dwarfing me even in my heels. “You heard?”

I studied his appearance, looking for any signs of a mental breakdown. There were none. If anything, he looked better than normal. The bags I’d often noticed under his eyes were gone, as if he’d finally managed to get a solid night of sleep.

“Yes, I heard. From Noah. He must be on drugs, because this is the most asinine idea I’ve ever heard.”

A weary smirk tugged on Mason's lips. "Nah. We took all of them away after he ended up on the roof at the last party."

"And you decided to sample them?"

"I'm not on drugs, Mol. Kaz and I are moving to LA and are going to try our luck with our band. We're hoping we can get signed." He ran a hand through his long blond hair and smiled.

What was there to smile about? All I saw was someone I cared about in the process of making a horrible mistake.

"You are out of your mind." There were so many things wrong with this I didn't know where to start. It hurt like a bitch that he hadn't thought to tell me earlier, or maybe even ask for my opinion on his plan. Yeah, by now I knew he wasn't interested in me romantically, but I'd thought we were still friends. I guess I held him in much higher regard than he held me. I couldn't imagine thinking about dropping out without at least talking to him before going through with it.

But I didn't feel like sharing any of that with him. He didn't deserve to know what he meant to me. It was clear to me now that we were so different, we may as well be alien species.

"Do you realize how lucky you are to have your parents paying for you?" I demanded. "You're going to throw it all away on a whim?"

He didn't even flinch. Here I was, feeling eternally indebted to my sister for getting me to college with her blood, sweat, and tears, and Mason clearly didn't feel an ounce of that gratefulness for his parents.

"I'm not doing well in my courses," he said calmly, but the smile fell away.

"And who's fault is that? I've offered to tutor you a dozen times, and you always brush me off."

He looked away. "I thought you'd be supportive, like you were of your sister," he said, his tone taking on a note of accusation.

My eyes widened at his audacity at comparing the two situations. They were nothing alike.

“My sister wanted to go to college,” I reminded him. “She didn’t get the opportunity to, and it was something she regretted for a long time. When she got the chance to pursue her dream, I was supportive because she was running *toward* something good. Not running away like you are.”

Couldn’t he see it? Why was he just *leaving*? Leaving *me*?

“I’m not running away,” he said as he turned and picked up a sweating can of beer off his desk.

“You are. You’re running away with that moron. This was Kaz’s idea, wasn’t it?”

He took a long sip of his drink. “We made the decision together.” I was sure he was lying.

“You know what they say about carefully choosing who you surround yourself with, right? You’re the average of the five people you spend most of your time with. He’s bringing your average down.” I was so mad, I didn’t have the mental capacity to filter what I was saying.

Mason turned to look at me, his eyes narrowed. “Is that why you stopped hanging out with me?”

God, he was infuriating. Did he really think it was somehow my fault we’d drifted apart? He was the one who’d led me on for years with all of his flirting and attention.

I scowled at him. “Yeah, that’s exactly why. And guess what? Kaz is going to ditch you in LA as soon as he grows bored of you. This is a mistake.”

Something dark flashed across his features as he took another long swig. He lowered the empty can down on the desk before eating up the distance between us with two sure steps. “Well, since we’re making mistakes tonight...”

He lowered his head and pressed his lips to mine.

My brain struggled to catch up. Was he...?

*Oh my God.* Mason was kissing me.

Shock cascaded from the top of my skull all the way down to my toes. His mouth was moving against mine, but I was too stunned to do anything but stand there and make useless observations. His lips were very soft. He smelled like home. Like campfires down in the pit, and morning dew in the field outside our high school, and Annie's tar-black coffee. His hand was in my hair now, his other on the small of my back. It felt shockingly good. So good I couldn't breathe.

And then it was over as suddenly as it had started. My eyes fluttered open to see his chest rise and fall. He was staring down at me, his blue eyes swimming with heat and regret.

My heart was about to jump out of my chest. "Mase—"

He shook his head, silencing me. "This is goodbye, Molly."

I choked on what had to be impending tears. What kind of an ass-backward goodbye was that? That kiss felt like a beginning, not an end.

"Why would—"

"I shouldn't have done that," he said, running a hand through his hair.

That stung. Was kissing me so bad he regretted it immediately?

"You're fucking stupid," I bit out, channeling my pain into anger. "And one day, you'll regret this."

His nostrils flared, and for a moment he looked genuinely hurt. Good. Maybe he felt a fraction of what I did.

Without another word, I left his room, slamming the door behind me.

## **MOLLY**

LINDSAY ACCOSTED me as soon as I returned to the living room. “What happened?”

“They’re really dropping out,” I said numbly, my mind still replaying that kiss. I was questioning my resolve to not drink tonight. Maybe a shot or two would help take the edge off. I was in no headspace to study after what had happened, and if I didn’t have an excuse for not getting back to work, Lindsay would pick up on something being wrong. I didn’t want to tell her about the kiss. I wanted to carve the memory out of my brain and burn it on a pyre.

“You didn’t manage to talk any sense into him?”

“No.” I eyed the kitchen. “I think I want a drink.”

Lindsay didn’t argue. We got ourselves two shots of tequila, threw them back, and made disgusted faces at the taste. Neither of us were big drinkers, but I didn’t have time to regret my decision. The liquor burned its way down my throat and pooled at the bottom of my belly. Some of the dark haze around me lifted.

“Oh my God,” Lindsay whisper yelled into my ear. “Look! They’re going to play spin the bottle.”

I craned my neck to see what was going on in the middle of the living room. A space was opening up, and Brock was in

its center, holding a half-full bottle of Jack above his head and inviting people to join in.

“Brock is playing.” She whirled around, her dark hair fanning out around her face, and gave me a significant look. “Please, Mol. We have to join in.”

I was already one unexpected kiss deep into the night, and I wasn't in any rush to get another one. “I'll pass, but go ahead.”

We pushed our way toward the sloppily formed circle, and I nudged Lindsay inside.

“You girls playing?” Brock asked. He was wearing his football jersey, and his auburn hair was slicked back with what seemed to me like too much product. I could smell the Axe body spray from a few feet away.

Despite all this, Lindsay was staring at him as if he was our Lord and Savior gracing us with his presence.

“She is.” I jerked my head in Lindsay's direction.

Brock eyed us both and then shook his head. “You both gotta play.”

“Dude, whatever,” I said, waving him off.

A notch appeared between his brows. “I'm serious. My game, my house, my rules. The chicks-to-dudes ratio is way off, so we need more girls. It's either both of you or neither.”

Grinding my teeth, I shot an exasperated look at my friend, whose cheeks had turned cherry red. How could she possibly like this guy?

Lindsay seemed undeterred by his behavior. She mouthed “please” at me, her eyes begging.

*For fuck's sake.* I suppose there was no point in ruining her night just because mine was in the dumpster. “Fine. One round.”

Brock wrapped his meaty hands around each of our wrists and pulled us forward. “Good call.”

I seriously doubted that, but there seemed to be no point in arguing. Casting my gaze around the quickly growing circle, I scanned the faces of the participants. Giggling girls I didn't recognize, a couple of guys from my marketing class, the hipster who got famous for a legendary dick pic a few months ago, and the master degenerate himself.

Kazimir Mikhailovich Nabokov.

How someone like him had a name that distinguished was honestly beyond me. There was absolutely nothing distinguished about the guy currently scowling at the entire room, his tatted-up arms crossed at his chest. Well, maybe with the exception of his cheekbones. They cut through his smooth, pale skin like sharp knives and gave him an aristocratic look that was at complete odds with everything I knew about him.

“Wowza,” Lindsay whispered in my ear. “Kaz looks extra delicious tonight.”

I rolled my eyes at her. She knew I disliked the guy. I'd told her all about the breaking and entering story, but it didn't seem to turn her off him. Lindsay was the reason I knew his full name in the first place. She had a career waiting for her as a private investigator if she ever decided to go for it. This girl could find out anything about anyone on the Internet.

“There are like ten guys here I wouldn't mind kissing,” she said. “Brock is at the top of the list, obvi, but I'd settle for Noah or Kaz.”

I was too annoyed at the entire world to reply with something non-catty. It wasn't Lindsay's fault Mason was an idiot, or that calculating gender ratios was probably the only math Brock was capable of doing.

Kaz's gaze landed on me, all cold and detached. I sneered at him. He always had this air about him, like he was cooler than everyone else, yet he clearly wasn't too cool for this dumb game. When he registered my expression, his lips curled into an infuriating smirk. I couldn't help but think he was reveling in the fact that he was stealing Mason from me.



Not that I ever had Mason in the first place.

Mason wasn't here, I realized. Relief surged through me. I had no desire to see him locking lips with someone right after he'd kissed me.

Brock hollered at everyone and kneeled at the center of the circle to set the bottle in motion. I was fairly sure Lindsay was muttering a prayer.

Unfortunately for her, the bottle pointed to some redhead I didn't know. I watched in disgust as Brock grabbed her shoulders, joined their mouths, and exchanged what looked like far too much saliva. The redhead didn't seem to mind, giving him a wink once they were done.

"Dang it," Lindsay said into my ear, sounding upset. "Kaz's next. You better be praying for me."

I did no such thing as I watched the spawn of Satan bring his hand to the bottle. People erupted into cheers when he entered the circle, as if he was some kind of celebrity. Honestly, what was wrong with everyone? As far as I could tell, Mason was the only person Kaz had ever been nice to, so I couldn't imagine what he'd done to earn this kind of reception. Did everyone at this party think he was cool for dropping out? That didn't bode well for my generation.

The bottle blurred as it spun and spun on the dirty floor. Kaz was watching it on his haunches, one elbow perched on his knee. He had a couple of inches of pitch-black hair that was just starting to hang over his eyes. Someone once told me he was from Russia. He must have moved to the United States, a long time ago because he didn't have a noticeable accent. There was a certain foreignness about him, though. He just didn't seem to fit in.

I pulled my eyes back to the bottle just as it ground to a halt.

*Oh, come on.*

It was pointing directly at me.

Slowly, Kaz lifted his gaze. I clenched my fists so tight my nails dug into my palms. How was this happening? This day

was quickly becoming one of the worst days of my life.

When our eyes met, a shiver ran down my spine. Kaz had deep, forest-green eyes, not too dissimilar from mine. The color reminded me of the woods behind my old home in the summer—lush, enchanting, and teeming with danger. Nearly every year, there were bear sightings. One time, a hiker nearly got mauled to death.

Kaz rocked on his heels and stood up. He was so tall, somehow even taller than Mason, and all I could think was in this scenario, he was the big bad bear.

He stopped right in front of me, frowning as he took me in. My face must have been screaming my distress. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips against my ear. I prepared myself for whatever nasty thing he was about to say.

“We don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” he whispered.

*Wait, what?*

Did he expect me to believe he was choosing this moment to try his hand at kindness? No, this had to be some kind of cruel gag. If I backed down, he’d probably tell everyone *he* was the one who didn’t want to kiss *me*. And even if he didn’t, I’d forever be known on campus as the girl who couldn’t handle the heat. Kaz may be leaving tomorrow, but I still had a few years left here. I wasn’t going to let him humiliate me as a parting gift.

“Why? You scared?” I challenged, tilting my head slightly so I could look him in the eyes. “Should have known you were all talk.”

He smirked. If he felt any genuine moral hesitation about kissing me, he was pretty darn good at hiding it. “Big words coming from someone like you.” He placed one firm hand on the small of my back, as if he owned me.

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“You’re the one who ran away from me last time, remember?”

The heat radiating off this man's body was ridiculous. I was beginning to sweat. "You're stalling. Is this your first kiss or something?"

The smirk transformed into a vicious-looking grin. "You won't be wondering about that once I'm finished with you." His gaze dropped to my lips. "You're different than I thought."

What the hell did *that* mean? How much time has this guy spent thinking about me? It was a disturbing idea. "I live to surprise you," I retorted. I unclenched my fists, brought my hands to his chest, and curled my fingers into his shirt. If he thought he was the only one who could get grabby, he was dead wrong.

"Enough chitchat! You going to kiss or what?" Brock yelled.

Kaz tugged me closer. I made sure to dig my nails into his surprisingly muscular pectorals. He glanced down at my hands. "Are you trying to turn me on?"

Absolutely insufferable. "Shut up and do it already."

That seemed to tip him over the edge. He placed his other hand on my left hip, lifted me to him—WTF? He was strong—and claimed my lips in a searing kiss.

I was floating. Literally. My toes were scraping the ground, but besides that I was airborne in Kaz's arms. His physicality was overwhelming, especially since it was so unexpected. I'd never touched him before this, never crossed into his personal bubble, and now I was discovering the bubble wasn't as horrible as I'd expected.

He smelled nice.

And he kissed *real* nice.

When his tongue swiped against my bottom lip, I granted him entrance on autopilot. Yeah, this definitely wasn't his first kiss. Kazimir Mikhailovich Nabokov was devouring my mouth, and on a purely physical level, I was actually *enjoying* it.

When I nipped on his upper lip, he made a sound at the back of his throat that made the hairs on my arms stand straight up. Heat rushed through my veins and settled somewhere right between my legs.

Oh my God, the spawn of Satan was turning me on.

The thought was so distressing I broke the kiss. Kaz's lips were pink, and his chest rose with heavy breaths under my palms. The circle around us was cheering, yelling lewd things at us as if we were on display at the world's most inappropriate zoo. My cheeks were burning, as was the spot on my hip where Kaz's hand still lingered.

I took a step back, forcing him to drop his hand. His green eyes were still fixated on me. He made no sign of hearing or giving a single fuck about our audience.

I whirled around, beelined toward the nearest gap in the circle of bodies, and pushed my way out. Someone gripped my wrist before I could break through. Outraged, I looked up, searching for whoever was trying to stop me. When I found him, my heart froze mid-beat.

Mason was glaring down at me, his jaw clenched so tightly it looked like it might snap. The room around us darkened. I felt ashamed, even though I had no reason for it.

"Let go," I hissed at him.

He did, shaking his head as if in disbelief or disappointment.

This was his dropping-out party, and yet he was judging *me*? How dare he look at me like I'd done something wrong?

I brushed past him, charged out of the house, and made it home so fast I barely even felt the night-time chill.

It was a good thing they'd be gone tomorrow. After tonight, I hoped I'd never see either of them again.

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The next morning, I woke up to my roommate shoving a piece of bacon into my mouth.

“What in the goddamn hell are you doing?” I sputtered, brushing the greasy, nearly burnt piece away. Lindsay sat on the edge of my bed, gnawing on her lip. Her eyes swam with remorse.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in a quick burst. “I shouldn’t have insisted you play the game. I felt so bad when you darted out of there after you kissed Kaz. Ugh, Mol. I know you don’t like him.”

I groaned and sat up, bringing my arm up to shield my eyes from the bright sunlight streaming through my open curtains. “It’s fine. I’ll survive. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“It’s not fine, so I’m on a mission for the rest of the weekend to make it up to you. I made you breakfast,” she said and lifted up the bacon. “Nearly burnt. Just how you like it.”

I huffed a laugh and opened my mouth expectantly. Lindsay grinned and dropped the piece on my tongue.

“Delicious, right? There’s more downstairs.”

Five minutes later, I was sitting at the kitchen island with her, dressed in my sweatpants and hoodie, and trying my hardest not to think about last night. Lindsay must have sensed I didn’t want to talk about it, because she didn’t bring it up again. We munched our way through the spread she’d prepared and talked about our study plan for the day. By the time our plates were clean, I was in a considerably better mood than the one I went to bed with.

“I’m going to take out the garbage,” I said to her, eyeing the empty cereal boxes littering our floor. I collected all of the recycling in a huge cardboard box and carried it to the big metal garbage bin down the street. The one closer to our house was always full.

When I got there, a flash of ink-black hair caught my eye.

I sucked in a breath when I realized who it was. Kaz was looking at me from the other side of the stinky bin, his own empty recycling box beside him on the ground. I averted my

eyes, quickly dumped the garbage out, and did my best to pretend I didn't see him.

*Please don't talk to me.*

“Morning.”

I let out a groan and stepped onto the sidewalk. “Can we go back to the thing where we ignore each other whenever we have the misfortune of bumping into each other outside?”

“Less than twelve hours ago, you were sucking my tongue out of my mouth, and now you don't even want to say hello?” he mocked. “Way to make a guy feel cheap.”

My eyes became slits. “I was not sucking your tongue.”

“What were you doing then?”

I had a feeling he found riling me up entertaining. “You know what, I'm not doing this. I have to get back to studying.” I began to walk away.

“What are you studying anyway?” he called out behind me. “Let me guess...”

Oh, this I wanted to hear. This was about the longest conversation we'd ever had, yet apparently, he thought he knew me well enough to guess my plans for the future.

“You seem like—”

I whirled around. “Like what?”

“Like someone destined to be in accounting.”

Unbelievable. I squeezed the edges of the plastic box so tightly my knuckles were on the verge of bursting through my skin. “Is that supposed to be an insult? Accounting is a perfectly good career.”

A smirk pulled at his lips. “Never said it wasn't. So I'm right?”

“No, you're not right,” I retorted, mocking his tone of voice. “I'm studying marketing and music management.”

His brows rose at that. “Wow. That's...surprisingly exciting.”

*And you're unsurprisingly annoying.* “Well, this was a nice chat.”

“You going to come say bye to Mase?”

“We already said our goodbyes,” I snipped.

“You seem not okay,” he commented.

“Trust me, I'm just fine. Goodbye, Kaz. Good luck with whatever crazy scheme you two have going.”

“Crazy scheme? We're going to LA to give our band a real chance. Nothing crazy about that,” he said with all too much nonchalance.

“And you're dropping out after wasting one year's worth of tuition. Must be nice to have someone footing your bill.”

His eyes narrowed. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Two college dropouts trying their luck in LA... Can you get any more cliché? I bet you'll be crawling back to your parents in less than six months, begging for forgiveness after you realize no one is interested in your shitty music.”

“We'll just have to see about that, won't we?” he challenged.

“I guess we will.”

**3**

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**THREE YEARS LATER**



## MOLLY

THE OFFICE of Hyperion Artist Management was in its usual state of organized chaos, punctuated with the staccato rhythm of many pairs of heels walking along the glossy marble floors.

I passed by Jenny at the reception desk and gave her a quick wave. She blew her hair out of her face and gave an irritated scowl. It wasn't personal. After working at Hyperion for nearly a year, I'd rarely seen Jenny in a good mood. She was always at the office at the crack of dawn, stocking the conference rooms with specially requested snacks, putting together customized gift bags, and working on whatever was needed to keep the steady stream of A-listers coming through our office happy.

My job as a personal assistant to one of the senior managers may be grueling, but at least my boss, Trinity, didn't require me to be here before sunrise. Since she was the most in-demand music manager at the firm, she had enough clout to set her own schedule. Most days, she didn't make it in until nine-thirty in the morning.

Today appeared to be an anomaly.

I checked my watch for the time—five minutes before nine, yet there was Trinity, sashaying past rows of see-through acrylic desks with her laptop under one arm and her ostrich-leather Kelly bag in the other. Her height—a cool six feet—made her impossible to miss. Add in her obsession with leather corsets and chunky metal jewelry, and she was pretty much a modern-day Amazonian. I always thought she would have made a perfect Wonder Woman.

Her purple-lipsticked mouth was pursed tightly, and her hawk-like eyes searched for some poor, unfortunate soul. I could see the fear reflected in my coworkers' faces as she walked past them, and the subsequent relief when they were ignored. Trinity was a step below partner at the company, and everyone knew she had her mind set on the coveted title. She

was one professional win away from getting it, and no one, absolutely no one, was going to keep that promotion from her.

Those hawk eyes landed on me.

“Molly,” she barked. “Where have you been hiding?”

“Nowhere,” I squeezed out my suddenly dry throat as I hovered beside my desk. “I’m here.”

Even after working together for more than a year, I had to consciously fight against the terror Trinity inspired. My fate at Hyperion rested entirely in her hands, and I couldn’t afford a single screw up if I wanted to have a career here. The pay for my entry-level job was just enough to keep me surviving, but it most certainly wasn’t enough for me to thrive in this city. I was desperate for a promotion. If Trinity made partner, she would likely bump me up to senior assistant, and that would come with a much-needed raise.

She surveyed the mess of papers on my desk with an unimpressed look, then her gaze landed on the framed photo of Ade and I. Trinity probably found my connection to Bleeding Moonlight the most interesting thing about me, which rubbed me the wrong way, but not enough for me to hide my sister away. When Trinity discovered our relation, she drilled me with a list of questions. To my relief, she’d never demanded an introduction. I was afraid she’d send me on a mission to steal Bleeding Moonlight away from their current management.

“I signed a new act over the weekend,” she declared, bringing her attention back to me. “Last Rites. A rock band. They’re fresh, heavy, and sexy. They sound like something that should be playing in every after-hours club in LA. Get smart on them in the next few hours. They’re coming in after lunch.”

“Absolutely.” I searched for my notebook and a working pen amidst the papers. “Anything in particular I should know?”

She popped her hip out and leaned against the edge of my desk. “I have a good feeling about these boys. They’re not with a label yet, but their indie releases are charting

exceptionally well. We need to get them a record deal quickly to really blow them up, so we've got a lot of hustling to do in the next few weeks. This is an opportunity for both me *and* you, you understand?" She gave me a meaningful look. "You ready to do whatever it takes?"

Excitement surged through me. I'd put on a ridiculous costume and hand out Last Rites fliers on a street corner if that's what it took to get me that promotion and raise. "Yes, of course. Happy to play whatever role you need me to." Ah, there was that notebook. I flung it open and jotted down some notes.

"Good. We're going to need to be very hands-on with them. See you at one."

By the time I looked up from what I was writing, Trinity was already walking away. I sank in my chair and sucked in a grounding breath. If Trinity thought this new act was her ticket to partner, I had no room for error. I needed to become an encyclopedia on Last Rites in time for this meeting.

"How the fuck did you get her to like you?" a familiar voice cut through my thoughts. I turned to see Piper plopping her leather tote on the desk directly beside mine. She brushed her curly brown hair back with her hands and heaved a sigh. "That woman breathes fire in every direction but yours."

I grinned at my friend. Piper and I had started at Hyperion on the exact same day, but what began as a friendship of proximity had quickly bloomed into the real deal. She was on the partnerships team that worked on getting brand deals for our clients, so she spent a lot of time on the road. It made days we overlapped at the office kind of special. She swore like a sailor, had a steely backbone, and was known to not mince her words even when talking to some of the more senior folk at the company. Most importantly, she was one of my few friends in LA. Graduating from college a year early meant I'd left all my college friends behind.

"*Like* me? She merely acknowledges my existence."

"That's more than the rest of us get," Piper grumbled. "What did she want?"

“She just signed a new act.” I cracked open my laptop. “Have you heard of Last Rites?”

“Sounds familiar, but I can’t quite place it.” Piper came up behind my chair. “Who are they?”

The first result on Google was their site. I clicked on the link. Their name was spelled out in embellished gothic-like font on a dark background.

“There’s gotta be a page with their bio,” Piper said, leaning over my shoulder.

I scrolled through the site. “I don’t see one. Music, Store, Socials. I guess I should go through each page.”

“Are they on Wikipedia?”

That page was even more bare. “A rock duo formed in LA, California,” I read out. “Not much to go off.”

Piper straightened back up. “Why don’t you ask Trinity? She’s gotta have more than that on them.”

Looking over my shoulder, I met her eyes. “And make her think I’m an idiot? No way. This is probably a test.”

My friend didn’t even bother arguing. She knew I could be right. Trinity had little patience for incompetence, and she tended to see it in nearly everything.

“K. I’ll leave you to it. We still on for lunch? We can grab our food and listen to these guys in the car.” She jerked her thumb in the direction of my screen.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you at twelve?”

“Deal.” She slapped her palm on my shoulder and walked away.

Last Rites’ online store was barebones—a few T-shirts with their logo and a sticker pack. So were their socials. They’d registered accounts on most of the platforms but didn’t post a lot of content anywhere, with the exception of S Wire, a short-form video platform that had blown up in the past two years. When I scrolled through the videos, I got my first hint as to why Trinity was interested in them.

A number of snippets of their songs had become viral hits, with people making videos and reposting the same sounds over and over again. On the original videos that the band had made, thousands of people were asking for more music and wondering who was behind the band. Not a single video contained the musicians' faces—they were all just simple animated graphics or still photos.

I frowned. Was this anonymity strategic or accidental? Whatever the reason for it, I had a feeling Trinity would insist they show themselves sooner rather than later. People wanted to be able to connect to the artists behind the music, and that was hard to do if they didn't know what the artists looked like.

When I pulled up their streaming numbers, my jaw dropped. Trinity wasn't kidding. They were doing *really* well. Tens of millions of plays on every single they'd put out to date. For an independent band without much of a marketing budget, this was seriously impressive.

I wondered if Ade had heard of them. For a moment, I considered calling her, but I decided against it. When I first started at Hyperion, everyone thought I'd gotten the position because of my connection to my famous sister. Getting a job at one of the top talent agencies in the world wasn't an easy feat, but despite what everyone had thought, I'd gotten here on my own. I'd never ask Adeline to help me with something like that. I was my own person, and I was determined to succeed on my own merits.

The rumors had dissipated once everyone saw how hard I worked, but it had all left a bad taste in my mouth, and now I felt weird asking my sister for help, even for something as small as this.

Plus, she was busy on tour. Bleeding Moonlight had released a new album a year ago that had gone straight to the top of the charts, and now they were on the European leg of a very long tour. She had more important things to deal with than unnecessary calls from her little sister.

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“I can’t get enough of this chipotle sauce,” Piper said with her mouth half full. We were sitting inside of her ten-year-old Toyota in the parking lot outside the office. “It’s honestly better than any orgasm I’ve ever had.”

I laughed. “Manny’s not doing it for you?”

My friend rolled her eyes at the mention of her illicit work lover. “Hooking up with him was a mistake. He doesn’t fucking get that I don’t want anyone on the team to know we’re sleeping together. Last week in New York, he tried to pull me into a hotel bathroom for a quickie. Lucas *saw* him, and I had to endure a very awkward coffee chat while my boss tried to suss out whether Manny was being too handsy with me. I swear, Lucas was ready to call in HR, but I finally convinced him he read the situation wrong.”

“I think you’re making too big a deal out of it,” I said between sips of my Diet Coke. My sandwich sat half-finished on my lap. This lunch wasn’t in my budget, so I’d have to make up for it by having instant noodles for dinner, but Piper was in the office so rarely, I couldn’t pass up on lunch with my friend. “Everyone sleeps with each other in this industry. We don’t even have anything about it in the employee handbook.”

Piper cocked a brow. “You read that thing? I swear, Mol. Only you. But, hey, that’s good to know.”

I winked at her. “You have to know the rules before you break them.”

This made her laugh. “When have you ever broken a rule?”

I gave her a self-conscious shrug. “I don’t know.” After my parents died, breaking rules seemed like a luxury I couldn’t afford. What if I did something stupid, got caught, and the state took me from my sister? Yes, in retrospect, I indulged in a lot of catastrophic thinking, but losing my parents in a car accident had been catastrophic and very real.

No, I wasn't much of a rule breaker. The worst I'd done was crash a pit party meant for seniors as a junior, and even then, I'd only stayed for thirty minutes before my nerves got to me and I went home.

Then I remembered something. "I went to a twenty-one plus show when I was seventeen."

Piper nodded knowingly. "Fake ID?"

"No. The band got me in. It was my sister's first show with Bleeding Moonlight."

She grinned. "Your sister is my hero. Seriously, here I am with annoying Manny, who's an eight on a good day, and your sis is hooking up with four solid tens who all worship her."

"It's a lot more serious than just hooking up at this point," I corrected. My sister had been in a polyamorous relationship with her bandmates for over four years, and as far as I could tell, they were all in it for good. It took me a while to wrap my head around it, but by now, the guys had all become my family. They were happy and in love, and my sister had more than earned her happy ending.

Piper sighed. "That woman is living the dream. She needs to teach courses. Like how does that even happen?"

I took a bite out of my sandwich. "It just happened organically. I remember when she first started working with them, before they asked her to officially join the band, she was trying to keep it all professional."

"Aren't we all." Piper sighed. "But it's damn hard when you're surrounded by super-hot people all day, every day. Hey, at least I'm not sleeping with the talent. Employee handbook or not, we all know what kind of reputation that gets you." She shrugged. "In the grand scheme of things, no one cares about Manny and I."

I held back a laugh. "That's the spirit. Okay, enough chitchat. You ready to listen to these guys?"

"Let's do it."

I connected my phone to the sound system and pulled up the Last Rites playlist. The first song was called “Unwell”, and when I pressed play, a distorted guitar riff burst out of the speakers.

“This is pretty catchy,” Piper commented, her head bopping in tune with the beat. “The singer’s got a nice voice.”

“Does he remind you of someone?” There was something familiar about the singer’s powerful tenor, but I couldn’t quite place it.

“Maybe?” Piper’s eyes widened. “Wait, what if this is someone famous? Someone everyone already knows?”

“I don’t think so. Trinity made it sound like they’re a brand-new act.” My boss could be tight-lipped about things, but I didn’t think she’d omit telling me something that important.

The more we listened, the more I understood why these guys were taking off. Their songs had memorable and energetic choruses that got stuck in your head. I was humming one of them thirty minutes later when Piper and I walked back inside the office.

“Break a leg,” Piper said as we split up at our desks. “You’re going to crush it.”

I headed to the conference room with a few minutes to spare so I could double-check everything was set up right. It was empty when I walked in. A spectacular view of downtown LA unfurled beyond the floor-to-ceiling window. When Trinity got the partner promotion, she’d move into the office on the other side of the wall and have this very same view.

*Maybe one day, if I work hard enough, I’ll have it too.*

The fact that imagining myself as a partner at Hyperion didn’t spark any excitement made me uncomfortable. I sat down. That was my long-term goal, right? To move up the ranks and join the leadership team one day? It was what every ambitious person working here wanted, so why didn’t it make me feel anything but dread?



I sucked in a deep breath and shook the tension out of my hands beneath the desk.

*This is not the time to question your life choices.*

The door behind me opened with a soft sound and Trinity's voice speared through the air. "And this is one of my assistants, Molly."

I rose from the chair, plastered a polite smile on my face, and turned to greet the newcomers with an outstretched hand.

"Hi—"

A heavy stone dropped in my stomach as my gaze collided with a pair of familiar blue eyes.

**MOLLY**

*No, no, no.*

What was *he* doing here?

I blinked rapidly at Mason Fletcher's towering form. He was staring at me with an expression that mirrored my own shock. He'd grown a short, blond beard, and it had turned his boy-next-door charm into something decidedly more dangerous. As did the tattoos that ran down his neck and disappeared under the collar of his black T-shirt. Any trace of the boy I remember was gone now—at least as far as his appearance was concerned. He'd filled out, his muscular chest obvious through his T-shirt, and his shoulders round and powerful. And the way he was staring down at me? It reached all the way inside and tugged on something in me that felt unbearably hot.

His gaze dipped to my outstretched hand. A tremor ran under my skin as soon as he made contact. His grip was firm. There was metal pressing against my palm—rings? Since when did Mason wear *rings*? I wanted to look down, but I couldn't tear my gaze away from his face.

The face of a rock star. God, he sure looked like one. Sexy and powerful and intriguing. How the hell did this happen?

I was literally unable to speak.

My mind raced as I tried to come up with my next move. Could I play this off? Pretend I don't know him? I was afraid to look at Trinity and see the look on her face. Had she picked up on the weird tension between her guest and I?

And then the situation got far worse. Because as Mason let go of my hand and stepped to the side, I saw Kaz standing behind him.

I felt dizzy. What would Trinity do if I went ahead and passed out during an important meeting? Probably shove my body under the conference table and tell her clients not to pay me any mind.

I forced myself to not look away from our new guests. Unlike Mason, Kaz had barely changed. His hair was cut shorter, and he stood straighter, but the mischievous air he always had swirling around him was still there. Only now, instead of pissing me off, it made the blood in my veins run cold.

I'd told him they'd never make it.

Clearly, I'd been wrong.

I could see no reason for him to not take this opportunity to make me pay.

His eyes tapered as he took me in. He wore all black, looking like the bringer of death, and maybe that's what he was. The death of all my hopes and dreams as far as this job was concerned.

I was acting strangely, and it was becoming painfully obvious. I dared a glance at Trinity and realized any chance at pretending nothing was wrong was gone.

"What's happening?" Trinity asked, her brows pulling together in suspicion.

I felt like a cornered animal, my attention flitting between the three of them. Would it be bad if I ran out of here and had a nice long scream inside my car?

"We know each other," Kaz said after a long, pregnant pause.

“Is that right?” My boss was trying to deduce if this new information would bode well for the meeting or not.

Maybe I could still play it off like it was no big deal.

“Yes.” I forced a shaky smile on my face and moved to take Kaz’s hand. “We went to college together.”

When Kaz returned the gesture, an electric current zapped between our hands. It reminded me of the last time he had his hands on me. His green eyes twinkled with devilry as he took me in, dragging his gaze over the entire length of my body. “Good to see you, Molly.”

Trinity visibly relaxed. “Ah, how nice.”

“It’s been a while,” Mason said.

I blinked a few times. “Yes, it has been. So great to see you two.”

Mason’s cheek twitched. Damn it, he could see right through my fake enthusiasm.

“Let’s sit down,” Trinity said.

I followed my boss and sat at her side. Mason and Kaz took places across from us.

“You’re Last Rites?” The question burst out of me before I could hold it back.

*Idiot.*

Of course they were Last Rites. Who else could they be? It was as if I’d lost a good chunk of braincells in the past two minutes. I desperately needed to get them back if I wanted to make it through this meeting.

“That’s us,” Kaz answered, his lips quirking up in amusement. He was obviously entertained by my discomfort. I estimated that by the end of this meeting, I’d have approximately zero-point-zero-five percent chance of holding on to this opportunity for a promotion. There was no way these two would want to work with me in any capacity, even if I was only working on their account in the background.

My parting words to Kaz were a blinking, neon sign inside my brain. *“I bet you’ll be crawling back to your parents in less than six months, begging for forgiveness after you realize no one is interested in your shitty music.”*

No one except for my goddam boss. And millions of people who’d streamed their music. If there’d ever been a time not to lean into the desire to be a bitch, that had been it.

I was seconds away from hyperventilating.

In the meantime, Mason sat in his chair, his arm slung over the back of another, looking utterly at ease, as if he and his buddy weren’t in the process of ruining my life.

“Rock is having a revival at the moment, and your sound is exactly what the market is hungry for,” Trinity began, kicking off the meeting. I was relegated to taking notes. “It’s sexy, gritty, and has the kind of melodies that stick in peoples’ heads. You’ve done exceptionally well on your own, but as you’ve said to me in our previous meetings, you’re ready to take it to the next level. I think that’s smart. Your royalty income is just not enough to produce and properly market the kind of ambitious debut record you envision. A record deal will bridge that gap. I think you’re going to have a lot of interest from top labels.”

“We’ve already had some interest,” Kaz said. His speaking voice was slightly lower than when he sang, which explained why I didn’t recognize it immediately. “But we haven’t taken any meetings yet.”

“Good,” Trinity said with an approving nod. “They’re trying to get in early and seduce you with a low-ball offer. You don’t need to waste your time on them. From now on, forward any inquiries my way. Your focus should be on making more music. Every independently produced hit that blows up on streaming platforms and social media gives you leverage with the labels. You want to make them think you’re perfectly happy staying independent, because that’s when they’re going to offer you deals you can’t refuse.”

Mason scrubbed his jaw. I couldn’t help but notice the prominent veins that ran up his muscular forearms. An old

forgotten feeling was needling inside of me, bringing me right back to when I was still attracted to him years ago.

*You're over this man*, I reminded myself.

“The strategy makes sense,” Mason said, “but we haven’t figured out why our songs have taken off the way they have. Most of our traction is coming from S Wire, and no one seems to know what makes their algorithm promote one video over another. We may have just gotten lucky.” He glanced at Kaz.

“And we can’t keep banking on luck,” Kaz said, fidgeting with a Hyperion pen he’d found on the table. “That’s why we signed with you. We’re hoping you can guide us in the right direction.”

“I intend to do exactly that,” Trinity said. “Here at Hyperion, we don’t believe in luck. We believe in strategy.” She rolled her shoulders back. “Here’s my proposed plan. We market the hell out of you for the next few weeks. Our first priority is getting your faces out there. I’m talking a proper photoshoot for your next single, as well as some band photos. A music video would be ideal, but you don’t have the time or budget for something well made. We have to move fast so that we can take advantage of your momentum.”

The guys exchanged a look. “That’s fine by us,” Mason said. “We’ve held back on any of that publicity stuff because we’ve been too busy making music. We thought we’d let our music speak for itself.”

“And it has,” Trinity agreed. “But if you want to keep growing your audience, you’re going to need to come to terms with the fact that you’re the product, not just your songs. You’ve got sex appeal, and if you take advantage of that, it’s going to help you pull in a strong female base.”

I bit on the inside of my cheek, relieved and disturbed at the same time. Trinity mentioning their sex appeal made me feel less guilty for still finding Mason unbearably hot, even if the thought of making him into a sex symbol made me want to gouge my eyes out.

And Kaz? I mean, okay, I could admit he was kind of good looking. The years had done him well. He still looked like someone who on a bad day might stab you in a dark alley, but I guess some women found that kind of moodiness attractive.

Not me, though. Definitely not me.

“We have a track that’s nearly finished that could work for the single,” Kaz said. “We recorded it last week. It’s in postproduction.”

Trinity gave him a thumbs up. “Keep working on it and send it to me when it’s ready. We’ll schedule the photoshoot as soon as possible. We need to align on a concept first, and I have a photographer in mind who’ll be just perfect. In the meantime, we need to start getting a social media content plan in place. That’s where Molly comes in.” She flicked her gaze to me. “Molly’s going to work very closely with you over the next few weeks, taking photos to capture your work behind the scenes, managing your day-to-day business tasks, and helping you however she can.”

A film of sweat broke out on my forehead. Was this what she meant by “whatever it takes”?

“We’re on a tight budget, so we can’t staff anyone else on this at the moment,” she added in lieu of an explanation.

Oh, so I was cheap labor.

“Of course, happy to help with this,” I croaked out.

Kaz smirked, and it felt like a punch to the face. Beside him, Mason’s expression darkened.

Trinity dove into a discussion about streaming royalties, but I was too stunned at the turn of events to pay much attention to the conversation. She wanted me to work with—*for*—Mason and Kaz. *Closely*. Whatever the hell that meant. These two guys probably hated my guts, or at the very least considered me a huge bitch, and now I was at their mercy. I bit on my nail and tried to resist the urge to panic.

“Molly will be over at your place tomorrow morning,” Trinity said, bringing my attention back to the room. She stood up and glanced down at me. “You’ll be working from there for

at least the next few weeks, since I want you to document their creative process.”

*Fuck. Me.* A bead of sweat rolled down my back.

“And we’ll let you know as soon as the photoshoot is arranged,” she added, looking back at the guys.

“Thanks,” Mason said stiffly. “We’re excited to get started.”

“Yeah, this should be fun,” Kaz added, his gaze fixed on me.

“Great. Molly, will you walk them out? I need to run to my next meeting.” Trinity looked down at her watch.

“Yes, no problem.”

Trinity said goodbye and left me alone with Kaz and Mason.

To my dismay, instead of getting up, Kaz leaned back in his chair, linked his hands behind his head, and propped his feet up on the table. “Well, well, well. Isn’t this an interesting turn of events? So did I get it right? You’re our new assistant?”

I swallowed hard. He wasn’t going to make this easy.

“I’m looking forward to working together,” I said, moving my gaze to Mason. He’d gotten up and was now standing by the door, his arms crossed over his chest. I was even more unnerved by Mason’s constipated expression than Kaz’s gloating. What was the drummer thinking?

“Are you now? And why’s that?” Kaz asked.

I could get through this if I pretended it was just an interview.

“Your numbers are great, and you’ve clearly made inroads with a large audience already. I’ve been working with Trinity for a while, so I know her instincts are rarely wrong. Plus, for what it’s worth, I like your songs.”

This finally earned a reaction from Mason. “You listened to our music?”



“I did my research before the meeting, like I always do,” I told him. “Good stuff.”

“Wow. Your enthusiasm is palpable,” Kaz drawled.

An alarm flared inside of me. They could easily walk into Trinity’s office and tell her they didn’t want to work with me. I was surprised they hadn’t led with that.

God, this was humiliating, but I wasn’t just going to let this opportunity slide through my fingers. I needed that promotion. If there was any possibility I could stay on this assignment, I had to fight for it. “Look, I think you have a lot of talent, and I liked what I heard.”

Kaz turned to Mason. “That actually sounded sincere, didn’t it? Did you know she was such a good actress?”

Anguish slammed into me. “I’m not lying. I’ll admit I didn’t expect to see you two walk into this room, okay? It caught me off guard, and I’m still processing. But frankly, it doesn’t matter who you are, because it’s not going to affect the quality of my work one bit.”

Mason was still giving me a blank look, but Kaz’s face was lined with skepticism. I knew what I had to do.

“I’m sorry for giving you both shit about dropping out,” I said, taking turns to meet their eyes. “Obviously everything worked out just fine for you.”

Kaz opened his mouth, but Mason beat him to it. “Yeah, it did. But this?” He pointed at me. “This isn’t going to work. Trinity must have someone else she can assign to us.”

His words stunned me. I’d expected this kind of cold ruthlessness from Kaz, but I hadn’t expected Mason to be the one dishing it out.

“No.” I could feel my adrenaline spiking, my palms growing damp. “I need this opportunity,” I said, looking between the two of them. “This is really important to me.” Forget about the promotion. If they told Trinity they didn’t want to work with me, I wouldn’t put it past her to fire me on the spot. “Please.” My voice shook.

Something passed across Mason's face. If he wanted to finish me, all he needed to do was say one two-letter word. It seemed like a steep punishment for what I'd said to him and his bandmate the day of the party, but I was in no position to fight back.

All I could do was beg.

Kaz let out a heavy exhale, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked at Mason. It was the drummer's decision.

The silence was so thick it choked the air out of my lungs.

"Fine," Mason said abruptly, sounding anything but happy about it.

I wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Instead, I gave him an uncertain nod. "Thank you. I'm going to give this assignment my all."

"Great. Then we won't have any issues."

We walked to the lobby in silence with me leading the way. I could feel their gazes boring holes in my back. Their combined presence was a palpable thing that made me want to shrink in on myself, and it took all my willpower to keep my shoulders back.

"Do you have our numbers?" Kaz asked, and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

We'd arrived at the elevators, and the button was already bright red.

"Not yet." I didn't even know where I was supposed to go to tomorrow, but I presumed Trinity would tell me. On second thought, I probably needed to figure that out myself.

"Can you give them to me? And your address? I'll be there at nine am, if that works?"

Kaz made an amused sound from the back of his throat. "You're going to need to adjust your schedule. We're night owls."

"We don't start working until about three," Mason said. "And we stay up late."

Right. They were up-and-coming rock stars, hardly a group known for being morning people. It dawned on me then that if I'd thought Mason liked to have a good time back in college, he must've evolved into a truly experienced partier by now. Was I going to have to watch him make out with groupies multiple times a week? Could I *handle* watching him do that?

I was going to have to pull on my big-girl pants and get over any remnants of my old crush. He clearly despised me. Even before he'd despised me, he hadn't wanted me. Really, what did this man have to do to get me to move on?

"That's okay," I muttered as Kaz typed his and Mason's address and phone numbers into my phone.

When he handed the device back to me, his fingers brushed against mine. I swear he did it on purpose. There was a wicked look in his eyes that should have raised all kinds of alarms, but I was already alarmed about everything, so it all just blended together.

"See you tomorrow," Kaz said, meeting my gaze. A weird tension electrified the air between us. Mason watched us, his face fixed in a grim expression.

"Until then," I said. Trinity might disapprove, but I didn't stick around to watch them leave. I ran to the bathroom. As soon as I closed the door to the stall, I emptied out my lunch in the toilet.

## MASON

I HAD A LOT OF FLAWS. More than the average human being. But there was one I was confident I'd overcome. Cowardice.

I'd spent the past few years being brave. I'd moved to the other side of the country with my friend. Started a band with no safety net. Put my music out there for anyone to judge and tear apart. Somehow, it had all turned out well. Maybe the universe thought I was doing *too well*. Or maybe fate had a funny sense of humor. Why else would it package up my past in a sleek yellow dress and throw it in my face?

I'd always been a coward around Molly. And it had taken less than an hour for that cowardice to creep back in.

"Keep her away from me, okay? I want as little to do with her as possible," I said to Kaz as we merged into traffic on the 101. We'd left Hyperion's office no more than five minutes ago, and my thoughts were circling around Molly like vultures. Damn it, she looked as good as ever. No, better. That blond hair that drove me crazy. Those big, expressive eyes. A body that made men stupid, no matter how hard one tried not to look or fucking think about it.

"Why did you let her stay on?" Kaz asked.

Because I might be a coward, but I couldn't bring myself to cross the line into being an asshole. Seeing her upset, let alone being the source of her anguish, made me feel awful.

“She said she needs this gig. I don’t know anything about her life anymore, and I don’t want to hurt her. I just don’t want to deal with her.”

“That’s going to be hard to do when she’s supposed to be at our house multiple days a week, taking pictures of us.”

“I know.” What I was asking of my friend was unreasonable, but I wasn’t thinking straight. I needed to lean on him, like I’ve done so often ever since we met. Kaz was more than a close friend. He was a brother to me.

“I’ll be a buffer between you and her.” His elbow was hanging out the window, the foreign writing on his arms offering a mystery to anyone who paused to look. “However I can,” he added after a moment. “She’s no one to me.”

Except a girl he’d once kissed. The image of his mouth locked on hers was etched on the backs of my eyelids, even after all these years. Unlike with me, she’d been prepared for his kiss. She’d gripped his arms, pressed her body flush against his, allowed him to explore her mouth with his tongue. With me, she’d been stiff with surprise. I’d stolen that kiss, desperate to know just once what she tasted like, and before she could respond, I’d pulled away. I’d been afraid that when the surprise wore off, she’d push me away.

*Coward.*

“Thanks,” I muttered, my thoughts skipping all over my and Molly’s history. It hadn’t even been that messy. At least, not as far as she was concerned, which is probably why she’d seemed so taken aback today by how I’d behaved toward her.

I exhaled a heavy breath. Fuck. The past swam before my eyes. It had been easy to be around her before we made it to Northeastern. I’d been a relentless flirt, eager for a reaction from the girl who’d stolen my breath the first time we met, but there was never any chance of taking it further. Her sister, my old friend Ade, would tell me off, and I’d back off. Molly’d been fifteen when we first met, two years younger than me. There were good reasons not to seriously pursue her.

But then we got to Northeastern. She turned eighteen the same day I got my diagnosis. My worst fears had been confirmed, and I knew there was no way I'd ever ask her out after that. She was clever, hardworking, and gorgeous. If she was the entire package, then I was a piece of discarded wrapping paper that no one wanted. I was defective. By then, I suspected my attraction wasn't one sided, but I knew whatever she was starting to feel for me would be gone in the blink of an eye if she ever found out.

I stalled, and she must have felt the change, because she quickly pulled away. That hurt far more than getting kicked out of Northeastern.

Not that the latter felt great, but it was inevitable. I'd been preparing for it ever since I stepped foot on campus. People like me didn't belong in places like that, no matter how much my parents had insisted on denying that reality.

"Molly aside, I think we've made the right call with Trinity," Kaz said, interrupting my thoughts. It was probably for the best. There was no point in dwelling on the ugly past.

"She seems sharp," I said.

"She seems like a shark. Exactly what we need. I can't wait to tell the sleazy record execs to go through our manager." He scoffed. "We're so close, I can practically taste it."

"Taste what?" I thought of the kiss again.

"Success."

I glanced over at the man who'd become my only family. *Thicker than blood*. We both got the words tattooed on the insides of our arms when we first landed in LA. Kaz was looking at his now. "I told you we'd make it."

Whatever courage I lacked, Kaz made up for it in spades. If he hadn't dropped out with me to chase after this crazy dream, I never would have made it this far. There were few people in our lives who'd believed we could do it. My parents cut me off immediately. I could count on one hand how often I'd spoken to them in the past three years. The conversation

with my dad when I told him I was done with Northeastern had been excruciating. He'd told me I'd never amount to anything, and that he'd wasted far too much time on a lazy idiot son. My mom had just cried. In their eyes, their only child had turned out an utter disappointment.

My other friends... Well, there hadn't been many. I'd lost a lot of friendships when I stayed in River Valley for two years after graduating high school, and I didn't have enough time at Northeastern to make many solid new ones. I got some pats on the back, some folks wishing me luck. Others, like Molly, tried to talk me out of it.

I remember getting on the bus to the airport and wondering if I was making a huge mistake. Was I really cut out for this? Plus, I worried about Kaz. Unlike me, he'd been doing just fine with his courses. What if I was derailing my friend's life by letting him drop out with me?

Kaz had noticed my low mood at some point and asked what was wrong. I'd told him I was terrified about everything going wrong. His answer had stayed with me for a long time. *"You know how I determine if something's worth pursuing? It's simple. It is if it makes me scared as shit. The best things in life exist on the other side of that fear."*

I took those words to heart and kept them there. Now, the other side was nearly within reach.

"We haven't made it yet," I said, squeezing the wheel a little tighter.

"Always the pessimist."

"Just cautious." If working with Trinity was the final step to getting us an incredible record deal, I'd have to suck it up around Molly. I'd do whatever was necessary to keep my guard up and not let her get inside my head.

"You know, I really don't get it. What is it about that girl?" Kaz asked. "It's been more than three years since you last saw her, and she still riles you up."

"She doesn't rile me up." Kaz didn't know the full story, mostly because it had never seemed important for me to tell

him. He knew we were from the same hometown and that I was friendly with her. He also knew I'd kissed her the same night he did.

*"Shit, I hope I didn't step on your toes,"* he'd said when he pried it out of me. I told him it meant nothing. I'd lied, just like I was lying now.

He glanced over at me and laughed. "Whatever you say."

We drove the rest of the way in silence. It felt like he was giving me space to process whatever I needed to process, but I knew I couldn't do that in this car. When we got back to the house, I didn't waste a second before making my way down to the basement. My drum kit stood at the back of the room. The sight of it was so comforting, I felt some of my tension ease.

I got on the stool, picked up my drumsticks, and took a deep breath. Drumming was my meditation. It calmed me. It kept me sane. We'd soundproofed the basement, so I could come down here whenever I felt like it. I often found myself here in the middle of the night, working out my demons by pounding out a hard rhythm.

There was a new song we'd been writing with a complex drum track. I began to play it, doubling up the speed and driving up the intensity. My frustration at Molly, at myself, poured out. The rhythm pulsed in my veins and vibrated in my lungs.

I wasn't the guy she remembered anymore. I'd changed. Back then, I was no better than a puppet. Going along with my parents' will, even when it felt completely counter to who I was. I'd been scared to lose their support. My father's words from when I was twelve years old had been branded into the fabric of my soul. *"You better hope you grow out of this, because no one but your mom and I could love a stupid idiot like you."*

I was determined to prove him wrong. It would take months, maybe years, but one day, Kaz and I would have a sea of adoring fans rocking out to our music and chanting our names. They'd love us for the art we were capable of making.



Sweat dripped down my neck and brow, but I wasn't ready to stop yet.

My secret weighed on me more heavily than it had in years. When we'd gotten to LA, I'd told myself I wouldn't dwell on it. My academic failures were irrelevant here, and it was easy to throw myself into making music with Kaz. We hadn't really come up for air in the past three years. It had been non-stop hard work, even if more often than not it felt like anything but that. Making music brought me peace I'd never been able to find anywhere else. Some days, my diagnosis seemed like a distant memory.

But it felt all too real again now. Molly could never find out. The thought of her knowing made me want to breathe into a paper bag.

Kaz appeared at the bottom of the stairs. He leaned against the wall to watch me, his arms crossed over his chest. I pounded out the last few beats before stopping and silencing the snares with my palms. Besides my parents, he was the only one who knew my secret, and he'd take it to his grave.

"Haven't seen you go this hard in a while," he commented. "You want to tell me what's really going on?"

"Nothing's going on."

"You really going to tell me this—" he gestured at me with his arms, "—isn't because of her?"

"I don't like her, okay? I'm annoyed this is the situation, and that I can't get out of it without acting like an asshole."

Kaz shook his head. "I consider myself somewhat of an expert on not liking people, and this—" he waved his arm again, "—is not what it looks like."

"Maybe you overestimate your expertise," I shot back, grabbing a folded towel from the floor and using it to wipe myself down. "I meant what I said."

"I know you don't want to be an asshole, but we're about to become famous musicians. Our kind gets a hall pass for acting like assholes on occasion."

I tossed the towel over my shoulder and stood up. “We’re going to have to work with all kinds of people if we want to make it in this industry. I’m not going to set a precedent by taking the easy way out.” Working with Molly would be a good test for my ability to stay composed. I was determined to treat her just like any other stranger.

“Huh. Look at you being all mature and shit.” Kaz grabbed one of the chairs, swung it around, and sat on it backwards. “And I spent a good chunk of that meeting thinking that despite her sharp tongue, she’s still fine as hell.”

A bitter feeling rose inside my chest. “Didn’t notice.”

Kaz laughed at my transparent attempt to dismiss his comment. As if anyone with eyes could have missed the fact that Molly was gorgeous. “Your girlfriend will be happy to hear that. Speaking of, she’s upstairs.”

Damn it. I forgot I’d invited Charlotte over today. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Well, whatever she is.”

“A friend.”

“That you fuck.”

“Maybe your fascination with who I fuck would fade if you were fucking someone of your own. What happened to that brunette you had over last week?”

“I got bored of her,” he said lightly, as if he was talking about what he ate for breakfast this morning.

“Yeah?” I scanned his face for any sign of emotion but came up empty. Kaz and relationships were topics that didn’t fit in one sentence. Sure, he got laid as much as anyone could want to, but he also tended to quickly get bored with every single one of his hookups. “I’m sure you can find someone else.”

He cracked his neck, keeping his gaze on me. “I was thinking of taking a shot at Molly. What do you think about that?”

A cold feeling trickled down my spine. Kaz waited, cataloguing every single one of my reactions in that encyclopedic brain of his. “You want to sleep with her?” I asked, trying to keep my voice from betraying my emotions.

“Why not? She’s going to be around us more than any other woman for the foreseeable future. It would be convenient,” he said. “Plus, you wanted me to keep her away from you. What better way to do it than to keep her busy with me?”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a romantic?” I joked, trying to loosen the tight vise around my heart.

“I haven’t met anyone who’s that good a liar,” he said, a smirk sneaking onto his face. “Of course, I won’t make a move if you don’t want me to. You know I’ve always got your back.”

“I already told you I don’t like her. I don’t care if you try to get with her.” Somehow, I’d managed to force a good bit of conviction into my voice. “Good luck, though. I don’t think she likes you much after how you egged her on today.”

Kaz pushed off the doorjamb. “I read once that desire can be spurred on by hate as much as by love. Always thought it was an interesting theory to test.”

If my experience counted for anything, the theory was true. I wished that Molly’s last words to me could have made me forget her, but instead, it was like they threw gasoline over a fire. I couldn’t stop wanting her for a long time, and that kiss sure as hell hadn’t helped the matter.

But that was years ago. I’d moved on. Maybe not completely, but enough to know getting close to her wouldn’t bring anything good. Enough to not give a shit if my best friend tried to sleep with her.

I headed for the stairs. “Just don’t let whatever you do with her interfere with our work.”

“You know I won’t.”

“I’ll be upstairs with Charlotte.”

“And I’ll stay as far away from you two as possible.”

Ignoring his comment, I made my way up. Kaz didn’t like Charlotte, just like he never seemed to like any of the women I started things with. He always had some reason for it—according to him Charlotte was too self-centered—but I suspected he frequently pulled these reasons out of his ass. It seemed to me that he was jealous of the time I spent with them and not him.

Yeah, sounds weird, but I didn’t mind it that much. Or at the very least, I understood it. We’d taken off on our own and moved to a city where we didn’t know anyone. We’d both more or less lost contact with our families around the same time. In those early months in LA, we stuck to ourselves. We’d work random jobs during the day to pay the bills and spend the rest of our time together writing songs. The bond we’d built was deeper than any relationship I’d ever had. Sometimes, it seemed Kaz knew me better than I knew myself.

When I hung out with someone I was seeing, Kaz was on his own, working in the basement, or going on one of his long drives to God knows where. He hadn’t made many friends in LA—the guy was allergic to most people—and none of his flings had lasted more than a few weeks. Still, none of those things seemed to get him down. As long as we were making music, he was happy. As happy as a guy like Kaz can be.

In the living room, Charlotte was perched on the edge of the couch, dressed in a pair of jean overalls and a cropped white T-shirt. I met her when someone brought her to a party at our house a few months ago. Like many in LA, she was an aspiring creative trying to break into film.

She looked up when she heard me enter and gave me a bright smile. “Hey, babe. I thought you’d forgotten I was coming over.”

I had forgotten, but I knew she’d be upset if I admitted that. Even though I’d made it clear at the very beginning I wasn’t interested in anything serious, I still had no desire to needlessly hurt her feelings. “Sorry. Been a bit distracted since we got back from the meeting with our new manager.”

She got up, walked into my arms, and tugged me down for a kiss. “What did she say?”

“Mostly good things. Her assistant is going to take pictures of us over the next few weeks.”

“What’s she doing with the pictures?”

“We’ll use them on our social media.”

Charlotte looked mildly curious. “You’re going to start showing your faces?”

“Yeah, we have a professional photoshoot coming up too.”

“Wow, I wonder if they’re going to get you some amazing photographer. Can I come and watch? I can cheer you on.”

“It hasn’t even been scheduled yet,” I said to avoid answering her question. I didn’t know if I wanted her there, and I didn’t feel like making that call right now. Would Molly be at the photoshoot? Just how much of her would I see in the coming weeks?

Suddenly, I wanted all of these questions to go away. I grabbed Charlotte around the waist and pulled her into me. “Want to grab something to eat?”

“Not hungry yet,” she said breathlessly, running her hands down my back. “At least not for food. Let’s go to your room.”

That was fine by me. Charlotte was exactly what I needed in my life at the moment. Someone easy and uncomplicated who didn’t know me all that well and was fine keeping it that way. I realized a long time ago that the less people knew about me, the better it was. I was good at cracking jokes and making small talk. Everyone thought I had leagues of close friends, but that wasn’t exactly true. I knew a lot of people. Made acquaintances easily. But true friends? One hand would be enough to count those off.

In my room, we collapsed on the bed and took each other’s clothes off. Charlotte moaned as I trailed familiar lines down her body. By now, I knew what got her off, and she could say the same for me. In the bedroom, we were as compatible as anyone could hope to be, but after we were done, the subtle

awkwardness would set in. Sometimes, she'd turn her head to look at me with this look in her eyes. Longing mixed in with adoration. It always felt like she was seeing someone who wasn't really me.

And honestly? It was probably better that way.

**MOLLY**

“So LET me get this straight. The new act Trinity wants you to go all in on is two guys who you said would never make it? And you kissed *both* of them in one night?” Piper asked from where she was sitting across from me on the ratty sofa.

I grimaced in her direction and took a sip of my red wine. “Years ago. But, yes, that’s right.”

My compassionate friend threw her head back and howled with laughter.

I groaned. “I’m glad this is amusing for you, but I didn’t call this emergency meeting for you to just laugh at me.”

She wiped the tears out of her eyes and took a few deep breaths. “Sorry, it’s just too good. Or too bad, depending on how you look at it.”

“What am I supposed to do now?”

“Your job. Easy as that. If there ever was a time to separate your work from your personal life, it would be now.”

“You think I can just pretend they’re any other client?”

“That’s exactly what you’re going to do. Show up there, do the work, and stick to small talk. It’s the only way you’re going to get through it. If they provoke you, don’t bite. You’ve got a lot on the line here.” She glanced around my dingy

apartment. “Just imagine earning enough to get yourself out of this shithole. That should be motivation enough.”

“It’s not that bad,” I said defensively. “It just needs...” My attention caught on the enormous yellow water spot on the ceiling.

“It needs to be demolished for what I’m sure are numerous building code violations. Seriously, Molly. This place screams mold. The kind that kills you.”

“Do you really think there’s mold?” I asked, nibbling on my bottom lip.

“I don’t know. But between the possible mold and the creepy AF neighbor—” she made a gagging sound, “—you can’t stay here for long.”

I rubbed my arms. “I haven’t seen Cory in a few weeks.”

“Thank God. I can’t believe he tried to break into your apartment that one time. What a freak.”

My neighbor had been a constant source of stress ever since I moved in here more than a year ago. Cory worked at a recycling plant just outside the city, and despite the receding hairline, he couldn’t be older than forty. Whenever we had the misfortune of bumping into each other in the hall, he’d stare at me with his crazy eyes. Eventually, the staring escalated to attempts at conversation. One day, he’d tried to invite himself in.

“I’m just glad I was able to scare him off.”

“It still makes me mad as hell the cops wouldn’t do anything.” She shook her head, her expression tight with anger. “You still carry that pepper spray I got for you, right?”

“Yeah.” I hated carrying that thing in my purse. I was pretty sure I wouldn’t ever use it on another person, but I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me feel safer. When I’d called the police last time, they’d arrived more than an hour later and all but dismissed my story. Cory had come out to talk to them while putting on his best behavior, claiming the incident was just a misunderstanding. I couldn’t believe it when the cops bought it and left without doing a thing. It was humiliating.



“I’m planning on moving out this year,” I admitted. “I just need to get my raise.”

Piper huffed in indignation. “You know you can always crash with me if you need to.”

“You live in a studio the size of a matchbox. I’m not going to intrude on you like that.”

“Well, what about your sister? Doesn’t she have like a mansion in Beverly Hills?”

“If I told my sister about my situation, she’d lose her mind with worry. I can’t do that to her, especially now that she’s busy with the tour.” I moved into this place a week before Bleeding Moonlight left LA, and in the chaos of their preparations, Ade never got a chance to visit. Whenever we talked over video chat, I made sure not to show her any of the unsavory parts of the apartment.

“Are you going to tell her about Last Rites?” Piper asked.

“Do you know she used to be in a band with Mason?”

Piper’s eyes widened. “The plot thickens. Let me guess, they used to hook up.”

“What? No!” The thought of Ade together with Mason made me want to gag. “She was like an older sister to him. I don’t know if they’ve kept in touch over the years, but she’ll get a kick out of hearing he’s doing well.”

“Is he though? You said he seemed different.”

Mason had been unnaturally quiet. Was it because he was upset to see me? Or was I overthinking it? It’d been three years, plenty of time for him to change. “I don’t know. He certainly wasn’t thrilled to see me. I can tell you that.”

“Well, I sincerely hope they’re not going to be dicks to you.”

“Me too,” I said with a sigh and chugged the rest of my wine.

Piper eyed her watch. “I gotta head home to do my laundry, or I’ll be wearing my bathing suit bottoms to work

tomorrow,” she said, getting up. “Text me tomorrow after you’re finished with them, okay? I want to hear all about it.”

“Deal.”

I locked the door, put the door chain on, and promptly passed out on the couch.

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There was a thumping noise somewhere inside my house. I woke up in panic, my half-asleep mind conjuring up scenarios of Cory trying to pound down the door, but it was just my phone vibrating on the glass coffee table.

Six am. A quick glance at the screen showed a foreign number, so it had to be Adeline. I placed my hand on my chest in an attempt to slow my racing heart and picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Mol! Shit, is it super early? Did I wake you up?”

I got off the couch and walked to the kitchen for a glass of water. “Kind of, but don’t worry. It’s good to hear your voice.”

“Fuck, sorry. I can never get the time zones right when they change what feels like every day. Want me to call back later?”

“No, it’s cool.” I knew from past tours that Bleeding Moonlight rarely had downtime. Between shows, signings, and interviews, their schedules were planned to the minute. “How are you?”

“Honestly? Exhausted. I can’t wait to come home in a few weeks. It’s been amazing to play a nearly sold-out tour, and the fans have been awesome, but it’s just non-stop. I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I said earnestly. “I wish I could give you a hug. I’ve been keeping up with the reviews though, and they’ve all been glowing.”

She laughed. “Have you really? I haven’t even read them. I think Abel is the only one who does.”

I grinned at the thought of the enigmatic singer. “I’m sure he’s loving the praise. How are the guys?”

“Currently? Sulking. They wanted to grab lunch together, but I told them I needed to call you. Say hi to Molly!”

A chorus of “Hey, Mol!” and “Miss you!” streamed into my ear.

“Tell them hi back. And I don’t want to interrupt your lunch. We can talk later.”

“What? No way. They’re just being needy. Enough about me, tell me how you’re doing.”

I gulped some water down and brought my glass back to the couch. “Actually, there was one thing that happened.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ade asked cautiously. “Good or bad?”

“Uh. Both? Trinity told me I could be getting promoted soon, but it’s contingent on me doing well on this new assignment.”

“Whatever it is, I know you’re going to crush it,” my sister said. “That sounds like great news.”

“Right, but the thing is, the assignment is to help out a new act she just signed. And guess who it is?”

“Who?”

“Last Rites. Do you know them?”

“Mason’s band? No fucking way!”

I took another sip of water and put the glass down. “You knew about it?”

“Yeah, we haven’t caught up in a long while, but I met him for a drink when he first got to LA, and we’ve also chatted a bit over the phone. They’re good, aren’t they?”

“They are.”

“Why am I sensing you’re not thrilled about it? Did something happen between you and Mason? I always thought

he had a crush on you.”

“Yeah, so did I,” I admitted grumpily. “But that’s water under the bridge.” I hoped.

“What do you mean?” Adeline pressed.

“I don’t know. It’s just soon after we got to college, he started to pull away. I guess it felt like mixed signals. And when I found out he was dropping out, I might have gone off on him.”

My sister laughed. “Really? How did he take it?”

“I pissed him off, I think. I couldn’t believe he was throwing his education away like that, and to start a band with Kaz? I mean, the guy was a nightmare back then. Probably still is. But they’re obviously doing well now.”

“You think Mason’s still holding a grudge?”

I had no desire to tell my sister about how Mason had nearly kicked me off the team. She didn’t need to worry about my shit. “Probably not.”

“You sure? Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Don’t you dare. This is my problem to sort out. I’m just telling you because I thought you might still talk to him, and I didn’t want you to find out from him.”

“Okay, okay. I know you can handle your own stuff. Plus, it’s Mason. Grudge or not, he’s a good guy. I’m sure you guys will work it out. What about his bandmate? What was so bad about him back then?”

“He was always getting into trouble. Sneaking into places he shouldn’t, smoking cigarettes everywhere—even though the entire campus was smoke free—and acting like he was above it all.”

“Above what?”

“School? Responsibility? Acting like a normal human being?”

“I’m a bit surprised,” my sister said after a moment. “You don’t usually just...dislike people like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t sound like he did anything wrong toward you. So what if he’s a miscreant? That shouldn’t bother you this much.”

“I wouldn’t say he didn’t do anything to me,” I said defensively. “He was always a dick to me. But he was a dick to everyone, so I guess it wasn’t personal.”

Ade snickered. “Sounds like how I’d describe Abel.”

In the background, I heard the singer shout, “Extremely sexy and talented?”

“No,” Ade said. “You’re a dick to everyone, so no one takes it personally.”

“That’s right!”

“Okay, sorry,” Ade said, stifling her laugh. “So why did he manage to get under your skin? There are plenty of rude people in the world.”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it.”

“Maybe you should if you’re about to start working with them.”

I guess she had a point. At the very least, I had to approach the singer with an open mind, even if he seemed unlikely to extend me the same courtesy. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“You sure there’s no other skeletons in the closet?”

I should feel comfortable telling my sister, of all people, that I’d kissed both Mason and Kaz in one night. She was dating four guys, after all. But for some reason, I couldn’t get the words out. Maybe because that night had inspired a lot of confusing feelings that I had no desire to dig up, especially now.

A deep voice sounded on the other end of the line.

“Is that Silas?” I asked.

“Yeah. You want to say a few words to him? Here.”

There were a few seconds of rustling and then the guitarist was on the other end of the line. “How are you doing, love? Your sister’s been worried about you.”

“I’m great,” I said cheerfully as I eyed the fraying carpet beneath my feet. Was something crawling across it? “No need to worry. I hope you’re enjoying the tour.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe text her more often. She likes getting updates from you.”

“And she was just calling you and rest of the guys needy.”

He barked out a laugh. “We’ve all got our weaknesses.”

I frowned. I wasn’t my sister’s weakness, was I? Not anymore. “Nah, Adeline doesn’t have a weakness.”

“Mmm. I know she’s getting eager to come home, and so are we. Soon, yeah?”

“Yep. Can’t wait to see you all.”

“Good. Alright, we’ve got to go to soundcheck. Here’s Adeline again, she wants to say goodbye.”

A moment later, my sister was back on the line. “Keep me posted on how things go with Mason, okay?”

“You’re the second person to say that to me in the past twelve hours.”

“Glad to hear you have someone else watching out for you. Talk soon, alright?”

“We will. Love you.”

“Love you too, Mol.”

We hung up, and my gaze drifted back down to where something was definitely crawling very close to my foot. A cockroach.

I sighed and crushed it with a flipflop. I may be afraid of my neighbor, but at least I wasn’t afraid of bugs.

**MOLLY**

AT TWO FORTY-FIVE in the afternoon, I parked my car across the street from the Culver City address Kaz had programmed into my phone. It was a one-story bungalow in an ordinary-looking residential neighborhood that seemed blissfully unaware of the up and coming rock stars living next door.

After talking to Piper and Ade, and sleeping on the situation, I woke up feeling mildly optimistic. Mason hadn't gone through with kicking me off their team, which meant he didn't completely hate me. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced I'd overreacted.

Sure, our friendship didn't end on a great note, but it's not like I backstabbed the guy or did something horrible. Yeah, I said mean things to him, but he was the one who kissed me out of nowhere. If anything, I'd been far more rude to Kaz, and I doubted the singer had taken my words to heart. If he wanted to torture me a bit, I could take it, as long as I could still do my job and keep Trinity happy.

I grabbed my bag and the DSLR camera I got from our tech team and got out of the car. Trinity had sent me an email this morning with exacting instructions around the content I needed to capture, and it was a long list. She wanted me to get a variety of candid shots and videos—the kind of stuff fans would be sure to eat right up. It wasn't a glamorous task, but

despite the tricky circumstances, I was excited to do it. Even though I was just an amateur, photography had become a genuine passion of mine over the past few years. Getting paid to do it, even if it was only temporary, set off a spark of excitement.

I knocked on the door and waited.

After a minute, I knocked again, louder this time.

Just as I was starting to wonder if they were going to ignore me until I went away, the lock clicked open, and the door swung open to reveal Mason on the other side.

My stomach did an annoying little flip at the sight of his mussed-up hair, still wet from a recent shower and dripping onto his clothes. He wore a powder-blue T-shirt that brought out the color of his eyes and showed off the outline of his muscular chest. Unfamiliar tattoos ran over his right biceps before disappearing under his shirt.

Everywhere I looked, I saw something I liked.

“Hi.” Why the hell was my throat suddenly dry?

“Hey,” he greeted me in a disgruntled tone of voice that finally made me snap back to my senses. “Come on in.”

I followed him inside, allowing my gaze to slide to the curve of his butt for a short moment before I forced it back up. I needed to get a hold of myself. I thought after all this time, my attraction to him would have faded, but it was as if it had buried itself inside of me at an atomic level. All it took for it to flare back up was having him around me once again.

He led me down the hall and into a large living room. The space was warm with the afternoon sun streaming through the curtained windows. I glanced around. The house looked like it hadn't been redecorated in at least twenty years, but everything was clean and well-maintained. Simple and functional.

“Do you want some water?” Mason asked.

“Sure.”



He disappeared through a doorway I presumed led to the kitchen, and I placed my things on the dining table.

“Have you been living here for a while?” I called out over the sound of running water.

“About six months. Moved in when our royalty income was enough to cover the higher rent. Before that, we had a place closer to downtown, but we kept getting noise complaints.” Mason reemerged holding a glass of water.

“Drummers must make the worst neighbors,” I said, taking the glass from him.

“Yeah, especially when you share a wall with them.”

I winced. “Ouch.”

“At least this place is fully detached.”

Taking a sip of my water, I flicked my gaze to the drummer. He stood with his arms crossed, his eyes fixated on the window. I got the sense he was trying to look anywhere but at me. “We used to get noise complains about Ade’s playing,” I said, “and the closest neighbor was at least twenty feet away. Some people are just cranky like that.”

The mention of my sister finally earned me a glance. “How is she, by the way?” he asked.

“On tour in Europe. She’s doing well. I told her about us working together. She was... surprised.”

“Hmm. I think we all were.” A moment passed before he cleared his throat. “You changed your hair.”

Piper convinced me to dye my tips a bright magenta color since I kept complaining how bored I was with the blond. I told her I wanted to go dark, but she said it would have been a travesty. I’ve always loved my hair, but Cory had said something to me a few weeks ago that had made me want to change it. *“There’s something special about blond girls. You’ll always be my favorite.”*

Ew. Just remembering it made my skin crawl. Why was it so hard to get that creep off my mind? I really needed to find a new apartment.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I felt like mixing things up. What about you? You’ve gotten a lot more inked since the last time I saw you.”

He glanced down at his crossed arms. “Got a bit addicted after I got the first one.”

“I hear that’s the way it often is with tattoos.”

He shrugged. This appeared to be the end of our small talk. What happened to the friendly, easygoing boy from my hometown? I felt like I was interacting with Mason on shut-down mode, as if he was trying his hardest not to let me in.

Reaching for my camera, I told myself I’d just have to deal with it. “Where’s Kaz? We should get started.”

“He’s downstairs in the basement. Come on.”

We made our way back to the hall before descending a flight of stairs. The first thing I noticed about the basement were the foam soundproofing panels covering the walls. Looked like they were determined to get ahead of the noise problem. Guitars hung on hooks scattered around the space. At the back of the room was Mason’s impressive drum set, and to the side was a DIY desk made out of a wooden door, laden with all types of music equipment. Kaz sat in a chair behind it, working on a laptop.

He looked up once we arrived and nudged one over-the-ear headphone off his ear. “I thought you were grabbing our lunch?” he asked, his gaze slowly sliding past me to land on Mason.

“Molly came as I was about to leave,” Mason said. “I wanted to bring her down here first.”

“Can’t she just get it then?”

My scowl was instinctual. “I’m not your butler,” I clipped out. “And hello, by the way.”

He dragged his headphones all the way down to his neck and tilted his head back. “Didn’t your boss say you’re supposed to help us however you can?”

“I’m sure she didn’t mean fetching your lunch for you.” I don’t know how I managed to have any pride left at this point, but my mouth kept moving even if the logical part of my brain screamed at me to just get them their goddamn lunch.

“Why don’t I call her and ask?” He pulled out his phone from the back pocket of his jeans.

Damn it. He was calling my bluff. I was not at all sure Trinity wouldn’t tell me to get my ass out the door and bring them whatever they wanted.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mason said. “I was already on my way out.”

I looked at him, surprised he was saving me from humiliation.

“Be back soon.” He left so quickly, I didn’t even get a chance to stutter out a thank you.

Kaz let out a low chuckle, forcing my attention back to him.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You when you squirm.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself,” I said, rolling my eyes.

He cocked a brow.

I put a hand on my hip.

An amused smirk appeared on his lips. It sucked that he wore it well. So well that heat washed over my cheeks. “You guys work here every day?” I asked, breaking our weird staring competition.

“Pretty much.” He got up and walked around the table, brushing right past me as he reached for a guitar hanging on the wall. I caught a whiff of something spicy and masculine before taking my next breath through my mouth. I didn’t need his hot rock singer pheromones messing up my thoughts.

“Is Mason okay, by the way?” I asked. “He seems different.”

He plugged in the electric guitar and gave me a mildly curious look. “Different how?”

“Less talkative. A bit closed off.” If there was something going on with him beyond the shock of having me back in his life, it was probably good I found out sooner than later.

A few chords broke through the air. “He’s fine. He just figured out a while ago he doesn’t need to try to be a friend to everyone. Just people who are worth a damn.”

My spine went straight as a rod as a fist squeezed my heart. The implication was obvious. I didn’t belong to that group anymore.

I tried to hide the sting of his words and dropped my gaze to my camera. “I’m going to start taking some photos.”

“Suit yourself,” Kaz said.

This camera was way more advanced than the secondhand one I had sitting at my house. I’d played around with it a bit when I first got it yesterday, but it still took me a few minutes to get the settings right. It was dark down here, with only one overhead lamp illuminating the space. I’d have to try to get some additional lighting from work tomorrow.

Kaz was strumming a soft tune on the guitar, breaking away from it occasionally to jot something down in a notebook laying on the edge of the desk. I moved across the small space, stopping in front of the drum set and kneeling to get the perfect angle.

Kaz’s buzzcut highlighted his strong bone structure and sharp cheekbones. Begrudgingly, I had to admit he was hot, but in an utterly different way from Mason’s conventional good looks. Kaz had an edge to him, a hardness in his features that was as memorable as it was unapproachable. He was the kind of guy a lot of women loved to admire from afar but were too intimidated to talk to.

For once, I was grateful he’d been an asshole to me from day one. Otherwise, I may have actually noticed all these things and put him on a pedestal he most definitely didn’t deserve to be on.

I focused in on his face and snapped my first shot.

Kaz didn't seem to care I was hovering a few feet away from him. If anything, it was as if I didn't exist. That was fine by me. I didn't know what I'd do if he wasn't comfortable around the camera. How was I supposed to make him feel at ease when I was far from it? My camera was my only saving grace. Being on the other side of the lens always made me feel in my element.

The pictures were coming out well. He was photogenic, as handsome men with razor-sharp jawlines tended to be, and the light wasn't as bad as I'd originally thought.

He stopped playing while I was scrolling through the photos. "You getting any good shots?"

"Some."

"Can I see?" He extended his hand.

"Here, let me show you." I squatted by his side.

He gazed at the screen in silence as I clicked through a few images. I needed him to like them. If he thought I was a shitty photographer and said so to Trinity, I was certain I'd be quickly replaced.

"What do you think?"

He didn't say anything for a while. Resisting the urge to repeat my question, I handed him the camera. "You can scroll through the rest."

After a while, he lifted his gaze back up to me, and there was a tentative smile on his face. "These are very good."

A fluttering feeling filled my belly. "Really?"

"I'm actually impressed." He stared at me intently. "You're a great photographer."

His unexpected compliment made heat spread across my cheeks. I stood up and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Thanks."

Kaz kept his eyes on me as I moved back to my previous spot, and then he began to play again. Spurred on by his

praise, I took a few more experimental shots, focusing on his fingers as they ran over the strings. He had big hands with long tattooed fingers. The tattoos looked like music notes.

We were interrupted by Mason's return. He appeared in the basement with a few brown sandwich bags and handed me one. "I forgot to ask if you were hungry, but thought I'd get you something just in case."

"You didn't need to do that," I said awkwardly, even as my stomach let out a low growl. I'd had breakfast at home many hours ago.

"It's nothing," he said without meeting my eyes.

He grabbed two folding chairs I hadn't noticed from a corner of the room and opened them up, offering one to me. I took a seat beside him, unsure of what to make of his behavior. He brought me lunch, yet he wouldn't look at me. I mean, it was just a sandwich, but still... Was he fine with me, mad at me, or indifferent? It was all very strange.

Kaz leaned his guitar against the desk and unwrapped his sandwich. "So how long have you been at Hyperion? Not long, I'm guessing. Didn't you just graduate a few months ago?"

"I graduated a year early," I told him.

He whistled. "You finished in three years?"

"Yeah," I said between bites. "I took a bigger course load each year."

"And here you are slumming it up with the dropouts. How the mighty have fallen, right, Mase?" He cocked a brow at the drummer.

"We must be bringing your average down," Mason said, a hard edge to his voice.

I sucked in a breath. Okay, he was definitely still mad.

My neck and ears felt hot as I lowered my sandwich down. If I wanted to have any hope of us working well together, I needed to apologize.

“I was an idiot for saying that,” I began.

“I thought I was the idiot,” Mason retorted.

Kaz’s eyes widened.

“I’m sorry, Mason. In retrospect, I wish we’d parted on a better note.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Mason said coldly before taking another bite.

I gnawed on my lip. Why wouldn’t he let go of it? It’s not like he’d behaved perfectly that night either. He’d *kissed* me. Had he conveniently forgotten that part? I was young, emotional, and really goddamn hurt he was just leaving me with no warning. It had confirmed he’d never really cared about me.

Now, I wondered. Why was he still hung up on that night if he’d felt nothing toward me?

I swallowed. “I’m really sorry.”

“Fine, whatever.”

We finished our food in soul-crushing silence.

Afterwards, I dug inside my bag for the paperwork Trinity had tasked me with giving to the guys to sign. “I have some contracts for you,” I said as I pulled the folders out. “One is to authorize me to post on your social media channels. Another is about your international royalties. Trinity wants to make sure you’re collecting them from all the right channels. I brought copies for you and Kaz to review.”

“Just give it to Kaz,” Mason said, bunching up his sandwich wrapper in his hands before tossing it into the garbage can.

“You should both read them,” I insisted, handing him a folder. “There’s a lot of important stuff in there, especially in the second one.”

Mason refused to take it. “Kaz takes care of the business stuff,” he said stubbornly.

I drew in a frustrated breath. Was he really going to fight over everything I asked him to do? This was ridiculous. “I really think you should read it.”

“I said Kaz can handle it.”

What was going on? Was he doing this to drive me insane, or was he just being lazy? I mean, come on. Mason may not have been the most hardworking guy in college, but this was real life now. This was his career we were talking about.

I pinched my lips together. “Mason, if you want to be a serious musician, you need to take this seriously.”

“Okay, enough,” Kaz interrupted. “Drop it, Molly. Mason and I have complimentary skillsets. I deal with the business bullshit he doesn’t want to think about, and he handles the distasteful act of casual socializing, also known as networking.” He made a face. “I swear, the word makes my gag reflex kick in.”

So that’s how they operated. If they were fine with it, who was I to challenge it? I glimpsed at Mason, only to find a strange expression on his face. He was frustrated, but there was something vulnerable simmering alongside the frustration.

“Fine,” I said, bringing my palms up in surrender. “I’ll drop it.”

“Great.” Kaz leaned back in his chair. “We know what we’re doing, all right? Somehow, we’ve gotten this far without you telling us how to run our band.”

I huffed. “I’m not telling you how to run your band, but I am here to help you. We all want this to be a success, right?”

Kaz considered me. “Of course, we do.”

“Then let’s agree to something.” I volleyed my gaze to Mason. “We have a lot on the line here. We don’t need to be friends, but can we at least promise we’ll be civil to each other?”

If they said no, I’d just have to put myself out of my misery and tell Trinity she had to find someone else to do this job. The mere thought of that conversation made me break out



in a cold sweat. Still, I couldn't spend my time here constantly fighting with the two of them.

Mason's cheek fluttered. He was clenching his jaw. "Fine," he said finally. "If you can respect our decisions, we can do civil. And we can at least agree on one more thing."

"Yeah?" I asked, tempering my relief.

"We'll never be friends."

**KAZ**

IFUCKING HATED GETTING UP EARLY. HAVING something to do before noon meant the first sound I heard was the shrill ringing of my alarm clock. It drove me crazy that the note it was programmed with was painfully off-key. Every time I heard it, I swore I'd take the thing apart and fix it, but I hadn't done it yet. The alarm rang on Wednesdays, and as the week went by I'd forget all about it, until it was Wednesday once again.

Eight am, and the traffic was moving at a glacial speed. If this kept up for much longer, I wouldn't have time to stop by the coffee shop, and then it would really be game over. If I didn't get some caffeine in me, I might have to skip out on this week's stakeout, and I was ready to approach *him* today and get this thing over with.

I ran a hand over my short hair and blew out a breath. In the car beside me, a woman in a crisp white blouse was talking on her phone, reciting financial metrics to her boss. To my left, a middle-aged man was going over his schedule with his wife. It felt like everyone except me was functioning at one hundred percent, and it annoyed the shit out of me. The world wasn't designed for people like me. The ones who operated better in the dark.

I'd figured this out a long time ago, but I couldn't say I've made peace with it. My childhood had been marred by

disciplinary meetings—Kaz was sleeping in class, Kaz was rude to his teachers, Kaz doesn't socialize with the other kids. It wasn't on purpose. I was just tired all the fucking time, but in Russia, no one gave a shit about excuses. Everyone had rules they had to live by.

When it became clear I'd never internalize that simple fact, my mama enrolled me in a high school in the United States. She said it was for my own good, and maybe it was, but I knew the real reason she'd sent me away. I'd been a problem for her from the moment I was conceived, and finally, she had a socially acceptable excuse to get rid of me for good.

The traffic began to clear. With "Arabella" by Arctic Monkeys as my soundtrack, I gunned it toward the exit. I only had twenty minutes left, but it was enough time to get my caffeine fix before driving to my father's office.

"Father," I muttered to myself. The word felt strange on my tongue. Mikhail, mama's husband, never liked it when I called him that, so I'd long since stopped using the word. The man hated me for a multitude of reasons. One, I was a walking reminder of my mama's infidelity. Two, Mikhail and my mama had tried to conceive a child unsuccessfully for years, and my arrival had made it clear who's fault that was. And three, my rebellious outbursts mixed like oil and water with his disciplinarian personality. It was actually kind of impressive he'd allowed me to live in his household for nearly fourteen years.

I hadn't spoken to him since I left Russia. Hadn't been back there since then either. Mama never invited me to visit, and frankly, I had zero fucking desire to go back. The United States wasn't perfect, but I'd found something here I never thought I'd have.

A real friend.

I swear, Mase and I were polar opposites in most things, but when it came to shit that mattered, we were exactly the same. Instead of blood, we had music coursing through our veins. We lived and breathed our art. We healed through our art. We knew love through our art.

At the light, there was a young woman crossing the street with her tiny daughter. The child said something, and her mother laughed before pulling teasingly on her pigtail. It felt fucked up that seeing normal families doing normal things made me feel a low pang of envy.

Love wasn't taught to me growing up. My mama took care of me—dressed me, fed me, took me to school—but she did all of those things with a level of emotional detachment that was impossible to miss, even for a kid. There'd always been a distance between us. A void she refused to cross. No wonder I sometimes felt as if I still lived in that lonely void.

But music turned out to be Mason's bridge through it. I let him in quickly. Far quicker than I'd ever thought was possible. We met the first day we moved into our campus home, and within hours, I was already playing him some music I'd written. We liked the same bands, and we shared a lot of the same opinions. I felt at ease around him. It was like we clicked on a subconscious level—two halves of one soul. Life became better with him around, so when he told me he was leaving Northeastern, I didn't have to think twice before dropping out with him.

I parked in front of the coffee shop and climbed out of my car. It was a five-year-old Nissan Rogue and I'd grown attached to it. I never owned a car until we got to LA, so I had no idea how much I'd enjoy driving it—outside of rush hour, that is. Long drives cleared my head. But the drives I took on Wednesday mornings had a different purpose all together.

Inside, I ordered an iced black coffee and went to wait by the other end of the counter. A girl, no more than twenty, caught my eye and smiled. She was cute. Blond hair and green eyes.

And just like that, my mind jumped to another green-eyed girl.

I didn't think Molly was anything special the first time I met her. My first impression of her was that she was attractive, but in a preppy, boring way. My opinion of her plummeted quickly when I realized the kind of person she was—a

conformist. A rule follower. Scared of authority. Did everything by the book. She'd practically broken out in hives when I suggested we take a peek inside a library no one ever used. It was like she'd never picked a lock in her entire life. Must have been a pretty fucking boring life.

She and Mason were friends back then, but I didn't think they had much in common besides being from the same small town. She'd been an unimportant blip in my consciousness, and I would have forgotten all about her if it hadn't been for that party.

It turned out the rule follower had teeth and nails. She didn't back down from me, didn't run away. It didn't take a genius to figure out she didn't like me, but that didn't stop her from giving me a kiss that still plagued my thoughts from time to time. She'd intrigued me that night.

In the aftermath, Mason had acted strangely. It was then it occurred to me he may have had some kind of a crush on the girl. When I pressed him, he'd assured me that wasn't the case, just like he was insisting now that he didn't like her.

Was he lying? Fuck if I knew. I wasn't a mind reader. If anything, my social skills were in serious need of improvement. But I wasn't going to treat Mason with kid gloves. If he had a problem with me finding out if Molly was still a great kisser, he'd have to tell me outright. That's how our friendship worked. No bullshit. We took each other's word for what it was, and so far, that had worked out damn well.

The barista called out my order. I grabbed it off the counter, gave the blond girl a wink, and walked back to my car.

Now the distasteful part of the day began.

Being a stalker wasn't something I'd chosen for myself. Who the hell wakes up and decides to stalk somebody? Psychopaths, maybe, but I wasn't one of those. At least, I didn't think so.

It just kind of happened. I remember the first time I pulled up outside my biological father's workplace and saw him

crossing the parking lot, a backpack slung over his shoulder, a brown paper bag clutched in his hand. I began to wonder about him. Who made him lunch? Where did he live? Did he have his own family?

I drove home with those questions swirling inside my mind, wrote some music, and then drove back eight hours later to watch him leave work. He lived twenty minutes away, in a one-story bungalow, with his wife and young daughter. I watched them have a family dinner through the big open window and tried to imagine myself sitting at the table with them.

I couldn't visualize it.

Instead of satiating my curiosity, that day made it even more starved. Until then, all I knew of my real father was what my mama had told me, which hadn't been much. She'd met him when she was on a month-long work trip to LA. They'd had a whirlwind romance, and a few weeks after she returned home, she'd discovered she was pregnant. When I got older, I wondered why she didn't get rid of me—Mikhail had surely wanted her to—but I could never bring myself to ask.

When I found out I'd be moving to the States, I'd decided I wanted to find my father. I'd bugged my mama with questions. What was his name? How old was he? Where did he live?

This made her angry. *“Zabyd pro eto, malchyk. Ti nechevo horoshevo ne naydesh. Etot mujshina tebe ne khto. On pro tebya daje ne znayet.”* Forget about it, boy. You won't find anything good. This man is nobody to you. He doesn't even know about you.

Naturally, hearing that discouraged me, but when Mase and I moved to LA, I knew I had to do it. It was a long shot, but what if he still lived in this city?

When I tracked him down with the help of a DNA test this past June, I didn't tell my mama. Not that we spoke much these days anyway. I hadn't even told Mase. This felt like something I had to handle on my own.

The parking lot outside the five-story office building was nearly full, but I managed to grab one of the guest parking spots right outside the main door. My father worked as an operations manager at a company that sold custom window blinds. He'd held this job for five years according to his LinkedIn profile. Before that, he'd spent a decade at an international logistics company, which is how he'd met my mother. She'd worked at the Moscow office of the same firm. After she returned home pregnant with me, Mikhail made her quit. She'd never gone back to work again.

I watched as a few familiar faces walked past my car. I've been coming here for the past God knows how many Wednesdays, so I'd begun to recognize some of them. It was weird to know who my father's work friends were when I had yet to speak with him.

Every time I showed up here, I told myself I'd get out of the car and confront him when he left the office for lunch. But every time, I found an excuse not to do it. Most days, he wasn't alone. It didn't seem appropriate to accost him in front of his coworkers and announce I'm his son. Other times, he looked worn down. Stressed. What if meeting me was enough to give him a heart attack? I didn't want that on my shoulders.

But there'd been at least two times when he was on his own, seeming just fine. Why hadn't I approached him then?

I wasn't scared of a lot of things. If anything, fear had often guided me in the right direction. But this fear felt different.

It felt existential.

I could deal with Mikhail, my fake father, not loving me. But could I deal with my real one wanting nothing to do with me as well?

I didn't know. And that scared the fuck out of me.

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Three hours later, I was driving home. I would have approached him today, I swear I would have, but he never came down for lunch. Something at the office must have kept him busy.

When I got back to the house, there was a white car in the driveway taking up my usual parking spot. “Car” might be too generous of a word. The thing was practically falling apart. I glanced at the time. Three pm. This was Molly’s? Had Mason seen this thing?

I parked across the street and walked over to examine the monstrosity. It had to be close to fifteen years old, and the bumper was covered in black tape. If I took it off, I was sure something would fall right off. There were a few deep scratches on the front door, a dent near one of the headlights, and what looked like rust on the edge of the hood. What the hell was she doing driving this thing? I mean really, it looked like it was on the verge of exploding in the middle of the highway. How did she even get it insured? Did she have a goddamn death wish?

Scowling, I marched to the front door and ducked inside the house.

Molly was sitting at the dining table, her laptop open in front of her, and her fingers pounding out a rapid rhythm across the keyboard. Her hair was up in a messy bun thing at the top of her head, and she wore a simple green dress. It was pretty obvious she wasn’t trying to be sexy, and yet somehow, she was. My attention drifted to where the dress rode up a bit and showed a good bit of thigh.

Fuck, how had I managed to ignore this girl for nearly an entire year?

I braced my hand on the wall. “Is that your car out there?”

Startled, she yelped in surprise, placing a hand on her chest. “Jesus, Kaz! I didn’t hear you come in.”

“Is it yours or not?”

She got up. “It’s mine. Do you need me to park it elsewhere?”



“Yeah, the scrap yard.” I stopped directly in front of her.

Her eyes narrowed, the surprise quickly replaced with annoyance. “Leave my car alone. We’ve been through a lot together.”

A laugh nearly bubbled out of my throat. Was she for real? “You’re actually attached to that thing?”

“So what if I am?” She crossed her arms, pushing her chest up in the process.

Of course, I looked. Of course, she noticed.

“Hey, I’m up here,” she said, snapping her fingers in my face. “Now if you’re done judging Audrey—”

“Audrey?” I choked out. “You *named* it?”

Molly let out an exasperated sigh. “What’s your issue?”

That was a great question. Why the hell did I storm in here outraged about her car? I rocked back on my heels and considered it for a moment. Something about the thought of her trying to wield that piece of trash during LA rush hour just didn’t sit right with me.

“You could get hurt if that thing breaks down in the middle of the street.”

For a moment, she just stared at me. And then something suspicious appeared in her expression. “Are you worried about me?”

I cleared my throat. “You’re a menace to other drivers.”

“And you’re a menace to society in general,” she shot back. “Don’t see me complaining about it.”

My laugh startled her again. Her eyes widened as she took me in, and then a small chuckle spilled past her lips too. She grazed her teeth over her bottom lip, looking entirely too sexy in the process, and shook her head slightly. “Are we done with whatever this is? Can we go downstairs?”

I ran a hand over my face, wiping off the remnants of my smile. She was distracting, and a bit infuriating, but I didn’t want her to fucking die on her way to work. “Molly, seriously.

I don't consider myself a very safety-conscious person, but that car has got to go. Just fucking think about it, okay?"

She didn't like me telling her what to do, but she didn't argue this time. "Fine, I'll think about it."

I was skeptical. "If not for me, do it for your parents. I'm sure they'd be horrified about you driving that."

"My parents are dead."

*Wait, what?* Well, now I felt like a dick. "I didn't know. Sorry."

"It's fine," she said calmly, reaching down to shut her laptop. "It happened a long time ago."

Mason never said anything about it to me. He wasn't one to gossip about other people, but in this case, I wish he had. I looked at Molly, really looked at her, and felt some of my old assumptions crumble. In college, I never thought she'd experienced real hardship based on how she carried herself, but I'd been wrong.

When I didn't say anything, she looked back to me and let out a breath. "Don't be weird about it, okay? Let's just get to work." She was trying to hide it, but I could see something vulnerable in her expression.

Suddenly, I wanted to peel back the layers and find out more about this girl. "We're having a party on Friday. Do you want to come?"

Her brows scrunched together. "Um. I don't know," she said, moving in the direction of the basement.

I followed close behind her. "You've got other plans?"

"Probably. I'll have to check my calendar."

I should have dropped it. After all, we'd promised to be civil. But civil was so *boring*. I was itching to provoke her.

Moving around her, I placed my hands on the sides of the doorframe, blocking the path downstairs. She walked right into me and made an angry noise. "Kaz, what the hell?"

“You sure you don’t want to come? Mase knows how to throw a damn good party. I’m sure you remember the last one you went to.”

Her cheeks turned pink. “How could I ever forget,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “The highlight of your time in college, I’m sure.”

“You’re not wrong,” I said, letting my gaze drift down her body. Her eyes widened in response. “You ever wonder what it would be like to have me kiss you again?”

She sucked in a breath. A tense, delicious silence rang out loudly in the air between us.

God, why was riling her up so satisfying?

One of her little hands curled into a fist, and I’m sure the other one would have too if it weren’t holding her camera. “You can’t say things like that,” she stammered, keeping her voice low. “It’s inappropriate.”

The longer we interacted in close quarters, the more inappropriate things I wanted to say and do to her, but I knew I’d never get a chance to if I didn’t play this carefully.

“Sorry,” I said with a nonchalant shrug as I moved out of her way. “Just thought I’d be honest with you.”

Her eyes met mine head-on, a mixture of anger and heat that made my dick twitch inside my jeans. She brushed past me, careful not to touch me, as if I’d burn her if she did. “There’s sharing, and then there’s oversharing,” she said over her shoulder.

I stifled a laugh and followed her down.

We worked in the basement for the next few hours, and I could have sworn that whenever I caught her looking at me, her gaze drifted down to my lips.

**MASON**

FRIDAY ROLLED AROUND, signaling the end of the week. So far, I'd managed to keep my distance from Molly. Sure, she spent a great deal of time with us in the basement, but besides exchanging a few greetings and answering a sporadic question or two, I'd allowed Kaz to handle most of the talking.

She hadn't pressed me to review more contracts ever since that first day. If she thought my hard stance on that was strange, she hadn't brought it up again, and that was just fine by me. I didn't have many excuses to use with her and telling her the truth was out of the question. She probably already thought I was lazy at worst, uninterested at best, and yet both of those were still better than her knowing I couldn't understand the fucking things.

I heard the front door slam. Kaz and Molly must have been back from their coffee run. A few moments later, my friend came down the stairs, holding two cups in his hands. Molly trailed behind him, her cheeks sporting a light-pink color.

Did I want to know how Kaz's seduction plan was going? Fuck, yes. Was I going to ask? Hell, no. I could deal with him going after Molly—at least, that's what I told myself—but I sure as hell didn't need to know the details.

“Oh, damn. Is it ready?” Kaz handed me one of the cups and leaned over my shoulder to look at my screen. “He's

putting the final touches on our latest track,” he said to Molly.

“I’m almost finished.” I’d been cooped up down here for most of the early afternoon, eager to get this thing done. Kaz may handle all of our paperwork, but I pulled my weight in other ways. Why the hell was I hoping Molly would notice?

“Let’s hear it.” Kaz sat down on the chair beside me and glanced at Molly, who was standing awkwardly in the corner. “You good?”

She raised the camera in front of her chest. Sometimes it was like she used that thing like a shield. “Yep. This is a good moment for me to capture.”

Kaz’s lips turned up at the corners. He always got excited about this part, and he seemed to have no reservations about having her here, when in the past it had always been just us two.

Me? I gave Molly a weary look before getting busy on the computer once again. I felt exposed by her presence. A few moments later, our latest and greatest was playing on the sound system.

As the notes we’d meticulously arranged together filled the room, I began to relax. My foot tapped out the beat, and my fingers drummed along the edge of the desk. Kaz was softly singing along to the tune. The world melted away, all of its conflicting ugliness and beauty moving aside to make space for the only thing that had ever made sense inside my faulty brain.

Music.

At some point, Kaz closed his eyes, and when the song ended, he didn’t open them right away. I waited. I could nearly see the ideas forming inside his head.

When he launched off the couch and picked up his guitar, I was ready.

“Something just came to me,” he said as he tuned his instrument.

Maybe it was narcissistic for him to be inspired by a song we'd written, but I've always believed we were capable of creating things that were better than us. Art frequently transcended its flawed creators.

I closed my laptop and focused on my bandmate.

The chords took a few moments to find, but then he had them, and the chorus began to form.

"What if you go a little higher?" I suggested, resting my elbows on my knees and steeping my palms together.

"Like this?"

"Yeah. And add a riff in the bridge."

We went back and forth for a while, until Kaz put down the guitar and jotted down some notes.

Someone cleared their throat.

Molly.

I turned to look at her, suddenly remembering she'd been here with us this whole time. She hadn't made a peep while we worked. It hadn't been as weird as I'd expected to have her here, a fly on the wall to our creative process.

Her wide eyes flitted between Kaz and I. "Thanks for letting me sit in on that," she said shyly and lowered her camera to her side. "I think I have more than enough for today."

"What do you think of the songs?" The question tumbled out of me. It was the first thing I'd said to her since she came down, and I desperately wanted to know, even if it was ridiculous for me to continue to try to prove myself to her. She'd already admitted she was wrong when she told me I shouldn't drop out to make music. What more did I want from her?

*To see me as someone worthy.*

Yeah, I knew for a fact that would never happen.

"The first one reminded me of some of the stuff you wrote back in River Valley," she said, coming to sit down at the last

remaining chair on the other side of the small room. “I remember you playing one of your originals to Ade back at our house and it sounded a little like this one. The lyrics went like... ‘*Falling into deep waters never scared me as much as falling for you.*’ Do you remember that one?” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ve always liked that song. It had a bold rhythm.”

She...remembered? I swiped a hand over my lips, trying to wipe the shock off my face. I remembered going over to their house to play that song for Ade and to get her help with the melody. I’d hoped Molly would be there. Finding opportunities to see her was my favorite game. She never came out of her room that day, but she must have heard it through the thin walls.

“You’re right,” I answered when I noticed Kaz giving me a quizzical look. “Kaz and I pulled some of the chord progressions from there.”

She smiled at me, triumphant. “I knew it sounded similar. I think it will be a hit.”

Kaz slapped his hand on my shoulder. “You hear that. Mase? You know it’s good if even our haters love it.”

I forced a laugh. “This must be a hallucination.”

Molly rolled her eyes and stood up. “Seriously? I’m not a hater. You really need to learn how to take a compliment.”

“Guess you’ll just have to compliment us more often.” Kaz walked to her and threw his arm over her narrow shoulders. He leaned into her. “How else are we going to practice taking them well?”

Molly plucked his arm off her by the sleeve of his crew neck, but I didn’t miss her sharp intake of breath when Kaz touched her. She sent him a furtive glance.

Was he already making inroads with her?

I didn’t want to see this. The flirtation. The subtle hints at something happening. Suddenly, I wanted her gone.

“I’m sure you’ll get plenty of compliments from all of your admirers tonight,” she said to Kaz.

A heavy stone dropped inside my gut. “You told her about the party?” I didn’t want her there.

Kaz met my gaze head-on. “Yeah, I did. Thought it would be a good place for her to get some pictures,” he said with a shrug, as if it were no big deal.

But it *was* a big deal. I couldn’t relax around her. I’d be on my guard the entire night. “No. No pictures. People aren’t coming over to have their faces plastered on our social media.”

Kaz scoffed and raised his brows at me. “Are you serious? Your friends won’t give a shit about that. If anything, they’d like to get their fifteen minutes of fame.”

“I said no.”

Molly sniffed and stood up. “Don’t worry, I’m not coming. No need to stress about it.”

“Hey, just wait a minute,” Kaz said, shooting me a death glare.

“No, really. I have a lot of work to do tonight, sorting and editing the content from this week.”

Our eyes locked together. She didn’t seem angry, but maybe a little bit hurt at the way I’d uninvited her. Still, she gave me a small smile. “It’s no problem.”

A crack appeared in my heart.

“You sure?” Kaz asked, his voice resigned. “It’ll be a fun time.”

“All good.” Molly stood up and smoothed her palms down her thighs. “Out of curiosity, who’s coming?”

“A bunch of musician friends Mason’s picked up along the way,” Kaz said. “Charlotte and her crew. A few other randos.”

*Shit.*

“Who’s Charlotte?”

*Double shit.*



Kaz dragged his hand down the back of his neck, knowing full well he'd just said something he should have kept to himself.

I rose to my feet. "A girl I'm seeing."

The temperature of the room plummeted. It was as if a layer of thin ice had frozen over my skin and then cracked into a million pieces. Molly's green eyes widened and blinked a few times.

"I see," Molly said flatly. "Well, enjoy your night." She turned on her heel and disappeared upstairs.

As soon as she was gone, I stepped in front of Kaz. "What the hell was that?"

"Fuck. I'm sorry."

It was a genuine apology, but it didn't tame the turbulent anger inside my chest. "Why would you invite her to the party when I told you I want her far away?"

A spark flared in his eyes. "And I told you I was going to go after her, and you said to go ahead. Her being at the party doesn't mean she'd be interacting with you."

"Our house isn't that big," I growled. "Thanks for bringing up Charlotte, by the way."

"Why are you so upset?" he demanded, his shoulders turning stiff. Now he was getting pissed at me. "I'm tired of you acting like a fucking corpse around Molly. You barely speak to her. I get you don't like her, but grow the fuck up. She's working with us. Ignoring her is no more professional than being a dick."

"You want to fuck her, and you're telling me I'm the one being unprofessional?"

"If I fuck her, you can be sure I'll still treat her like a human being when we're at work."

"You know what else is not professional? Sharing my personal life with her."

Kaz laughed incredulously. “What’s the big deal with Molly knowing you have a girlfriend?”

“She’s not. My. Girlfriend.”

“Mase, I don’t know what the hell is going on with you. Either you tell me, or we move on.”

I tamed the impulse to lash out at him again. This felt like a real argument, and I didn’t like it. Kaz and I never fought like this, but a few days of working with Molly, and we were at each other’s throats. I had to fix this.

“Okay.” I said, hiding the unease sneaking into my heart. “Let’s move on.”

Kaz shook his head, pressing his back against the wall. “If you don’t want me to get involved with her, just say it.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “No, I just don’t want her sticking her nose in my business. The only way this is going to work is if I keep a clear line between what’s personal and business. I don’t want her at my parties, and I sure as hell don’t want her meeting people that have nothing to do with the work she’s been hired to do.”

“Fine. But tell me something. What did she do to you to make you hate her this much? Is it really just because she wasn’t happy for you when you told her you were dropping out? Or is it because hating her is easier than examining what you really feel for her?”

My nostrils flared with a hard breath. No matter how close Kaz and I were, he’d never understand what it was like to feel inferior to everyone around you. To be born less than whole. “No,” I said, my voice dropping low. “It’s because she’s a walking reminder of my old self. The self I’ve been working really hard to move on from.”

“You could show her who you are now,” my best friend said. “If you wanted her to know.”

“I don’t want her to know anything.”

*Coward, coward, coward.*



## MOLLY

IT WAS FRIDAY EVENING. Instead of celebrating that I'd survived my first week with Last Rites, my mind was entirely focused on one thing.

Mason had a girlfriend.

I bit on the side of my lip. This was fine. Perfectly fine. Expected, really. Why would a guy like him be single? Especially now that his band was on the brink of success.

She was probably a creative type. A painter or a musician. Maybe a model—rock stars loved those, didn't they? She and Mason probably met at a party—no, a gallery opening. Not the stuffy kind old people went to, but a hip one in Santa Monica, where the art looked like graffiti, and the hors d'oeuvres were all vegan.

I was so frazzled I nearly ran through a red light.

By the time I scaled the steps to my fourth-floor apartment, my stomach was growling insistently, and I forcefully pushed thoughts of Mason's model girlfriend out of my head.

My key already clutched in my hand, I hurried to the door. Getting inside as quickly as possible had become a necessary habit after the incident with Cory. I kept my ears peeled for any sounds coming from his apartment as I passed by. A TV was on.

A chill ran down my spine as I struggled to get the key into the rusty lock. Just as I heard the telltale click, the TV volume lowered. I hurried in, locked the door behind me, and hooked the security chain.

Dropping my head back against the door, I took a few deep breaths. The pounding inside my chest seemed to slow down, but there was no denying living like this sucked. I put on a brave face to Piper, but it seemed pointless to lie to myself when I had to scurry inside my own home in order to feel safe.

The clock on my wall read six-thirty. I'd been at the guys' house for only four hours, and my work for the day was hardly done. It'd been tricky balancing going over there with all the other stuff I still had on my plate. Trinity had cleared up a good chunk of my schedule to give me time for this assignment, but I still had some administrative tasks left. Not to mention editing the thousands of photos I'd gotten over the past week. Trinity was expecting an email from me tonight so that she could review the material.

I tossed my backpack on the couch, popped a frozen meal into the microwave, and went into my bedroom to change into sweats. If I was going to be working late, I may as well be comfortable. This place was becoming more and more unlivable by the day. I needed to keep my focus on that promotion, which meant impressing Trinity. I settled at the dining table with my laptop and camera, ready to dive into the treasure trove of photos.

My breath caught in my throat as the pictures popped up on the screen. I'd been looking at the photos throughout the week on the small camera screen, but seeing them blown up on my laptop was a completely different experience. The first batch was of Kaz playing the guitar. Greedily, my eyes scanned each one.

He was sitting with his instrument, one hand on the neck of the guitar, and the other holding a marbled pick. His expression showed his total concentration, sharpening his features. There was something utterly compelling about the shot. An artist at work. A glimpse into a sacred moment.

*"You ever wonder what it would be like to have me kiss you again?"*

I closed my eyes and slumped against the backrest. I'd been so worried about working with Mason, I'd only spent a fraction of my time thinking about what it would be like to work with Kaz. The experience had been unexpected. For all of his hostility in the beginning, he seemed to be warming up to me. Maybe a little too hot, too fast.

It scared me that I didn't entirely hate it.

Getting back to the photos, I tagged the best ones. Some of these felt too raw to post. Like they showed too much for the masses to consume. But that was Trinity's call to make.

When I got to the shots that included Mason, I released a heavy breath. Why did things feel so strange between us? He was clearly keeping his guard up around me, and sometimes, I got the sense he was afraid. But of what? He had all the power in this situation. What could he possibly be afraid of?

In the photos, his eyes were magnets. When he looked into the camera, they immediately became the focal point, holding the viewer in their azure depths. He was so handsome it was nearly painful to look at him. The medium of the photograph only added to that sensation, reminding the viewer that the subject was completely out of reach.

I finished touching up the handful of photos I wanted to show Trinity, lay down on the couch, and closed my eyes. Anxiousness battled with exhilaration inside my head. Despite the awkwardness between me and the guys, I was enjoying this assignment. I'd pushed my interest in photography aside for years because it seemed like a pursuit that would never give me the financial stability I craved. It was too risky, too likely to end with me asking my sister for help. But now I had a one-off opportunity to flex that creative muscle, and it felt amazing. I was determined to make the most of it.

Something shattered next door. I jumped off the couch in alarm. Cory swore loudly, the sound traveling through our thin walls so well that for a moment I thought he was inside my apartment.

He must have broken a dish. Nothing major. I ran a hand down my chest and sat back down, listening for any other sounds that could spell out trouble for me. Five minutes later, everything had gone quiet, but the fearful knot in my chest wouldn't leave.

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An incoming call woke me from a night of fitful sleep. Recently, I'd been having weird dreams where I was trapped in a maze, unable to find an exit. In the dream, I'd hear footsteps behind me, but when I turned around, no one was there. They freaked me out.

I pawed at my nightstand, grabbed my phone, and saw Trinity's name on the screen. It was ten am on a Saturday.

She greeted me quickly, making no mention of the fact that it was the weekend. I'd gotten used to that by now. Trinity rarely took days off. "Philo is hosting a party at his mansion tonight, and I can't make it. My father's sixtieth birthday party is in San Francisco, so I'm flying out in a few hours. I want you to take Last Rites to Philo's, get a few photos, and keep an eye on them."

My shocked silence sounded loud to my own ears, but Trinity paid it no mind.

"They're fresh meat, so people are going to want to talk to them. Just make sure they don't make any commitments that are counterproductive to our interests. You know how creatives get excited about everything. I can't have them coming out of this with the wrong collabs promised left, right, and center."

"Isn't there someone else more experienced that could go?" I finally choked out.

"You're the only one who knows the guys. I can't send them with someone they've never met. It would be uncomfortable."

And sending me, a junior assistant, to attend a celebrity-studded party wouldn't be?

"Umm..."

"Look, I trust you to handle yourself and them. The photos you sent me last night are exactly what I'm looking for. Great job. Keep at it, and the promotion is yours."

Her words had the intended effect. I perked up. "Okay. What time is it?"

“Don’t get there before eleven pm. I’ve already texted Mason and Kaz, and they’re excited to go.”

Of course, they were. Unlike me, they’d be in their element.

“I’ll email you the address and some notes while I’m in the cab. Okay, I have to go—”

“Wait!” I sat up on the bed, pressing the phone closer to my ear. I had so many questions, I didn’t know which one to ask first. “So, um, what do I wear?”

“Something on brand.”

I gulped. “Like, rocker stuff? I don’t have anything like that.” My style was squarely laidback West Coast vibe, and most of my clothes were lovingly thrifted. I guess I could raid Ade’s closet if I really needed to.

“I’ll send you something. I really have to go, Molly. Have fun.” She hung up.

I stared at the phone for a few seconds before burrowing deep under my covers and letting out a groan. Good thing I still had more than twelve hours to mentally prepare for this thing.



Loud rock music was blaring from inside Kaz and Mason’s house when I arrived in an Uber around ten pm. I’d decided it was best to meet here first and head to the party together.

Were they throwing a pre-drink? The last thing I needed was for them to be wasted before we even arrived at Philo’s.

My fears were somewhat calmed when I realized there weren’t any other cars parked around the house besides Kaz’s Nissan.

I quickly learned they kept their front door unlocked most days. Must be nice to not have to worry about a creepy neighbor. I looked back over my shoulder and gave the quiet neighborhood a wistful once-over before walking right in.



The music was coming from the living room. I found Kaz sitting on the sofa, one ankle hanging over his jean-clad knee, and a beer in his hand. His attention was fixated on his phone. Mason was directly across from him, sitting in an armchair with a dark-haired woman in his lap.

My blood froze inside my veins.

This had to be her. His girlfriend.

Mason glanced over his shoulder as if sensing I was there. Our eyes clashed. His girlfriend leaned into him, kissed him on the cheek, and trailed her fingers down his arm.

Someone turned down the music, but there was a whooshing sound inside my ears. I felt like I was falling, everything around me blurring except for the blue of Mason's eyes.

“Wow.” A hand slipped around my waist. “Let's get you a beer.”

Slowly, I came back to my senses and turned my face toward Kaz. I hadn't even noticed him cross the room. “No, thanks.”

“You look like you're about to go nuclear.” His lips brushed against my hair, his voice low enough so that only I could hear. “Take a breath.”

I allowed him to steer me into the kitchen, away from Mason and her. I hadn't even said hello, let alone introduced myself, but I didn't think I could do it in this state. Shock mixed with anguish. Betrayal underlined with hurt.

It was one thing to imagine him with someone else, but seeing it in real life? My heart was stuttering out an uneven rhythm as I attempted to get my emotions in check. I shouldn't care. He could do whatever he wanted. It shouldn't matter to me.

Only for some fucked-up reason, it did.

“I'm fine,” I forced out, shielded from the living room by the fridge and Kaz's tall body. “Just a dizzy spell.”

“Right. And I'm Mother freaking Teresa.”

We stared at each other. His green eyes narrowed with something I could misinterpret as concern.

“You don’t need to lie to me, Molly.”

“Oh, please.” I huffed a sad chuckle. “If there’s anyone I should most definitely lie to, it’s you.” What was I saying? I shouldn’t be entertaining this conversation. Kaz could never know there was a chance I still felt something for Mason.

“Why?” he asked softly, and only then did it register that his arm was still snug around my waist, his body mere inches away.

I stiffened, lowered my eyes, yet for some reason, I allowed myself to remain close to him. “Never mind.”

Kaz’s touch began to burn through my clothes, his spicy, male scent making my pulse race.

“Do you have feelings for him?”

I unraveled Kaz’s arm from around me and shook my head. “Of course not.”

My voice came out firm, but inside, everything was crumbling. How could I be over Mason if in the span of a week he’d managed to turn me into an uncertain mess? If seeing him with someone else felt like arriving in my personal hell? There was an ache in my chest whenever he was around, as if my heart had become aware of a gaping wound that had never healed.

Maybe what I needed was closure. A confrontation about why he’d led me on for years only to never make a move when he finally had the chance. An explanation for how he could leave me so easily and yet take what I thought of him dropping out to heart.

Or maybe that was a Pandora’s box I didn’t want to open, because chances are I wouldn’t like the answer. Mason had moved on. He had a girlfriend, for fuck’s sake, and I’d become someone he only tolerated because of work.

Work. That’s what I was here for.

“Look, like I said, I just felt a bit dizzy. Sorry for worrying you.”

After a while, Kaz’s penetrating gaze moved from my face down to my body. His lips twitched into a half-hearted smirk. “All right. You look hot, by the way.”

I bit down on my lip. “Inappropriate.”

Kaz dragged his palm over his mouth, keeping his gaze angled down. “Yeah, maybe a bit.”

I looked down at myself. Trinity had sent me a gorgeous silk slip dress that looked like shiny black water cascading down my body. It was a little too big, but the cut was forgiving, and it was without a doubt the nicest piece of clothing I’d ever worn. I’d slipped a leather jacket Ade had gifted me a few years ago over the dress and completed the look with a pair of wine-colored velvet boots. Before I left my apartment, a buzz of excitement had managed to build up beneath my skin. *Perhaps this party would be fun after all.*

There was nothing quite as bitter as realizing the naivety of one’s expectations.

“I meant your comment, not my outfit,” I said, slapping Kaz’s chest lightly.

He grinned in earnest and captured my hand in his. “Fine. You look beautiful. Is that better?”

I eyed him nervously, all too aware that he was still extremely close, and that a blush was starting to rise up my cheeks. “Sure. Thanks, or whatever.” Tugging my hand out of his, I opened the fridge and reached for a beer before thinking better of it. I needed to keep my wits about me tonight, and I didn’t need alcohol to handle the scene awaiting me in the living room.

Not waiting to see if Kaz would follow me, I marched out of the kitchen and headed directly for the armchair.

I extended my hand toward the woman still perched on Mason’s thigh and smiled. “Hi, I’m Molly. I’m their manager’s assistant.”

She grasped my hand with her far-more manicured one. “Charlotte. Nice to meet you.” The smile she gave me was cautious, but not as fake as I had expected it to be.

*Why would she be fake to you? You’re no threat to her.*

My attention jumped to Mason. “We should head out soon.”

He nodded slowly and then placed a languid kiss on Charlotte’s cheek. Was it just me, or did she seem surprised by the act?

“You ready, Char?”

*Wait, she’s coming with us?*

Mason’s eyes flashed when he saw the change in my expression. “Trinity said we could bring plus ones.”

*Well, great.* Apparently, she didn’t think to tell me that, but I was so over the whole thing I didn’t have it in me to cross-examine Mason. “Is Kaz bringing anyone?”

“Nah.” The singer polished off the last of his beer and placed the bottle on the dining table. “I’m afraid you’ll have to keep me company,” he said, amusement and wickedness flickering in his eyes.

I made a show of rummaging inside my purse for my phone. “I’m going to order our ride.”

When the car arrived, Charlotte and Mason walked out hand in hand, with Kaz and me following behind them. I’d ordered a huge black SUV for the specific purpose of not being pressed up to any of them. Unfortunately, Kaz didn’t get the memo and climbed in beside me at the back.

“You’d be a lot more comfortable at the front,” I huffed.

“I’m good here.” He threw one long arm over the backrest and let his fingers dangle just above my shoulder.

I tried to relax, I really did, but it was nearly impossible.

My mind wouldn’t stop ruminating on the situation. Anger seeped into my chest. What was Mason’s problem? He had a gorgeous girlfriend, lived in a nice house with his best friend,

and had a career that was about to take off. You'd think he'd be able to find some graciousness as far as I was concerned. Instead, he was still acting like I was contagious with a deadly disease. His refusal to hold a proper conversation with me was starting to feel drawn out and excessive.

"Are you going to let loose a bit?" Kaz asked, his voice close to my ear.

"I'm working," I said curtly.

"Oh, yeah? What does that mean?"

I bit my tongue. Trinity probably didn't want me to admit point-blank that I was there to supervise the guys and their dealings.

"I'm supposed to network on your behalf," I said.

Kaz's fingertips brushed the top of my left shoulder. "Then what are we supposed to be doing?"

"The same thing. You can never meet too many people, can you?"

He chuckled, a low, deep sound that plucked at something beneath my skin. "I wouldn't know. Mason's more the networking type. At parties, I usually grab a drink, find a quiet corner, and watch people do things they'll regret in the morning."

"How do you know they'll regret it?"

"I guess I don't." Another brush over my bare skin. "Maybe that's just what I tell myself to feel better about not participating."

I forced myself to slide lower, putting myself out of his reach. "So you want me to let loose while you stand in your corner and watch?"

"Maybe I want you to draw me out of it."

I met his gaze, my breath hitching when I saw the clear interest in his eyes. I was a new game he wanted to play, that much was obvious. But I could handle his provocations.

At least, that's what I told myself.

Charlotte looked over her seat at us. “What are you two talking about back there?”

She and Mason hadn’t exchanged a word since we got in. Were they always this quiet? I wondered how long they’d been dating.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Kaz said dismissively. Charlotte shot a glance at Mason, probably expecting her boyfriend to say something, but he didn’t even turn to her. He seemed lost in his own thoughts.

When we arrived at our destination, Mason helped Charlotte out of the car, and Kaz did the same for me. I tried not to notice how good his hand felt in mine, or how his eyes licked a trail down my body. I was deeply wary of the man, but I was also starting to acknowledge that all of our bickering was fueled by something very akin to chemistry.

That was fine. I could ignore chemistry. It was a flighty, destructive thing that was of little use to me.

All thoughts of the chemical variety left my head when I finally saw the house where the party was being hosted.

“Holy shit,” I breathed.

Mason whistled, and Kaz laughed beside me. “This isn’t a house. This is a compound.”

Philo’s lavish estate sprawled over a lot that could have easily housed five normal-sized homes. The immaculate lawn looked as if every blade of grass was trimmed individually by someone with a ruler, and the facade was illuminated with strategically placed lights. Water gurgled from a fountain in the shape of a horse frozen on its hind legs.

“This is insane,” Charlotte said breathlessly.

“So that’s what six platinum records and a twenty-year-long career gets you.” Mason sounded awed. “I can’t tell which is the main entrance.”

I could see at least three impressive wooden doors that could be it, but the safest bet had to be the one closest to the fountain.

“This way.” I began to walk forward and immediately stumbled over my heel.

A strong hand gripped me by the elbow. “Careful.”

I glanced up at Kaz, who was still taller than me even in my four-inch heels. “Thanks,” I muttered and let him keep his hand on me until we made it all the way to the front door. When I glanced over my shoulder at Mason, his expression was tinged with something sour, and he looked away when his eyes met mine.

A man dressed in a tailored suit checked our names off a list and opened the door. “Welcome.”

The first thing I saw was a chandelier I swear was bigger than my bedroom. Rings upon rings of glass teardrops reflected the throngs of smartly dressed guests. Lupe Fiasco was playing on the sound system, and when someone offered me a glass of champagne, I took it automatically. My eyes struggled to find something to focus on.

The rest of my party was equally dazzled with the scene. None of them seemed to know what to do with themselves. Mason hovered beside Charlotte, who was obsessively fixing her hair, and Kaz surveyed the surroundings, his lips in a tight line.

“We should go mingle,” I said over the music. It was loud, but not to the point where it made conversation difficult. It was a reminder this wasn’t just any party. People were here to talk business.

I grabbed Kaz’s wrist and pulled him forward.

“Where are we going?” he asked, his breath brushing against the nape of my neck.

“To get you a drink.”

“I already have a drink.”

“Well, finish it so that we can order another at the bar. It’s easier to start a conversation there.”

He pulled me back. “I told you, I don’t network, or mingle, or whatever other ridiculous word people use to describe

conversations with strangers.”

I whirled around and put on my best don't-mess-with-me expression. “Get over yourself, Kaz. I'm not asking you to go and talk to people for my own amusement, although I'll admit there's a part of me that's looking forward to seeing you struggle.”

A corner of his mouth ticked up at that.

“If you want to make it in this industry, you're going to need to know people. Trinity is giving you an opportunity to do that. So pull that stick out of your ass for a few hours. These are musicians, for God's sake. They're your people.”

Mason caught the very end of my pep talk as he appeared by Kaz's side. “She's right. Let's do this.”

*Whoa.* Was Mason actually agreeing with me on something?

He caught the look on my face, ground his jaw, and gave me one nod of acknowledgment. With one arm around Kaz's shoulders, and his other hand twined with Charlotte's, he steered them toward the bar.

It took me a moment to realize I'd been left behind.





## MOLLY

TRINITY'S PLAN for me to keep an eye on the guys had a few fatal flaws. One, it was difficult to mingle as a group of four, and obviously, I was the first who got cut. Two, unless I wanted to awkwardly hover behind the guys, there was no way for me to eavesdrop on their conversations. And three, as the clock ticked closer to midnight, Philo's party got more and more rowdy, and to my surprise, some attendees were drunk enough to start talking to *me*.

The fact that all of them were male and apparently single made it clear what they wanted. I guess when women like me—lacking any fame or talent—came to these parties, they generally had a singular purpose on their mind.

Too bad I had no interest in sleeping with moderately handsome B-list musicians who couldn't handle their alcohol.

Excusing myself from a short-lived conversation that began with a shockingly uncreative pick-up line about whether I fell from heaven, I cast a glance in Kaz and Mason's direction. They stood about a dozen feet away making conversation with an older man with long hair. For someone who made such a fuss about networking, Kaz seemed to be doing just fine.

My bladder, on the other hand, was in desperate need of attention. I left the guys and went in search of a bathroom. This place was a maze. One dimly lit hall led to a door that seemed somewhat bathroom-like, so I dared to crack it open.

"Sorry!" I yelped and slammed the door closed. A naked couple were tangled amongst black satin sheets, so involved in each other that I didn't think they even registered the intrusion. Didn't I see those two at the bar earlier? I shook my head. Call me a prude, but getting it on in the hosts' bedroom seemed a step too far.

Then again, judging by the size of this house, they were probably in a forgotten guest bedroom no one ever used except

on an occasion such as this.

In the next hallway, I discovered a much more pleasant surprise.

The walls were covered with rows of framed stunning black and white photographs depicting Philo at the studio, on tour, and even here with his family in his home.

Forgetting my bladder for a moment, I studied the prints. Whoever took these was exceptionally talented, using each shot to tell a complex story with a combination of great lighting, impeccable timing, and an intimate knowledge of the subject. In one shot, it was as if Philo looked directly into the camera by accident, just as someone told him the end of a joke, and an open smile lit up his entire face.

Goosebumps erupted over the skin of my arms, and an unexpected sliver of longing lodged itself inside my chest. I've always told myself my interest in photography is just a whim that would pass. I'd only gotten interested in it in my first year of college, which felt like way too late to discover a true passion. Look at my sister. Even as a child she knew she'd known she wanted to be a musician, and I'm sure it was the same for Mason and Kaz. For Philo, definitely. Music was their calling in a way photography could never be mine. I probably just craved a creative outlet because my normal job had so little creativity involved.

But standing here, looking at these incredible photographs, I experienced a longing so potent it hardly felt like a whim.

I exhaled a heavy breath and rubbed a spot on my cheek.

"That one is my favorite," a deep voice rang behind me.

I turned and barely held back my gasp. Philo was standing a few feet from me, his dark, muscular arms crossed over his chest, and a few thick gold chains shimmering around his neck. He was dressed in a pair of jeans and a sports jersey, but his casual look didn't detract from his powerful aura. The man was a genius, using his unparalleled lyricism to call out societal issues his contemporaries stayed far away from. He earned awards and controversies like they came hand in hand.

His gaze moved from the photo to me, and his lips turned up into a kindly smile that made me weak in the knees. I was on the verge of some serious fangirling. Instead, I looked back at the picture. “It’s stunning. Who took all of these?”

“My ex-wife.” His voice didn’t betray any emotions on the subject. “I was glad she let me keep them without a bitter battle. Out of all the art in this house, this collection has always been my favorite.”

“It makes sense that it was someone close to you who took them,” I said. “They’re very intimate.”

A flash of surprise colored his face before he pulled it back and nodded. “She was my biggest supporter in the beginning. Would come to every recording session and to every show, even when she was pregnant with our first daughter. I feel lucky I had her to document so many important moments in my life.”

I smiled at him and turned my attention back to the pictures, but the unspoken question weighed down the air between us.

After a moment, he sighed. “She got tired of sacrificing her dreams for the sake of my career. Have you ever sacrificed anything big for someone you love?”

“Yes.”

“Feels good for a little while. You feel like you’re doing a nice thing for them, so you do it again. And again. And then you forget what you wanted in the first place, so years go by and you’re happy. Maybe they forget that you wanted something too. But the things we want—and I’m not talking about a nice purse or a luxury vacation—the things we really want, maybe even *need*, they have a way of reminding us they’re still there. And when that day comes, it becomes a reckoning. One that my relationship didn’t survive.”

A chill swept down my spine. “I’m sorry.”

“Me too.” A silence settled between us. He ran a hand over his chin. “There are more of these in my daughter’s dance

studio behind the pool house. Feel free to wander over there if you want. She always forgets to lock the door.”

“I’d love to,” I said. “I’m Molly, by the way.”

“Philo.” He shook my hand. “Who are you here with?”

“Last Rites. They’re signed with Trinity at Hyperion. I’m her assistant.”

A thick brow rose. “Will you introduce us? Someone played me their stuff recently, and I thought they sounded pretty darn good.”

I beamed at him, nearly overwhelmed with joy that I could actually do something useful instead of being the fourth wheel. “Absolutely. But first, can you show me where I can find a bathroom?”

Philo pointed it out to me and waited to walk me back to the party. As we made our way back past the photos, a question popped inside my mind. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“Did you always know you wanted to be a musician?”

I hadn’t expected the wry chuckle he gave me in response. “Darling, you know how old I am?”

I blushed. “Forty?”

“I’m fifty.” When he saw my eyes widen, he added, “money has a way of shaving off a decade.”

“So you got started late,” I said once I’d done some quick math.

“I was twenty-nine when my debut album came out. Before that, I worked in construction for many years, and I loved that job. I’d probably still be slinging bricks somewhere if I didn’t hurt my back. It was during my long-ass hospital stay that I began to scribble down lyrics. I was bored out of my mind, and we didn’t have smartphones back then, so I picked up a hospital branded notepad and wrote down thoughts I’d had circling inside my head for many years. I’d always been opinionated and interested in politics, but it took

that accident to help me realize how I could channel all of that. When I sent my first demo out, everyone told me I was too old to make it in this industry. That I didn't have the stamina or drive a young man does." He grinned. "Felt damn good to prove them wrong."

Something warm and hopeful sparked inside my heart. "I can only imagine."

We emerged into the living room where the party raged, and it took me a few seconds to spot Mason's blond head on the other side of the room. "They're over there."

Philo nodded and came around me to lead the way, the crowd parting before him as if before a god. We reached Last Rites, and the guys shot me looks of surprise as I introduced them to the famous host.

Charlotte came to my side. "I heard he's recently divorced," she whispered into my ear, her voice tinged with interest that rubbed me wrong. Philo was twice her age, not to mention she was here on Mason's arm.

I gave her the side eye. "I believe you're right."

She adjusted her dress and fluffed her hair before noticing how I was looking at her. "What?" she demanded guiltily.

"Nothing." Mason's relationship wasn't something I remotely wanted to get involved with.

Mason and Kaz were talking to Philo about something technical to do with recording, and I began to zone out. The photographs in the dance studio called to me, so after a while, I excused myself and headed out to the backyard.

The pool was lit up from the bottom and shimmered an alluring blue. A few couples splashed inside of it, most of them foregoing bathing suits and simply jumping in wearing their underwear. I watched the revelry for a while before continuing down a stone-paved path.

I passed a secluded patio at the edge of the pool house and found the modest-sized dance studio on the other side of it. A statue of a ballerina frozen in a pirouette marked the entrance to the building made entirely of some kind of tinted glass. It

reflected the lights illuminating the lawn around it. I couldn't see anything inside.

I pulled open the door and slipped inside, my eyes needing a few seconds to adjust to the near darkness. There had to be a light switch somewhere here, but as I patted down the walls, I couldn't find it.

When I was younger, I took a lot of dance classes. Ballet, jazz, even contemporary dance. I didn't really have a talent for it, but I enjoyed moving my body and learning the routines. My parents came to each one of my recitals, and when they passed, Ade never missed a single one, even though I kept telling her she didn't need to waste her precious time on something so unimportant. She used to pretend to relent, say she might not be at the next one, but when my gaze scanned the crowd for her unruly dark curls, there she was.

A smile pulled at my lips at the memory as I kept patting down the walls. I hoped Ade was enjoying the last few weeks on tour, despite the non-stop schedule and being away from home for so long. Although maybe for her, home was where Ezra, Abel, Silas, and Cole were. To be doing something you love with the people you love most... It sounded like a dream come true. And if anyone deserved it, it was my sister.

Movement on the other side of the glass caught my eye. Two people were following the stone path I'd walked on minutes earlier, but instead of continuing on to the studio, they turned onto the patio across from where I stood. My ears perked up at the sound of a familiar high-pitched giggle, and then I knew who they were. Mason had his arm around Charlotte's waist. One of her palms was squeezing his ass.

A weird sensation ran down my spine. It was strange to watch them while they couldn't see anything on this side of the glass. Charlotte playfully pushed Mason down on an armchair and then sank to her knees before him. Her back was to me, but the hazy look of arousal on Mason's face was more than enough to telegraph what she intended to do.

Disgust hit me like a sharp stab in the gut, but then Mason's lips parted, his azure eyes grew hooded, and a

confusing heat materialized at the bottom of my abdomen.

I swallowed hard. I didn't need to watch this. I didn't *want* to watch this.

But fascination was suddenly alive beneath my skin, surging and soaking through each one of my veins. Mason's throat moved slightly on a moan, and his right hand gripped Charlotte's hair. A shadow danced across his sharp cheekbones, the full swell of his lips, and it was a lethal dance partner. It carved Mason down from a man to a stunning, sinful god.

My hand drifted down my dress before I could even process what I was doing. When my fingers brushed against the apex of my thighs, I jerked my hand away and curled it into a tight fist. What the hell was wrong with me? Mason was being *blown* by another woman. I shouldn't be watching this.

But now that she was kneeling, I could hardly even see Charlotte, and I had a front-row seat to Mason's expressions. And fuck if it wasn't easy to imagine *I* was the one making him moan.

Relinquishing the last of my dignity, I hiked up my dress, slid my hand inside my underwear, and duly noted that I was already wet. My fingers slid past my seam and brought a bit of the wetness to my clit. I bit down on my lip to stifle the groan that rumbled in my throat when Mason tossed his head back, exposing his corded neck, and my fingers found just the right spot.

*Oof.*

A soft sound broke through my arousal-induced haze. My blood chilled. I panicked, jerking my hand out of my underwear, and whipping around to the where the sound came from.

A dark outline stood by the door. As fear, shock, and a healthy dose of embarrassment held my lungs captive, the outline stepped into a thin sliver of moonlight that illuminated a familiar face.



Kaz stared at me with his lips slightly parted, and his eyes as black as coal.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted out, the words coming out breathy.

He brought a long finger to his mouth, signaling for me to be quiet, and the sight of it only made me all too aware that my index and middle fingers were still wet with my arousal.

When he took a step closer, I backed away. “Kaz,” I whispered frantically. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to see you with your hand in your panties.”

A hot flash consumed every inch of my skin.

He kept advancing, and I kept moving until my back collided with the ballet barre that ran along the perimeter of the space. Something flashed in his eyes that terrified and thrilled me in equal parts.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I said.

He stopped in front of me and placed his hands on the barre behind me, effectively trapping me. “You mean to tell me you weren’t just touching yourself to the sight of my best friend getting sucked off?” His low tenor caressed my throat before drifting beneath the neckline of my dress.

I gulped.

“I’m curious to hear of another interpretation,” he said, standing oh-so-very close to me.

What was I supposed to say? I always considered myself quick on my feet, but I was drawing a blank.

I cast my gaze down at the sliver of space between us. “Why are you standing so close to me?”

“You’re a smart woman. Isn’t the answer obvious?”

My heart was fighting to break out against my rib cage. “What do you want?” I asked weakly.

“You.”

His spicy scent was everywhere, muddling my thoughts and making my nipples tighten beneath my dress. He gripped my chin and tilted my head up until I was staring directly at him. “Did you get yourself off?”

The rough rasp in his voice sent a pulse right down to my core. Flames tore across my cheeks. “Kaz...”

He dragged his calloused thumb over my bottom lip, his gaze searing the flesh. “Tell me. Did you come?”

“No,” I said on a breath. For the second time tonight, I was sure something was very wrong with me. I knew I shouldn’t be going along with this, but my body craved his touch.

“I don’t like unfinished business,” he said, his gaze dropping to my lips. “Especially when I know I’d be so good at finishing it.”

My heart pounded out a tribal rhythm that seemed appropriate for virgin sacrifices. Not that I was a virgin—that ship had sailed my second year of college—but all of this felt very intense. He took half a step forward, eating up all the distance between us, and pressed his body to mine.

His erection was flush against my thigh, the thin fabric of my dress acting as a non-existent barrier, and his jeans faring only slightly better. I gasped. “What are you doing?”

A series of emotions flashed across his face, but none of them stood a chance against the dark need that won out. “This,” he simply answered as he wrapped a hand around the back of my head and pressed his lips against mine.

The lust pulsating beneath my skin was electric as his tongue swiped against my bottom lip. I was brought right back to our first kiss in the middle of the grimy college house surrounded by a crowd of drunks and hecklers. There was a lot familiar about how he kissed me now, but there was also plenty new. The want radiating from him in a blatant, confident way. The strong hands wrapping around my waist. The deep, rumbly moan that I swallowed up so that I wouldn’t share it with the air around us.

I turned my head to the side, breaking the kiss.

“Tell me to stop.” His breath pulsed against my cheek as he slid his leg between my thighs. I clamped my mouth shut so that the gasp that threatened to come out stayed in.

This was a mistake. A big one. But it also felt too fucking good, and when I tried to force the word stop out of my mouth, nothing came.

Kaz waited for a few heartbeats, as if giving me time to consider it. When I remained silent, he dragged his fingertips from my hip, up my ribs, and paused right over my breast. When his fingers dipped into my top and clamped around my nipple, I couldn't hold back my moan.

He shuddered at the sound, his eyes growing hazy. And then he jerked my neckline down, exposing me to him.

We both looked down at my bared breasts. We both watched as he curled his warm palms around them. It was obscene to do this here with him, with Mason and the party raging just one wall away from us, but the obscenity added to the allure.

My head tipped back, and Kaz twisted my nipples, making my eyes squeeze shut in pleasure.

“I like when you look like this,” he said hoarsely.

“Like what?” I asked as I tried to grind myself against his leg.

“Undone.”

I opened my eyes so that I could see him while I gave in to the desire I'd been trying so hard to fight. Some part of me had expected him to look smug at my unravelling—I was humping his leg like a puppy—but there was none of that in his expression. Instead, there was heated desire and a surprising tenderness that made me weak in the knees.

He dragged his hand down to the curve of my ass and gave it a firm squeeze. “Turn around and hold on to the rail.”

I could feel my pulse in my throat as I obeyed his command. He moved one hand to fist my hair. His other palm

slid from my ass to my upper thigh, and then he hiked my dress up to my waist.

I arched my spine when he pulled my head back, his grip tight in my hair. “Are you watching him?” he rasped into my ear, pushing my panties down. “I want you to watch him.”

I blinked a few times, as if that could somehow separate the shame and the arousal and make any of this make sense. It didn't. As my half-lidded gaze found Mason in the shadows, and Kaz's fingers traced a path down to my clit, I felt as lost as ever.

But I was also alive.

My blood surged, my skin burned, and my clit pulsed with a heartbeat of its own. I moaned when Kaz dipped his fingers inside of me. “*Fuck.*”

He pumped into me once, twice, then he pulled his fingers out. “I want to taste you.”

He kneeled behind me, helped me step out of my underwear, and spread my thighs apart with his hands.

When his tongue pressed against my clit, I let out an undignified groan. “Kaz, oh my God.”

“Keep your eyes open.”

It was becoming difficult to do so. My eyes wanted to roll to the back of my head as he licked and sucked and made me shiver with pleasure. Still, I obeyed his command.

Mason was also close. I could tell it by the way his eyes were shut tightly, his expression taut with tension. A rough gasp tore past my throat as Kaz once again penetrated me with his fingers. His tongue moved up higher.

He was licking me *there*. “Kaz, what are you—”

“Keep watching, baby girl.”

His fingers moved to rub circles around my clit, and I began to shake everywhere. I leaned over the bar, using it to support myself while liquid heat was spreading through my

core. This was fucked up. This was so wrong. I was going to go to hell for this.

And in the moment, I didn't give a damn.

Mason and I came at the same time. I let out a sob as pleasure erupted across every inch on my body, my muscles finally giving up on me. Kaz stood up and caught me before I could fall, his strong arms encircling my waist, his hard chest against my back. He was so solid, and I was so weak. The contrast was dizzying.

“Fuck, I like having my tongue inside of you,” he murmured into my ear. “I think I could spend a long time buried between your legs.”

I let out a weak huff in response, instead of doing what I should have done—telling him he couldn't say things like that. It felt pointless given minutes ago his tongue was inside my ass.

He held me for a while, his thumb rubbing soothing circles over my abdomen. When my legs found their strength again, I pulled away. Pulled on the panties that had lay discarded on the floor. Kaz helped me fix my dress, his touch soft and gentle against my skin. When our eyes met, he wore a slack expression, and I quickly looked away.

We walked out of the dance studio. I was grateful he didn't say anything. The thought of discussing the mutual perversion that had just occurred seemed untenable. I kept my gaze to the ground, letting Kaz lead me in the right direction and taking some small comfort in his confident stride. I wondered if his head spun like mine at what had just transpired between us, or if it was normal for him to finger women at parties and move on like nothing happened.

Mason and Charlotte greeted us with excessive enthusiasm when they returned to the party minutes after us. They were wasted. I sniffed and led the way out the door. It was time to go home.



## MOLLY

THE DAY AFTER THE PARTY, I went on a run for the first time since I moved to LA. There was a restless energy beneath my skin I needed to get rid of, and the black coffee I'd chugged earlier had only made it worse.

I listened to my favorite album by Dead Poet Society while I jogged down the beach. The ocean slammed into the sand and washed away old footprints seconds after they'd been left. I wished it could wash away the memory of last night with a single brutal wave.

But I was done with wishful thinking. It was time to admit to myself I was spiraling because I wasn't over Mason and face the problem head-on. How did people get over someone? There had to be a foolproof way I simply wasn't aware of.

One thing was certain. It couldn't involve Kaz.

What we did last night was wrong on about a million different levels. The employee handbook might not have anything about it, but it was still frowned upon to sleep with the talent. If Trinity ever found out what I did when she was this close to her big promotion, she might just fire me to eliminate any potential risk. My history with both of the men seemed combustible enough as is, without me throwing more fuel into the mix. And finally, Kaz had a way of getting under my skin that lured that *wild thing* out.

She was the one who did all those things with him. Not me. This Molly would never spy on her old friend engaged in a sexual act while getting off with his best friend.

My skin tingled with heat. I tried to ignore it. Wrong or not, last night had made me feel things I'd never experienced before. My last semi-serious boyfriend back in college hadn't made me feel half of what Kaz did.

At home, I pulled out the secondhand juicer I'd never taken out of the box and attempted to make a green juice. Anything to occupy my mind and make me feel like I was

back on track with my life. Some part of me knew a run and a homemade juice weren't going to be enough, but hey, I had to start somewhere.

I was so absorbed with my task it took me a while to pick up on a strange noise in the background. It sounded like metal scraping on metal.

Wiping my hands off on a towel, I took a few cautious steps toward the door. The scraping got louder.

A cold sense of dread washed over me when a muted curse drifted through the door.

It sounded like Cory. Was he trying to break into my apartment? In the middle of a goddamn Sunday?

I picked up my cellphone from the coffee table and found the courage to peer through the peephole. There was no one to be seen, but I *felt* him on the other side. He must be kneeling down.

I slammed the side of my fist into the door three times. "Get the hell away, Cory! I know you're out there."

"Stupid bitch," he swore and straightened up. I could see him as if he were in the same room. He leaned into the peephole. His eyes were tinged with red and madness. "I heard you coming home last night. What were you doing out so late? Whoring yourself out?"

Cold sweat trailed down the back of my neck. "Get away from the door."

He leaned away and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Who were you with?" he demanded, as if he had any right to know.

"You have five seconds to go back to your apartment, or I'm calling the cops."

He huffed in frustration and changed course in the span of a second. "Okay, I'm sorry," he said, his voice growing significantly softer. "I just want to see you, Molly. You're so beautiful, like an angel. My angel, aren't you? Let me see you."



Fuck, this was beyond creepy. “I’m calling 911,” I said desperately.

I waited for him to call my bluff—there was no way I was going to subject myself to a repeat of what happened the last time I called for help—but to my relief, he shook his head and took a step toward his apartment.

When I heard the click of his lock sliding into place, I slid against the door and sank into a heap on the floor. Tears of frustration pricked the backs of my eyes. It wasn’t even past eleven am, and I was already dreading spending the rest of the day here alone.

As if on cue, my phone vibrated in my hand.

It was a message from Kaz. I gnawed on my bottom lip. Should I open it? Maybe dealing with this was better than contemplating if Cory would pay me another visit before the day was over.

I tapped on the notification.

*“We need to talk.”*

I drew my knees up to my chest and typed out a response. *“I’m busy.”*

*“With what?”*

Casting a glance around my apartment, I landed on the juicer. *“Cooking.”*

*“What’s for breakfast?”*

*“Juice.”*

*“How strange, I also happen to be in the mood for starving myself. I’m coming over.”*

I scrambled for a response that would ward him off. The thought of Kaz coming here and seeing where I lived made my chest tighten. *“You don’t have my address, and I’m not giving it to you.”*

*“I’m sure Trinity will be happy to share it.”*

*“That’s an HR violation.”*

*“You’re one to talk.”*

Heat crept up my neck. Would Kaz tell Trinity about what we did at the party? I was ninety-nine percent sure he wouldn’t do that, but maybe I did need to talk to him to confirm. I couldn’t lose my job. I needed to move out of here.

*“Fine. Let’s meet somewhere.”*

*“Spicy Dumpling on 7<sup>th</sup> street, 7 pm.”*

Huh. I loved that place. Piper and I would order dozens of dumplings from there and do movie nights every few months.  
*“Okay.”*

*“It’s a date.”*

*“NOT a date,”* I typed out, following up with a string of exclamation marks for good measure.

*“See you at 7.”*

*Ugh.* My head fell against the door, and I released a pent-up breath. I had only a few hours to come up with what I was going to say to Kaz.

---

The restaurant was bustling when I walked in a little after seven. Clinking chopsticks, energetic conversations, and the mouthwatering smell of broth and fried rice filled the air. I preferred places like this over fancier restaurants where I always felt out of place.

The top of Kaz’s head was sticking out of a booth, and I made my way to him. A fluttering sensation filled my chest as I got closer to the singer. He wore a long-sleeved shirt with the buttons at the top undone and the sleeves pushed up. My gaze paused on the dark tattoos marking his forearms and the muscles visible beneath before trailing down to his powerful hands. Memories of last night flashed before my eyes.

*“Hi,”* I said on a breath.

He drank me in slowly, as if I were a glass of expensive bourbon he wanted to savor. I'd purposefully kept it casual in a simple skater dress that reached just above my knee, but if he was disappointed in my rather unsexy outfit compared to last night, he didn't show it. Instead, when his eyes finally met mine, they were filled with an unmistakable heat. "I was worried I was going to get stood up."

I slid into the seat across from him. He put his elbows on the table, cradling his jaw with one hand. The air between us crackled.

"Why would I? You said you wanted to talk. Communication is important, especially between coworkers."

He arched a brow, calling me out on my bullshit. "Let's eat first. I already ordered for both of us."

"How did you know what I like?"

"Took a wild guess."

"A bit arrogant of you."

"I had a pretty good idea about what you like last night."

My cheeks heated. "If you're just going to keep bringing it up, we might as well talk about it now. No point in spoiling a meal."

"Fine, let's come back to that. I have another question for you. Why did you go into this industry?"

I eyed the server loading up a tray full of dumplings over by the kitchen. "I don't know. I've spent most of my life around musicians, so I suppose that's what put it on my radar."

"Do you like it?"

"It's all right," I said with a shrug.

"You ever wish to be on the other side of it?"

I tore my gaze away from the food and focused in on Kaz. "What do you mean?"

"To be the talent."

My brows scrunched together. “Obviously not. I’m not a musician.”

“You’re a photographer.”

I was about to laugh before I noticed his earnest expression. “I’m definitely not. This is just a temporary assignment.”

“But you like doing it, and you’re good at it.”

“How do you know I like doing it?”

He leaned into his seat, letting the waiter place the plates on the table. “It’s pretty obvious. You get into the zone every time.”

“The zone?” I asked, maneuvering my chopsticks around a shrimp dumpling.

“Yeah. You get all intense and focused. You’re in a flow state. C’mon, you must know what I mean.”

I chewed slowly, considering his words. “I mean, sure. I like doing it, but calling me a photographer is a stretch.”

Kaz scooped up a soup dumpling. “Why does that word scare you?”

“Because it makes me feel like a fraud,” I admitted and then immediately regretted it when Kaz’s eyes lit up with interest. “I chose this career path because it’s relatively safe, and I’m not in a position to take risks. Sure, I like photography, but my pictures won’t pay the bills, and I don’t have a safety net to fall back on.”

He cocked his head to the side. “What about your sister?”

I frowned at him. “My sister has done enough for me, Kaz, and I’m perfectly happy as is, all right? Not everyone is meant to become a creative.”

He studied me as he chewed and then wiped his mouth with a napkin. “You were jealous of Mason last night.”

I smoothed my hands over my thighs. “That’s not true.”

“As soon as you saw him with Charlotte, you became upset.”

“That’s not what we need to talk about.”

“Isn’t it? Clearly, you’ve still got a thing for him.”

“No. I came here so that I could make it clear last night never happened. You have to promise not to tell anyone about it.”

This amused him. “You think I’m going to post about it on social media or something? Relax, I don’t even have a profile.”

“You can’t say anything to Trinity. Or Mason.” I added quickly. “Please, it was...a lapse of judgement on my end.”

“Which part? You rubbing one out to the sight of him, or you allowing me to help?”

“Both,” I said just as a waiter returned to refill our glasses. Kaz’s gaze heated my face.

“You don’t need to be ashamed of it,” he said as soon as he left. “Everyone’s got their kinks.”

I stabbed my chopsticks into a bowl of rice. “Well, I am ashamed. I don’t know what got into me. It’s not a kink of mine and I don’t do things like that. Ever.”

“Maybe that’s your problem. You’re repressed.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then some version of what happened last night could happen again. You could lose control. Wouldn’t you prefer it happened on your own terms?” He arched his brow.

“What are you proposing?”

A smirk played across his lips. “We keep hooking up. Casually.”

My throat turned dry. “You can’t be serious. I work for you.”

“There are only two people who might care about that. Trinity and Mason. Trinity won’t ever find out, and I know

Mason doesn't give a crap."

Something cold washed over me before I checked myself. Of course Mason wouldn't care, he'd obviously had no problems moving on from me.

"Even if I agreed with your assessment about me being repressed, I don't know why I wouldn't want to lose control with someone else."

His eyes narrowed. "Like who?"

"I don't know. I could find someone on Tinder." I'd been on a few dates many months ago when I decided to try my hand at the LA dating scene. Besides one unimpressive one-night stand, the experience had been a bust.

"And go through the hassle of trying to find out if you're sexually compatible with someone new when you already know we are?"

I bowed my head. "This is crazy."

"What are you afraid of? That you're going to fall for me?"

An indignant laugh burst out my mouth. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Then what?"

I was afraid this would breathe life into the wild thing. But maybe Kaz was right. At least this way, I stayed in control of her.

"How would it work?"

He gave me a boyish grin. "Well, I have this thing called a dick and you have—"

"Not that," I said, rolling my eyes at him. "Where would we do it?"

"Your place?"

"No. We can't go to my apartment."

He seemed mildly taken aback. "Don't want your neighbors seeing me?"

“Trinity can’t find out, and someone on my floor knows her well,” I lied, making up a random excuse.

“Then we’ll just have to play it by ear.”

It was strange negotiating our future sexual encounters in public, but there was also something erotic about it.

My gaze fell back to his hands.

*Get a grip.*

“What are you getting out of it?” I asked, searching for any reason to say no.

“Do you really have to ask? Did I not make it clear how enjoyable last night was for me?”

His complement made heat spread across my cheeks. The longer he held my gaze, the stronger the pulse between my legs grew. “Never took you for such a simple guy.”

He grinned. “We’ve all got base instincts to take care of.”

Ugh. I couldn’t really argue with that.

“Okay.” I let out a long breath.

Kaz leaned back, a satisfied expression on his face. “I promise you that you won’t regret it.”

“So where do we do it? In your car?”

He let out a dark chuckle. “Tempting, given it’s parked around the corner, but I’m not having you for the first time in a car. When I fuck you, Molly, I’m going to lay you out like a feast and take my time tasting every part of you.”

A shiver ran down my spine, and I pulled my lip between my teeth. Kaz’s gaze dropped to my mouth. “You sure you don’t want me to come over?”

No matter how badly I wanted Kaz to deliver on that tempting promise, I couldn’t let him do it at my place. Given how he’d reacted to the state of my car, I knew he’d have a lot to say about the apartment. And what if Cory tried to pay me a visit? I didn’t even want to think about that confrontation.

“I have to do some work before tomorrow,” I said, picking up my last dumpling.

He gave me a smile and got back to his food while I tried hard to ignore the fluttering in my belly.

*It's just sex.*

And I wasn't going to let it become anything more than that.





## KAZ

WHEN I LEFT the house to meet Molly, Mason was out trying to sweat out his hangover at the gym. Part of me hoped he'd still be gone when I returned home. I didn't know what to tell him if he asked me where I'd gone. The thing with Molly was turning out to be a lot more complicated than I'd anticipated, but I couldn't bring myself to call it off.

Last night, when I walked in on her in that dance studio, I was once again confronted with the fact that I'd been massively wrong about her. That rule-following girl I'd first met must be a mask she hid behind, because there was *nothing* rule following about the woman who let me eat her out from behind while a celebrity-studded party raged no more than a hundred feet away.

My dick perked up at the memory.

In a world filled with boring stereotypes, Molly was proving to be anything but. I was curious about her, and now I had the opportunity to find out what made her tick.

She'd just said yes to becoming fuck buddies, and I wanted her more than I cared to admit.

Even if I was just a means to an end.

There was no point in trying to figure out what she still felt toward Mason, or what he thought of her. The important piece was that both of them were trying to move on. By getting involved with Molly, in theory, I was helping them both. And, yeah, maybe it wasn't all completely altruistic, but I had nothing to feel guilty about as far as Mase was concerned. He gave me his blessing.

Some of the tightness around my chest eased.

I walked into our house, collapsed on the couch, and flipped through the TV. Everything was quiet. No one was home.

A half hour later, Mason walked through the door. His hair was wet with sweat and sticking to his face, and he gave me a tired grin when he saw me on the couch.

“Feeling better?” I asked, tipping my chin at him.

“I will after a shower.” He dropped his gym bag on the ground and shrugged off his gray hoodie. “I really shouldn’t have drunk that much last night.”

“It was good party.”

He cast me a curious look. “Oh, yeah? You had a good time?”

“You know, I’m not totally incapable of enjoying myself.” I crossed my feet at the ankles. “It was cool meeting Red Robin. And Philo of course.”

“James and Taylor were cool dudes,” Mason said, leaning his shoulder against the doorjamb. “I think they’d be down to work with us on something.”

“We can run it by Trinity tomorrow.” We were meeting the photographer she found for our photoshoot at the office first thing in the morning. “Would be good for expanding our audience.”

“You did good yesterday.” Mason kicked off his shoes, his expression thoughtful.

I scoffed. “Yeah, okay.”

“Seriously. You made an effort.”

I mean, I had to, didn’t I? We were in a phase of our career where as long as we didn’t fuck up, we were almost guaranteed a record deal most other artists would kill for. My dislike for socializing had to take a back seat to my desire to succeed.

Instead of saying all that, what came out of my mouth was, “Molly said I needed to network.”

The mood shifted immediately. “Ah, right.” Mason pushed himself off the doorway, his expression darkening. “How are

things going with you and her?” It was as if he had to force the words out.

This was my chance to fess up. To tell him I had her, and that I *wanted* to have her, and that if he had any doubts about letting me have her, he had to speak up now or it would be too late.

My greed won out. I’d given him enough chances to change his mind about her, hadn’t I?

“Good,” I said curtly. “Seems like you and Charlotte are spending more time together?”

“We are.” He leaned down to pick up his gym bag. “I’m glad she came with us.”

Didn’t he see her giving every famous guy at the party fuck-me eyes? I kept my mouth shut. Mason wasn’t dumb, but he could be ignorant when he chose to be.

“I’m going to get cleaned up,” my best friend said, turning toward his bedroom. I followed him with my gaze and then sunk farther down into the couch when he’d disappeared behind the door. Guilt scratched at my chest, its sharp claws drawing drops of blood.

---

The next morning, we waltzed into Hyperion’s office ready with a new single for Trinity and eager to meet the man who would help us make it our biggest hit yet.

Molly greeted us in the lobby, her cheeks turning slightly pink when her gaze landed on me. I grinned like a Cheshire cat, enjoying making her blush. Was she thinking about us finally making it into bed with each other? I hoped so, because I hadn’t stopped thinking about it ever since I left her last night. The mere memory of the little sounds she’d made when I went down on her was enough to get me off.

“Theo is already here,” she said in lieu of a greeting. “C’mon, I’ll show you to the conference room.”

“What’s he like?” Mason asked as we followed her down the hall.

“He’s um...” She adjusted the cuff of her pink blouse. “Very knowledgeable. He’s been in the industry for over thirty years.”

“But is he good?”

She shot me a look over her shoulder. “I think that’s for you to decide.”

Inside the conference room, Trinity sat at the table with a man in his mid-fifties, his graying hair betraying his age. He wore a blue velvet blazer, a pair of sunglasses, and a silk scarf covered in logos for what must have been some expensive fashion brand. When we walked in, he cast us a judgmental look that immediately rubbed me the wrong way.

Trinity stood up. “Mason, Kaz, this is Theo Lane.”

We exchanged greetings and handshakes before taking our seats. Molly handed out bottles of water for everyone. When she got to me, I gave her a wink.

She rolled her eyes, tilting her head so that only I could see, and sat down across the table from me.

“Theo is an absolute genius when it comes to crafting a story with the bands he shoots,” Trinity began. “We want to evoke certain emotions with these pictures, as they’ll act as a guideline for how your fans will perceive you.”

“I listened to a couple of your hits,” Theo said in a tone laced with condescension. “They’re heavy, but I’d consider them still on the edge of mainstream. I want to see you two leaning into your sex appeal.”

He jumped into his idea for the shoot, and with each word he spoke, I liked him less and less. There was an unmistakable arrogance about the guy, as if he knew our songs and our vision better than we did.

I kicked Mason lightly under the table to get his attention. My bandmate cast me a weary look. He wasn’t thrilled about this either.

“Pretty sure there’s a way to do sex appeal without tapping into the most cliché rock star bullshit,” I said, interrupting Theo’s monologue. He seemed so taken aback, like no one had dared to interrupt him before.

Mason crossed his arms over his chest. “I agree with Kaz. We don’t ride motorbikes, so why would we have them in our main promo images? Plus, I doubt our female audience is going to connect to photos of multiple women draped over us. That’s not us.”

Theo’s mouth gaped. He shot Trinity a look that screamed she needed to reel us in.

Our manager cleared her throat. “I agree, we need to be mindful of what’s going to appeal to your audience. But—”

“I’m confident we can appeal to them while still being authentic to ourselves,” Mason said.

“You guys are something.” Theo’s voice was tinged with impatience. “Been a while since I met rock stars who didn’t want to have models around them.”

“We’re fine with models,” I retorted, “but the shoot you’re laying out is, respectfully, uninspired. Molly could probably take better pictures than that. Maybe we should just use some of the candid photos she took of us at our place.”

Molly’s eyes widened at the same time as Theo asked, “who the hell is Molly?”

Wow. The guy hadn’t even bothered to remember her name from when she was introduced to him minutes earlier?

“She is.” I pointed at Molly, despite the slight shake of her head. Now Mason was kicking me under the table, probably wondering what the fuck I was doing. He hadn’t even seen her photos. He probably thought I was losing my mind.

Theo turned to Molly, his expression twisted in confusion, as if he was noticing her for the first time. “You’re a photographer?”

Damn right, she was. Even if she didn’t want to say it out loud. Molly had had plenty of opportunities to tell us how to

behave or try to stage a scene, but unlike this buffoon, she understood how to capture the real Last Rites.

Molly's face was turning beet red. "Amateur," she mumbled. "I've been helping Last Rites with their social media content."

"She's really fucking good," I added, narrowing my eyes at Theo. "Maybe you should take a look at her work."

Her eyes were pleading, clearly telegraphing a request for me to drop it, but I didn't fucking want to. She was making a mistake by dismissing her talent, and for some reason, it felt important for me to change her mind about it.

Theo scoffed, clearly insulted. "You want an amateur to do this gig?" He scraped his chair back, looking ready to get up. "Be my guest."

"Okay, let's all take a deep breath." Trinity's acrylic nails tapped out a quick rhythm on the glass table. "If you two feel strongly about the shoot, I'm sure Theo is open to adjusting his plan based on your ideas." She pinned the photographer with a hard look. "Theo?"

Molly bowed her head, looking defeated. Trinity hadn't even acknowledged what I'd said about her art. I grit my teeth. This wasn't over. If I knew anything about life, it was that creating art made it a fuck ton better, and if Molly felt that calling, she couldn't just ignore it.

"Of course." The bitter edge in Theo's voice felt pointed directly at me. "I'm all about collaboration."

Mason cleared his throat. "I think as long as you allow us to be ourselves, you'll find we're pretty open with most other things."

Molly and I remained silent as Mason, Trinity, and Theo hashed out the details of the shoot. When Molly finally lifted her gaze, her eyes swam with emotions I couldn't read. I sucked in a ragged breath. Did I just fuck things up between us?

My thoughts were interrupted by Trinity rising from her seat. The discussion was over. "We'll see you all again next at

the photoshoot.”

Mason and I shook hands with Theo, who wore a sour expression, clearly unhappy with how the meeting had played out. I wasn't sold on him either, but I trusted Trinity enough to give him a try.

“Will you walk them out, Molly?”

“Sure,” Molly said, keeping her gaze on the ground as she walked around the table.

Mason nudged me, mouthing, “*What was that?*”

I shook my head and followed after Molly. “Hey,” I said as I caught up to her. “Are you okay?”

She ran her teeth over her full bottom lip. “You shouldn't have brought me into it.”

“The guy fucking sucks. I meant every word I said.”

She laughed, the sound bordering on hysterical. “Kaz, stop. I appreciate the vote of confidence, I really do, but you can't do that again. Suggesting I could be your photographer on the shoot instead of Theo is ludicrous.” She glanced around and then lowered her voice. “It's suspicious. Please. I can't lose this job.”

Why was she choosing to stick around this place instead of doing what she really loved? She was afraid of failure. That had to be it. I could never do something like that. I could never let fear choose for me.

Except for where my father was concerned.

The realization was sobering. We were all afraid of something, weren't we?

Mason's hand wrapped around my wrist in warning. I shrugged him off. “I get it,” I said. “I was out of line.”

Molly exhaled with relief as we stopped by the elevators. “Are you okay from here? I need to go talk to Trinity to make sure we're okay.”

“Go ahead,” Mason answered on our behalf. “We'll see you later at our place?”



“Yeah, maybe.” She was already turning away. “I’ll text you guys.”

We watched her skitter away and stepped into the elevator.

“Feel like explaining yourself?”

I clenched my jaw. “The guy pissed me the fuck off.”

“Me too, but somehow, I refrained from suggesting our assistant take his job.”

We walked out of the building, and I shielded my eyes from the bright late-morning sun with my hand. “You haven’t even seen what she can do.”

Mason unlocked the car, but instead of getting in, he crossed his arms on the hood and gave me a searching look. “I get it,” he said in a low voice. “You’re still trying to work her, right? That was a good trick.”

“That’s not what it is,” I said angrily, jerking the door open. “You’d know if you took any interest in what she can do with that camera.”

He pressed his lips into a tight line. “You said you could keep whatever you’re doing with her from affecting our work.”

“Nothing came out of it anyway, did it? We’re working with Theo.”

“You better hope you didn’t just get her fired.”

Fear swirled inside my gut. There was no way I’d screwed up that badly, was there?

“As if you care,” I lashed out, my defenses coming up.

A flash of something furious crossed his face before he managed to pull it back.

I looked back at the office building, counting out the floors until I got to four. What was happening there right now? Was Molly packing up her things?

“Let’s go home. She’ll text us,” Mason said.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath and slid into the car.



## MOLLY

TRINITY STOOD by the massive window in her office, her hands clasped behind her back as she assessed the sprawling city view below. “I can see you’ve managed to gain their respect quickly, something not everyone is able to do. Still, I can’t for the life of me figure out how they got the idea to pitch you as their photographer. Is that something you discussed in advance?”

Beads of sweat had formed at the small of my back, soaking through my dress shirt. Self-consciously, I tugged the fabric away with my hand. “I can assure you we didn’t. I had no idea Kaz would say that.”

“He wasn’t entirely wrong about your work.”

*Wait, what?* My mouth gaped open.

“I took a look at the photos you sent me on Friday. They’re impressive.”

She was still facing away from me, and instead of being thrilled about the rare compliment, I felt my anxiety rise. “Thank you. I’m trying my best.”

Finally, she turned, her face void of any emotion. I gulped, my fingernails digging into my palms. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes. Given the amount of good content you already got in just a week, I don’t foresee you needing to stay on this task for much longer. Another week maybe. After that, there are a number of administrative projects for Last Rites we need to focus on.”

Disappointment trickled through me, but I hid it behind a shaky smile. I knew this photography gig wouldn’t last forever. I just didn’t expect it to end so soon. “Of course. That sounds great.”

I was dismissed with a curt nod.

My desk felt foreign after being away from it for a week. I sat down and eyed the photo of Ade and me. It had been taken at the first concert she played with Bleeding Moonlight, the same night they'd asked her to join their band and she'd agreed. I'd never seen my sister as happy as she'd been that day. Her dream had come true. She was finally a professional musician, and I couldn't be prouder.

Is that how she felt when I told her I'd gotten my job at Hyperion? She knew all about the competitive interview process, and when I received the offer, she was thrilled I'd gotten my "dream job". I was taken aback when she called it that. I guess I'd hyped it up quite a bit to her, but I'd never thought of it as a dream job. It was a step toward independence and security, and it was a good fit for me, but it had never been my dream.

Maybe I just wasn't born to be a dreamer.

Shaking out my stiff shoulders, I reached for my laptop just as my phone buzzed with an incoming message.

It was Kaz. He wanted to see me.

*"I can't ditch work."* I wrote.

*"Your work is at our place. Come over."*

*"I need to do some in-person stuff at the office. Maybe in a few hours."*

*"Did I screw things up?"*

I bit on my upper lip and let out a slow breath. Without a doubt, Kaz had overstepped, but I couldn't bring myself to be mad at him. He'd gone to bat for me, pitched me to my terrifying boss, and made it clear he thought I was better than an accomplished photographer.

It was ridiculous.

It was unhinged.

It also made my heart feel all weird.

*"No. Everything is fine."*

It did cross my mind he may have only been trying to get inside my pants, but why would he when I already told him I'd sleep with him? No, that wasn't it. At least, not entirely. My gut told me he genuinely thought I was good at taking pictures.

What if I listened to him? What if I gave photography a real shot?

I chewed on my nails. How would it even work? It's not like I could afford to quit this job. I was barely making it in LA. I had no savings to speak of and an apartment I was desperate to move out of. The only way I could give it a shot would be to ask Ade for a lot of help.

A solid mass materialized on top of my chest. I couldn't do it. My sister had given me *everything*, and for what? For me to end up on her doorstep admitting I couldn't make it on my own? It was pathetic. Not a real option.

I needed a plan to stick to. I'd get my promotion, work at Hyperion until I saved up a bit, and then reevaluate what I wanted out of my career.

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“Anybody home?”

The guys' house was quiet when I got there around five pm. I wandered into the kitchen for a glass of water, and when I returned to the living room, Kaz was there. He stood in the middle of the room in only a pair of sweatpants.

I clutched my glass tighter and allowed my gaze to skate over his lean body. He was covered in tattoos, mostly English and Russian writing that I suspected were lyrics. The words tangled over his pale skin, dancing with the outlines of his muscles and trailing past the pronounced V that disappeared under the waistband of his pants. His left nipple was pierced with a barbell. I wanted to toy with it with my tongue.

He took a step closer. “You came.”

My skin grew feverishly hot under his gaze. “I told you I would.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” His eyes flashed with something vulnerable. Like he was worried for me, and he didn’t know what to do with that emotion.

I swallowed past the weird sensation in my throat. “Yes. Trinity said I’m probably going to start doing other work for you soon.”

A wrinkle appeared between his brows. “No more pictures?”

“Maybe another week until I have enough.”

“If she pulls you off our team, I’m going to throw a fit.” He lightened his words with a smirk, but the intensity in his eyes didn’t abate.

“She won’t. There’s plenty of other work to go around.” I glanced past his shoulder. “Where’s Mason?”

“He left for the gym a few minutes before you arrived.”

“Oh.” Anticipation curled inside my stomach. “We’re alone.”

Slowly, Kaz’s smirk melted off his face. He walked toward me, stopping less than a foot away. The air between us became a compact, limited thing, as if the only way we’d get another breath was if we kept moving closer.

He lifted his hand to my face and dragged his thumb across my cheek before tracing it over my bottom lip. “You’re the softest thing I’ve ever felt,” he muttered like he was in a trance.

Leaning into his touch, I curled my hands around his neck, feeling all the hard muscles bunching in response. His usual detached persona was gone, replaced by a presence so intense it sent a shiver down my spine.

“When you look at me like that, I can’t think,” I whispered. That earned me a soft chuckle.

“Sometimes thinking is overrated.” He smoothed his hand down my arm. “You’re trembling. Are you scared of me?”

I was terrified of this man. My heart raced so fast I thought I might have a heart attack at the premature age of twenty-one. This idea suddenly seemed very bad. I could feel the wild thing’s manic enthusiasm at being allowed out of its cage. I’d agreed to this arrangement thinking my feelings for Kaz weren’t as potent as my residual feelings for Mason, but now, I wasn’t so sure.

“You’ve got nothing to be afraid of,” he said, dropping his gaze to my lips.

I felt dizzy with arousal. “Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.”

Instead of answering me, he grabbed me by the back of my neck and pulled me into a kiss.

The wild thing screamed with hedonistic joy inside of me. I moaned into his mouth, unable to hold it back.

He bit my bottom lip, licked it with his tongue, and then pulled back an inch. “If you’re not thinking, what are you doing?”

The moss-green depths of his eyes told me the answer. “Feeling.”

“So feel.” His breath brushed against my lips as he trailed his fingertips over a sensitive spot on my neck. My mouth parted, my eyelids drooped, and I... I didn’t want to fight it any longer.

I’ve always told myself to be happy with less, but maybe with Kaz, for once, I could allow myself to want *more*.

We tumbled into his bedroom—him tugging on the buttons of my blouse and me sneaking my hands past the waistband of his pants. He groaned when my palm wrapped against his steely erection, then jerked my hand away a second later to finish peeling off my shirt. I pulled down my jeans and stepped out of them, allowing him to see me for the first time in my underwear. There was a sense of desperate urgency in

the air. Who knew when Mason would return? We had to do this now. There was no going back. My core pulsed with need.

He sat down on the edge of his bed, his fascinated eyes never leaving my body. Inch by inch, he took it all in before extending a hand.

I took it. He pulled me closer until my knees hit the edge of the bed between his legs, and then he guided me so that I was straddling his lap. When I tried to grind against him, his hands became a vise on my hips. “Don’t,” he said through clenched teeth. “I’m really fucking turned on.”

I stifled a laugh and glanced down at the outline of his erection. “I can see that.”

His grip didn’t relent.

I straightened out my arms, placing them over his broad shoulders. “So how long are we just going to sit like this?”

Amusement flickered in his eyes. He flashed me his teeth, then lifted me by my thighs and flipped us over so his body stretched over mine. He nipped at my lips. “That sass of yours is going to get you into trouble.”

“I think I’m already in trouble.”

He pulled down my bra straps, leaving featherlight kisses over my neck, my shoulder, my décolleté, as if I was something he wanted to worship. My nipples tightened when he finally made it to my breasts. He unclasped my bra, threw it somewhere on the bed, and grabbed a handful. His tongue sneaked out of his pink mouth and licked a circle around my areola.

A moan tore through my throat. “Kaz,” I panted, lifting my hips off the bed in search of friction, “please.”

He cupped me over my underwear with a possessive hand. “Is this already wet for me?”

It had to be a rhetorical question, because I was pretty sure I was leaking everywhere. I nodded anyway. He pushed the fabric aside, ran two fingers over my slit, and groaned. “Sopping.”



When his fingers began to trace circles around my clit, I threw my head back, a moan escaping my throat. My body was alive, buzzing with pleasure and need for this man.

“You look so good in my bed,” he whispered in my ear just before he removed his fingers and replaced them with his tongue. I propped myself up on my elbows to watch him. My thighs were on his shoulders, his hands holding them firmly in place. He knew how to work me, how to make me feel all sorts of insane, delicious things, and I was determined to ignore the part of my brain that screamed in warning.

*This kind of chemistry isn't to be dismissed.*

*Careful, or you'll have a very hard time giving this up.*

*You're taking far more than you deserve.*

“*Fuuuck.*” The wave was cresting, the timing so perfect it was as if my body wanted to wipe my noisy mind blank.

Kaz held on as I thrashed on his bed, the motions of his tongue unrelenting. When I finally shattered apart, moaning his name and telling him I was coming, he dragged himself up my body and gave me the deepest kiss yet. I tasted myself on his lips. I saw my own need reflected in his eyes.

He rose to get a condom and take off his pants, and my droopy eyelids sprung open. I wanted to see him. All of him.

He was so damn hot. The sight of him took the air out of my lungs. Lean and muscular, tall and powerful. I traced his tattoos with my eyes from where they started at his neck and ended on his abdomen. Light hair was scattered over his toned bare chest, a line of it running from below his bellybutton to where it thickened above his very hard cock. I sat up, watched him roll on the condom, and then rose to my knees and licked around his nipple ring.

He sucked in a breath. Wrapped his calloused hand behind my neck. “I can't wait to be inside of you,” he said in a raspy voice that felt like a caress.

He pushed me back down on the bed and lined up his body with mine. I wrapped my legs around his waist, digging my

heels against his powerful thighs. He was big enough for me to squirm a little when he started to slide inside.

“Such a good girl. You almost got it. Look at how well you fit my big cock.”

My body was almost unbearably hot. I hadn't anticipated his dirty words of encouragement, or how they'd turn me on. I looked at him with wide eyes and caught his lips in a kiss. A drop of sweat had formed on his brow, his expression almost perfectly split between uncontrollable lust and exacting control. He held still within me as he waited for me to adjust to the brutal sensation of being completely filled with him.

He didn't have to wait long. I rolled my hips to signal I was ready, and he wrapped his hand around my throat. His grip was gentle, but it was enough to show me who was in control.

“Are you going to take it like a good girl?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered, moving my lips against his cheek. He was driving me crazy with his voice and his words.

It was hard to believe that until very recently, I'd told myself I wasn't attracted to this man.

What a fucking joke.

He began to move, slowly at first, before picking up speed. Oh God, I swear he was reaching parts of me no one had ever touched before. His hand was still on my throat, his other hand planted by my shoulder so that he could watch me lose my mind below him for the second time.

I lifted my hands to his face, and he caught my index finger with his mouth. He swirled his tongue around it. “Put that pretty little finger on your clit and make yourself come for me, baby girl.”

Sure, why the hell not?

His warm green eyes watched as I lowered my hand between us and started massaging my clit. It wasn't going to take long. He was pummeling into me with the massive thing

between his legs, and fifteen seconds was all I needed to feel another orgasm coming on.

“Kaz, I think I might die,” I told him, feeling all kinds of non-sensical things as the pressure in my core reached a new level.

He let out a low chuckle. “I’m right there with you.”

And then it happened. Shockwave after shockwave of pleasure tore through me, causing me to momentarily leave planet Earth. I’d never felt an orgasm like *this* before. It was stunning. Like a solar eclipse, or an earthquake, or the formation of the goddamn universe.

I returned just in time to see Kaz squeeze his eyes and release a desperate groan. His cock pulsed in me. “Holy fucking shit,” he ground out, pumping into me a few more times. “Molly, fuck.”

I dug my nails into the flesh of his back, anchoring us to each other. I struggled to process that *this* is how sex was with him. How could this man who infuriated me so much make me feel like *that*?

When he opened his eyes, he looked as dazed as I felt. “That was...”

“Yeah.”

He brushed his lips against mine and then pressed our foreheads together. A few moments passed before he pulled out of me, and we collapsed on our backs, our gasping breaths loud in the still, quiet air. A hand folded around mine. I rocked my head to the side, locking my gaze with Kaz’s and noticing the way his lips were just slightly parted. He was looking at me with a level of wonder that should make me uncomfortable, but somehow, it didn’t.

I was at peace in this room, lying beside him.

Until suddenly, I remembered something.

I lolled my head away from him and forced myself to sit up. “I should get dressed before—”

“Mason comes home.”

“Yeah.”

The bed shifted as he moved behind me. He traced my spine with his fingertips, slowly enough to count each vertebra. “I wouldn’t do this if I thought it would hurt him.”

Pulling my lips inside my mouth, I shook my head. “This isn’t about him.”

I could deal with Kaz thinking I was repressed, or sexually unfulfilled, or whatever. After this session, I was pretty sure he was right about that. But I wouldn’t ever admit to him I was partially doing this to get over Mason. He could theorize about it all he wanted, but I’d never give him a confirmation. For both of our sakes.

After all, who’d feel good about being a means to an end?

Kaz was good at wearing his armor, but even he wasn’t invincible.



## MASON

“DID MOLLY SHOW UP YESTERDAY?” I asked Kaz over lunch the day after we had our meeting with the photographer. Last night, after I got back from the gym, he’d been strangely absent, hiding out in his room for the rest of the evening. I gave him his space. Maybe he was upset about putting Molly in an awkward position at work and needed to mull it over on his own. Still, we had to get some work done today, and we couldn’t afford to have him sulk the day away.

He swallowed a piece of his hash brown and nodded. “She stopped by for a bit.”

The flash of guilt across his face brought me up to speed fast enough. They were sleeping together. Why else would she leave before I came home? I was only gone for about two hours.

My fists curled on top of my thighs, hidden by the table. The consequences of all my recent bad decisions were finally catching up to me. My best friend and the girl I couldn’t let go off were hooking up, in large part because I’d allowed it to happen.

*Coward. Coward. Coward.*

The situation was beyond messed up. Why couldn’t I cut off these emotions at the root and just move on from her? Nothing helped. Not the fact that she could still make me feel like an idiot by just flashing some fancy contract in my face. Not the cold front I’d kept up around her. Not even the woman I was seeing. I’d been hanging out with Charlotte more than ever, but I wasn’t growing any fonder of her. Our relationship, if you could even call it that, had an expiry date that seemed to approach at an ever-increasing pace.

“When are you seeing Charlotte next?”

I side-eyed my friend. Sometimes, I swear he could read my thoughts. “I don’t know. Maybe later.”

“You do know she was salivating over all the famous dudes at the party, right?” he asked, casting me a weary look. “Or did your little rendezvous help you forget it?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw you two.”

*Shit.* I’d been just drunk enough to go along with Charlotte’s exhibitionist urge, despite feeling more than a little sick about it the next morning.

“You saw us? Was...” My nostrils flared. “Was Molly with you?”

Kaz rubbed the back of his neck, not meeting my gaze. “She saw it too.”

My stomach dropped. “I should have been more discreet.” I’d been giving Kaz shit about not letting his thing with Molly affect our work, but maybe I needed to focus on my own behavior. That party had been ripe with opportunities for us, something I was supposed to take care of, but instead of focusing on Last Rites, I’d escaped the party to let Charlotte blow me. All so I could get my mind off how good Molly looked that evening.

“Probably a good idea,” he said before taking another bite.

We ate in silence for a while, both of us consumed with our own thoughts.

“You ever get the urge to reach out to your dad?” Kaz asked.

I glanced at him. It was an unexpected question. “Yeah, sometimes. But it doesn’t take me long to talk myself out of it.” The last time I’d talked with my father was the week after I dropped out. He’d yelled at me so loudly over the phone, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d lost his voice the next day. “I know what he’d say, and none of it’s good.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, that’s probably true. Your mom never brings him up?”

“She used to, but she stopped after I’d asked her a few times not to. I didn’t want our conversations to become solely

about him.” My mom hadn’t cut me out of her life like my father, but staying in contact with her hadn’t been easy. She wanted us all to reconcile, yet she refused to stand up to my father or admit he hadn’t been a good dad to me. We limited ourselves to pleasantries. Small talk about our lives. I didn’t know how she felt about my career or my music. It was a topic she avoided.

“That’s funny.” Kaz stood up to pour himself more coffee. “There was a time when I’d do anything for my mom to say a word about mine.”

I leaned back into my chair. “You still sitting on that DNA test? You should just take it.”

When he turned to me with a hesitant expression on his face, I frowned. “You’ve done it?”

“Yeah. A while back.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I don’t know. At first, I didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I thought I’d best keep it to myself while I tried to figure that out. But then I did the test, and I just...” He blew out a breath. “I found him.”

Surprise racked through me. “Holy shit. Dude, that’s huge.”

“I know.”

“Do you mean you got his name? Or you’ve met him in real life? Or what?”

Kaz ran a hand over his head. “I have his name. He lives in LA, believe it or not. I’ve seen him in real life, but we haven’t met. I’ve been kind of...following him around.”

“You’ve been following him around?”

“Yeah. On Wednesdays.”

“But he doesn’t know?”

“No.”

“Isn’t that kind of like stalking?”



He sat back down in his chair. “Yes. That’s exactly what it is. I can’t fucking do it, man. How am I supposed to just walk up to him and say, ‘Hey, I’m your long-lost son.’?”

I couldn’t believe he hadn’t told me about this until now. Something twinged inside my chest. I guess I wasn’t the only one who’d been keeping things secret.

“I don’t even know what I want from my dad,” he continued. “He’s a stranger to me. For all I know, our DNA is the only thing we have in common.”

“You looked him up for a reason,” I said. “Some part of you wants to know him.”

“People make a big deal out of fathers, right? They’re supposed to teach you things. What if the reason I hate rules and don’t know how to make friends and all that shit is because he was supposed to have taught me?”

“You can’t use your dad as an excuse for why you’re an asshole,” I teased him. “You’ve got to at least meet him first.”

My comment broke through his serious demeanor. “Yeah, you’re right. I just have to fucking do it, don’t I?”

“You know I’ll come with you if that will help, right?”

He shook his head. “I’ve gotta do this alone, I think.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.”

“I will.”

While we cleared the dining table, I thought about all those Wednesday mornings Kaz had been gone. I’d never wondered too much about where he went. He needed space, even from me at times, so I’d assumed he left the house to go on a long drive and get his alone time. Turns out, I’d been wrong. I’d assumed things about my best friend instead of digging to find out the truth. All this time, he could have used my support, and I’d been too blind to see it.

Guilt gnawed at me.

I’d been so focused on myself and Last Rites since we came to LA that maybe I’d begun to take Kaz for granted.

He'd been the strong one in the beginning, taking care of things while I tried to come to terms with our new life. Now it was my turn.

I needed to end things with Charlotte to remove at least one distraction.

And I needed to make peace with Molly. If being with her helped Kaz, then I had to be fine with them hooking up. My own feelings be damned.

---

Molly arrived in the mid-afternoon with her hair up in a high ponytail and her lips tinted with some kind of gloss.

I let her inside, for once not in a rush to get her to Kaz so he could be a barrier between us. She looked at me with curious eyes, as if sensing the change on some level. "How are you?" she asked.

"Fine. Sorry I missed you yesterday," I said, shutting the door behind her.

Her cheeks flushed red. "Don't worry about it."

"Do you want some coffee before we start?"

"Sure."

She was sitting on the edge of the couch waiting for me when I returned with two cups of coffee. She tracked my movements, a cautious smile on her face.

"So what did Trinity say about all the content you've got?" I sat down on the other end of the couch.

She took a sip and scrunched her nose. "Wow, it's hot. Um, she seems happy with it. I think she's going to reevaluate how else I can help you guys, but for now, she's told me to keep going. I hope I can keep taking photos until the photoshoot at least."

I blew over the top of my cup. "I realized the other day I've never seen any of your pictures."

“Oh, I should have offered to show you.”

“Nah. I should have asked.” The words were a peace offering, easing some of the tension between us.

She placed her coffee on the small table, reached for her backpack, and pulled out her laptop. “Let me get some of my favorites.”

While she did her thing, I drank in her appearance. Paying too close attention to how she looked was something I usually tried to resist doing, but at this point, I had to desensitize myself to her one way or another.

She’d always been petite, a good few inches shorter than her sister. Her blonde pink-tipped hair draped over her shoulders, the colors reminding me of a River Valley sunset in the winter. I could still recall how soft it was the one time I’d held it in my hand. She’d smelled like lilacs that night. It must be her favorite perfume, because even now, I could pick up on the same, subtle notes.

Today, she wore an oversized jean jacket over a white T-shirt, and a pair of skinny jeans. The way she dressed around us was less formal than her clothes at the office. Was that intentional? So that we’d feel more comfortable around her and her camera?

It would make sense. I got the feeling she tried to blend into the background when she was downstairs with us while we worked. But when it came to her, blending into the background was impossible. She drew my thoughts to her like the destination of a long pilgrimage. A beautiful, far away thing that I couldn’t help but crave.

“Here.” She turned her laptop and held it out to me. “Take a look.”

I didn’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t this. The shots were gorgeous and artistic. They somehow managed to capture the intangible magic of what happened in that dinky basement. I laughed at a great photo of Kaz being uncharacteristically animated while we debated something about a song. My laugh fell away at the next shot. My

bandmate and I, deep in our process, or faces marked with intensity. That's how we got when we made music together. Sometimes it felt as if we lived through the spectrum of emotions in the span of a few minutes.

“Molly, these don't belong on our social media,” I said after a while. “They belong straight in a gallery. And not because Kaz and I are good models. It's all you.”

Her expression wavered between happiness over my praise and something more bittersweet. “Hyperion owns the right to all of the photos. It's not up to me what they do with them.”

“I'm sure you can find clients of your own if you wanted to. You don't need Hyperion.”

She gave me a startled look before laughing softly. “Has Kaz gotten into your ear? You have the wrong idea. This stuff isn't even part of my job description. It's a one-off thing Trinity tasked me with because it's what Last Rites needs at the moment.”

“What do you normally do then?”

“A lot of paperwork for bands in her roster. I prepare her for meetings. PowerPoint presentations and spreadsheets. Random errands and tasks, like going to that party with you guys.”

The party where one look at Molly had been enough to make my head spin and my heart ache.

“Why do you do all that stuff if photography is clearly what you want to be doing?”

I could see her defensive shell click in place. “I never said that. Again, you've been listening to Kaz too much.”

“Is he wrong?”

She clicked her laptop shut and picked up her coffee. “It doesn't really matter. Not everyone gets the chance to be a professional artist, Mase. It's a privilege. Surely, you know that.”

Shouldn't seeing Adeline do it have helped Molly acknowledge it as a real possibility for herself? “You sound

like Adeline back when she was still in denial about having a career as a musician. As if she wasn't born for it."

"Yeah, well, *I* definitely wasn't. I didn't even pick up a camera—phone excluded—until my first year at college."

"So?"

She sighed. "So I'm not going to give up on a job where I might be getting promoted soon on a whim. Not everyone has a safety net like you, Mason. I can't afford to live in LA if I don't have a stable job. Ade did enough for me by working as hard as she did to send me to college. I'm not going to waste my education or take a massive risk on her dime. It's not fair to her, and it's not fair to me. Do you think it feels good to be a burden on someone I love?"

The air around us stilled under the weight of her words.

No wonder she thought I was lucky. That's what she said to me back then, wasn't it? She didn't know my father disowned me over dropping out. Of course not. How would she? I'd never said anything to her, and Kaz knew better than to air out my dirty laundry. Molly must think my parents were funding my career.

I felt anything but lucky being at Northeastern. I'd been forced to go. But to her, it must have looked like I was ungrateful for the opportunities I'd been served on a silver platter. The same ones she'd gotten only because of how much Ade had sacrificed to her.

"Is that why you worked so hard back in college?" I asked, trying to put all the pieces together even as I sensed I wasn't going to like what I found. It didn't paint me in a great light. "You graduated in three years so that you could get out there and become independent?"

She rubbed her palms on her thighs and looked toward the ceiling. "I just wanted to start my own life as quickly as possible. To make money, have my own place to live, find a career. I know I acted stuck up." Her gaze dropped back to me meet mine. "But I was only laser focused on my goals."

I swiped my palm over my mouth.

“I’m sorry for how we said goodbye, Mase” she said in a lowered voice. “I was...angry. I lashed out at you, and I’ve regretted it ever since. Saying you were bringing my average down, calling you stupid... I wish I could take it all back. There was never anything wrong with you, you know? I was hurt you were leaving so suddenly without giving me a heads-up, and I said things I didn’t mean.”

I took a deep breath. Then another. What could I say to that? I’d been so consumed with my own anger about how she’d dismissed me, telling I was an idiot for chasing after my dream, that I hadn’t even considered her perspective. We were friends at first. We’d drifted apart when I couldn’t face the prospect of telling her the truth about me. And then I left. Abruptly and without a proper explanation.

Yeah. Maybe I didn’t handle it all that well.

Here we were, three years later. Could I honestly say I’d grown out of my selfish mentality? Apparently not, because I’d missed all the signs of my best friend going through something big.

“I think I should be the one apologizing,” I muttered. “I never tried to see anything from your perspective. And I’m sorry for how I’ve been acting since we’ve started to work together.”

Her lips parted, relief unfurling across her face. “Apology accepted.”

A sad smile tugged at my lips.

She mirrored it with one of her own. “I think it’s about time we move on from the past, don’t you think?”

“You’re just going to let me off the hook? I’ve been a real dick,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck.

She chuckled. “Of course not. From now on, I expect fresh coffee every time I come over.”

“I might even toss in a pastry from time to time.”

“Now you’re really spoiling me.”

Molly stood up and extended her hand. “To new beginnings.”

“To new beginnings.” I’d shake on that any day.

---

That night, I lay in bed in the dark and reflected on all the dumb crap I’d done in my life. It was a decently long list, but somewhere near the top of it was my current relationship with Charlotte. What had started off as a very casual situation had morphed into me using her to distract myself from Molly and her getting ideas about us being more serious. Or maybe not. Hell if I knew what she was thinking. All I was certain of was it was time to end it.

Molly’s words drifted into my mind. “*There was never anything wrong with you.*” She was wrong about that. There was a lot wrong with me. I couldn’t read like a normal person. I struggled with learning most things you found in a textbook. The idea of writing a test in a frigid exam room made me break out in cold sweat. That’s why I loved making music. None of that crap mattered when I was deep in my art. This industry didn’t give a shit about academic measures of success.

Molly did, though. At least that’s what I’d assumed until now. She got mad at me for dropping out, called me *stupid*. God, I hated that word with my entire being. It triggered me. Made me spiral into a miserable state where all I could think of was my father’s words.

“*No one but your mom and I are going to love a stupid idiot like you.*”

That word had been the crux of it all. I couldn’t get close to her because I couldn’t stand to have her call me that again. To hear it from her mouth again would crush me, just like it did that night. But she’d said it because I’d hurt her first. And now that I knew why she’d been so focused on school, why it was so important for her to succeed... Well, fuck. I wanted to help her.

I jumped out of bed, burst into the hallway, and knocked on Kaz's door.

"Come in," he called. Inside, I found my friend sitting at his desk, his fingers tapping something out on his laptop.

"You think we can still convince Trinity to let Molly shoot us?"

The way he whipped his head around to look at me told me he hadn't been expecting the question. "I don't know."

"What if we put our foot down and say we'll only do it with her?"

Kaz scanned me head to toe, his gaze assessing. "I think that would be overstepping. You know I don't love the guy she's chosen, but Trinity's our manager, and we owe it to her to give him a try." He turned his chair to face me and steepled his fingers in front of his chest. "Where is this coming from?"

I perched myself on the edge of his bed. "Molly and I talked today. I realized I've been kind of an asshole. She showed me her work, and you were right. It's fantastic. If I'd seen it before the meeting on Monday, I would have backed your suggestion."

Kaz scoffed. "And here I thought I was imagining you two were finally warming up to each other when we were down in the basement today."

"We cleared the air."

"I'm happy to hear that." Kaz's voice held the hint of an edge. "I realize you're trying to do a good thing for her, but I don't think butting into her business with her boss is the way to do it. Even if you'd backed me up, Trinity would have insisted on using her photographer, and the more we pushed back, the more uncomfortable Molly would have felt."

"When did you become such a people expert?" I lashed out, frustrated with his pushback. "For someone who's sleeping with her, I would have expected you to care a little fucking bit more."



His jaw hardened. “You were the one who told me not to let my relationship with Molly interfere with our work. Or have you forgotten that?”

“Relationship?” It felt like there was gravel in my throat. “You’re in a *relationship*?”

“I meant that in the general sense.”

The tightness around my chest faded. “Be careful with her, Kaz.”

He gave me a dismissive look and turned to his computer. “Thanks for your concern, but we’ve got it.”

*We*. Why did it hurt so bad I wasn’t a part of that *we*? Fear seized me. What if this became more than sex? What if he fell in love with her? I don’t think I could exist in the same space as them if they were together for real. If it came down to it, who would Kaz choose? Her or me?

I walked back to my room in a trance. It felt like I’d fucked up a lot of things without ever realizing it.

And now, I had no idea how to fix any of it.



## KAZ

NEARLY A WEEK HAD PASSED since the first time Molly and I slept together, and her smell was quickly becoming a permanent feature of my room. It was everywhere—buried deep within the fibers of my pillowcase, bedsheets, towels, and the Iron Maiden T-shirt she'd worn once. When I touched these items, it was as if they carried the ghost of her skin. I couldn't stop thinking about her. She was the best lay I'd ever had.

Lying on my bed, I glanced down and plucked a blond hair tinged with pink off my chest. We'd slept together another handful of times, whenever Mase was out of the house. I closed my eyes and conjured images of her writhing on top of me. Fuck. The way my heart pounded against my ribs was a bad sign, as was my already hardening cock. I'd had enough casual sex to know it shouldn't feel like this, yet here I was, already missing the girl who would never be mine.

She didn't really like me. I had no delusions about what I meant to her. I was a way to get her mind off the guy she was actually pining after, who happened to be my best friend.

I dragged my palm over my face and exhaled a heavy breath. A bitter feeling washed over me. Ever since Molly and Mason "cleared the air" this week, they'd become more relaxed around each other. Cracking jokes, having in-depth discussions about work, exchanging glances. The last one may be a figment of my paranoid imagination, but I was becoming convinced it was only a matter of time before she changed her mind about me. I wondered how different things could have been if, instead of pushing her away from day one, Mason had been brave enough to let her in. Something told me I wouldn't have been part of that equation.

The pile of laundry in the corner stared back at me. Mase and I had gone to a music festival this weekend in Joshua Tree and returned just a few hours ago. It was something we'd planned months in advance, something I'd looked forward

to... until I started sleeping with Molly. Now all I felt was regret I hadn't spent the weekend with her.

I got off the bed and started to sort through the clothes. Mase had asked me a lot of questions about my father ever since I'd told him about the DNA test. It felt good to talk to him about it, which made me think I should have fessed up a long time ago. He'd asked me what had stopped me from talking to my father. It had nothing to do with lack of opportunity. There'd been a few perfect chances, where he was on his own, in no particular rush, and I could have walked right up to him, but my body had failed me. I couldn't get my legs to move. He'd rejected me once already, before I was even born. And chances were, he'd do it all over again.

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When I looked at my phone when I woke up on Monday, the date caught me off guard. A knot formed inside my chest. August eighth. My mama's birthday.

For a moment, I considered calling her. It was a grave insult in Russian culture to not wish people close to you a happy birthday. I'd know, since she'd missed my last three. When I'd dropped out, it was like she'd gotten the permission she needed to drop the last remaining pleasantries between us.

Instead of picking up my phone, I picked up a bottle of vodka. The glass was icy cold, straight out of the freezer. I poured a shot, raised it in the air, and mumbled "Z'dnem rojdenia" before throwing it back.

The harsh liquid travelled down my throat and into my empty stomach, leaving a dull fire in its wake. Today wasn't going to be a good day.

Mason emerged from his room a short time later. He took me in spread out on the couch, my left hand curled loosely around the still-frosted bottle, my right around a vape I rarely used these days. He let out a sigh. This was how he'd found me last year on this date as well.

"What can I do?"

“Go,” I said tonelessly. He’d seen how I fared on the previous two birthdays, and he knew by now it was best to leave me alone.

Yet he stayed for a while. Rummaging in the kitchen. Keeping an eye on me. Finally, I told him to get out—rather rudely—and he left with his gym bag slung over his shoulder.

By the time the clock ticked past two, I was well on my way to being drunk. I made my way down to the basement and tried to strum something out on the guitar, but as expected, nothing good came out. Unlike so many other musicians, alcohol never helped with my art. If anything, it dulled me down to the point of musical uselessness. I wasn’t a big fan of drinking. Anything that blocked my creativity wasn’t worth my time, but today was an exception. Dullness was the only way I’d get through it.

Abandoning the instrument, I left the basement and wandered up to the small backyard Mase and I rarely used. It was a shame we didn’t. The bamboo was overgrown, and the grass needed a thorough weeding, but the way the light shone through the spiky leaves was nice. It could be beautiful if we gave it some much-needed love, but I doubted we ever would. We were too busy with everything.

Sitting down on a step, I perched my elbows on my thighs and breathed in the fresh air. Then I took another swig.

“There was a time I loved you, you know?” I mumbled to myself, my thoughts becoming scattered. “Before I finally realized you didn’t give a fuck about me.”

“Kaz?”

For one terrifying moment, I thought it was her. My mama. Here in my home on the other side of the world. But, no, it was another female voice, soft and with no accent.

I looked over my shoulder. “Why are you here?” I said with a slur.

Molly’s brows pulled together. She was dressed in a soft-pink dress that billowed around her in the breeze. “It’s two thirty. I thought I’d come a bit early to review the details of the

shoot with you. Are you...” Her gaze dropped to the bottle by my side. “Why are you drinking in the middle of the day?”

Fuck, I didn’t want to her to see me like this. She looked perfectly put together and wholly too good for someone like me. The concern in her voice was the last thing I needed to hear right now. “Mase isn’t here. Take the day off. We’ll meet tomorrow.”

She didn’t listen. Her steps made the wooden boards creak angrily, as if the deck itself was telling her to go home.

Instead, she sat down beside me.

“You’ll get dirty,” I warned her. “We haven’t swept in... Well, ever.”

“I don’t care.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Let’s hang out.”

“It’s not a good time.”

“Hmm. How much of that have you had?” she asked, tilting her head in the direction of the bottle.

It was half-empty. “I don’t know.”

“Given it was full when I saw it in your freezer on Friday, and the fact that you were gone for the weekend, I assume you’re responsible for the damage.” She reached over to pry it out of my grasp. I didn’t fight her. She’d be gone soon enough anyway, and even if she took the vodka with her, I’m sure I’d find something else at the house.

A green cricket hopped across the grass, pausing for a second before continuing his journey, and a gust of wind sent a fragrant scent my way. In the corner of the backyard was a small patch of some sort of wild flower with orange petals and brown centers. I pointed them out to Molly.

“Black-eyed Susan,” she said. “We had them growing in my childhood home as well. Did your family have a garden when you were a kid?”

I shook my head. “We lived in an apartment building. My grandpa owned a dacha outside the city—”

“What’s a dacha?”

“A cottage. That’s what we call them in Russia. Anyway, when he died, no one took care of it for many years. I think my mama sold it at some point.”

Her bare thigh brushed against my own. “You never talk about your family.”

A bitter laugh spilled out of my throat. “We work, and we fuck. We don’t talk much about anything.”

She shifted uncomfortably. “Maybe we should. I’d like to know more about you.”

“No, you don’t,” I said harshly. “You just want to know what’s going on with me today.”

“Can’t it be both?”

I exhaled and ran my hands down the sides of my face. “It’s my mama’s birthday, okay? We don’t have a good relationship. I do my best not to talk or even think about her all year, but I make an exception on this day.”

“I get it. I do the same thing on the day of my parents’ death.”

I gave her a weary look. “What happened to them?”

“Drunk driver,” she said, looking out at the backyard. “I was fifteen.”

“You got along with them?”

She smiled sadly. “Yeah. I loved them very much. But I discovered a long time ago that if I let myself think about them for too long, it takes me to a bad place. So I give myself one day a year to do it and try to forget for the rest.”

“You also finish off half a bottle of vodka on that day?”

This made her laugh. “Tried once with rum. Only made me feel worse.”

“You learned a lesson I’ve never seemed to absorb.”

Her palm warmed my shoulder. “Let me get you some water.”

“I haven’t talked to her in three years.” Molly stilled just as she was about to get up. “Our relationship is so damaged that I don’t think I’d miss her even if she were dead.” I met her gaze, daring her to show her outrage, her disappointment, but it never came.

She squeezed my flesh in a comforting gesture. “I’m sure you have a good reason.”

“I was her biggest mistake.” She’d said that to me once when I was only six or seven, but a sentiment like that was something you didn’t forget. “I nearly ruined her marriage. The marriage that dragged her out of poverty, a place she never wanted to visit again.” My mama lived most of her youth one inconsistent paycheck to the next, working at the local market, selling produce. She hated that place. Hated the smell of raw meat that stuck to her clothes every single day. Marrying Mikhail had been her ticket to a better life, and every time I’d fight with him as a teenager, she’d yell at me to stop. *“Ti hochesh meniya poslat obratno v eto uzhasnoye mesto, ti neblagarodniy d’yavol?”* Do you want to send me back to that wretched place, you ungrateful devil?

“But their relationship must have had its problems even before I came into the picture,” I mused. “Why else would she cheat on her husband?”

Molly’s eyes widened. “You were…”

“A product of her infidelity? Yes.” I swiped my hand down my chest. “And they never let me forget it. Mikhail once said all of my behavioral problems at school were because I was born rotten to the core. Said I had the worst of my mother in me, and the worst of my father, and that I would do everyone a favor if I just killed myself.” My throat burned. I’d never repeated his words aloud to anyone before. “I don’t know why I’m telling you—”

Arms wrapped around me, pulling me into a painfully tight embrace. “I’m so sorry, Kaz. It sounds awful. You’re better off without them in your life.”

“I know that,” I said, my lips brushing her shoulder. “We’ve had half the world between us for years. She sent me



away to a boarding school when I was fourteen. I should have forgotten about them by now. It's funny, isn't it? I've avoided nearly everyone who could possibly hurt me, but I'm still hanging on to the one who hurt me most."

It must be the half bottle of vodka in my veins, because I was laying it all out for her to see. Her eyes shone with tears on my behalf, as if she really cared about me.

"I should have avoided you too," I said as I tucked a strand of pink-tipped hair behind her ear. "But maybe some fucked-up part of me enjoys the pain. Maybe it's what I deserve."

A tear slid down her cheek. "It's not. No one deserves to feel unwanted by their family."

"They made me angry," I said, trailing my fingertips down the wet path of her tear across her cheek. "So fucking angry. Making music has always been the only cure for it." I wrapped my arm around her slim waist and tugged her into my chest. Fuck, it felt good to have her here. She was so warm and comforting. I wanted to lose myself in her, to make her moan my name and forget all about this day.

My hand crept up her ribcage to palm her breast. She sucked in a ragged breath, sending a rush of blood straight to my cock.

"Kaz! Look, I know you said you needed space, but it's been a few hours, and I'm worried, man."

We pulled apart, straining our ears to hear Mason's voice as it streamed from somewhere inside the house. Molly wiped away the residual wetness under her eyes, smoothed her hands over her dress, and put a few inches between us.

A moment later, Mason burst onto the deck. "There you are. Jesus, I got worried when I didn't see you inside." He became aware of Molly. "Oh."

"Hey." She cleared her throat and pointed at the vodka bottle beside her. "I think we're done with that."

Mason nodded, flicking his gaze between the two of us.

When I tried to get up, my head began to spin.

“Whoa, hold on there.” Molly slid her arm around my waist, somehow managing to steady me despite being at least a head shorter. “Let’s get you back inside.”

“You don’t need to stay. Mase is here,” I said, unable to resist pressing my nose into her hair. Lilacs. She smelled like flowers.

“I can take care of him,” Mase added, coming up on my other side. “You okay to walk?”

“I’m fine,” I said roughly, embarrassed that Mase was acting as if I were incapacitated. “Just got a bit dizzy.”

“Not much of a drinker, are you?” Molly asked as she and Mase walked me to the living room.

“Last time he got like this, he nursed a two-day hangover.”

I shot him a glare. Or at least I tried, but his attention was on Molly.

“Well, we can’t have that. You two got a big week ahead.”

They got me to the couch, where I immediately lay down on my back. My stomach roiled. “Can you get me that water?”

Molly padded away to the kitchen, while Mase got down on his haunches beside me. “You okay?”

“Fine.” I slung my forearm over my eyes. “I’ll sober up in a few hours.”

“I’ll keep you company.”

“*We* will keep him company,” Molly announced, handing me a glass and helping me sit up. “Drink this, and then I’ll make you something to eat.”

I chugged the entire glass of water, suddenly eager to get out of this altered state. It had made me spill my guts out to the woman I really didn’t want to push away.

She was still here though, taking care of me.

When I handed Molly my empty glass, I caught Mason glancing at her again. He used to avoid looking at her, but ever since their clear-the-air conversation, I’d find him studying her

often. Was he wondering why she was choosing to stay rather than leave? Or were his thoughts about her going in a completely different direction?

“I’ll help you in the kitchen,” he said, getting up to follow her.

I watched them disappear through the doorway, apprehension rising in my chest. Mason may have been fine with me fucking Molly, but what if he thought it was becoming more than that? My heart was starting to crack open for her. It scared me I wasn’t confident in how my friend would react if things ever got more serious. I couldn’t lose him for anyone, even for her.

And yet the thought of walking away from Molly was becoming harder and harder to stomach.

I needed to stop thinking about this shit until I sobered up.

They returned with two plates of ham and cheese sandwiches cut into triangles. Molly fed me one herself. It was embarrassing how much I reveled in the attention she was lavishing on me.

“Mase and I thought we should all watch a movie,” she said, sitting down beside me.

“Sure,” I muttered, putting my arm on the backrest behind her. “I’m down for whatever.”

Mason was in the armchair, his attention focused on finding something on the TV. It was the first time the three of us had hung out without having work as our main focus, and to my surprise, it felt...comfortable. The silence stretched without becoming awkward.

Mason chose some old black and white movie and propped his feet up on the coffee table. I nudged Molly closer, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. She turned her face to me, her emerald-green eyes piercing right through my soul. I wanted to kiss her badly, but I couldn’t with Mase in the room with us. How would he react if I did it right now? If I peeled off her dress and took turns sucking each nipple into my

mouth? If I made her come with my tongue right on this couch, spreading her legs for him to see?

A shock of arousal coursed through me.

Fuck, I was still way too fucking drunk. I needed to get a hold of myself. There was no way I wanted Mason to see me getting it on with Molly.

I've shared just about everything with him. But I could never share her.

*Right?*



## MOLLY

I TUGGED on the neck of my T-shirt as I pulled into Hyperion's parking lot on Wednesday morning. When Trinity texted me to come into the office, my first thought was she'd somehow found out I was sleeping with Kaz. I'd taken a long shower back at my apartment, trying to calm my anxiety. If I showed up to the meeting looking nervous, she'd know something was going on, and I couldn't afford to give anything away.

There was simply no way she could know, unless she'd secretly installed cameras in his bedroom. We'd been careful, only hooking up at Kaz's place, and never showing any PDA in public. Well, there was that one time we ran out to pick up lunch and he kissed me on the cheek while we waited for the order, but the place was empty besides us and two teenage employees. Now I was just being paranoid.

I turned off the ignition and climbed out of the car, my thoughts stuck on the enigmatic singer. Kaz wasn't like I'd expected him to be. On the surface he was cold, mocking, insensitive...but I was discovering a different man beneath the upper layer of frost. When we were together, he was thoughtful, eager to please, and dominant in a way that thrilled me. Every new kiss and soft caress from him was a brand on my soul that wouldn't be easy to erase. On the day of his mom's birthday, he'd been so vulnerable it had made my heart seize with emotions. I wanted to be there for him. *Needed* to rid him of his pain.

It was a terrifying thought.

We were blazing down a road, traveling far above the speed limit, and something told me the only way we'd come to a stop was by way of a massive crash.

I took the elevator up and headed straight to Trinity's office. She wasn't in yet, so I placed my belongings on her velvet couch and walked over to the espresso machine.

The door opened behind me with a soft whoosh, followed by the telltale clacking of Trinity's high heels. "Oh good, you're here. Make me one, please. Theo emailed this morning to confirm the shoot on Monday and asked if you were going to be there."

As usual, Trinity didn't waste time on pleasantries.

"I'll be wherever you need me," I said, handing her the espresso.

She tossed it back in one gulp and sat down in her chair. Today, she wore a navy wrap dress, a tailored jacket, and a penetrating look on her face. She scanned me up and folded her hands in her lap. "Where do you see yourself in five years, Molly?"

I tried to contain my surprise at her question. Was she really taking an interest in my career? Besides dangling the promotion in front of me now and then, she'd never asked me what I wanted.

"Here," I blurted out. "I see myself at Hyperion."

She rolled her eyes. "I meant in what role. I was under the impression you wanted to get promoted to be my senior assistant and perhaps work toward an eventual managerial position. Did I misinterpret your intentions?"

"No, that's correct."

"Then why are you spending most of your time taking pictures of Last Rites, instead of working down the list of other tasks I emailed you?"

A chill ran down my spine. "I've been doing both. Have I missed a deadline on something? I'm sorry, it wasn't my—"

She brought her palm up to silence me. "Molly, I know the reputation I have at the firm for being a hard-ass. But I've gotten where I am by having an eye for talent. I gave you this opportunity in large part because I saw your potential. You're organized, sharp, and know how to hustle. I don't need to explain things to you twice. And you understand musicians better than most of the people in this building ever will, which I presume is due to you growing up with your sister. I think

you have what it takes to be a music manager one day. Maybe even a great one. But I'm not going to invest my time into you if that's not the path you want to take. So tell me, what is it that you want?"

The aftertaste of the coffee burned on my tongue. "No, that's— I mean, it's what I came to Hyperion for. To be a music manager. What else would I want? The photography stuff is just a hobby. Really. I may have gotten a bit carried away with it."

Trinity tapped the end of her pen on the desk. "Are you sure about that?"

*No.* "Yes." It was Kaz's fault for planting ideas in my head, and mine for listening.

"I hope for your sake that's true, because it's a hell of a lot easier to make a living as a music manager than a photographer. Not that the former doesn't come with its own challenges."

But she'd made it. And maybe, if I just managed to stay focused, I could count on Trinity to be my mentor.

"It's one hundred percent true," I said, even if it didn't feel completely honest. "Do you want me to stop doing the photos?"

She tipped her chin, peering down at me. "Cut down on the time you spend each week doing it, but don't stop yet. You're capturing a lot of good content that we'll be able to use in some shape or form."

Relief swept over me. "Of course."

"And I want you to be at the photoshoot. Get some behind-the-scenes shots."

"I don't want to step on Theo's toes."

"Then don't. Make yourself small, and maybe ask Mason and Kaz not to bring up the fact they'd rather have you take their pictures."

"Will do."



“Good. I’ll forward you the finalized brief so that you can prep the guys on what to expect.” She cracked open her laptop to signal I was dismissed.

I rose. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” She flicked her eyes back to me. “And, Molly, when I gave you this assignment, I made the call to ignore whatever history you may have had with Mason and Kaz back at college. I hope that wasn’t a mistake.”

I was sure Trinity never let herself get this tangled up with the acts she managed. I was sleeping with Kaz, reconciling with Mason, and getting involved with both of them in a way that undoubtedly crossed the line of professionalism. But none of that mattered as long as it didn’t affect the quality of my work, right? If anything, I was more motivated now than ever to help them find the success they deserved.

“You didn’t.” I slipped out the door and shut it behind me.

---

“Do you think there’s something inherently immoral about hooking up with one of our clients?” I asked Piper as we ate our lunch in her car.

She nearly choked on her food. When the coughing fit subsided, she flicked a strand of hair out of her face and turned her entire body to look at me. “That’s not a hypothetical question, is it?”

“Um...”

Her eyes grew wide. “Oh my God, which one? Or wait, are you taking notes from your sister and doing both of them at the same time?”

“No!” I exclaimed, even as my body lit up unexpectedly at the suggestion.

It was the strangest thing. The thought of being with both of them had never crossed my mind before, but now that it was there...

The wild thing stirred inside of me, eager and curious. This was precisely why I needed to keep her locked up far, far away inside my brain. Piper's suggestion should not have given me such a thrill. Sure, given my family circumstances I was pretty openminded about sexuality and attraction, but I was also rational. I knew what my sister had with her multiple partners wasn't a normal thing. Most people didn't like to share. In fact, most people wrinkled their noses at the thought.

So why didn't I?

Why *the hell* did it sound so intriguing?

I blew out a breath. "It's Kaz."

"You're hooking up with him?"

"Yes."

"On the regular?"

"Sort of."

"And it's going to happen again?"

"Probably. Unless you convince me it's a very bad idea."

One corner of Piper's mouth quirked up. "Oh, it's a fucking terrible idea, but when has that ever stopped anyone?" She laughed. "Does Trinity know?"

"God, no. I might be temporarily insane, but I'm not suicidal. She won't ever find out."

"She didn't get to the position she's in by being naive, Mol. The longer this keeps going, the more risk you're taking on."

My blood pulsed a hard, rebellious rhythm inside my veins. "We're careful."

"I believe you." Piper's tone softened an inch. "And I hate to be a buzzkill, but I have to say, I'm surprised that you would take a risk like this. You've always been by the book."

"And where has that gotten me?" I demanded, as if she'd have all the answers. "I did everything right in college, graduated early, left the few friends I made behind, and moved

to a city where I thought I'd finally be independent. I got a job I thought I wanted, only to discover it barely pays enough to survive. You know, for years I thought following rules was the only sure path to success, but I'm starting to realize maybe I've been wrong about that all along. Look at all the truly successful people around us, Piper. We're surrounded by them. Are any of them rule followers? You think Trinity could ever be described as by the book?"

Concern lined her face. "Whoa, okay. I thought you liked being at Hyperion despite the crappy pay. What about the promotion you wanted?"

"I still want it. I think." My fists curled on my thighs. "Ugh, I don't know! Trinity just told me she saw potential in me, and of course I told her I'm committed to Hyperion, but I felt like a fraud saying it. I don't know what I want. I never got a chance to figure it out. I just know I've been seeking a certain feeling ever since my folks died, but the closer I think I get to it, the further away it actually is."

"What feeling?"

"Security. Stability. Some combination of the two. If you asked me two weeks ago, I'd say the promotion was the thing that would give that feeling to me, but now..." I covered my face with my palms and dropped my head against the headrest. "I have this feeling in my gut telling me I'm wrong."

"So what is this thing with Kaz? Some kind of self-sabotage?"

I dropped my palms. "No. I—" Shutting my mouth, I looked out the window. I didn't want to tell Piper I'd started it because I thought it would distract me from Mason and the unresolved feelings I still have for him. "I don't know what I want, but when I'm with him, I forget about all that for a little while."

Piper reached over and clasped my hand. Her expression told me she thought I was making a mistake, but I knew she wouldn't say it out loud. "I'm glad he takes your mind off things. It sounds like what you need."

“Yeah.”

A pregnant silence settled around us before Piper broke it. “I’d ask if you want to talk over lunch again tomorrow, but I’m taking the day off. Manny and I are going to San Diego for the weekend.”

I gave her a teasing smile. “Things are really heating up between you two, huh?”

She sighed. “He booked a fancy five-star hotel. I could hardly say no to that. He is growing on me. I told him he had to ease up on the at-work PDA, and he actually listened.”

“He better if he knows what’s good for him.”

Piper chuckled before growing serious once again. “Yeah, well, don’t let our getaway stop you from reaching out if you want to talk this weekend, okay? I’m here for you, Mol.”

“I know. I’ll be fine.”

I spent the rest of the day at the office, catching up on the tasks Trinity had implied I’d let fall by the wayside, and by the time I walked into the lobby of my apartment building, it was past seven pm. I cursed myself for unintentionally risking an encounter with Cory. Usually, he was at work until at least seven, which meant he got home between seven thirty and eight—a time slot I was currently too close to for my own comfort. I gingerly climbed the stairs and beelined straight inside my apartment.

My living space was due for some serious tidying, but I ignored it. After the long day I’d had, the cheap box of Trader Joe’s wine I had stashed in the kitchen was calling my name. I poured myself a generous glass, undressed, put on some Erykah Badu, and climbed into the tiny tub. It was too small for a proper soak, but I’d gotten used to the half-submerged experience. Back in my childhood home, I’d taken long baths in my parents’ ceramic claw-foot tub at least once a week because it helped me think. And I was in need of some serious thinking.

Did I want that promotion or not? With Trinity as my mentor, I could really make a career for myself. I knew what

to expect having seen what her life looked like—a blur of strategy meetings, industry parties, and deal making. Trinity was always busy, always on, always ready to snatch up talent that showed promise. I admired her as much as I was terrified of her. She was powerful and successful—a perfect role model. And yet imagining myself in her shoes didn't fill me with excitement.

It filled me with an uncomfortable dread.

Would I ever have time to relax? To slow down and appreciate the life around me? To notice other people and admire how they navigated their own imperfect lives? Or would I become like her? Feared, untouchable, removed. Isolated by the virtue of her incredible accomplishments.

I splashed some water on my face, but no answers came. Instead, my thoughts drifted back to Kaz, as they tended to these days.

Now that I knew how Kaz had grown up, I was starting to understand why he was the way he was. I lost my parents at fifteen, but during those fifteen years, there hadn't been a day where I'd felt unloved. To live a life feeling unwanted? I couldn't comprehend it. It was untenable. Awful. No wonder he'd chosen to keep his distance from most other people. If I'd been hurt like him, I'd never want to risk feeling that pain again.

Sliding farther into the hot water, I pressed my palms together between my knees. Thing was, he was risking something by being with me. I didn't know how he felt about me. It wasn't like we'd spoken about it in the week and a half we'd been hooking up, but the clues were there. Being with him was electric. The chemistry that used to keep us at odds turned into something far more heated when our clothes came off. We were an escape for each other. And that was fine, wasn't it? We could be just that as long as it served us well. A temporary reprieve from the things we didn't want or were too tired to face.

Like my evolving relationship with Mason.

I reached for wine and took a big gulp. We were on friendly terms now, although I still couldn't figure out how to crush the very non-friendly butterflies that swirled inside my belly whenever I caught him looking at me. For a long time, I thought it was the lack of closure that had kept me from moving on, but the closure had arrived last week. I'd apologized. He accepted.

*New beginnings.*

We'd even shaken hands on it.

There was now a clear path for us to be friends, and I wasn't going to throw it away over the unrequited ache inside my chest. He knew about me and Kaz. Clearly, he didn't care. Clearly, he'd been able to get over me like a normal person, or otherwise Kaz would have never made a move on me. Of that, I was sure. He wouldn't have jeopardized his friendship with his bandmate for a hookup, which told me Mason didn't give a crap about us being together.

The phone buzzed on the ground, the screen flashing Kaz's name. I picked it up.

*"Can I come over?"*

*"No,"* I typed back.

*"Why not?"*

*"I'm taking a bath."*

*"You're naked right now?"*

*"Is there another way to take a bath?"*

*"Fuck. Address. Now."*

I sat up quickly, and some of the water splashed over the edge. *"I'm going to bed soon. Had a headache all day."*

*"I'll eat you out until you forget all about your headache."*

His words sent a surge of heat right between my legs, but there was no way he was coming here.

*"My place is a mess."*

*"Don't care."*

*“Seriously, Kaz. Not happening.”*

The dots blinked for a while. *“Fine. But be a good girl and touch yourself for me tonight.”*

I read the words in his deep voice sounding in my head. My hand slid down to the apex of my legs, my fingers pressing gently against my clit. I imagined it was Kaz’s hand expertly working me up. He knew how to dance with the wild thing inside of me, lure her out, make her feel right at home.

My gasps filled the air. *“You’re a sight when you come, baby girl,”* he’d said to me a few days ago in his growly voice while his cock was buried deep inside of me. He had a way of fucking me like it was the only thing he ever wanted to do for the rest of his life. Languid and unrushed for a while, only to turn brutal during moments when I craved it most. He’d lift my hips with his strong hands and pummel into me until my body could do nothing but surrender.

My climax crested inside of me, making me throw my head back, and tearing a moan out my throat. I trembled in the lukewarm water, riding the waves of pleasure until the last one passed.

My eyes blinked open.

It was good, but not as good as it was with him.

A part of me feared it never would be.

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“What kept you at the office all day yesterday?” Kaz asked as he let me into the house the next morning. My attention caught on his bare chest and the way his jeans rode low on his hips. I dragged my gaze up. He wore a smirk, but his eyes shone with something uneasy. “Avoiding me?”

“You caught me.” I slid my hand around the back of his neck and tugged him down for a quick kiss. “Trinity wanted to talk about my career, of all things. I stayed at the office afterward to get some admin work finished.”

His smirk slid away. “What did she say?” he asked as we moved to the living room. “Is this about the meeting with Theo?”

“Not—”

“Molly, if they fire you over what I said, Mase and I will walk away from our contract.”

Wait, *what?*

I whipped around, disbelief slamming into me like a giant wave. He couldn't possibly mean that. Yet he wore a grim expression that lacked any hint of amusement.

“Don't you dare,” I stammered out. “No one is firing me, but even if they were, you are *not* going to break your contract on my behalf.”

His jaw moved as he grit his teeth.

“Tell me you know I'm right,” I demanded, my heart beating hard inside my chest.

He tore his gaze away from me to look out the window. I held my breath as I waited for his answer.

“I know,” he said finally. Then he added more firmly, “You're right.”

I rubbed my temples, shocked he would even consider something drastic like throwing away their representation for my sake.

He stopped behind me, placing his hands on my hips before turning me around to face him. So much tatted skin. My palms landed on his chest, and his heart thumped steadily under my touch.

“Kaz, you can't say things like that,” I muttered, drawing my hands up to his shoulders. “I hope you weren't serious. You don't need to woo me anymore, you know? We're already sleeping together.”

“We're having a few people over later in the evening,” he said, pointedly ignoring my comment. “You should stick around.”



“Okay. I’ll think about it.” Now that Mason and I were on good terms, I didn’t really have an excuse not to attend. I’d probably get a few good shots at the party, something different from our usual studio sessions, and Trinity could hardly fault me for doing photography during my personal time.

“You and Mase seem on better terms,” he said in a careful tone.

“We talked. We’re cool.”

“Be honest with me, Molly.” His voice dropped low. “Are you with me only because you’re still hung up on Mase, or have we moved past that by now?”

Indignation flared inside of me, but right behind it was a hot flash of shame. “I told you in the very beginning it was never about him.”

“I’m not an idiot.”

I pushed him away. “Where is all of this coming from? Why does it even matter? You’re getting what you want regardless of the reason, aren’t you?”

He crossed the distance between us and gripped my chin. “And you know exactly what I want, don’t you?”

“You want an easy lay.”

His chuckle was dark. “Because you’re so easy, huh? If that’s all it is, why did you stay with me earlier this week when I told you to leave?” He was referring to the day of his mother’s birthday.

I jerked my chin out of his grip. “Don’t over complicate this.”

“Was it ever simple?”

No. Nothing about this was simple. I was feeling things for both of them that were incompatible, that didn’t make sense.

“We need to get to work,” I muttered as I busied myself with my bag. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him shaking his head. It had been a mistake for me to be with him while he was drunk and raw. We’d crossed a boundary that

day, and now we were in a foreign land where neither of us knew the rules.

“If you want something, you should try just asking for it,” he said in a rough voice.

What the hell did that mean? Irritation flooded me. It was time put him into the same line of fire. “And what about you, Kaz? Do you know what you want?”

He fell silent, staring at me with narrowed eyes.

I huffed. “Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

I flipped open my laptop and typed out an email, forcing myself to focus on my task. When I looked up after I’d finished, he was no longer in the living room.

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to calm my racing heart. This could have been simple, but I’ve made it complicated. Now it was on me to live with the consequences of that decision.



## MOLLY

I'D BEEN on the fence about sticking around for the party, but the afternoon came and went, and I was still at the guys' house when the doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of the first guest. It was Charlotte, all done up in high heels, a flattering dress, and perfectly curled hair. Mason greeted her with a hug and tugged her in the direction of his room. A burning sensation spread through my chest. She passed by Kaz and I, giving us a tight smile that didn't reach her eyes.

Kaz watched the two of them with clear disapproval.

"How are they doing?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he responded irritably.

Kaz had been off all day, and I was starting to get concerned. At first, I thought he was angry about our earlier conversation, but his bad mood didn't appear to be entirely directed at me. For once, it hadn't been tension between Mason and I sucking out the air from that basement room. Kaz had snapped at Mase while they were working on their next single a few hours earlier, accusing Mase of being all over the place. Mason hadn't taken Kaz's curt tone well.

Where was this coming from? Kaz seemed more volatile and uneasy with something, but I couldn't figure out what. First there's been the startling declaration about Last Rites leaving Hyperion if they sacked me, and now this aggression toward Mase...

"Are you and Mason okay?" I asked, taking a seat on the couch.

"Yes. Just an off day." Kaz turned on his heel and disappeared into the kitchen. I heard him opening the fridge and then slamming it closed. He didn't want me to push him, but at the same time, it was sort of my job to make sure Last Rites were doing fine. The photoshoot was on Monday, and if their tempers flared then, it could derail the entire thing. If

there was even a small chance I was somehow at fault for Kaz's current mood, it was my responsibility to fix it.

I accepted the beer he handed me and made space for him on the couch.

He sat down, his thigh pressing against my own. His spicy, masculine scent filled my lungs, sending my mind back to the last time I was in his bed.

*Focus!*

I cleared my throat, trying to ignore the fluttering sensation between my legs when he wrapped his palm over my knee.

"I never properly thanked you," he said, meeting my gaze with his.

"For what?"

"For keeping me company on Monday." His eyes were dark-green pools simmering with intensity.

I gave him a soft smile. "I hoped I helped?"

"Yeah, you did."

"If you ever need someone to talk to about anything, you can talk to me."

His expression cracked, spilling out something precious and vulnerable.

I waited with bated breath to hear what he'd say next, but our conversation was interrupted with a loud bang of a door.

"You're a goddamn asshole!" Charlotte yelled as her steps pounded down the hall. I caught a flash of her face, twisted in a grimace, before she stormed out the front door.

I stood up in alarm, ready to investigate what was going on when Mason appeared.

"What happened?" I asked.

He ran a hand through his blond hair. "I broke it off with her."

There was a flutter in my belly. "Oh."

His gaze wouldn't let go of me, as if he were trying to communicate something solely with his eyes.

My thoughts ran in multiple directions. What had happened between them for him to call it quits? I'd made a point to stay far away from their relationship, but Charlotte had to have meant something to Mason. Why else would he have her around as much as he did?

"About time." Kaz's dry voice broke through the silence. "I wonder what finally pushed you over the edge?"

The challenge in his tone dropped the temperature of the room by a couple degrees, and Mason finally tore his attention away from me. Kaz rose from the couch and took a few steps toward the drummer. "What's changed, Mase?" he demanded, his voice low.

I was intruding on whatever the hell this was, and I felt a sudden urge to get out of here. This wasn't my business. I didn't need to know why Mason had broken up with Charlotte, or why Kaz seemed to radiate contempt at his best friend.

*This isn't about me.*

It couldn't be about me. It was absurd and narcissistic to even contemplate the possibility... if it weren't for that one look Mase gave me.

The wild thing banged against her cage.

I swiped my bag off the chair and pulled out my car keys. "Actually, I think I'm going to go. I just remembered I have something to do at home."

Kaz shot me a dark look but didn't say anything.

"If you're sure." The smile Mason gave me was tense.

"I'll see you on Monday." I rushed out the house and squeezed inside my car before taking a deep breath. There was no point in hypothesizing about what had just happened. No sense in letting my thoughts drift to unlikely scenarios.

Like the one where Mason had broken up with Charlotte because maybe he still felt something for me.

---

Dark clouds gathered above the hills on the horizon and obscured the setting sun as I drove myself home. The digital clock on the dashboard read seven-thirty, but the gloomy atmosphere made it feel like we were in the middle of December instead of August. I gripped the wheel tightly, keeping my eye out for drivers rushing too fast to get home. It was a good thing I'd only managed to have a few sips of the beer before Charlotte exploded out of Mason's room.

I wanted to talk to Adeline, if only to keep my thoughts from spiraling down all kinds of rabbit holes, but it was the middle of the night in London. What would my sister say if I told her I was starting to have feelings for two men at the same time? It was such a cliché. Me following in her footsteps. But few stories that start like hers have a happy ending, and I was more than certain mine wouldn't. If there was even a small chance I was the reason behind the current tension between the two men, I couldn't let it go on. Maybe I needed to rethink pursuing a friendship with Mason, and I definitely needed to put a stop to what was happening between Kaz and I, no matter how much I enjoyed being with him physically. It was all becoming too messy.

I parked outside my apartment building as the first drops fell out of the sky. The weathermen were going to be happy. For the last few weeks, they'd been bemoaning the exceptionally dry summer on the radio. But I had no desire to get caught in the rain, so I grabbed my bag and hurried across the parking lot.

The sky opened up when I was halfway to my destination. I ducked inside the building and wiped the wetness off my face before taking the stairs. It was very quiet, the normal sounds of life in the concrete structure drowned out by the pouring rain.

When I reached my floor, the light at the end of the hallway was out. It dawned on me then I didn't have my keys ready like I usually did, and I scrambled to turn on the

flashlight on my phone before pointing it inside my bag. Damn it. I'd been in such a rush to escape the rain, I'd just tossed them right in, and now they were lost somewhere at the bottom beneath my laptop, makeup case, and a dozen other random items.

I dug and dug until my fingers closed around the jagged edge of the key.

The floor behind me creaked. Fear seized me, turning my blood cold. Before I could lift my phone and shine its light around me, a hand closed over my mouth. It muffled the scream that tore out of my throat.

“Got you,” a hoarse voice whispered right into my ear. “Now don't get any funny ideas. Open your door.”

Cory pressed his body against my back, letting me feel his growing erection. I'd rather die than let him inside my apartment. My heart felt like it was about to explode out of my chest. *Ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum.* His palm smelled like something acrid—a chemical from the recycling plant where he worked? It was suffocating. The time to act was now.

With all the strength I could muster, I sank my teeth into the fleshy part of his hand.

The skin tore. He screamed, swore, and his blood filled my mouth with metal. I spit it out and fought down the urge to gag as soon as he jerked his hand away.

*Run!*

I didn't make it a step before he grabbed me again, his other hand curling around my throat. I thrashed against him, trying to step on his toes, to kick him, scratch him anywhere it would hurt, but he was still dressed in his work clothes. Some kind of a uniform. My Chucks had no chance against his steel-toed boots, or the thick long-sleeved uniform he wore.

He squeezed my throat tightly as I tried to gulp down air.

“Do as I say.”

The only other time I'd felt fear like this was when I saw Adeline's face the day the cops came to tell us our parents had



died. She'd turned to me after they left, and I felt our entire life cracking open and falling apart at our feet. For a moment, everything seemed impossibly bleak. I thought nothing would ever feel as awful.

Now I knew I was wrong. As Cory's relentless grip cut off the air to my lungs, black spots appeared in my vision. I couldn't pass out. Something told me if I lost consciousness, it would be game over.

I stopped fighting. Let my limbs sag. He wasn't expecting it, so after a moment, he let go of my throat and shoved his hands under my armpits to hold me up. "Open. The. Door."

My keys and bag were on the floor. At some point, I must have dropped them. That had to have made a sound, right? Apparently, not loud enough. Even if the neighbors heard it, it was doubtful they'd rush out to help. This wasn't that kind of building. When I saw other people in the staircase or in the hall, we tended to avoid eye contact.

"Pick them up," Cory commanded, dropping me down on the floor right on my kneecaps. Pain shot up through my bones. I patted the ground I could hardly see until I felt something cold. My bag had to be right there. Maybe I could dig for the pepper spray—

He jerked me up roughly and steered me toward my door. Tears were pooling along the edges of my eyes. Should I scream? No, I couldn't risk him choking me again. My throat throbbed where his fingers dug into the flesh. He was strong enough to break my neck in his rage.

*Think, Molly!*

I sorted through the keys with one hand, feeling the one for my car, the one for the office, the Bleeding Moonlight keychain...

I ran over it with my index finger. It was a bottle opener, slim and with a sharp tip. Not much of a weapon, but sometimes I'd poke myself on it when digging for my keys, and I knew that at a certain angle, it was sharp enough to hurt.

I lifted my hand to the lock and stabbed the keyhole with the tip of the keychain, pretending I couldn't get it inside.

“What are you doing?” Cory demanded.

“I'm sorry.” My voice trembled. It sounded so weak, I couldn't believe it was me speaking. “It's too dark, I can't see.”

He swore and loosened his grip around me before outstretching one hand. “Give them to me.”

Without second-guessing what I was about to do, and using all of my strength and adrenaline, I tore myself away from him, and slashed the keychain diagonally across his face.

He howled in pain, jerking his hands to his face and staggering away. I must have hit something good. Before he could come to his senses, I grabbed my bag and ran. Jumped three, four steps at a time, my keys still clutched tightly in my hand. I needed to get away from here.

*Go. Go. Go.*

The rain slapped against my face as I sprinted to my car, past the mailboxes and the garbage area, past some neighbor I didn't know who gave me an alarmed look. I must look an utter mess.

But at least I was alive.

I slid inside my car, threw my bag on the seat beside me, locked all the doors, and stuck the key in the ignition, my hands shaking with desperation.

It wouldn't start.

“No. No! Audrey, c'mon love. Not today.”

Through the rivulets cascading down the window, I could see a silhouette heading my way.

I tried to start the car again, fighting to keep my panic at bay. Would the locks hold if Cory tried to force his way in? What if they didn't? What if he dragged me out into the street by my hair?

As the silhouette got close, Cory's face came into focus. He was bleeding through an ugly open gash across his forehead. The car sputtered to life. Relief flooded me, and I pressed on the gas, tearing out of there as fast as I could. I watched Cory through the rearview mirror until I finally turned a corner, and he disappeared out of sight.

Fifteen minutes passed before my heart rate slowed and I found the courage to pull over outside a Starbucks. My chest was still tight with residual fear. When the tears began to fall, I didn't try to stop them.

In my car, in the brutal rain, I bawled my fucking eyes out for long while. Time lost its edges and became blurred, just like the world outside. Every time I calmed down a bit, my neck would ache as if his hands were still on me, and it would set me off again. I couldn't stay in this parking lot forever, but I had nowhere to go. I couldn't go back home. Calling the police seemed daunting and likely useless. Piper was out of town. Ade was asleep on the other side of the world.

She'd lose her mind if I told her Cory attacked me. She'd cancel her shows to fly over here on the first plane out and take care of me. Everything I'd done since I left for college was in service of making sure this kind of situation never happened, yet here I was—helpless, weak, afraid.

I sniffed and wiped the wetness under my nose with my sleeve. At least one thing was different. This time, I could *choose* to not be a burden on Ade.

Slapping my cheeks a few times, I blew out a breath and shrugged off my blood-stained sweater. I rolled down the window, stuck my hands out into the rain, and rinsed off Cory's blood. I just needed to get through the night, and tomorrow first thing in the morning, I'd go grab my things from my place.

*Pull it together. Find a cheap motel, take a shower, and go to sleep.*

But as I drove past neon signs screaming vacancy, I couldn't make myself stop at any of them. The peeling paint, the flickering lights, the silhouettes I didn't know...

My throat had dried out. I felt like a husk of a person, fragile and about to snap. I drove and drove for what must have been hours before somehow finding myself in Kaz and Mason's neighborhood. The clock inside the car read eight minutes past eleven, and when I stopped across the street from their house, I could see there was a bunch of people inside.

Maybe I could just get one drink at their party before heading out. I didn't need to tell them what happened. I could pretend I was fine. I just couldn't be alone right now.

A girl with red hair bumped into me as soon as I walked in. "Still pouring out there, huh?"

"Yeah." I brushed the rain drops off my shoulders and followed her into the kitchen in search of something strong. She offered me a beer, but I shook my head. In the freezer, I found Kaz's half-finished bottle of vodka, poured it into a red solo cup, and took a throat-burning sip.

"You came back."

I whirled around in the direction of Kaz's voice. He was looking at me with a dark expression, his jaw tight.

"I finished the thing I needed to do more quickly than I'd expected," I said, trying to look anywhere but his eyes.

"Right," he said in a tone I was too tired to decipher.

"Going to get some air." I snuck past him and hurried to the door at the end of the hall, doing my best to blend into the wall. The covered deck had stayed mostly dry except for around the edges, and to my relief, there weren't any smokers lingering. I collapsed on the backless bench propped against the wall, put my elbows on my knees and took another sip from the cup. The jittery, nervous energy beneath my skin felt like an itch only alcohol could scratch.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and the sounds of crickets filled the air. I stared at the wet, untamed greenery of the backyard, taking deep breaths through my nose to try to calm down.

When the bench moved slightly beneath me, I sprung up.

“Whoa, it’s just me.”

I pressed my hand to my chest. “Jesus.”

Mason had taken the seat beside me. His hair was messy, as if he’d been running his hands through it all night. “Kaz told me you came back.”

“Sorry. I hope the invitation still stood,” I said, sitting back down.

“You’re always welcome here.” A second later, he produced an awkward sounding laugh. “I didn’t mean to say it so offhandedly. I know I didn’t make you feel very welcome here for a while.”

I couldn’t hold a conversation with him, or anyone, at the moment. My body had decided to give up on me. I was so tired. It was as if my limbs had turned to lead. My hair fell into my face, the mere touch of it against my cheeks irritating. I brushed it back around my neck, savoring the cool after-rain air that snuck a caress across my hot skin.

Mason sucked in a harsh breath. “What the hell is on your neck?”

Shit. I wrapped my palm around the area that still burned. Cory must have left a mark on me. I’d been so disoriented, I hadn’t even bothered to check what I looked like in the mirror.

“Is that a—“ His voice cracked. “Molly, is that a handprint?”

Rubbing at the tender flesh, I looked in the opposite direction from him. What was I supposed to say? My throat prickled with fresh tears, and my eyes stung. I didn’t want to tell him.

He got on his haunches in front of me, placing his palms on the bench and bracketing my thighs. His eyes swam with horror. “What happened? Talk to me.”

I pulled my lips into my mouth and shook my head. One word, and I’d break apart. He’d see me for all the stupid things I’d done, for how I’d let myself get into this bad situation.

Why didn't I listen to Sandy when she told me to get the hell out of there?

Mason pried my hand away from my neck gently, so gently, and hissed at what he saw. "Who. Did. That?"

He sounded genuinely murderous.

"It doesn't matter," I babbled. A strangled sob burst out of me.

"Like hell it doesn't. What the fuck. Please, say something." He squeezed my wrists.

The door to the patio sprung open loudly. I would have jumped out of my skin again if it weren't for Mason's grounding touch. "It's just Kaz."

I turned to look at the singer. He'd halted in his tracks, his weary gaze settling on us. It took him a second to realize something was off. His brows furrowed. "What's—"

"Get everyone out," Mason barked, his gaze never leaving me. "Something's happened."

I didn't get a chance to protest. Without a single question, Kaz disappeared back inside the house. In my head—I was starting to acknowledge I was probably in shock—weird ideas had begun to float in and out. Mason was so pale. It was like he'd seen a ghost. Or maybe he was just cold. Tonight was the coldest night in recent memory. What if it never got warm again?

I blinked. "Am I dreaming?"

It must have been the wrong question to ask, because the remaining color drained from Mason's face. He ran a jerky hand through his hair.

"You're awake." He was trying to keep his voice calm but failing. "Molly, please. Talk to me. Do I need to take you to the hospital?"

I shook my head as a few tears slid down my cheeks. "No. I'm fine."

“You’re not fine.” He took my hand and lifted it. “Look. You’re trembling.”

The music got shut off, no longer masking the sounds of conversation inside the house. A loud voice—Kaz’s—cut through the clamor and yelled at everyone to leave.

I began to cry. Mason’s expression softened. He didn’t say anything else. He held me in the clear blue depths of his eyes and waited.

When Kaz rushed back out, his expression a mask of worry, and his hands fisted by his sides, I knew neither of them would ever drop it. They’d wait here all night until I told them the truth. I wiped my face off with my sleeve and tried to find the right words. “I...I have this neighbor on my floor.”

Mason stood up, clasping his hands over his head before squatting back down in front of me. “What did he do?”

God, it was hard to get the words out. Kaz lowered himself onto the bench beside me and placed his palm on the small of my back.

I sucked in a steadying breath. “He’s...awful. A real creep. He’d been harassing me for months, and tonight, when I got home, he ambushed me.” A wet sob worked its way out of my chest. “He grabbed me and tried to force me to open my apartment. When I fought back, he choked me. I managed to get away, just barely.”

“Those marks on your neck are from him?” Kaz asked in a strangely flat tone.

“Yes. There have been red flags for months,” I said, sobbing uncontrollably now, “and I kept living there...I let it happen. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot.” Mason’s palms wrapped around my knees. “Look at me.”

I lifted my eyes to his, trying to contain the sobs.

“This wasn’t your fault,” he said firmly, his expression as hard as granite.

“I’m going to fucking kill him,” Kaz said. When I turned to him, his murderous expression cracked. He let out a ragged breath. “Baby girl, I’m so sorry.”

I launched myself into his arms, allowing him to press my snotty face against his chest and finding refuge in his familiar warmth. He held me tightly, smoothing my hair with his palm and muttering comforting words into my ear.

For the first time since I’d entered my apartment building earlier today, I felt safe.

When my sobs finally quieted, I pulled away from Kaz and wiped my face with a tissue Mason managed to procure from somewhere.

Kaz palmed my cheek with his hand. “We need to take you to the hospital.”

“No,” I shook my head adamantly. “I don’t want to go anywhere. Please, I just want to sleep.”

“Molly—”

“If she doesn’t want to go, she doesn’t have to go,” Mason interrupted, giving him a warning look.

The singer clamped down on his bottom lip, but eventually nodded. “Okay.” He tangled his fingers with mine. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Did you call the police?” Mason asked as Kaz helped me stand.

“No. I didn’t have time, I just ran. And afterwards, I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“I understand. C’mon, let’s get you inside.”

They wrapped their arms around my waist, Mason on one side and Kaz on the other, and led me into the house. Kaz pressed a kiss to my temple. “He won’t get away with this. That fuckface is never going to touch you again.”

They brought me to Kaz’s bed. Mason helped me peel off my damp T-shirt, while Kaz handed me a fresh one of his. I



ducked beneath the blanket, inhaling the singer's calming scent while he watched me from across the room.

"Can I spend the night?" I asked softly, peeking at him from under my sinking eyelids. "I'm so tired."

"You're staying with us until we're sure you're safe," Mason said, earning himself an emphatic nod from Kaz.

"Just one night," I mumbled as darkness engulfed me.



## KAZ

I THOUGHT I understood anger in all its forms. I'd spent years with it as my only true companion while I tried to adjust to a lonely life in a new country. I'd survived on its dark energy and nourished myself with the perverse comfort it provided. I used it as a shield against anyone who attempted to hurt me.

But I'd never—*ever*—felt it completely possess my body and make it move with a singular purpose.

*Make that sick fuck pay.*

A hand wrapped around my biceps just as I was about to burst through the front door. "Kaz, don't."

I spun around, sneering at Mason. "You're telling me you don't want to give that creep what he deserves?"

"Of course, I do." His grip on me tightened. "I want to wipe the floor with him, but Molly needs us here."

"She's asleep. It'll be taken care of before she wakes up." The image of the handprint on her neck flooded my veins with another wave of fury. "He fucking touched her. He *hurt* her."

My throat closed up. I couldn't deal with the thought of Molly afraid for her life in a place where she should have felt safe. Seeing her on our deck, all hunched over and defeated, reminded me just how small she was. No more than five-four. I was almost a foot taller, always careful with her when we were physical together because I didn't want to hurt her by accident. Yet this scumbag wanted the exact opposite. He could have killed her.

Mason let go of me and ran both hands through his hair, his face a grimace. "He'll get what he deserves, but we can't leave her now." His voice shook. "We don't even know where she lives."

A strangled sound escaped my throat. "Fuck!"

He jerked me into an embrace, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and swiping a palm over my head. I couldn't

remember the last time we fucking hugged each other. It had been years. But now, I leaned into him, knowing he was feeling the same anger and pain.

When we finally broke apart, he swiped a palm over his tired face and waved me into the living room.

“I’m sorry,” he said as soon as we sat down. “About earlier.”

The conversation we had right after Molly left. It seemed as if it had happened days ago, but it had only been a few hours.

*“You just can’t stand seeing her with me, can you? Admit it, Mase.”*

*“This has nothing to do with Molly. Char and I have run our course. That’s all.”*

*“Liar. If you think I’m going to stand aside while you go after her, you’re about to be sorely disappointed.”*

*“So are you if you think she sees you as anything more than a convenient fuck.”*

The truth stung like a bitch. Our first few guests had arrived right then, saving me from coming up with an insincere rebuttal, but Mason’s words stayed with me through the night. I thought about them as well as my off-the-cuff offer to walk away from Hyperion if they fired Molly.

Fuck, what was happening to me? I’d said that to her without thinking twice about it. I couldn’t fucking stand the thought of her getting penalized for something I’d said, but her shocked reaction had told me I’d taken it too far. I promised Mase not to let my feelings for her mess with Last Rites, and I’d nearly broken that promise.

I was furious with myself and angry at the world. So much so that when Molly returned, I barely looked at her. I hadn’t noticed anything was wrong.

*Fucking asshole.*

I let out a breath. “It’s fine. I hate fighting with you, man.”

“Me too. It’s my fault. I’ve been too caught up in my shit for the past while, but I promise you I’m done with that. I shouldn’t have said that about you and Molly. I have no idea how she feels about you, and as long as you’re happy with her, I’m happy for you, dude.” He looked me directly in the eyes as he said it, as if to underscore his sincerity.

I nodded and steered us back to the problem at hand. “She can’t go back there until the fucker is gone.”

“Agree. When she wakes up, we can ask where she wants to stay in the meantime. She’ll probably be most comfortable at Ade’s.”

Was it selfish to want her to stay here with us, where both of us could keep an eye on her? The powerful protectiveness I felt took me by surprise, largely because I’d never felt this way about anyone.

*And to her you’re just a guy she’s using to move on from Mason.*

If he knew the truth behind our arrangement, I had no doubt in my mind he’d make his move. Didn’t matter how fucking remorseful he’d seemed just now. If he even suspected she still had feelings for him, nothing would stop him from pursuing her. Not even having me in the middle.

It dawned on me that I was a shitty friend. He was willing to step aside for me, but I wasn’t willing to do the same. I was keeping them away from each other because with every single day, I fell more and more for this girl, even though I doubted she’d ever feel the same.

It couldn’t last. It was a farce put on by a shitty puppeteer. But fuck if I wasn’t going to draw it out. In this very moment, she was in *my* bed, in *my* sheets, leaving her maddening scent in the very place I slept. It was a heady feeling.

Mason shot a look at the clock. “We should get some sleep. We’re going to have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

I was wide awake, but I nodded in agreement. “She’s going to need us.”

He slapped me on the back and trudged into his room while I tried to decide if I should crash on the couch or sleep beside Molly. The latter was obviously preferred, but I didn't want to invade her space without making sure she was okay with it, and I could only do that if I woke her up.

Couch it is. I crept into my room as quietly as I could to grab a spare blanket and pillow from the closet, and she stirred on the bed.

"Kaz?" she called out quietly, her voice heavy with sleep. Her hair was a golden halo painted across the pillow, her face dark with shadows I wanted to chase away.

"I didn't mean to wake you," I said hoarsely.

She eyed the stuff under my arm. "I'm in your bed." It was as if she'd only realized it now. "I can move to the couch."

"Forget it. Go back to sleep."

When she didn't say anything, I turned to leave, thinking she'd drifted off again.

"Wait. Will you hold me?"

My pulse sped up. Silly girl, didn't she know I'd do anything for her right about now? "Of course."

I placed the bed stuff on the ground, lifted the blanket, and slid in beside her, gently pulling her into my chest. She sighed in what sounded like relief and moved my arm until it was snug around her waist. Within seconds, her breathing slowed and she was asleep. I suspected I wouldn't catch a wink with her in my arms like this.

Pressing my nose against her hair, I took a deep breath. It was only for one night. She didn't need me like this. It meant nothing to her.

And yet, it meant everything to me.

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When I blinked my eyes open, the darkness outside had lifted, and Molly was sitting with her back against the headboard, typing something out on her phone. I'd managed to fall asleep after all. I even felt somewhat rested, but as soon as I remembered what Mase and I had to do today, the feeling disappeared.

Molly scooted her feet closer to her butt and plopped her phone facedown on the bed. "Morning."

I rolled to my side and patted her knee...like a fucking idiot. My protective instinct—one I hadn't known was there—flared up as soon as the memory of her crying flashed inside my mind. I was too groggy to even attempt to shut that shit down. "How are you feeling?"

She gave me a shrug. "I don't know."

"I think we should take you to the hospital," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Get them to take a look at your neck."

"It's not necessary." Molly brushed her hand over the bruise that had formed overnight. "I can breathe and swallow fine. It's just the skin that's tender." She sighed. "I should feel fine, right? I got away before anything really bad happened. I'm safe now. But I still..." Tears pooled in her eyes, and all I wanted to do was strangle the faceless asshole, just like he'd tried to do to her.

"I still feel like utter crap," she confessed. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you. Some dead man assaulted you and tried to break into your home. You're allowed to feel whatever you need to feel, yeah?"

She sniffled and wiped under her eyes. "I guess you're right. Thank you for everything. I'll get out of your hair soon enough."

"There's no rush." Did she really think we'd let her leave without a solid plan in place? "You're more than welcome here."

"I was going to rent a room in a motel."

I laughed because it was fucking ludicrous. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

“I won’t be able to find a new apartment for a while. The rental market is crazy. I need a place to stay in the meantime.”

“Not at a fucking motel,” I growled, curling a possessive hand over her thigh. “Like I said, you can stay here for as long as you need, but what about your sister? Mase thought you might want to be with her.”

Molly crossed her arms over her chest. “She’s wrapping up her last two weeks on tour. If I tell her what happened, she’ll fly right back here, and I can’t let that happen. I’ll go to her once she’s back.”

“Okay, so stay with us for two weeks. It’s no big deal. We’ve got room.”

She pursed her lips. “I’m literally taking up your bed right now.”

“You are more than welcome to stay in my room while I sleep on the couch.” I sat up and nudged her chin so that she’d look me in the eyes. “If you’re hesitating because you think this offer comes with strings, let me set you straight right now. You don’t owe me anything, okay? This room is yours. As simple as that. The only reason I’m in bed with you right now is because you asked me to.”

Her eyes widened. “I know that, Kaz. I wasn’t implying your offer was disingenuous. I just don’t want to put you out like that, or make you guys uncomfortable. I don’t even know how Mason feels about all of this.”

“Mason wants you to be safe, as do I.” That much I was sure of. He’d been as devastated as me to see her hurt.

Brushing her hair behind her ear, I cupped her cheek. “Let us help you, baby girl.”

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she leaned into my touch, as if she needed it as much as I did. I brushed my thumb over her cheekbone before moving it down to her lips.



I didn't mean to start anything, not when she was in such a fragile state, but she parted her lips and gave me a look filled with unmistakable warmth. "Kiss me."

Who was I to refuse her?

My lips brushed against hers, once, twice, and then she was opening up for my tongue and letting me taste her.

When my cock began to harden, I pulled away with a groan. "As much as I'd like to continue, we've got things to take care of first."

The hazy arousal coloring her face disappeared in a blink. "I don't want to go back there," she said, moving to get off the bed. When she stood up, she looked down at my T-shirt hanging off her body. "Shit. I guess I need my stuff. I don't have anything on me."

"Mase and I will handle it," I said, tossing the blanket off and grabbing my jeans off the floor. "Make a list of what you need, and we'll bring it."

Molly nibbled on her lip. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. Let me see if he's awake."

I pulled on a shirt and exited the room in search of my bandmate.

Mase was putting some plates out in the dining room, and the delicious smell of bacon and eggs wafted from the kitchen. When he saw me emerge, he glanced at the couch, and then gave me a small, uncertain grin. "How is she?"

"I think she's in the shower. She's okay. I offered for us to grab her things from her place while she waits here."

"Good idea." Mason strolled into the kitchen, and I followed behind him. He opened the oven to check on something inside. "Let's go right after we eat?"

"Yeah. I also told her she should stay with us until her sister is back from tour in about two weeks. Assuming that's fine with you?"

Mason was still looking at something in the oven. “Sure, of course.”

Was he thinking about how he’d handle seeing us together for the next two weeks in his own home? He could hardly avoid us. Then again, I had no idea how Molly would behave after going through a traumatic event. If she needed to keep her distance to feel safe, so be it. The realization that her wellbeing was more important to me than any of my own selfish needs was sobering. Fuck. When did this girl become this important to me?

Was it the first time we slept together? Or when she sat beside me on the deck and listened to me rant about my fucked-up family? Or maybe it was last night, when I saw her hurt and in tears, and I knew I’d do anything to make her whole again.

Breakfast was quiet. Molly asked Mase if he really was okay with her staying and then picked at her food without saying much else. She seemed nervous about something, maybe our impending confrontation with her neighbor, assuming the fuckface hadn’t done the smart thing and fled.

“Has he done anything like this before to you?” I asked.

Her eyes flitted back and forth between Mason and I. “He tried to break into my place before. Twice. And he’s made a bunch of creepy comments.”

I tried to temper the anger setting fire to my blood, but Mason was less successful doing the same to his.

“Why did you stay there for this long? Not to imply this was your fault in any way. I just need to know.” His jaw ticked as he waited for her answer.

She rubbed her arms. “The rent is cheap. I was going to move some place better as soon as I got a promotion at work and could afford it. And I thought I could handle Cory. I guess I was in denial he’d ever take it this far.”

Mason looked like he was about to say something but then thought better of it and gave a slight shake of his head. “Okay. I understand.”

I sure as hell didn't understand anything about this. Why didn't she ask her sister for help? They lived in the same fucking city and appeared to be close, so I was pretty sure Adeline would have done whatever was needed to get Molly out of that situation. Still, when I took in Molly's low expression, I decided to follow Mason's lead and not push.

When she handed us the key to her apartment as we were about to leave for her things, her body language betrayed her anxiety. She gnawed on her bottom lip and avoided looking us in the eye. Was she worried about us confronting the neighbor or something else?

I understood when we got to the building.

A groan burst out of Mason. "This place looks like it should have been demolished a decade ago."

Just like her car. The clues were starting to fit together. Molly was struggling to make ends meet with the pittance Hyperion paid her, and she was clearly refusing to ask for help from anyone, even if that put her in danger.

I slammed the car door behind me and stomped my way to the entrance with Mason right on my heels. We scaled the steps to the fourth floor where a broken lightbulb hung off a wire and began looking for her unit.

"It's here," Mason said. A moment later, a lock clicked, and the hallway flooded with natural light from Molly's apartment.

We spent a few minutes taking it in, and I felt marginally relieved. It wasn't as grim inside as it was outside. Molly had clearly tried her best to make it into something resembling a home, but no amount of fairy lights and decorative pillows could change the fact that the building was unsafe.

We worked down the list of items she'd given us and quickly packed two duffel bags. I was about to grab her notebook when a sound from the hallway made me freeze. I shot Mason a look and jerked my head in the direction of the open door. He frowned and nodded.

“You came back, huh?” A raspy voice drifted through the open doorway. “Couldn’t stay away from me.”

We waited for the owner of the voice to step inside. When he did, my stomach turned in disgust. He was huge, with a big ruddy nose, a protruding beer belly, and an overgrown beard that looked like it hadn’t been washed in months. I felt homicidal. My hands curled into fists.

When he registered us instead of Molly, he narrowed his eyes. An angry red scratch ran across his forehead and cheek, and I hoped to God it was Molly who did that to him. If he thought that was going to be the last of his injuries, he was about to be proven very fucking wrong.

“I thought you were someone else,” he bit out.

“Yeah, we got that part.” I didn’t waste another second. I lunged at him, pulling him inside the apartment by the neck of his dirty shirt and slamming the door shut with my foot. He coughed, trying to pry my fingers off him, but there was no chance in hell I’d let him go. I slammed him hard against the door. “You know, I’m not the violent type, but something tells me I’m going to get a lot of satisfaction from making scum like you bleed.”

He started to fight back, but I was ready for it. My punch got him straight in the nose—almost certainly breaking it—and he swayed on his feet. Mason stepped forward, getting Cory in the jaw with a brutal uppercut before kicking at his feet.

The piece of shit collapse with a loud thud.

We stared at the pathetic sight of him curling into the fetal position. “Stop! Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

I kicked him hard in the gut. “Why the fuck do you think? You’ve got a brain cell or two in that thick skull of yours?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Mason sneered down at the man and then gestured for me to finish packing up. I quickly grabbed the rest of Molly’s things, zipped up the duffels, and swung them over my

shoulder. Cory was still on the ground, his beady eyes wide with fear.

Mason fisted his hand through Cory's greasy hair and lifted his head a few inches off the ground. "You're never going to see Molly again, you understand? She won't be coming back here, but if you happen to run into her anywhere in this city, you're going to turn around and walk the other way."

"Who are you?" Cory wheezed. "She never said she had a boyfriend."

"You're. Not. Listening." Cory's jaw slammed closed as Mason shook him to emphasize each word. "If you touch her again—if you as much as *look* at her—we will destroy your pathetic fucking life and make you wish you'd never met her."

"I got it! I'll stay away from her."

Mason threw him back on the ground, wiped his palms on his jeans, and gave Cory a disgusted look.

*Jesus.* Honestly, I was impressed. My bandmate hadn't gotten into a single fight since I've known him, but he could clearly put his muscle to work when the need arose.

We left the apartment and dropped Molly's things in the trunk before getting inside the car.

"Feels like he got off too easy," I said, imagining how scared Molly must've felt. "He could do it again to someone else."

"She should go to the police and make a statement."

"When I suggested it to her earlier today, she said she didn't want to."

"Let's give her some time."

Mason began to drive back home, while I kept my eye on the bleak skies outside. "You said you understood why she stayed here."

He tapped out a rhythm on the wheel. "She didn't want to seem weak by asking for help."

*Oh.*

I wanted to say that was ridiculous, that no one would think that of her, but the truth was, I understood that thinking all too well. I was convinced I was better off alone for a long time, until I'd met Mason. He'd shown me that close relationships didn't always need to end in me getting hurt. Maybe Molly was still learning that for herself.

I glanced at my bandmate and rubbed my chin.

Maybe we could be the ones to teach her.



## **MOLLY**

IT'S funny how life can turn on its head in the span of a few minutes. Yesterday, I'd folded this very same T-shirt and put it away in my closet, and now I was tucking it into the drawer Kaz had cleared out for me in his dresser.

Yesterday, my biggest worry was causing a rift between Mason and Kaz, and today I was coming to terms with being displaced from my home.

Yesterday, I thought I could handle anything life threw at me on my own.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

I put away the last of the clothes the guys had retrieved from my apartment, plopped down on the edge of Kaz's bed, and dug the heels of my palms into my temples. A splitting headache was the last thing I needed, yet I could feel it coming on. There were a few things I needed to get done before I could go to sleep guilt-free, but I had zero motivation to do any of them. Going to the police station earlier with the guys to file a report drained the last of my energy. I didn't want to eat dinner. Didn't want to shower, or look at my phone, or send the work emails I'd meant to write this weekend. I still hadn't called my sister, and I definitely didn't want to make that call.

A few minutes of genuinely fearing for my life had turned me into an utter mess. I supposed no one could blame me for feeling out of sorts.

A knock sounded on the door. This wasn't my room, so it felt weird someone was asking for my permission to enter. The guys were very kind to let me crash with them, but I had no intention of staying here the entire two weeks. I'd look for a new apartment as soon as I got some of my energy back.

"Come in," I said awkwardly.

The door cracked open, revealing Mason on the other side. "Kaz is picking up dinner. I wanted to see how you're doing."



I raised my hands up before dropping them back on the bed. “Honestly? I’m drained. I don’t even have the energy to pretend otherwise.”

His soft smile conveyed his understanding. He approached the bed. “I hear you. You know you don’t need to pretend around us, right? It’s okay to not be okay.”

A bitter smile graced my lips. “I feel really goddamn stupid. And embarrassed.”

Mason pointed to a spot on the edge of the bed. “May I?”

I motioned for him to sit down, shifting my legs over to make space.

His brows pulled together as he studied me. “You don’t have anything to be embarrassed about. This wasn’t your fault.”

“But wasn’t it?” When he opened his mouth to argue, I lifted my hand. “Hear me out. I know it wasn’t my fault Cory attacked me. Clearly, he’s seriously disturbed and could have done what he did to me to anyone. But it’s not like I didn’t know he was dangerous. There were enough red flags to put me on my guard, and yet I didn’t do anything smart to protect myself. You’re probably thinking why didn’t I?”

It was a question I hadn’t stopped asking myself since I woke up today, and now, I needed to get the answer off my chest.

“Because I was too fucking proud. Too proud to ask for help or tell my sister anything. She would have solved the situation like this,” I said, snapping my fingers to emphasize my point. “Too proud to admit to anyone, even myself, that I didn’t have it all under control.” I sagged forward and covered my face with my hands. “It’s pathetic. I let my ego get the best of me.”

Mason released a pent-up breath. I could feel him shifting on the bed beside me, but I couldn’t bring myself to meet his eyes. He wasn’t even trying to argue with my self-assessment. Jesus. What must he think of me after that admission?

“Molly, I get why you did what you did,” he said gently, pulling my hands away from my face. “And I don’t judge you for it.”

My heart skipped a beat. His expression was soft with understanding—the intimate kind. The kind that said he’d been there before.

He released my wrists. “I never told you the truth about why I dropped out. I think it’s time I did.”

He turned to face the last bit of afternoon light streaming through the window. It bounced off his blond locks, making them look like spun gold. There was tension in his jaw, extending down to the tendons in his neck, as if getting his next words out required serious physical effort.

I waited with bated breath. I studied the man I’d been hopelessly in love with for the better part of five years and imagined for a moment what we could have been if he hadn’t left me behind in Northeastern.

“I didn’t actually drop out. I was kicked out.”

The words punctured the quiet of the room and echoed inside my head. *Kicked out. Kicked out. Out. Out.*

The choice he’d made...wasn’t a *choice*. He’d been forced out.

“I’d failed more than half of my classes. But it wasn’t because I slacked off or didn’t take it seriously.” He looked at me. “I know you thought I didn’t put in any effort, but in reality, I spent most of my days and nights studying as much as I could. It just wasn’t enough for someone like me. I—” He pulled at the collar of his shirt, unease radiating off him. “I’m dyslexic.”

Shock cascaded through me. Mason, *dyslexic*? There’s no way. There’d been a dyslexic kid in my tenth-grade class. All I could remember was him writing his tests in a different room from the rest of us. He was quiet, very shy, and he hated to draw attention to himself. He’d been nothing like Mason.

“I don’t understand,” I said with a shake of my head.

Mason's lips pressed into a thin line.

"But..." I needed to check myself before I said something stupid. Besides my limited experience with the boy in tenth grade, I didn't know a lot about the condition. "What does it mean? Why didn't you say?"

"I didn't ever talk about it. My parents never got me tested as a child. They couldn't live with the thought of their suspicions being confirmed. It would ruin the perfect image they'd built." A bitter note had snuck into his voice. "Every dyslexic is different. My learning problems weren't that obvious at first. I did okay in math, physics—pretty much everything but English, where I scraped by with Bs and the occasional C. But that changed when I started high school. The material got harder across the board and when I read things—long paragraphs, essays, prompts—it was a huge struggle to understand them. I had to decode each sentence, word by word. It took hours for me to get through an assignment that should have taken no more than thirty minutes."

That's why he didn't want to read the contracts I shoved in his face. Not because he was uninterested, but because he couldn't understand them. How did he manage to hide this for so long? I was certain even Adeline didn't know, otherwise it would have slipped out eventually.

"My dad was convinced it was all a matter of hard work and discipline," he continued. "He wouldn't let my mom hire any specialized tutors, because that would be admitting I had a problem, so he personally tutored me. It was..." Mason swallowed. "He wasn't a patient teacher, let's just say that. For years, I spent most of my time studying, on my own or with him, on a schedule that few kids my age could adhere to. It got me through high school but it also took everything out of me."

I could see it was hard for him to relive these memories, so I reached for his hand and clasped it inside my own.

"The only thing that kept me going through that time was music, playing with Through Azure Skies, and developing my drumming ability," he said, looking down at our hands.

“Drumming came to me easily. It felt like second nature. Getting good at it and getting praise from my bandmates gave me confidence. It allowed me to see myself as more than just an academic failure, but those feelings lasted only until the next time my dad and I sat down at his desk, him ready to remind me just how inadequate I was. One late evening, after we’d spent the entire weekend studying for a test, only for me to get a fifty on the practice test he gave me, he lost his temper. He said, I’d better grow out of this, because no one could possibly love an idiot like me. Those words stayed with me. How could they not?”

I couldn’t hold back my horrified gasp. Who could say something so cruel to their kid? Now, I saw his decision to force Mason to go to college in an entirely new light. “I’m so sorry, Mase.”

He shook his head. “After high school, I told him I was done. What was the point of me going to college just to fail? I didn’t want to feel inadequate for another four years. When I told my dad that, he lost his mind. He said he’d spent so many years trying to fix me, that I was going to college or getting the hell out of his house. He was ready to kick me out that same night, but my mom calmed him down. She said of course I had to go to college, but I didn’t have to go right away. She always took my dad’s side, but I think she sensed how close I was to my breaking point, so she tried to find a compromise. We settled on getting me two years to do whatever I wanted on their dime. But then I was going.”

Everything was coming together now. It was during those years that I started getting to know Mason. I had no idea what he was like in high school, and my sister graduated a few years before him, so she probably had no idea as well. They’d been close, but mostly because of their band. If Mason had wanted to hide that side of him from her, it would have been easy enough to do it. “You used that time to live the life you wanted.”

“Yeah, I tried to make the most of it, despite having to take the SAT over and over again so that I could get a score my dad deemed good enough. Finally, on my fourth try, I did it. He

congratulated me, even told me he was proud of me, but at that point, I had so much resentment toward him the compliment felt empty. I used those two years to have the high school experience I never got to have—slacking off, drinking, partying, and playing music. God, I loved playing with the band so much. It made me feel alive unlike anything else. But even in that domain, I was scared my talent was a fluke. What if one day it would be just gone?”

The idea that a musician of Mason’s caliber could doubt himself would have seemed impossible if I hadn’t seen my sister struggle with similar feelings for years. I squeezed his hand, and he met my gaze for a moment before speaking again.

“The two years flew by way too fast, and then it was time for me to deliver on my end of the deal. I was headed to Northeastern so that my dad would never have to be ashamed of his son who only got a high school education. The thing is, despite my dad’s wishes, dyslexia isn’t something you can grow out of. And because I never got diagnosed, never even began to understand what was wrong with me, I had no chance at succeeding. I didn’t know how to study or learn on my own. I couldn’t ask for accommodations because I didn’t have an official diagnosis at first, but even once I got it, I couldn’t bring myself to tell any of my professors. I’d been conditioned to be ashamed of it, still am. Telling you this is...difficult.”

A harsh taste filled my mouth. I was starting to see the things I’d said to him at that party in a new, horrible light.

He tipped his head back, looking at some spot on the wall. “It’s better to be known as irresponsible than stupid, don’t you think? That’s what I decided a few weeks into the first semester. I could be the guy who slacked off and made bad choices. Who’d get wasted the night before a test and laugh about failing it. That sounded a hell of a lot better than admitting there simply weren’t enough hours in the day for me to actually learn the material. Kaz was there through it all. He saw me struggling, and when the inevitable happened, he offered to drop out with me. Said he was more interested in making music together than staying in Northeastern on his

own. It meant a lot to me. My parents cut off contact with me when they found out what had happened. I don't know where I'd be without Kaz by my side."

Pulling his hand out of mine, he shook his head. "Fuck. I just unloaded on you. This was supposed to make you feel better."

I climbed off the bed and went down before him, placing my hands on his knees, just like he'd done to me last night. His eyes surveyed me, their usual lightness all but gone. "Mase," I croaked past the ball in my throat. "Thank you for telling me all this. The things I said to you then... I didn't know. Never would have imagined it."

Hesitantly, he lifted his hand and brought it to my cheek. "I know."

"I judged you harshly for leaving without knowing the full story. I should have respected your choice. You knew what was right for you. No wonder you were so angry at me. I deserve your anger."

He shook his head. "No. It was immature of me to hold a childish grudge for so long. You didn't know the full story because I was terrified of sharing it with you. You were only trying to keep me from making what you thought was a mistake."

"No. I mean, yes. But also, no." The truth was on the tip of my tongue—

"I know, Mol. You were fighting your own battles. Your sister worked so hard to get you to Northeastern, and I was just throwing—"

"No! That's not it." I had to tell him. There was no holding it back anymore. "I wanted you to stay for *me*, Mase. I thought you liked me. Wanted to be with me. But months went by, and nothing ever happened, and I didn't know why. You pulled away. And then you said you were leaving for good, and my first instinct was to make you stay."

He stared at me, his eyes wide with surprise at my words.

Pushing off his knees, I turned away, suddenly too scared to keep looking into the mirrors of his blue eyes. Could he sense my thoughts? Did he know I still wanted him now, even when I was sleeping with his best friend?

The wild thing was coiled tightly inside my chest, lurking in the shadows and ready to spring out. My hands were shaking, as if keeping her contained required physical effort.

Mason rose from the bed and stopped behind me, his delicious clean scent invading my senses and making it harder and harder for me to keep my emotions contained. I longed to lean back into his broad chest and feel his strong arms around me, but I dug deep, finding one last crumb of self-control.

“I wanted you.” His voice was low, his breath hot on the back of my neck. “But I was ashamed of myself. I couldn’t stand the thought of you knowing just how broken I was.”

“You’re not broken,” I whispered. “I’d never think that, Mase.”

“But I do. Do you see now how we’re the same?” His drew lines down the backs of my arms with his fingertips, his touch as hot as fire and as light as air. “Pride and shame... They’re two sides of the same coin, aren’t they?”

My pride was borne of my shame. Mason’s shame was created from his father’s pride. It was a mobius strip of loneliness and fear that had become like a noose around our necks.

Slowly, I turned around to face him. He was so close, a deep breath would be enough to make our chests touch. The way he was looking at me made my breath hitch and my skin tingle with electricity.

“I want to toss that coin away,” I said shakily.

“So do I,” he whispered, darkness seeping into his voice. “But it has a tendency to find its way back.”

His lips descended onto mine with an air of inevitability. There’d been no other option, no other conscious choice to make. The wild thing had known we’d end up here from the very first second he walked into Hyperion’s offices, but I’d

become a practiced denier of her wisdom. It was too bad that in the long run, deniers always lost the battle against truth.

He held my waist in a firm, desperate grip as I tilted my head back to give him better access. He plunged his tongue inside my mouth, licking, sucking, and tasting everything I had to give. When I dared to open my eyes, it was like looking at things through a feverish haze, with only his piercing blue gaze anchoring me to reality.

After a few moments, he made a tortured sound and pulled away, dropping his hands down. “Fuck. We can’t do this.” He raked his fingers through his hair and crossed the room, trying to put some distance between us. “Not when you’re with Kaz.”

*Kaz.* The singer’s face flashed before my eyes, but the wild thing didn’t shrink with the wave of guilt that crashed over me. It stood up straighter and mouthed four simple words.

*I want them both.*

It was impossible. Selfish. Destructive. I’d had this thing inside of me for years, and I’d never managed to contain her. Now, she would walk me to the edge of a cliff and push me off with a cackling laugh. All because I’d failed so miserably at keeping her locked up.

*I can’t have them both.*

*You haven’t even tried.*

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, crossing to the other side of the room to put more distance between us. “I think I want to be alone now.”

Mason left without another sound. Ten minutes later, I was still planted in the same spot with the fading memory of him on my lips.





## MOLLY

THE PHOTOSHOOT WAS SCHEDULED to start at the ungodly hour of six am. I was still coming to terms with the events of the weekend as I shuttled the two groggy men down a nearly empty freeway. My composure was in check, but my thoughts took turns swirling around the kiss with Mason, my overall situation in the aftermath of the assault, and the fact that I really couldn't risk anyone at the shoot finding out I was living with the two of them.

Last night, during the awkward post-kiss-that-never-should-have-happened dinner, I reminded them not to let it slip, but I was still worried.

“If Trinity shows up and asks about how you got to the shoot, remember to say I came from my place to pick you up,” I instructed, even if the chances of Trinity inquiring about their transport were slim. She didn't concern herself with trivialities.

Kaz grunted unintelligibly, while Mason remained quiet, his face turned to the window. I bit my lip as I watched him through the rearview mirror. He was upset. Probably because of the kiss.

Definitely because of me.

The line between right and wrong in this situation seemed unfairly blurred. Was it wrong of me to kiss Mason while sleeping with Kaz? It's not like the singer and I were exclusive. We weren't anything, really.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. No, that was a lie. Along the way, Kaz had started to mean something to me, and as far as I could tell, the feeling wasn't one-sided. We had a connection that went beyond being purely sexual, and if he knew I'd kissed Mason...he'd be hurt.

Everything inside of me rebelled against the idea of hurting Kaz, but why hadn't that stopped me from kissing

Mason? Why did everything about that moment feel so goddamn right?

I couldn't logic my way out of this. The feelings bubbling inside of me were confusing, irrational, *incompatible*, and yet...

And yet...

My heart felt full in a way it never had before. Looking at the two men through the mirror, I swallowed past the strange sensation in my throat. I needed to talk to the only person who could credibly advise me on the situation—Adeline—but that conversation would have to wait.

We arrived at the warehouse serving as the location for the shoot just as the sun peeked over the horizon. Kaz and Mase climbed out of the car, the singer donning his sunglasses, and the drummer hidden behind the peak of his cap. Something about the barely there light and their ragged appearance highlighted their status as up-and-coming rock stars, and in response, a thrilling sensation ran up my spine. They were so fucking *hot* I wouldn't have been surprised if the windows of my car fogged up on the drive over.

Kaz caught me staring and frowned, misinterpreting my thoughts.

*Probably for the best.*

"Hey, you don't need to babysit us all day," he said, taking a concerned step in my direction. "If you want, you can just go back home—I mean, to your home," he corrected himself despite no one being around us, "and get some rest."

"I'm good," I told him with a smile. "Just need a coffee, and I'll perk right up."

"You sure?" Mason asked, pushing his palms into the pockets of his jeans. "No one would blame you for taking another day to recover after what happened."

"Trinity doesn't know, remember? And I want to keep it that way. Seriously, I'm fine. Let's go in before Theo yells at us for being late."

Mason searched my face for a heartbeat before nodding in reluctant agreement. We crossed the parking lot and knocked on the heavy steel door.

A young assistant in thick-framed glasses and a hoodie let us in after checking our names off a clipboard. “You two are going straight to makeup and hair. Someone will bring you breakfast,” she said after announcing Last Rites’ arrival into her walkie-talkie. “And you’re with me for now,” she said, pointing at me.

We dropped the guys off at the dressing rooms and headed to the set. “I’m Nora,” the woman introduced herself. “Theo’s assistant. My job is to make sure this thing goes smoothly. I know you guys have a tight budget, and we need to get all the shots in just a few hours, so we’re going to be running a tight ship.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said. “I hope we won’t have any unexpected hiccups.”

“So far so good, but I need to check on the model flying in from San Francisco for the “Mahogany” promo photos. She was supposed to have landed just now, but I haven’t heard anything. You okay if I leave you for a moment?”

This stirred my memory. The guys had pushed back on a bunch of Theo’s ideas, but one he’d managed to slip through was adding a female model to promote the upcoming single and amp up the sex appeal. Seemed a bit old school to me, but I think everyone was tired of arguing over each little detail, so they’d let that one pass.

“Definitely. I’m going to hunt down some coffee,” I said, scanning the area for catering.

Nora pointed it out and rushed away.

I walked over to the table laden with coffee pots, granola bars, yogurts, and an assortment of fruit and picked out a few things before pouring myself a big cup.

“Oh, it’s you,” someone said in a disgruntled voice behind me.

Careful not to spill any of my coffee on myself, I turned to face Theo. He gave me an assessing once-over and pursed his thin lips. “What was your name again?”

Despite being sure he was trying to be nasty, I gave him my brightest smile and said, “Molly. Great to see you again.”

“Is your boss coming to this thing?”

“She’ll drop by for a bit in the early afternoon once she’s done with her other meetings.”

“And what are you here for?”

I co-opted Nora’s earlier words to me. “To make sure everything goes smoothly. Don’t worry, I’ll stay out of your way. Just want to make myself available to Mason and Kaz in case they need anything, and maybe snap a few BTS shots.”

To my relief, he didn’t seem overly upset about the last part. “Yes, Trinity mentioned something about that and how Last Rites didn’t have the budget to hire a professional.”

The smile stayed frozen on my face, even if it no longer reached my eyes. Why did guys like him get off on minimizing other people? He had to be painfully insecure about something to act this way.

“They have to be scrappy until they get their record deal,” I offered. “Something this shoot will hopefully help with.”

The glint in Theo’s eyes told me he took that as a compliment. “I should hope so. If only you knew how many musicians have told me it was my work that put them on the radar. I should really be getting a cut of their royalties.”

The arrogance was so over the top I thought he was screwing with me. But, no, he appeared to mean it and was now expecting a response, when all I wanted to do was send this very hot coffee flying in his face.

Instead, I took a small sip and pointedly looked at a clock hanging on the wall beside us. “Oh, shoot, I’m sorry. I told the guys I’d bring them breakfast. Let me do that quickly.”

He gave me an irritated shrug. “Hurry, we’re starting in thirty minutes.”

I waited until he walked far enough in the direction of the set before making my way to the dressing rooms, praying Theo wouldn't catch me in my lie. When I walked in, the guys were getting some makeup done while trying to sneak in bites of the breakfast that had already been provided.

"Hey," I called out, hesitant to move any closer to the flurry of people around them. "Do you need anything?"

Mason's gaze found mine in the back-lit mirror. "All good."

"How do we look?" Kaz asked, looking markedly more awake than on the drive here. Something told me he was getting excited for this thing, and I couldn't blame him. Their future stardom was becoming more and more real with every single day. Today in particular was a big step forward.

"Like you're halfway through getting your make up done," I said with a teasing grin.

One corner of his lips quirked up. "Just you wait."

Ten minutes later, when they rose from their makeup chairs and changed into the clothes selected by the stylist, I had to bite my tongue.

They looked good enough to *devour*. Mason was rocking a black Last Rites T-shirt, dark jeans that hugged him in all the right places, and a pair of leather combat boots. Beside him, Kaz stood in a button-up shirt with the top three buttons undone, sleeves pushed up to show off the tattoos on his forearms, and his fingers adorned with thick rings.

I wanted those hands on me. The cool metal against my scorching, needy skin. They were trying not to make eye contact with me, probably conscious of my admonishments about not giving anyone the wrong idea about us, but even their brief glances felt like licks of fire across my cheeks.

There was a thick, sexually potent silence as all the other women in the room took a moment to admire their excellent work.

"You look good, boys," said a short-haired woman who looked to be the oldest and most experienced. "Now get the

hell out there and make love to the camera.”

They exchanged some friendly barbs with the rest of the wardrobe team and then made it over to me. I cleared my throat and gave them a shaky smile. “C’mon, I’ll walk you over to the set.”

As soon as we exited the dressing room, Nora was on us. “You’re ready. Good. We’ve switched the order of the scenes we’re shooting. Briony, the model for your new release, is still in San Francisco because of a flight delay. She’ll be in the air soon, but we have to get started now if we want to get it all done.”

“Fine by us,” Mason said as he surveyed the set. It was a simple setup. A silky black backdrop, a drum kit off to the side, and a distressed leather couch where most of the official band photos would be shot.

Kaz nudged me with his elbow and gave me a wink. “You’re awfully quiet.”

Yeah, because I was acutely aware of how many pairs of admiring eyes on the two of them, and the jealousy surging through my veins made me clam up. They weren’t mine to be jealous of, goddamn it. “I’m just worried about your model. Trinity will be pissed if we don’t get what we came here for, and your budget doesn’t leave much room for error.”

“We’ll make it work,” he assured me. “We don’t need the model to get kick-ass photos, no matter what Theo thinks.”

With one last confident grin in my direction, he sauntered over to where Mason was talking to Theo.

I hovered around aimlessly for a while before deciding to pull out my camera and get started on the behind-the-scenes photos. Nothing much was happening yet. Theo was shouting directions to Nora and the set designers, while Mason and Kaz lounged on the couch. But there was beauty to be found even in moments of idleness. As a photographer, no matter how amateur, it was my job to capture it.

I circled around the set at a distance that felt safe—God forbid I got in Theo’s way—and snapped a few shots.

Everyone was too busy to notice me, which was exactly how I liked it. It didn't take me long to get into a good flow, searching for the right angle, finding an interesting story to tell, and capturing the right moment.

When Theo started shooting, I didn't stop. He didn't seem to pay any mind to me, and if this was how the rest of the day went, I'd be in the clear. I could tell he was getting some powerful images of the guys, who by now appeared at ease on the set. Kaz slung his arm around Mason's shoulders and looked off to the left, both of them sprawled on the couch.

Click.

Click.

Click.

A thousand more clicks later, and the first part of the shoot was wrapped up.

"Can someone tell me where the hell is Briony?" Theo barked to no one in particular. "Is she still on that goddamn plane?"

Nora rushed over to him with her clipboard squeezed under her arm. "They're waiting to land, apparently some traffic-control issue. Might be another hour."

Shit. We didn't have any time to waste. I lowered my camera and hurried closer to the set that was quickly getting dismantled by two strong-looking dudes. "I can call Trinity and see if she has a backup," I said to Theo.

"We can't wait for your boss to decide to take this seriously," he snapped. "She's not even here. We need a stand-in. Nora!" he called out loudly even though his assistant was only a few feet away. "Find me a stand-in so we can figure out the right shots, and we'll swap Briony in as soon as she gets here."

Nora looked like she was about to keel over from stress, her frantic eyes searching around the set. "What kind of a stand-in? Someone with similar features to Briony or—"



Theo silenced her by lifting his palm and zooming in his attention on me. “Enough. We’ll use Molly.”

A weight dropped inside my stomach. “I’m sorry?”

He raised one mocking brow. “You’re here to be helpful, aren’t you? So be helpful.”

Mason and Kaz had come up to stand beside us, and I shot them a nervous glance before turning back to Theo. “What do you need me to do exactly?”

“Just follow my directions and don’t ask any questions,” he said gruffly. “We’re back here in fifteen.”

I rubbed my arms as I watched him stomp away. Of course, I’d help them however they needed, but I was a hell of a lot more comfortable behind the camera than in front of it.

“What should I expect?” I asked, turning to Kaz and Mase. “I saw they sent an email on Saturday about some changes for this shoot, but I didn’t read it.” I was behind on work after barely opening my laptop the whole weekend. The guys had told me they were on top of everything.

Kaz and Mason shared a look. Before they could answer, the two burly stagehands reappeared carrying what looked like a bed frame to the set.

Nervous energy travelled up my spine. “What’s this? Wasn’t this shoot supposed to be the two of you in a fake concert hall?”

“They changed it at the last minute,” Kaz said, keeping his voice low. “They wanted us to—”

“Okay! Listen up,” Theo reappeared with Nora by his side. She waved her arms in the air to get everyone’s attention.

“We’ve got Mason on the bed,” Theo read off a clipboard, pointing to the set that was rapidly being assembled. “He’s there with Brio—I mean, Molly.” His finger moved to me. “She’s in his lap, he’s kissing her neck, and then we have Kaz on the edge of the bed beside them, writing the lyrics for the song in blood on the floor...”

My eyes all but bulged out of their sockets. “Wait, what?”

Theo leveled me with a hard look that radiated impatience. “Molly, what are you still doing here? Wardrobe, now! Do we have the fake blood ready? Where is it?”

I didn’t get a chance to stutter out another word before Nora was dragging me away in the direction of the makeup tent. I shot a helpless look at Mason, who grimaced and shrugged in response. Beside him, Kaz stared at me with an apologetic expression.

This was a disaster. What was Trinity going to think when she saw the photos? I hoped to God the real model would appear quickly. Maybe she’d arrive and I’d be spared from being her stand-in.

Makeup and wardrobe made fast work of me. I felt as if I’d been tossed in the center of hurricane consisting of sponges, brushes, hair straighteners, and other devices meant to transform me at record speed.

“Gosh, what’s that on your neck?” one of the makeup artists asked, pointing at my fading bruises.

“I burned myself with a hair curler,” I said quickly. “Can you cover it up?”

She snorted. “Child’s play, honey.”

She wasn’t kidding. A few minutes later, I couldn’t see any hint of the discoloration.

Someone helped me take off my clothes before handing me a black lingerie set and tugging a silky slip over my head.

“You look hot,” one of the women said before shoving me in front of a mirror.

I gasped. I was half naked in a room of at least a dozen strangers. My thighs were on display, peeking through the slits in the slip dress, and my breasts were practically spilling out of the engineered push-up bra. This was ludicrous. I couldn’t go through with it.

“I can’t do this,” I whisper-yelled to Nora, who was already pulling me outside of the room. “Nora, seriously!”

She paused to give me a once-over. “What’s the problem? You look great.”

“It’s indecent,” I hissed. “I’m an assistant, not a lingerie model. How would you feel if Theo told you to get up on that stage?”

“Terrible. And then I’d suck it up and do it because I don’t want to be out of a job.” She pulled a robe off a hook by the door. “Here, put this on for now.”

I donned the robe, making sure to tuck everything I could inside. “How far away is Briony?” I asked, tying the belt in a tight knot.

“They’ve landed and waiting to disembark.” She held the door open and waved me through it. “We need to hurry. They’re waiting for you.”

And I was waiting for the ground to open up and swallow me whole, but something told me it wasn’t going to happen. As we made our way back to the set, I told myself to stay calm and keep it professional. Surely I could act like a professional even if I looked like I was on my way to work a corner.

My anxiety lowered when Nora and I finally made it back and neither Theo, nor the many assistants swirling around him, paid me any mind. Maybe I’d overreacted in the dressing room. I mean, I was just a temporary prop, right? Kaz and Mason were the real stars of the shoot.

Inhaling for courage, I stepped up on the elevated set and padded over to the guys. They stood with their bare backs turned to me, their eyes glued to their phones.

*Hold up, when did their shirts come off?*

I allowed myself two seconds to admire their muscular builds. Okay, maybe three. Then I cleared my throat to get their attention. “So it sounds like Briony might be a little while, but at least she’s on the ground.”

They turned at the sound of my voice, abandoning whatever they were doing. Kaz’s eyes widened.

“I shot a quick text to Trinity to let her know about the delay,” I continued, “but she—”

“Okay, we’re getting started,” Theo shouted, jogging over to us. “Mason, you’re on the bed. Molly, get undressed and climb onto him. Quickly!”

I swallowed, frantically undoing the knot of my belt before slipping the robe off.

“Holy fuck,” Mason said under his breath. His gaze met mine and then dropped lower, sending micro-currents of electricity across every inch of my skin. For a moment, the look on his face was pure hunger, then he caught himself and shot a guilty glance at Kaz.

But the singer was oblivious. He stepped closer to me, as if forgetting we were in a room full of other people, and dipped his mouth close to my ear. “Baby girl, you’re the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

My breath caught in my throat. He shouldn’t say things like that, things that made my heart pound and my chest feel as if it were splitting open. I didn’t get a chance to respond before Theo was shouting again, telling us to hurry it up. Loud rock music started playing in the background.

Mason got on the bed, and then I was on top of him, my knees bracketing his hips. Immediately, the slip rode up my thighs.

Mason glanced at the dark fabric of my panties and released a heavy breath.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly.

“Hands on her waist! Sit up straighter, Mason!”

We adjusted our position, our movements resulting in all kinds of delicious friction between his jeans and the thin fabric between my legs. I bit on my lip. This shouldn’t be turning me on in the slightest. There were cameras pointing at us, blinding lights from all directions, strangers moving in and out to fix our makeup and adjust my hair. And yet all I could focus on was the electric feeling of Mason’s big hands splayed over my waist.

“I’m fine,” he answered, sounding anything but that. He looked pained, the tendons of his neck flexed and tense.

I shifted a bit, and he tightened his grip. “For the love of God, stop moving, Molly.”

“Move up higher, Molly,” Theo commanded. “Put your hands on his shoulders.”

“I have to move,” I said out of the corner of my mouth. Theo was already shooting, circling us like a vulture.

I nudged closer, and Mason exhaled through his teeth. “Fuck.”

*Oh.*

I felt him pressing against me, hard as a rock. Self-consciously, I glanced at Kaz over my shoulder.

“Hold it! That’s good. Keep looking at Kaz.”

Kaz sat on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees, and his expression as dark as night. Fake blood dipped off his fingers onto the bloody letters on the ground. But he wasn’t looking at the letters. He was staring directly at me as I straddled his best friend.

A thrill ran up my spine.

God, there was something seriously wrong with me.

“Okay, now let’s see some more movement. I want to capture you in motion.”

I could tell Mason was biting on the inside of his mouth by the way his cheeks were caving in. “Relax,” I whispered. “You look like you’re about to pass out.”

“I might,” he said as he dragged his hands down to my hips. “This is difficult.”

“Yes, one might even say...hard.”

He shot me a deadly look that flickered with amusement. “This is not how I imagined my first photoshoot.”

“You mean you didn’t fantasize about having me in your lap in front of twenty strangers?” I raked my hand through his

hair, tugging a bit at his nape.

His throat vibrated with a barely perceptible growl. “Let’s just say having you in my lap was reserved for an entirely different type of fantasy.”

My pulse raced beneath my skin and throbbed between my legs. He moved his palms back up to my waist, brushing his fingertips against the curve of my ass in the process, and all I wanted was for the cameras around us to disappear.

I craned my neck, looking back at Kaz, and my body grew hot at the desire painted across his expression.

“Kaz! Reach over and curl Molly’s hair around your fist. I want tension! I want intrigue!”

Kaz didn’t need to be told twice. He reached for me, pulling me to him, making me bear my neck to Mason. My heart kept colliding with my chest, over and over, as if it wanted to break free.

*It’s not your heart. It’s me.*

The wild thing. She wanted to be let out. The cage was failing, breaking apart at the seams, and I had no idea how to mend it. Kaz’s hand curled over my shoulder, light but firm.

“That’s it. Hold it!”

Theo’s voice cut through my trance. I pried open my eyes, the lights around us reminding me where we were and what was at stake.

Suddenly, the clicking of the camera stopped.

“There she is. Briony, we’ve been waiting! Let’s take a five-minute break.”

Movement exploded around us, but the small bubble around Kaz, Mason, and I stayed still. Our chests rose and fell.

And an unspoken question waited to be answered.



## MASON

I HEARD A SAYING ONCE about nothing making us as lonely as our secrets. Its meaning hadn't sunk in until I'd finally told Molly my big secret last night. The shameful truth had kept me away from her in college because I'd convinced myself she'd never accept me if she knew.

Well, in a life full of fuck ups, that topped the list. It was out in the open now, and it turned out, she didn't give a damn.

I'd allowed my fear to win, and now I had to live knowing I'd lost her because of it. If I were a decent person, I'd let her go and deal with my shit however I needed to. That's what I said I'd do after I kissed her last night. Kaz was my best friend, and unlike me, he knew how to go after what he wanted. He'd earned the reward. I wouldn't do anything to take Molly from him.

But after that photoshoot, my resolve was cracking and crumbling at my feet.

I guess I wasn't all that decent, because I couldn't erase the memory of her in my lap, no matter how hard I tried. If I had to guess, I'd be cursed with reliving that image for the rest of my life.

We were on our way home from the shoot, Molly sitting in the driver's seat. She was considerably more clothed than she'd been just a few hours ago, but my hands still itched to slide under her T-shirt and press against her soft skin. Instead, I stuffed them into the pockets of my jeans.

As if that would help.

Blowing out a breath, I bit the inside of my cheek.

I wanted her more than I'd ever wanted anything.

And she was with my best friend.

"I need to pick up some things from the store," Molly said as we pulled up to the house.



“We’ll go with you,” Kaz said.

She shook her head. “It’s been a long day. I’ll be quick.”

Kaz and I climbed out of the car and trudged inside. I was exhausted. My stomach was a churning cocktail of regret, pain, and bitter craving.

Suddenly, I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep it down.

I pressed my back against wall and looked over at Kaz. I needed to tell him. I had no idea how he was going to take it, and that scared the hell out of me, but if I didn’t get this off my chest, it would only fester more. Fear had led me astray too many times before. Today, I was choosing courage.

“It hurts to see you with her.”

He halted in place, already halfway down the hall. His back was to me, so I couldn’t see his expression, but his shoulders rose an inch.

“I can’t keep lying to you anymore,” I said, running my palms over my forehead. “I never hated Molly. Fuck, how could I? Did you know I was seventeen the first time I met her? I’d been playing in a band with her sister for two years by then, but somehow our paths hadn’t crossed. The first time I saw Molly was at her parents’ funeral. She stood beside Adeline in a black dress, a skinny little thing with a mop of blond hair hanging over her shoulders. I couldn’t stop looking at her. She looked so sad and defeated beside her older sister. But at one point, our eyes met, and I realized I was wrong. She was devastated but not defeated by the shitty hand she’d been dealt. There was a fire inside of her. A flicker of determination that refused to disappear even during what must have been her darkest moment. It stunned me. For days, all I thought about were those bright-green eyes.”

Kaz was frozen as he listened to me. My gaze brushed over his back, but there was no hint to what he was thinking.

I kept going. “Every time I met her after, I noticed something else I liked about her, but she was too young for me. At least that’s what Ade said when she noticed my interest in her. I respected that, but it didn’t stop me from flirting with

Molly whenever we were in the same room. I thought I'd finally ask her out when we got to Northeastern, but I got my diagnosis right before I worked up the guts to do it. And then it was too late. I knew I'd never be good enough for her. When she noticed me pulling away, things soured between us."

A part of me wished I could go back in time and ask her out the day we got to campus. But if I'd been with her all along, would I have dropped out and moved to LA with Kaz? This was my life now, and I couldn't imagine not being a musician. What if Molly and I were never meant to be?

Well, then it looked like I was doomed, because I couldn't let her go.

"I thought I could get over her, Kaz. I really did try. But I can't. I want her, even though I have no right. Last night, I told her about my dyslexia, and afterwards, I kissed her. I'm an asshole." I squeezed my eyes shut. "I'm telling you this because you're my best friend, and I'm done keeping secrets."

The ground beneath my feet felt unsteady, as if my words had destabilized it. Kaz was my best friend. The guy who'd dropped out of college to chase after the same crazy dream as me. I was risking it all by confessing how I felt about the woman he was with. As seconds ticked by with silence as his only response, dread enveloped me.

He let out a heavy sigh, letting his shoulders drop before turning to me. His expression seemed defeated. "She never got over you either. It all started as a way for her to move on from you."

I let his words sink in for a moment. No, that couldn't be true. "I've seen how she looks at you."

"And I've seen how she looks at *you*. Today at the shoot. That first time in Hyperion's office. Fuck, every single day she's here when she's capturing you working downstairs." He dragged his nails down his neck. "It's always been you and her, Mase. I'm just a temporary thing, ready to be discarded when the right time comes. I'm the one that gets left behind."

I saw his hidden thoughts spelled out across his face. “I don’t know how it started, but I know where you are now, and you’re not disposable to her.”

He scoffed and looked away. “That would be a first.”

He thought that because that’s how his mom had made him feel for a good chunk of his life. But he was wrong.

Pushing off the wall, I made my way to him. “Kaz, you’re my partner. My only real family in this fucked-up world. Have you forgotten this?” I bared my wrist to him, showing him the tattoo we both had. “Thicker than blood. You’ll never be disposable to me. I’m telling you this stuff about Molly not because I want you to step aside, but because if I’m not honest with you, then I can’t be honest with anyone.”

His eyes swam with vulnerability I’d rarely seen on him. He swallowed hard. “I don’t know what to say, Mase. I...I like her a lot. Seeing her hurt that day made me realize how much she means to me.”

Even in this, we were in sync. The moment I saw that bruise on her neck would be with me until my dying day. I’d never felt so livid, so ready to make whoever did that to her pay.

“We both want her,” Kaz said. “And maybe, just maybe, right now she wants both of us too. At some point though, she’s going to have to make a choice. You or me.”

What would happen to us when that choice was made? Would Last Rites survive in the aftermath? Would our friendship?

I covered my mouth with my palm as fear filled up my lungs. We could lose everything we’d managed to build over the past three years. *Everything.*

“Unless there’s a third option we haven’t considered,” Kaz said.

I met his contemplative gaze, an inkling of what he might say next sparking and growing inside me.

“If she really does want us both, why should we make her choose?”

“She’s not her sister,” was my immediate response. “We can’t assume—”

“I’m not assuming anything, and her sister’s relationship is not why I’m suggesting this.” He held my eyes with his. “Tell me, didn’t it feel kind of...really fucking right to you today at the shoot? The three of us together?”

I paced the hall. Once. Twice. “Yeah, it did. But we were acting.”

Kaz let out a chuckle. “I’m a shitty actor. It wasn’t just today either. Lately, whenever we’re together, I feel like I finally belong somewhere. It’s a fleeting sensation, but maybe if we explored it further...”

“Who knows,” I muttered.

“You said it hurt to see her with me.” Kaz stopped in front of me and looked me in the eye. “Dig deep, Mase. Does it hurt because she’s with *me*, or because *you’re* not a part of it?”

This was a distinction I hadn’t considered. I wanted Molly, but I also needed Kaz. Our friendship wasn’t something I was willing to throw away. What if we shared her the way we shared our dream of making it as musicians? What if it worked just as well?

Hope dripped into my blood, spreading a tentative lightness through me. “Neither of us are perfect, but we’ve always been better together,” I said, placing my hand on his arm.

The corners of his lips inched up as he covered my hand with his. “Then maybe together, we’ll be good enough for her.”

---

She slept with Kaz that night. We hadn’t wanted to spring anything on her when she returned from the store tired and

ready to pass out. I lay in bed staring at my ceiling for a long time, mulling the idea over and picking it apart from every angle. There was a long list of things that could go wrong, starting from her rejecting us outright, and ending with Kaz and I—our friendship and our band—disintegrating in the aftermath.

The latter worried me a lot less than the former. I guess there was a part of me that was sure Kaz and I would figure out whatever we needed to. That's how it had always been with us.

But Molly? I didn't know how she'd react. True connection between people didn't conform to arbitrary societal standards. If she felt even a fraction of what Kaz and I felt for her, I hoped she'd consider it. After all, she'd *seen* it work for her sister.

I pressed my fingers to my neck, feeling my pulse beating out an anxious rhythm. Maybe she'd be in my bed and in my arms tomorrow night. All that soft and supple skin still left to explore. The thought of her writhing beneath me was enough to get my dick stirring. I wanted to see her come apart, to know each one of her expressions when she reached her peak. There were so many things about her I'd missed out on knowing, but maybe I'd still get my chance.

Tomorrow, I'd tell her how I felt.

The ultimate leap of faith.

And I was ready to take it.

---

“We need to talk.”

Molly lowered her camera and looked at me with curious eyes. “What about?”

We were lounging around downstairs while listening to the final mix of “Mahogany”, our new single scheduled to come out next week. It had Trinity's approval, and all we were waiting on now were the photos from the shoot to go with the

release. A week from now, if everything went to plan, we'd have our biggest hit yet.

Somehow, that felt a lot less monumental than the conversation we were about to have.

Kaz lifted the guitar he had on his lap and propped it against the wall. No matter how calm he seemed, I knew he was as anxious about this as I was. He met my gaze and gave me a barely perceptible nod before standing up. "I'll be right back." We'd agreed he'd let me talk to her one-on-one first.

I cleared my throat, more nervous than I could remember feeling in years. Molly's brows rose slightly as she waited for me to speak.

"Molly, I can't stop thinking about you."

Whatever she'd been expecting, it wasn't that. She grew very still in her chair, her fingers tightening around the camera.

"I've made a lot of mistakes since you've come back into my life," I said. "I told Kaz I was over you when I wasn't. I tried to push you away and failed. I acted like a jerk and I pretended I didn't care. I said things I regret. Well, here's me finally saying what I really feel. I want you, Molly. I've never stopped wanting you. And I—"

She shot up. "Mase. Stop. I can't. I'm—"

"You're with Kaz, I know."

"This is exactly what I was afraid of. Getting between you two." She wrung her hands, tears pooling inside her eyes. "I've made a mess of things, haven't I?"

"Please, let me finish," I pleaded.

There was an intake of breath and then a nod.

"I feel things for you, and I think you feel something for me too," I plowed on. "Maybe it's wishful thinking on my part. Maybe you've moved on from me far better than I managed to move on from you. I don't have a very high opinion of myself, so really, it would be a miracle if somehow

you still liked me after everything I've put you through. But if I'm right, and there's still something here...please, tell me."

She was shaking her head. "It doesn't matter what I feel. I can't choose between you and Kaz. I can't do that to him, or to you. My job was supposed to be about helping you, not tearing you apart. I'm not worth it, I promise you. Oh God, I never should have done any of this."

I steadied her trembling form, placing my hands on her shoulders. "I'm not asking you to choose. And neither is Kaz." I nudged her chin up with my index finger. "Look at me, Mol."

Tears were trailing down her cheeks. I wiped them away with my thumb. "We're not asking you to choose between us. We're asking you to choose *us*."

Understanding crashed over her features like an invisible wave. The speed with which she caught on seemed almost too quick. As if the thought had crossed her mind before. "Both of you?" she asked tentatively.

"Yes," Kaz's voice sounded. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, his hand anchored to the wall. "Both of us."

Molly twisted in my arms, turning to him.

Kaz's features lost some of their hardness when he saw her tear-streaked face. "Don't cry, baby girl."

"I don't know," she mumbled, wiping her face dry. "This is crazy. You know it's freaking crazy, right?"

"Crazier things have happened," Kaz said, walking up to her until they stood inches apart. "Us meeting here after all those years. You taking a chance on me. Mase opening up to you." He slid his hand around her waist. "I don't believe in fate, but recently, I've been thinking back to that college party." His eyes met mine. "It feels like the universe wanted to show us something, doesn't it? The three of us together." He dropped his gaze back to Molly. "Like it was meant to be."

She stood in his arms and searched for my hand. She found it and interlaced our fingers together. "I need some time."

"Take it," I said, squeezing her hand.

Kaz's eyes were fixated on her. "While you're thinking it over, I want you to remember yesterday." He leaned into her. "Us, on set, putting on a show for dozens of people. It shouldn't have been anything but clinical, and yet it felt so fucking right."

Molly shuddered, her cheeks blooming with red. I took it for a good sign.

"Now imagine if it was the real deal," my best friend said hoarsely.

She studied us for a long moment before extracting herself out of Kaz's arms and letting go of my hand. "I'm going to go for a drive."

We watched her disappear up the stairs before turning to each other.

"I hope we didn't screw that up," Kaz muttered, his jaw lined with tension.

We chose truth over lies. Courage over fear.

And now, all that was left was to wait.





## MOLLY

*“IF YOU WANT SOMETHING, you should just try asking for it.”*

Kaz said that to me last Friday, but I'd nearly forgotten about it. It was the day I got attacked, and memories of Cory's assault cast a shadow on everything else that had happened that day.

I was used to struggling. Intimately familiar with it actually. But *this*? Getting offered exactly what I wanted, no matter how impossible it seemed? I had no fricking clue how to handle it.

It seemed too easy. In my life, good things just didn't fall into my lap. The one time I found a penny on the ground, it was turned the wrong side up.

My phone began to vibrate on the dashboard, Adeline's name on the screen.

I pulled over. This wasn't going to be the kind of conversation I could casually have while driving down a busy road.

“You're alive!” she exclaimed as soon as I picked up. “I was this close to cutting the tour short to fly back and track you down, Mol. Where have you been?”

I sucked my bottom lip into my mouth. “Sorry for being MIA. Don't worry, I'm good.”

“You don't sound good. I can hear it in your tone.”

Damn it. My sister knew me too well. “I had to leave my apartment,” I confessed.

“What happened?”

“Don't freak out, okay?”

“I'm already freaking out! Spill it.”

“One of my neighbors turned out to be a creep. We had an altercation, so I moved out.”

I could hear my sister's breath catch. "Oh my God. What kind of an altercation? Were you hurt?"

"Not really." My hand travelled to the right side of my neck where the fading bruises were covered beneath a layer of makeup. "He tried to break into my apartment, but he didn't. It was scary, but I'm honestly okay."

Something clattered on her end of the line. "Where are you staying now?"

"I'm at Mason's. He and his bandmate have a house."

"Kaz, right?"

My brows pulled together. "Wow, good memory."

"You really think I wouldn't do my own snooping when you told me you were working for them? I needed to make sure he wasn't a serial killer. Clearly, I should have done the same for all your neighbors."

I huffed. I was an adult, and yet my sister still couldn't help but baby me. "You don't need to do stuff like that, Ade. I can take care of myself. What is that rustling sound?"

"My suitcase. I'm coming home. You shouldn't be alone at a time like this."

My eyes widened. "Ade, stop. That's crazy. You have what, less than two weeks left? You're almost done with the tour." There was no way I was letting my sister race home for me.

"We can afford to cancel a few dates. It's not like we haven't already made enough money for everyone involved."

She was full of crap. "I know you don't care about the money, but you do care about your fans. It wouldn't be fair to them."

I could visualize the clench in her jaw. "Molly, I don't like this."

"Neither do I, but we'll see each other soon. Plus, I'm not alone. The guys have been really good to me." I picked at the hem of my shirt.

There was a long pause. “You’re going to be staying with them until we get back?”

Well, here it was. I needed advice, badly, which meant telling my sister the truth about what’s been going on. “Yes. I’m kind of...” I cleared my throat. “I’m interested in both of them. And they just told me they feel the same.”

Ade made a funny sound. “God, I really have been a bad influence on you.”

My cheeks heated. “I’m following in your footsteps, aren’t I?”

“I’m kidding. You’re definitely not following in my footsteps. When my relationship with the guys was starting, I had no clue what I wanted. You’re already doing far better than me,” she said with a relieved laugh.

I pursed my lips. “Trust me, I’m not. I’m confused, and I haven’t said anything to them yet, and all I can think is that this is a bad idea no matter how I feel.”

“Why? You’ve seen it can work.”

“Did you know when it all started that you’d fall in love with all of them?”

“Of course not. I took a chance because my heart told me I’d regret it if I didn’t, but I knew very well the whole thing had a high likelihood of becoming a disaster.”

“Right. And you know what disaster would mean for me? I’d be out of a job, first and foremost. The job I worked really hard for. And I’d lose two men that have become good friends.”

“If they like you enough to share you, they will never settle for only a friendship. And the job?” She exhaled a long breath. “Yeah, it’s a risk, but some things are worth it. How much do you like them?”

I squirmed in my seat. “A lot. I...feel connected to them on a level that’s hard to put into words.”

“A soul connection.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“Kaz lifts me up. He’s supportive and encouraging and a hell of a lot of fun. He’s got this hard shell around him, but he lets me get past it, and it makes me feel special. And Mason...” I gnawed at my lip. “It’s everything about him. He’s been through a lot in these past few years, Ade. And he’s come out on top of it all. I’m drawn to his energy and perseverance. He feels like home—comfortable and safe and peaceful. They both make me feel so protected and whole. Does that make any sense to you?”

“It doesn’t matter if it makes sense to *me*. All that matters is that it makes sense to you.”

“It does. Somehow.”

“Then take a chance on them, Mol. One thing I learned early on is that you don’t need to have all the answers. A lot of things that look messy in the beginning have a way of sorting themselves out eventually.”

What if I gave in to my wants and took what I wanted? The thrill of being with both of them was a tempting incentive. God, the things I’d felt during that photoshoot when they were both touching me were unlike anything— *anything*—I’d experienced before. And then there was the safety they gave me without question. In my darkest moment, they were there to help me find the light. Before then, it would have been easy to dismiss the connection between us as something purely physical, but now, I knew from the bottom of my heart it was more than that. If things fell apart, it would hurt. But the regret of not doing anything? That would gnaw at me for the rest of my life.

I turned the keys in the ignition. “Thanks, Ade. I think I know what I need to do.”

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They were playing in the basement when I returned home. Quietly, I sat down at the top of the staircase and listened for a while. They sounded so good it felt like a crime I was the only one in the audience. I smiled to myself. Soon, they'd be playing concert halls and outdoor festivals, and I'd remember this moment fondly.

I waited until they ended the song before making my way down.

Mason sat behind the drums in a loose tank top and sweatpants, while Kaz wore a pair of low-slung jeans and nothing else. Heat bloomed across my skin. It was insane how one look at them could send me spinning.

Kaz was the first to sense my presence. He turned to me, his hand gripping the neck of his guitar. "You're back."

Our eyes locked, and the wild thing caressed the inside of my chest, as if to say, *I've waited long enough. It's time to let me out.*

"I need you to make a promise," I said, flicking my gaze to Mason.

He put his drumsticks on the floor and stood up. "Anything."

"You too, Kaz."

The singer nodded. "What is it?"

"You won't let this distract you from what's most important. Last Rites." On the drive over, it occurred to me that the worst-case scenario here had nothing to do with me and my job. The absolute worst thing that could happen was Mase and Kaz losing sight of their dream. A part of me insisted I was flattering myself for even considering that possibility. Of course, their career would take precedence over me, as it should. But I needed to hear them say it while we were still thinking clearly, before we got involved.

Kaz ran a hand over his chin. "You're not a distraction, baby girl."

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Then it should be an easy promise to make.”

“Molly, you don’t need to worry about that.” Mason emerged from behind the drum set. “Last Rites is always going to be important. We’re not going to drop the ball, especially with you by our side.”

Some of the remaining tension inside of me eased at his words, and when Kaz nodded his agreement, I finally exhaled in relief.

“Does that mean your answer is yes?” Kaz asked. His eyes glimmered with anticipation.

“Yes.” The cage inside of me opened with a soft creak. The wild thing stepped out, tentatively at first, and then with more confidence when she realized nothing would stop her this time.

Kaz walked up to me and cradled my face with his hands. “The best things in life exist on the other side of fear,” he said, brushing his lips against mine.

The heat of Mason’s body enveloped me from behind. “He’s right.” Mason’s voice was hoarse. “The fucker is always right.”

Kaz swallowed the laughter that burst out of me with his mouth. I groaned into his kiss when I felt Mason’s hand slipping under my shirt. It was almost overwhelming. I broke the kiss and turned to the drummer, who didn’t waste a moment before kissing me himself.

By the time I pulled away, the three of us were panting. “Can we take it a bit slow?” My hands were clammy, and my nerves were frayed. The wild thing whined angrily. *How much slower can this get?*

Mase bit on his bottom lip before releasing it. “Of course.”

I could feel impatience radiating off Kaz, but he kept it in check as he moved my hair away from my neck and placed a soft kiss on my skin.

We spent the rest of the evening watching a movie that I was pretty sure no one paid any attention to. How could I give a crap about who James Bond was trying to outsmart when I had Kaz's bare arm slung around my shoulders and one of my legs splayed over Mason's thigh? The wild thing growled impatiently and paced inside my gut.

"Sleep together with us tonight," Kaz whispered into my ear just as something exploded on screen.

"Okay." Hot anticipation curled inside my belly. "Just sleep."

"Whatever you want," Mason said.

When the movie ended, I padded my way into the bathroom, washed off the little makeup I had on, and removed the elastic holding back my hair. I changed into my pajamas. They were only a short pair of cotton shorts and a loose tank top, but it was better than sleeping in my underwear sandwiched between the two men. The thought of it sent a shiver down my spine.

In Kaz's room, the lights have been turned off save for the small bedside lamp, and both Kaz and Mason were already under the blankets, with a very obvious space for me between them. Their attention moved to me as soon as I came out of the bathroom.

I walked to the foot of the bed so that I didn't have to climb over Kaz to get in the middle, and quickly crawled my way up to the headboard.

Mason pulled out a corner of his blanket from under my butt and held it open for me. "Get under here, it's cold tonight."

I bit on my bottom lip and nudged closer to him, as much as I could without touching. When I glanced at Kaz, he was watching the scene play out with obvious amusement.

"Stop smirking," I snapped at him, my nerves already vibrating with tension.

He raised his palms in surrender. "I'm not smirking."



“Oh, yeah, then what’s that?” I pointed at his smirk.

“My gorgeous face,” he deadpanned, earning a chortle from Mason.

“Ugh. Whatever.” I was trying to hide my arousal from being so close to them and their delicious manly scents by being cranky. But it wasn’t working well, so it was time call it a night and attempt to go to sleep.

“Okay, good night,” I said, and slid lower on my pillow until the blanket was right up to my chin. “Sweet dreams.” Turning my back to Mason, I closed my eyes.

“Sweet dreams,” Kaz said and planted a light kiss on my forehead.

I sucked in a breath but didn’t open my eyes. A moment later, the bed moved as the guys settled in, and then, someone flicked off the lamp.

In the darkness, I swear their scents intensified. Why the hell did they smell so good? They’d showered with the same soap I used, yet it’s like their pheromones transformed that plain clean smell into a potent aphrodisiac.

I snuggled farther under the blanket, pulling it over my nose, but it didn’t make it any better. I’d just have to deal with their stupid smells and the dampness I was beginning to feel between my legs.

Behind me, Mason moved again, and then his palm was on my hip.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, my voice muffled by the blanket that was now up to my cheeks.

“Getting more comfortable. I was half off the bed.”

I couldn’t even call him out on a lie, because I was pretty confident he was telling the truth. This bed was not big enough for me and two guys their size. Their feet must be hanging off the sides. I stayed quiet as Mason shifted until he was gently spooning me from behind.

My heart was beginning to race. I knew this was bound to happen, didn’t I? But I’d expected a stronger resolve on my

part. Instead, my vagina was weeping, and my clit was sending off little pulses as if to remind me of its existence.

*I know you're there, you jerk.*

A movement on my other side sent my eyes flying open, and I found myself staring at the dark outline of Kaz's face. He wiggled a little closer. "I was falling off too."

"You both seemed fine when I came out of the bathroom," I grumbled, but there was no force behind it.

Kaz's teeth flashed in the dark. "You seemed a little tense when you first came out. How are you feeling now?"

My eyelids fluttered. I knew I could shut him down, bark at the two of them to really go to sleep, and they would leave me alone no matter how much they didn't want to...or I could play along with their game.

And fuck, it seemed like a fun game.

I pulled the blanket down to my chin, excited while simultaneously hating the way they always seemed to manage to break down my resolve. "Still a little tense," I said and waited for them to react.

I didn't have to wait long. Mason tightened his grip on my hip and tugged me closer, letting me feel his growing erection. "We could help you with that," he whispered. "What do you think, Kaz?"

The singer propped himself up on one elbow and reached out to brush the back of his hand over my cheek. "I think I know just the right thing."

Now, my heart was pounding in earnest, and suddenly I was hot, even in the cool room. While Kaz continued his soft caresses, Mason slithered his hand around my front. "May I?" he asked.

"Yes," I said breathlessly. Fuck it. At this point, if I didn't get off, I was liable to have a panic attack.

He dipped his fingers into my underwear and groaned into my ear when he felt how wet I was. "No wonder you're so

tense,” he murmured as he gyrated his hips against my ass. “You have a bit of a problem here, sweetheart.”

Kaz brushed my hair off my neck, and Mason’s lips were right there, sucking and licking at the tender flesh just below my ear. His fingers found my clit and traced a light, teasing circle around it.

“Oh God,” I moaned and arched my back, brushing my hard nipples against Kaz’s chest, which made him growl and move even closer. They were both so warm, their bodies strong and powerful, and I allowed myself to sink into the sensation of being at their mercy.

Kaz nudged the strap of my tank top off my shoulder, lower, lower, until the shirt fell beneath my breasts, and then his lips were suckling on one nipple before moving to the other. When he bit down lightly, pleasure surged right down into my clit, and I bucked against Mason, craving more pressure from his touch. He understood immediately and increased the pace of his movement, rubbing me with his thumb, while his fingers curled inside of me.

“How does that feel?” Mason’s lips moved against my skin.

“So good,” I panted. “Don’t stop.”

I reached down for Kaz’s cock, craving to feel the hardness of both of them at the same time, and he sucked in air when I wrapped my hand around his length.

“Fuck,” he muttered as I gave him a few languid strokes. He lifted his head from my breasts and brought his lips to mine in a feverish kiss. His tongue slipped into my mouth, and he cradled my face carefully in his palms, as if tasting me was something precious and ephemeral, bound to be gone in a blink of an eye. I was enveloped in pure bliss.

Bliss was Kaz’s lips brushing against mine.

Bliss was Mason’s hands working my body as if he’d designed it himself.

Bliss was being here between the two of them, ravished, real, and raw.

I came with a breathless cry, my entire body undulating like a wave and writhing over the thin, scratchy sheets. Their hands caressed me, and then their lips followed, and even though I could barely see them in the darkness of the room, I felt them everywhere.

Some time passed, and they were still touching me, but without any urgency. I realized they were waiting for me to indicate if I wanted to take this further. The tense, unbearable arousal I'd felt earlier was gone, but I didn't want to stop yet. I wanted to make them break apart the way they'd made me.

I rolled my hips against Mason's cock, threw the blanket off us, and sat up on my knees, reaching over Kaz to turn on the lamp.

The light flooded the room, illuminating the men's handsome faces. They were both watching me, Mason with a light smile, and Kaz with his signature intensity, one arm tucked under his head. I grabbed the tank top that had pooled at my waist and lifted it over my head, tossing it to the floor.

"You're so fucking beautiful." Kaz's gaze drifted over my body, lingering on my breasts before coming back up to my face. "Isn't she, Mase?"

"The most gorgeous thing I've ever seen," Mason said.

Heat crept up my chest at their compliments. I shook my head. "How are you still wearing clothes? Off. Now."

They shimmied out of their boxers and tossed them to the floor. Kaz resumed his earlier position, and I crawled over his legs until my lips were in line with his cock. His abdominal muscles rippled with anticipation. "Are you going to suck me off, baby girl?"

"That depends," I murmured, letting my breath skim over the tip of his hardness.

Kaz let out a harsh exhale. "On what?"

"On whether you're willing to share my mouth with Mason."

Mason groaned from beside me. “Keep saying things like that, and I’m not going to make it to your mouth.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him stroking himself.

Kaz leaned over and placed a kiss on my lips. “I’m a generous guy.”

“Good,” I smirked. “Then get up and stand side by side.”

As they followed my orders, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and grasped both of their cocks in my palms. First, I licked up Kaz’s shaft, then I did the same to Mason. I took turns taking them in my mouth, deep enough to feel them at the back of my throat, earning groans that grew progressively more desperate.

“Fucking hell,” Kaz swore. “I’m close.”

Immediately, I stopped. There was something else I wanted before I allowed him to finish.

Looking up at Mase, I wiped away the saliva that dripped down my chin and got on all fours on the bed. “I want you inside of me when he comes.”

Mason nodded, his eyes hazy and dark with need. He looked eager but also a little nervous. We’d never done this before, ever. I couldn’t explain it, but somehow, it felt right to do it for the first time in front of Kaz. He was the missing link Mason and I needed to make this work. We just hadn’t known it until now.

Mason moved on the bed until he was behind me. The rip of the condom wrapper sounded, and a moment later, he cupped my ass with his hands.

I was breathing hard, my eyes glued to Kaz’s. When Mason pushed into me, stretching me inch by inch, I took Kaz in my mouth again.

“Do you like that, baby girl?” Kaz asked, tightening his fist in my hair. “How does his cock feel inside of you?”

Kaz’s words sent a pulse down to my clit, and I moaned around him.

Mason filled me perfectly. He began to thrust, making pleasure radiate from my core. It's like he knew the perfect angle, the perfect spot to make me see stars. His hand slipped between my legs and found my clit. I closed my eyes and sucked harder on Kaz.

The singer grabbed my chin. "Is he doing a good job? Is he working your pussy right?"

*Fuck.*

I couldn't answer. I was so close I could barely even keep my head moving. Kaz gripped my hair and began to move my head for me. He thrust into my mouth carefully, until he knew I could handle more of it. His dick hit the back of my throat over and over, and then his rhythm lined up with Mason's, and I could do nothing but surrender. There was something absolutely maddening about being with two of them, giving and taking at the same time. I came, my fingers digging in the backs of Kaz's thighs as I whimpered around his cock.

"Yeah, that's it," Mason said hoarsely. His hips began to buck harder and harder, slamming into my cunt.

When I felt Kaz's balls tighten, I took him all the way in. His cum filled my throat, and I swallowed everything down to the last drop. My head was still spinning, my thighs shaking, and my core was still throbbing from the aftermath of my orgasm.

"What a good girl," Mason panted behind me, his hands firm around my waist, "Fuck, you look good with his cock in your mouth."

"Yeah, she does," Kaz said, pulling out of my mouth and wiping my lip with his thumb. His chest rose and fell as he looked at me with a satisfied expression. "Doesn't she feel amazing, Mase?"

"Like fucking heaven." With one last violent thrust, Mason stilled, his cock twitching inside of me as he came. He lifted me up so that my back was pressed to his chest, and then he found my mouth with his own. His kiss was thorough. He

must have tasted his friend on my lips, and the thought of him enjoying it made me whimper.

“You sure you haven’t done this before?” I asked when he broke the kiss. “You’re awfully good at it.”

He let out a rough laugh and looked at Kaz. “No, we haven’t done this before.”

“Makes everything we’ve done pale in comparison.” Kaz brushed my cheek and kissed me again.

It all felt natural, like somewhere in our DNA we’d been preprogrammed to be together like this. Even with euphoria still swirling through my brain, it scared me. *This* scared me. But with each one of their kisses, it was harder and harder to hold on to that fear.

Afterwards, we lay in bed, their hands caressing my back, my breasts, my hair. “How do you feel?” Mason asked.

I snuggled into him with a sigh. “I think I’ve forgotten the meaning of the word tense.”

Kaz barked out a laugh. “Then our work is done.”





## MOLLY

I AWOKE to the buzzing of my phone, and the sensation of someone's hand brushing against my nipple.

Judging by the tattoos, the hand belonged to Kaz. He let out a sleepy grumble when I nudged his arm away. I cast a quick look at Mason, who was still dead to the world, and crawled off the bed to silence the phone.

*"Need you at the office today. A lot to discuss."*

Shit. Was Trinity's tone usually this curt or did something happen? She sent me a message after the photoshoot on Monday to apologize for her absence (family emergency), and she even thanked me for keeping everything on track. I ran my teeth over my bottom lip. She probably just had more work to assign to me.

*"I'll be there at 9,"* I texted back before hopping into the bathroom.

In the shower, the water pressure left much to be desired, yet I barely noticed, too consumed with thoughts of last night.

*So much for taking it slow.*

In retrospect, that idea seemed doomed to failure. The chemistry between the three of us was its own living thing, impossible to resist now that we'd agreed to explore it.

I liked waking up in their arms, to the soundtrack of their deep, calm breaths, and their heat surrounding me. An improvement from greeting the day from my own lonely bed where I never quite managed to feel one hundred percent safe.

Yeah, I liked it *a lot*.

Stepping out of the shower, I rubbed myself down with a towel and crept back into the room. The guys were still sleeping, so I pulled on some clothes and wrote them a quick note on the fridge about heading to the office.

The world felt the same, yet different. The wild thing was roaming free inside of me, her carnal appetite sated by last night, but only for a time.

An unwelcome pang of guilt hit me when I stopped at a light. I couldn't even pinpoint what I felt guilty about. It just felt wrong to feel this content with how the situation was playing out.

*Don't you think you deserve some happiness?* The wild thing asked.

*Of course, I do. I thought I'd be happy when I got the promotion, and the raise, and moved to a new apartment. But I haven't done any of those things yet.*

The wild thing laughed. *Don't be arrogant. You can't think your way to happiness. You can only feel it when it comes.*

It made sense, but no matter how hard I tried to push the guilt away, it still lingered at the back of my mind.

When I entered Hyperion's lobby, Jenny from the reception collided into me.

"Crap, Molly! So sorry."

"That's okay," I said, steadying her by her elbow. Unfortunately, the stack of papers she was balancing under her arm went flying across the floor.

She bent down to collect them. "Crazy day as usual. Between greeting clients and helping organize the event this week, I can barely find time to go to the bathroom."

I kneeled down to help her, noting the dark bags under her eyes. "Can I help with anything?"

"Do you happen to know anyone in our artist pool willing to participate in the upcoming dyslexia awareness week? Trevy just dropped out—he's going in for emergency vocal cord surgery this Friday, so he won't be able to speak for two weeks. I'm looking for someone to fill in for him. It's been a nightmare trying to find anyone on such a short notice." She wiped her brow.

What were the chances? Mason was the perfect candidate although I had no idea if he would be interested in this. “What exactly is the event?”

“We’re recording a set of interviews for our YouTube channel where the artists talk about their own experience with dyslexia or about someone close to them. Did you know a lot of famous musicians are actually dyslexic? Few people do, so the idea of the interviews is to raise awareness. Colin’s oldest son is dyslexic so it’s a cause that’s personal to him.”

Colin was one of the highest-tenured partners at Hyperion, a surprisingly down-to-earth middle-aged guy who liked to surprise the office with ice cream on Fridays.

“When is it?” I asked.

“We’ve already started filming the interviews. The video will be posted sometime next week.”

We stood up, having finally collected all the papers off the ground. I smiled at Jenny. “Let me think about it. If I find anyone, I’ll let you know right away.”

“Thanks, Molly. Oh, by the way, Trinity is already in her office.”

My brows rose. “This early?”

“Yeah. She got here even before me.”

I gulped. “I should hurry then.”

Trinity was sitting behind her desk furiously typing something on her laptop when I walked in. She glanced at me. “Sit. I need a minute.”

I obeyed and fidgeted with my thumbs while I waited for her to wrap up whatever she was doing. She looked a bit chaotic, as if she’d been wired on caffeine from the moment she woke up.

After one loud clack of the enter button, her gaze found me.

“Take a look.” She spun the laptop so that the screen faced me.

In less than half a second, I turned beet red. I was looking at a picture of me sitting on top of Mason while Kaz gripped me by my hair. Oh my God. I could see a very prominent vein in Mason's neck as he pressed his fingers into my thigh. This was way too high def.

"Umm." Would it be okay for me to say no comment?

"I'm impressed yet again."

*That* was not what I'd expected to hear. "You are?"

Trinity leveled me with a serious look. "Of course. You were willing to do anything, literally anything, to make sure we got what we needed from this shoot. If that—" she pointed her perfectly manicured finger at the screen, "—isn't proof of that, I don't know what is."

I choked on my own saliva. "Theo told me he needed me."

"He sure did." She pressed the space button to move to the next picture. "Look at this one with the model. I actually think your test photos are slightly better than this, but I'm guessing you're not too keen on giving us permission to use those."

*Um, no.* I did not want more strangers looking at me in my lingerie. Having my boss see them was bad enough.

"I'd prefer not to."

Trinity smiled at me. That was a first. "I understand. Regardless, good work, Molly. You saved the day, and now we have the material we need to blast Last Rites out to the world. The single's launch got moved up. We're uploading it to all the streaming platforms on Saturday—yes, three days from now—and I've asked Vanessa to plan a big release party at my place that night. It will attract all the vultures." She meant all the record execs. "I bet my annual bonus we'll be fielding multiple offers next week."

"That's great," I stammered, overwhelmed with all the information being fired at me. "What do you need me to do?"

"Prep Mason and Kaz. They're about to join the big leagues, and they need to know that everything will change as soon as a deal is signed. They're going to need to focus on a

full-length record, but more importantly, they need to tour. We need to get them on the road quickly to monetize the buzz around them.”

She was fired up like never before. I could practically see the coveted partner title reflected in her eyes. Somehow, in the midst of everything, I’d lost sight of the massive milestone ahead of Last Rites, and its effect on... Well, everything.

I was happy for Mason and Kaz. Of course, I was. But I wondered where I’d be left when they became superstars.

“A tour?”

Trinity crossed her arms over her chest. “North America is guaranteed, but I think there’s even potential for Europe. Their numbers in the European regions are surprisingly strong. Just a few years ago, a band as young as them would never be sent across the ocean, but with social media, some bands gain a massive following practically overnight. Last Rites is one of the lucky ones.”

They would be leaving LA for God knows how long. An uncomfortable itch appeared between my shoulder blades.

“I’ll talk to them. I’m sure they’ll be excited.” How could they not be? This was a dream, even for many bands who’d been signed for years.

“I’m going to be in contact with them a lot over the next few days,” Trinity said. “But I have a lot on my hands, so I’m counting on you to catch anything slipping through the cracks. After the shoot, I have no doubt I can count on you.”

Just a few weeks ago, this kind of mindboggling praise from my tight-lipped boss would have made my entire month, but now, all I could do was muster up a weak smile.

That night, we went out for dinner. The three of us sat in a booth with red vinyl seats and talked about the future over steaming hot bowls of pho.

“Trinity has her eye on a three-sixty deal,” Kaz said between bites. “That means there’ll be touring, merchandising, and recording. Most deals these days are like that, so the key will be negotiating an advantageous royalty split.”

“We have an edge,” Mase said. “Our streaming numbers as an indie surpass many successful signed artists.”

“‘Mahogany’ will do even better,” Kaz said confidently. “Have you checked on how the teasers are doing, Mol?”

I’d been checking the view numbers at least a dozen times a day. “Both of them are at over a million views already, and it’s been less than forty-eight hours since I uploaded them.” I’d filmed the videos myself, capturing Mase and Kaz playing parts of their upcoming hit.

“That’s great.” The singer wiped his mouth with a napkin and leaned back against his seat.

“I can hardly believe it,” Mason muttered, a smile pulling on his lips. “In less than a week, we might be signed to a major label.”

“I’m going to email the press release to Mikhail.” Kaz snorted. “He’s going to shit bricks.”

“What about your biological father?” Mason asked. “Are you going to tell him?”

My eyes widened. “Wait, what? You know your bio dad?” Kaz had never said anything to me about his real father, and I had assumed he wasn’t a part of his life.

Kaz’s expression lost some of its lightness. “He’s in LA. I tracked him down, but I haven’t approached him yet. So the answer to your question, Mase, is no.”

“Why track him down if you won’t talk to him?” I asked.

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Mason piped in. “And actually, it might be better for you to get in contact with him before you become famous.”

“Right,” I said, nodding my agreement. “The longer you wait, the more complicated it will get.”

Kaz looked deep in thought, his brows close together. He ran a hand over his chin and looked away from us. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right. I need to think it over.”

“He’ll be so proud of you,” I said, reaching across the table to take his hand. “Who wouldn’t be?”

But Kaz was skeptical. I could see it in the way his lips tightened, the angle of his shoulders drawing up. He met my gaze but kept his mouth shut, only relaxing when the waitress came with our check.

We paid, and Mason placed his hand on my thigh. “Let’s go.”

Anticipation curled inside of me, and I pushed aside all my worries and concerns. Maybe things were about to change, but I didn’t want to spend any more time worrying about the future. Not when the present was so damn good.

The wild thing smirked. *Finally, you’re learning.*

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The drive home felt far too long. Memories of last night were on replay inside my head, and the looks Kaz and Mase kept shooting in my direction told me their heads were tuned in to the same program. We stumbled into their house, slamming the door so hard it shook on its hinges, and then my back was pressed against it, and I was taking turns kissing the two men.

“Do we really have you?” Kaz asked between kisses. “This isn’t just a fever dream?”

I moaned as Mason’s palm slipped under my shirt and skated over the underside of my breast. “You have me. I’m yours.”

Mason lifted me, his hands curving around my ass, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. When he pressed his hard length against me, I sighed in pleasure. “Get me out of these clothes.”

He carried me through the house and tossed me onto Kaz’s bed. The singer was right there, his hands tugging my top off, followed by my jeans. The indulgent patience they’d displayed last night was gone, replaced by a frenzy fueled by desire. Seeing them like this turned me the hell on. It was because of

me that they were losing their minds. Was there a more profound pleasure than feeling so desired?

“I need to taste you again,” Kaz said as he tugged my panties down my legs, leaving me completely bare. “I can’t stop thinking about how you taste, Molly. You’re like a fucking drug.”

I tried to sit up on the edge of the bed, but he pushed me back down, kneeled at the foot of the bed, and spread my legs. “Mase, turn on the lights. I want to see everything.”

My eyelids fluttered in anticipation. Kaz dragged his finger down the center of me, dipping it inside just barely before moving it back up. “I love how wet you get. You’re dripping for us.”

The bed sank beside me, and then someone was guiding my face to the side. I opened my eyes to see Mason, stripped down to his boxer briefs, gazing down at me. He lowered his lips to my mine, brushing lightly at first before going all in and claiming my mouth in a fierce kiss. The contrast made me buck my hips, but Kaz held down my thighs, still looking, just looking.

“Get on top of me,” I told Mason. “I want you in my mouth.”

He made a rough sound at the back of his throat before climbing off the bed and pulling down his boxers. I watched him take them off, admiring the flat planes of his stomach, the well-defined chest, and the way thick veins ran up the length of his forearms. No wonder he’d lifted me up with seemingly no effort. He looked so strong. I wanted to feel his weight sinking into me, his body pressing me into the bed.

Kaz picked that moment to swipe his tongue against the wetness between my legs, and I cried out. I was lightheaded, as if all my blood had travelled to that one point between my legs. There was no way I’d last long.

Mason climbed back onto the bed and straddled my chest, his cock pointing directly at my mouth. I gave him a few



strokes, reveling in the way his expression tensed, and then I guided his hips closer.

He sank between my lips as Kaz increased the speed at which he lapped at my clit. I moaned around Mason, urging him to move by digging my nails into his ass, knowing that I was seconds away from bursting open.

Then Kaz pulled away and stood up. I whined, my eyes finding his face. He watched Mason thrust into my mouth for a moment, his gaze burning hotter and hotter. He liked observing, but I think I liked seeing him enjoy it even more.

He walked around the bed and ran his fingers through my hair. “This time, you’re going to come right on my cock.” He said it like he’d already seen it happen, his voice certain and possessive.

Mason shuddered and took himself out of my mouth. He leaned down to kiss me deeply, and then he looked back at Kaz, as if waiting for his direction.

Their teamwork, even in this, was impressive.

Kaz rummaged for something inside his bag and returned to the foot of the bed with condoms and a bottle of lube.

I was squirming, ready to demand they do something to ease the insane pressure between my legs, but I didn’t have to wait for long before Mason moved me higher on the bed and Kaz settled himself between my thighs.

He bracketed my head with his arms and gave me a hungry look. “How do you feel?”

“Like you better fuck me right this second.” I tried to punch his shoulder, but he laughed, caught my hand with his, and pinned it above my head.

“So vicious. Does Mason need to hold you down until you remember your manners?” he asked huskily.

“Fuck manners,” I bit back, trying to provoke him.

He grabbed my free hand and pinned it beside the other, a crooked grin on his face. “Bad girls get punished.”

“Then punish me already,” I breathed as Mason’s hands replaced Kaz’s.

The singer grabbed my hips, tightly this time, and entered me in one smooth thrust.

My eyes rolled to the back of my head, my entire pussy squeezing him for dear life. How could it possibly feel this good?

Kaz picked up his speed, holding my chin with one palm. “I want you to look at me when you come.”

Mason’s grip didn’t waver on my hands. I flicked open my eyelids and stared into Kaz’s green orbs just as the first wave of my orgasm hit.

“Fuck me,” I whimpered, wrapping my legs around him and digging my heels into his muscular thighs. “Don’t stop. Just like that.”

He didn’t stop this time. He kept up that delicious, perfect rhythm, sending waves and waves of magnificent pleasure through my entire body.

“That’s right. Show us how gorgeous you are when you come.”

I writhed on the bed, not bothering to censor any of my moans. At times in the past, with other partners, I’d felt like I was performing in bed—trying to fulfil some idea of what I thought they wanted to see. But here, with Kaz and Mason drinking in my every reaction, I felt no desire to hide behind a mask. I was what I was, and I’d never felt so free.

When the veil of my orgasm receded, I tapped the tops of Mason’s hands with my fingers, and he immediately let go. My brain was flooded with endorphins, and I was still greedy for more. There was so much I wanted from them.

I moved my hands to Kaz’s hips. “What if we try having both of you in me at the same time?” I asked breathlessly, flicking my gaze from one to the other.

Mason ran a hand over his chin as excitement flared in his eyes. “You sure?”

“Yes, but you’ll need to warm me up.” A moment after I said it, fear spiked inside of me. God, this was probably a bad idea. I mean, what if it was too much for them? It was one thing being in bed together, but what I was suggesting was on a whole other level of intimacy. Would they be comfortable with that?

“Hey,” Kaz said, gently pulling out of me. “You okay?” He brushed my hair off my face. “What are you thinking?”

I felt blood rushing to my cheeks. “I just realized it might not be something you’re comfortable with. We should have talked about it before we got started.”

He huffed a silent laugh before turning to look at Mason.

The drummer grinned. “We may have talked about it already.”

I propped myself up on my elbows. “Really?”

“Yeah. About how much we hoped you’d let us have you like that.”

Relief flooded me, followed by a heady wave of arousal. “Do you talk about fucking me a lot when I’m not around?”

Kaz trailed his lips over my chest. “What do you think? It’s quickly becoming our favorite pastime.” He reached for the bottle of lube that had been discarded on the side of the bed and tossed it to Mason. “You up for the challenge?”

Mase caught it. “I’m going to set the bar high for you,” he said. He helped me sit up, then lifted me bodily and placed me on top of Kaz.

“Hi,” Kaz whispered, bringing his hand up to brush the hair out of my face. “Do you know every time you wear your hair in a ponytail, I want to coil it around my hand and fuck you hard against a wall?”

My core clenched, apparently ready for round two. “Last time I wore it that way was at the office.” I helped him roll on another condom, and lowered myself onto him, taking my time with every inch. “You’d be breaking a lot of rules.”

“Fuck the rules.” He let out a soft groan once I finally got all of him in, then pushed his hand into my hair and pulled my lips down to his.

The bed bounced as Mason moved closer and reached out to knead my ass. His ran one slick finger over me before stopping at his destination. I pushed back, showing him I was ready, and he didn’t waste any time before gently entering me. Kaz pressed me closer, kissing me more and more deeply, as if he was trying to kiss some pain away, but it didn’t hurt. All I felt was a building pressure in my core from the excitement of what was to come.

“Have you ever done this before?” Kaz asked, breaking the kiss but keeping our lips brushing against each other.

“No,” I admitted.

Kaz’s cheeks flushed with pleasure. “Oh, baby girl. We’re going to make you feel so good.”

His words made me press harder against Mason’s fingers. There were two inside of me now, soon to become three. Kaz was thrusting shallowly into my pussy, probably trying to pace himself, but it was enough to keep the heat inside of me spreading. I wanted to come apart on both of them, and if Mason took much longer, I wouldn’t last.

“I’m ready,” I said over my shoulder. “Please, Mase. I need you now.”

He ran his fingers down my spine, and then gave my ass a quick, firm, slap. “Tell me what you want.”

I gasped as I felt him nudging at my entrance. “Your cock in my ass.”

“God, I love your dirty mouth,” Mason said as he coiled my hair around his fist. I forced myself to relax all my muscles until I felt him sink all the way inside.

“Holy. Fucking. Shit.” Mason’s voice was strained.

My arms shook as I tried to hold myself up. The sensation of them inside of me was nearly too much. It was like my world had shrunk to the space inside my body where we had

joined with each other. Me and them. Them through me. I was the bridge and the destination. It was overwhelming. Being all that for the two of them.

“You feel so good,” Mason said, moving out just a fraction of an inch before sinking back inside. I let out a soft whimper.

Kaz gripped my face between both of his palms. His arms trembled with the effort it took to stay still inside of me. “How does it feel?” he asked.

It was as if every nerve ending was firing at once in search of a release. “Incredible. I’ve never—” Kaz made a shallow thrust. “Oh my God.” I felt my second orgasm just waiting to be unleashed.

My words gave them confidence. They picked up their speed, apparently set on melting my insides. I think I might have tried to say something, but I couldn’t form words.

“This is just—” Kaz began and then threw his head back in a desperate moan when Mason changed his angle slightly. “Fucking hell.”

We were melded together, moving in a perfect rhythm, as if we’d been made for this.

“Oh fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Kaz caught my nipple with his mouth as his own release consumed him. The sight of his face in this moment was enough to throw me over the edge once again.

I clenched around the two of them, sweat rolling down the valley of my breasts and dripping on Kaz’s abs, and then Mason was no longer holding onto my hair, but his breath was warm on my neck. “Oh, Mol,” he moaned, thrust one more time and stiffened, fully sheathed inside of me. I rolled my hips, wanting to draw out their pleasure, until finally my body gave out, and I collapsed on top of Kaz.

We stayed that way, fused together, with the sound of our desperate heartbeats loud in my ears.



## MASON

SUNLIGHT WARMED my face as I walked back home from the store, my arms laden with grocery bags. I'd woken up earlier than usual and decided I wanted to cook something delicious for Molly and Kaz. If they were half as ravenous as me, we'd have no problem getting through the carton of eggs and pack of bacon I'd picked up.

There was a newly acquired spring in my step. So this is what life could be like when you were surrounded by people who knew exactly who you were and accepted you for it.

The mind-melting threesome last night had also helped.

If I thought my obsession with Molly was unhealthy before, it was definitely reaching lethal levels now. Someone could tell me this woman would be the death of me, and I wouldn't give a damn. Being with her was like laying a drum track for a new song for the very first time. Exhilarating and full of potential.

It shocked the hell out of me how much I enjoyed seeing Kaz give her pleasure. Even though this was all completely new for me and my friend, we'd so far managed to avoid any awkwardness that came with the territory. We were in this together, with her as our primary focus, and aside from music, nothing in my life had ever felt this right before.

At home, I unloaded the groceries, washed my hands, and began to work on our breakfast.

Molly popped in while I was scrambling a dozen eggs. She sported a bedhead and wore one of my old KISS T-shirts. I couldn't help but grin at the sight.

"I thought I smelled bacon," she said sleepily before padding over to me and giving me a kiss. "Need any help, chef?"

I smacked her ass and pulled her in for another kiss. The fact that I could just do that—kiss her whenever I wanted—was still mind-boggling. "Yeah. Check on the oven, please."

She did, bending over until I could see she had no underwear beneath that shirt.

That got my attention real quick.

“Looks about half done,” she said, straightening back up.

I wiped my hands with a kitchen towel and prowled over to her. “Good.” I slid my hand up her bare thigh. “I know exactly how we can occupy the time.”

She sucked in a breath when my fingers lightly brushed against her pussy. “Shouldn’t we keep an eye on the food?”

I didn’t give a fuck if the entire house burned down. “It’ll be fine for a while.”

After that, she didn’t protest when I turned her around and lifted her up by her thighs. Her legs wrapped around me, her palms cradled my face. “Last night was amazing.”

“Tonight will be even better.” The things I still wanted to do to her. Having another person in the equation really opened up a lot of possibilities.

“So what’s this? A warm-up?”

I threw her down on the couch and spread her legs wide. Jesus. Her glistening cunt was the prettiest thing I’d ever seen. “No. This is me trying to play catch-up for all the years I was an idiot.”

“Mase— Ungh. Fuck.”

People say all things are good in moderation, but I wasn’t convinced of that as far as Molly was concerned. If someone chained me in this position—right between her legs with my tongue inside of her—I’d die a happy man. What more was there to want from life?

I guess there was that record deal. A few months ago, if someone had asked me what would make me happy, I’d say getting signed. Now? Sure, I still wanted it. But I no longer needed it.

Everything I needed was right here in this house.



She gasped when I swiped a circle around her clit. “Do that again.”

Again, again, and again. Her taste coated my tongue and my lips, and when I pushed one finger inside of her, her pussy clenched. “I want you inside of me,” she panted.

“I need to get a condom.”

She sat up and looked me in the eyes. “I want to feel all of you.”

My dick was as hard as a steel bar inside my jeans. I didn’t bother asking more questions—I’d wrapped up with every single woman I’d been with before, and I trusted Molly.

She undid my belt and helped me tug down my jeans. I got her out of my shirt, because no matter how good she looked in it, she looked even better without anything at all. My mouth attached to her nipple. I sucked and licked to earn me some of those maddening Molly mewls. When I thought I might die if I held off any longer, I slid my cock inside of her.

Skin on skin.

Heart to heart.

Her nails dug into my back. “Oh, fucking hell, Mase.”

Holding myself up on my forearms, I looked down at her. Blond hair was plastered to her cheek, and there was a drop of sweat above her brow. I thought she was the most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen.

She splayed her hand across my chest before moving it down to my abs. “You’re so hot it should be illegal,” she muttered.

I let out a surprised chuckle. “And you’re good for my ego.”

She grinned at me momentarily, then I changed my angle and made her mouth form an O.

Another O quickly followed when I pressed my thumb over her clit. She writhed beneath me, her eyes tightly shut as she rode her waves of pleasure.

The sight of it was enough to get me there. My orgasm started at the base of my spine before overtaking my entire body. I pumped and pumped, spilling my cum inside of her wet heat, until there was nothing left for me to give. My pulse raged under my skin. My heart drummed a heavy metal beat. I wanted this moment to last until the end of eternity, because God, it was perfect.

She pulled me to her chest, kissing my temple and then my cheek. I dragged my lips down her neck, considering going straight into round two.

“I think I smell burnt bacon,” she whispered into my ear.

*Damn it.*

We got dressed, and Molly tried to salvage what she could from the oven, while I got back to the eggs.

“I forgot to ask you yesterday,” she said while placing the bacon on a tray, “but would you be willing to participate in a short interview about dyslexia? Hyperion is doing a video for Dyslexia Awareness Week. They had an artist drop out, and they’re looking for a replacement.”

My hand, the one holding the whisk, stopped moving. “An interview? You mean they’d ask me questions about being dyslexic?”

“Yeah. They want to build awareness around the condition and how many musicians have it.”

I looked down at the ground. Was I ready to go public with my learning disability? If I’d asked myself that question a month ago, the answer would be a hard no, but I would have also said no to telling Molly, and I’d somehow survived that.

Still, I wasn’t sure I was ready to expose myself to the entire world. A familiar fear crept over me. We were just about to get our deal. What if people looked at me differently?

“I think I’ll pass,” I heard myself say. “Maybe next time.”

Molly came up to me and wrapped her arm around my waist. “Okay, no pressure. But Mase, I won’t ever stop telling you you’re perfect just the way you are.”

I kissed because how could I not after she said a thing like that.

If she really thought that about me, maybe one day I'd believe it myself.

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Days passed, during which the three of us spent many hours together in bed, and even more hours huddled over a laptop, preparing for the launch of 'Mahogany'. Trinity was paying us a visit at the house on Friday, so we spent the entire morning making sure Molly's things were hidden out of sight.

I hated hiding us. I finally understood why heroes in romantic movies wanted to scream their love from rooftops. Happiness this potent felt like something that needed to be shared. Kaz's surly expression during the cleanup hinted he felt the same.

When Trinity arrived, we settled around the dining table. "Do you have a guess at who'll be giving us the best offer?" Kaz asked.

Trinity took a sip of a coffee Molly had gotten for her a few minutes earlier. "If I had to guess, I'd say WMI. You're perfect for their portfolio, and I've known Errol Watkins for about a decade. He's interested. He'll be even more interested after he sees the numbers tomorrow. Make sure you talk to him, but if he starts talking business, keep it vague. Tell him to talk to me."

I sat up straighter. WMI had some of my favorite bands signed to it, and the thought of joining their ranks was exciting.

We discussed the content plan Molly had put together for the next week, and were almost wrapping up the meeting when Trinity came back to the deal. "Just so you have it on your radar, you'll probably need to get on the road sooner than later. I assume you don't have any issues with that."

I shook my head. It had been many years since I'd performed live with Through Azure Skies, and as Last Rites, we'd never played live at all. I was ready to be back on stage. "No issues."

"We're excited," Kaz added, "and our fans will be too."

I grinned at Molly. It was going to be a lot of fun having her backstage. She met my gaze, but her smile seemed off somehow. It was probably because of Trinity. She was always antsy around her boss.

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"Mahogany" became available on all streaming platforms at eight am the following day, and by the time we left the house for the party Trinity was hosting, we'd racked up over a million plays.

"I still can't believe it," Molly said, refreshing the data table for the hundredth time that day.

"Neither can I, but it's time for you to put that thing away," Kaz said, plucking the phone out of her hands. "We're in a stretch limo with a bottle of fancy champagne waiting to be opened."

"Fine, no more refreshing for today." She grabbed her phone back and slipped it into her purse. "I'm sure there will be plenty of other people keeping us updated at the party."

I popped open the bottle, spraying the liquid out of the window before filling three glasses Kaz handed to me.

"To Last Rites," Molly exclaimed, raising her glass.

"To this badass fucking team," Kaz corrected her. "We wouldn't have made it here without you."

"Cheers to that," I said.

Molly blushed and clinked her glass to ours.

We piled out of the limo outside of Trinity's very modern-looking house and were greeted with loud applause as soon as

we walked in. Something that sounded like Des Rocs was playing in the background, but the chatter was so loud I could barely make it out.

Trinity was at the head of the welcome party, dressed in a smart cocktail dress and shiny black heels. She greeted Kaz and I with more warmth than we'd ever experienced from her to date and didn't waste a second before dragging us into the midst of the party.

I glanced over my shoulder, trying to find Molly. When my gaze caught on her, she waved me forward, and mouthed, "Go."

After that, the night was a blur of handshakes, cocktails, and congratulations. Everyone suddenly seemed to know who we were. It was disorienting to say the least.

"Are you going to remember all of their names by tomorrow?" Kaz grumbled to me during a rare break in conversation. "I've already forgotten everyone, and my social meter is about to run out."

This party was a lot, even for me. I scanned the room for Molly and saw her standing beside Trinity. "Let's go see who else we need to talk to before we're cleared to go home."

We made our way to our manager. Trinity was locked in conversation with a tall guy in a crisp suit. She immediately paused the conversation when we approached. "Ah, there you are. This is Errol Watkins."

The executive from WMI she'd mentioned to us before. I shook his hand and gave him a friendly smile. "Great to meet you."

"Pleasure is mine." His voice was incredibly deep. If he sang, he'd probably sound like Barry White. "I like your sound, boys. I was in the car on my way to the office this morning when I heard 'Mahogany', and I'm telling you, as soon as the song was done, I called Trinity to tell her you're something special."

"We appreciate that," I said.

“You must be thrilled with how well it’s doing. I haven’t...”

I tuned him out for a second, my gaze settling back on Molly. She was dressed in a pretty blue dress that flattered her incredible figure and a pair of high heels. The fact that she was ours sent a bolt of pride to my chest. She was listening to the conversation attentively, and when she noticed me staring at her, she gave me a tiny shake of her head.

Right. This was the guy who was likely to sign us. I probably needed to pay attention.

“This isn’t going to be announced until Monday, but we just signed a deal with The Flea Biters,” Errol said. “We’re looking to further build out our heavy rock and metal roster, and I have to say, Last Rites would fit right in. We’ve got a lot of experience working with bands like yours and taking them to the next level. Our marketing and branding expertise in this genre is unparalleled.”

Wow, he was jumping right into the sales pitch. I could sense Trinity’s smug excitement at how everything was playing out, and I could hardly blame her. She’d gotten us here in a remarkably short amount of time. Now it was time for her to cash in.

“Some of our all-time favorite bands are signed to WMI,” I said.

“Some of those might be your collaborators one day in a not-too-distant future.” Errol took the last sip of his whiskey before turning to Trinity. “I need a refill. Want to join me?”

“Absolutely.” Trinity linked her arm through his, and they bid us goodbye.

“He’s practically salivating.” Kaz took a swig of his beer. “It’s a good sign.”

“I agree,” Molly said, digging in her bag for something. “Before you two came, they were already starting to discuss the terms. Anyway, Trinity told me I was off the hook. I think I’m going to call an Uber back to the house, if that’s all right with you.”

Kaz moved to her side. “We’ll go with you. I’m peopled out for the night.”

“You sure? Don’t you have more salivating execs to talk to?”

“We’ve worked the room enough,” I said.

“All right.” Molly looked up from her phone. “You’ll need to call your own car, remember?”

*Ah, right.*

We left the party in separate cars.

Kaz reclined against the back seat and threw his forearm over his eyes. “Feels weird leaving without her.”

“I know.” I watched the passing cars out the window and wondered when we’d be able to proudly show off Molly as ours. One day, we’d move past the need to hide. Sooner rather than later if I had a say in it.



The deal arrived in our inboxes a few days after the party.

Molly and Trinity called us from the office, their faces appearing on the video chat. This week, Molly had spent a lot more time there given that her photo duties with us were put on hold. In the evening, when she returned home, we pounced on each other as if she’d been gone for months instead of only a few hours. I wondered if the excitement of being together would ever fade, or if this is just the way it was when you finally found your soulmates?

Yeah. Saying things like that didn’t seem like an exaggeration as far as her and Kaz were concerned.

“You’re inching into the top ten on Spotify, and Twitter is still blowing up with commentary on the promotional images.” Trinity wore a smirk, as if to say I told you so. Her call regarding Theo had paid off. The images were provocative and hot as hell, which appeared to be just what we’d needed to get a shit ton of attention.

“The deal is good,” she said. “But we can make it better. Errol is joining the call in a few minutes to walk you through the details. After that, we’ll convene with our legal team and decide what we want to push back on and what we’re fine with taking as offered.”

“Fine by me,” Kaz said, putting his elbows on the edge of the table. “I scanned it quickly just now. The royalty rates are aggressive, especially when it comes to merchandising rights.”

“He’ll try to justify those by claiming their in-house expertise will help you market the merchandise, but I agree it’s something we need to negotiate. Labels always overestimate their abilities for everything besides getting a great record out.”

“The Flea Biters signed away twenty five percent of their rights,” Molly said, looking down at a notebook before her. “And WMI is asking us for forty.”

Trinity’s brow spiked up. “How do you know that?”

Molly shifted in her seat. “I asked their manager. My sister is connected to him.”

“Good work,” Trinity said. “It’s always good to have an extra data point for comparison.”

A smile tugged at my lips. Mol was damn good at her job, and she better get rewarded for the incredible work she’d done with us. If not, Kaz and I would need to have a talk with Trinity.

Our computer made a noise to announce Errol’s arrival, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“Congratulations, gentlemen,” he said, tipping his coffee cup at the screen. “Signing an artist is always exciting, but this feels doubly so. I see a lot of promise in you two.”

“Thank you, we’re excited,” I said.

“That’s great to hear, but I’m sure you have a lot of questions.”

“Yes,” Trinity jumped in. “We’ll save them for the end of the call.”



“Great. I’ll walk you through what we’re thinking.”

Errol began to talk us through the terms, all of which made sense until we got to the part about touring.

“You’ll have a dedicated team assigned to you, including the road crew, a touring manager, and an assistant to help you with the day-to-day.”

“We don’t need another assistant,” I said, thinking nothing of it. “We already have Molly helping us.”

Trinity laughed, as if I’d said something ridiculous. “Molly won’t be going on tour with you. She’ll continue to support you from LA as needed, but her focus will shift to another artist in my roster.”

It was as if a record had scratched to a stop.

I shot Kaz an alarmed glance. He was looking at me with furrowed brows. I had taken it for granted she’d keep working closely with us, and based on his expression, he’d thought the same. Is this why Molly’s expression turned a little tense whenever there was any mention of a tour?

“Having a strong team while you’re on the road for the first time will be really important,” Trinity continued. “In fact, Errol, I’d prefer to add a line in here that specifies—”

“Hold on,” I interrupted. There was a way to address this without exposing our relationship with Molly, but I needed to be careful. “How much of a say do we have when it comes to hiring this team?”

“You’re free to meet them ahead of time, but we have a trusted network of folks that we work with, and we like to stick to it. A bad crew member can majorly screw things up in a high-pressure environment,” Errol said.

Why wasn’t Molly saying anything? She was on camera, her face an expressionless mask, while I felt panic rising inside my chest.

“Could you excuse us for a moment?” I asked.

“Of course,” Errol said.

I muted the call, turned off the camera, and turned to Kaz.

“We can’t go on tour without her. We’ll be on the road for months. There’s no fucking way.”

Kaz was frowning. “We’ll figure it out before we sign anything. We need to talk to her first, one-on-one.”

“Did she know about this?” I couldn’t understand why she’d hide it from us if she knew.

“I don’t know. Let’s finish this call.”

We jumped back on, and I swore Molly looked paler than moments earlier.

“We can keep going,” Kaz said, his finger drumming against the underside of the table.

Even through the screen, I could sense her relief.

But I didn’t share it. Because there would be no deal if she wasn’t part of it.



## MOLLY

THE TAB on my laptop collapsed as the video call ended. A part of me wished I could click a button and make myself disappear as well.

Ever since the release party, I knew where we were headed. Mason and Kaz were racing forward with no brakes, and there was no room for me on the motorbike. They would be on tour soon, traversing the world and making headlines, while I'd be....what? Back here in LA trying to keep our relationship going over video chat? As if that could work for any of us. While they had life-changing experiences left, right, and center, I'd be the boring girl they left back home.

We had no future. I knew that. But now that the day was here, and our end was getting spelled out in a contract, literally, I couldn't help but mourn.

"They're quite attached to you, aren't they?" Trinity asked as she rose from her seat.

*They love you, you know,* the wild thing purred.

*I should have never listened to you,* I shot back. This is what I got for giving in to my selfish desires.

Heartbreak.

"We've become good friends," I said, hoping my tone of voice didn't betray how awful I felt.

Approval cut across her features. "That's great. Close personal connections are what keeps talent with us. Most like our personal touch." She moved to the door. "Walk with me."

We left the conference room and walked past rows of desks until we reached Trinity's office. She ushered me inside before taking a seat behind her desk.

"I had dinner with Colin last night. He gave me the partner position."

Surprise shot through me. “That’s incredible. Congratulations.”

Her lips turned up at the corners. “Thank you. When he saw the success of ‘Mahogany’, he knew it was only a matter of time before I secured a great deal for the guys.”

“You must be thrilled. When are you moving to your new office?”

“Not for a while. Everything has to be finalized from a legal and HR perspective first, but I don’t want to waste any time when it comes to figuring out my plan. As a partner, I’ll have even higher targets, which brings me to the topic at hand. I’d like to offer you the position of my senior assistant.”

How many times have I imagined these words coming out of her mouth? This was what I’d been working toward for the past year. And yet, instead of fluttering excitement, a heavy weight appeared inside my stomach. “Are you serious?”

She looked at me intently. “I am. You’ve more than proven yourself since starting at Hyperion, and it’s about time you get rewarded for that. I told you my promotion would mean a step up for you as well. I intend to keep my word.”

“Thank you, Trinity. I’m honored. Really.”

“You earned it. Now, I want to set the right expectations. This will be a demanding role, but it comes with a pay bump that should make it worth it. Since you’ve done so well with Last Rites, I have another artist that I’d like for you to focus for the next few months. The Mycophiles. They’re a very promising rock band from New Orleans. You’ll start with them next week.”

*Next week.*

It left me with just a few days to say goodbye.

Something told me they would be the hardest days of my life.

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Mason and Kaz were waiting for me when I got home. I didn't even get a chance to get my shoes off before the questions came.

“What the hell, Mol?” Mason demanded, his hair a mess on his head, as if he'd spent the past few hours dragging his hands through it. “Did you know they were going to pull you off our team?”

I sighed as I nudged my sneaker off with my other foot. “I didn't know for certain, but it wasn't exactly a surprise. Me helping you was always meant to be temporary.”

Kaz was leaning against the doorjamb, his feet crossed at the ankles. He wore a dark expression that told me he was just as angry as Mase. “Maybe in the beginning, but now we all realize this arrangement has to be permanent. We're not leaving LA without you, Molly.”

Frustration began to bubble inside of me. “You're kidding yourself if you think Trinity will send me on tour with you. It's not even up to her. Errol will be the one making the ultimate decision, and I can guarantee you he won't take your side.”

“There has to be a way for us to convince him. He can hire you directly.”

I scoffed and brushed past them on my way to the living room. “He's not going to steal Trinity's employee.”

Mason followed me. “He will if he wants us to sign the deal. Look, we'll take care of it.”

I whirled around. Why couldn't they see the impossibility of our situation? “I don't want you to take care of it. Trinity just offered me the promotion I've been after this whole time. I'm not going to throw it back in her face for something that's never going to work anyway!”

“What does that mean?” Kaz's voice dropped low.

“It means that you just became superstars with one of the best deals I've seen in this industry,” I said, flinging my hands out. “Your life is about to change in ways you can't even imagine. You're going to be on a non-stop circuit of shows, studios, parties, signings, and God knows what else, and there

just isn't room for me in any of that." I was yelling now, my voice shrill with frustration.

Kaz scowled at me. "That's bullshit. You're our priority. We will make it work."

"No, we won't! We've been together for what amounts to a tiny little blip in our lives. We don't even know what this is, and you want me to leave everything behind to go on tour with you? I can't do that." Maybe there were those who'd take the risk, but all I saw was uncertainty. This promotion would finally allow me to feel secure in my life. I couldn't throw it away.

"We'll tell Errol we're not touring until we're ready for it," Mason ground out.

"And if he says no, we'll just have to find a better option," Kaz added. "Fuck the deal. There will be others."

Ice exploded through my veins. "You promised me you'd always put Last Rites first."

"Goddamn it, Molly." Kaz ran his hands over his face. "It doesn't fucking matter."

"Of course it does," I hissed. "I am not going to be responsible for you blowing the best deal you can possibly get." There was no way I'd be able to live with myself if they refused the deal on my behalf. I wasn't going to be a burden on them or anyone else. "If you do something insane like that, I promise you, I will walk away. You won't just lose me, you'll lose your career."

A tense silence filled the room. "Fine," Mason said softly. "We won't kill the deal. But what do you want us to do, Molly?"

I felt cold all over. "I want you to walk away from me. I want you to go on tour, live your lives, and make your dreams come true. I'm not going to stand between you and that." I already knew what it felt like to keep someone I loved from chasing after their dream, and I'd sworn I'd never be in that position again.

Kaz was shaking his head. “This is bullshit. I thought we meant something to you.”

They meant everything. Which is exactly why I had to walk away.

I picked my backpack up off the floor. “I’m sorry.” My gaze caught on my hoodie tucked into the corner of the couch. At some point, this house had become my home, but I’d left home before. I could do it again.

“Screw your apology.” Kaz was looking at me with glassy eyes, his hands curled into fists.

“Molly, please,” Mason said numbly.

My throat felt tight, and tears pricked behind my eyes. I stared at the two men that meant everything to me, knowing I’d never feel their hands on me again. Knowing that giving in to my desire had come with a steep price.

But the most important thing I knew was that they had a sparkling future awaiting them, and sooner or later, they would forget about me.

I turned on my heel and left through the front door.

Ten minutes later, and their messages started blowing up my phone.

*“Where are you going?”*

*“Come back. We don’t need to talk about it anymore tonight”.*

*“Molly, seriously. Where are you? Please tell me you’re not going back to your apartment.”*

*“I’m staying at a friend’s place for the night,”* I responded, not wanting them to worry. It was time for me to take Piper up on her open invitation. My sister and her guys were flying in late this evening, and I needed to ask if I could stay with them for a while, no matter how uncomfortable it made me feel asking for a favor. With the promotion coming, I wouldn’t have to infringe on their hospitality for too long. I’d begin looking for a new apartment as soon as I could.



Piper greeted me on the doorstep of her four-story walk up. As soon as she saw my face, she pulled me into a tight hug. “Let’s get you inside. I’ll make you some tea, and you can tell me what happened.”

I did. I told her everything. How I ended up living with the guys after Cory assaulted me. How they took care of me and snuck into my heart and mind. How we agreed on being with each other.

When I was finished, tears shone in her eyes. We were sitting on her floor, our hot mugs in our hands.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about Cory,” she said, wiping her cheeks with a tissue. “I’m horrified, Mol. I should have dragged you out of that place a long time ago.”

“It was horrible,” I admitted. “And I blamed myself for staying there for as long as I did. I know it wasn’t my fault he decided to attack me, but at the same time, I could have been more cautious.”

“Fucking ridiculous that this is what it comes down to for so many women living alone.” She sniffed. “I’m so glad Mason and Kaz made you feel safe again.”

“They did. They made me feel so many things.” Now I was on the verge of tears. “I feel horrible. Like my heart has been ripped out of my chest. But I just can’t see it working between us. Our relationship was already unconventional, and now with the added complications...” I sighed. “I don’t know.”

Piper leaned back against the couch. “Are you sure Trinity wouldn’t allow you to join them?”

I let out a sad laugh. “She already has plans for me, and you know how she is about sticking to her plans. I’d have to tell her why they want me on tour with them this badly. She’d see right through any other excuses. You think she’ll react positively to knowing I’m fucking both of her new stars? She will fire me.”

I was sure of that. My boss had no patience for unnecessary complications.

“And what about taking a job with Errol? They might be able to make him offer you one.”

“I just got this promotion. I can’t start over again. And what if we break up while they’re somewhere in the middle of Europe? I’d be locked into spending the rest of the tour with them. It’s a bad position for me. No matter how much I miss them right now, I have to stick to the decision that’s smart for me.”

“God, this sucks.”

“I know.”

“You’re not even in the mood to celebrate your big achievement, are you? You’ve worked so fucking hard to get senior assistant.” She sipped on her tea and shook her head.

I looked down at the floor. “No, I’m not in the mood. You know, I thought I’d be over the moon. But when she told me I got it, I felt...nothing. I was just numb. All I could think about was that I was going to have to break up with the guys.”

Piper pierced me with an inquisitive gaze. “You sure you want the position?”

It was the million-dollar question, one I’d been going back and forth on ever since I got to play photographer for Mason and Kaz. Did I want to keep going down this path? It was possible, maybe even likely, that with Trinity’s support, I’d get a junior manager position within two or three years. After that, I could keep working my way up. I was confident I could do it. It was just a matter of putting in the work, right? And I’ve always been a hard worker.

But the wild thing wouldn’t leave me at peace. I stuffed her back into her cage, but she was pacing it angrily, every step loud inside my chest.

*What is wrong with you? she demanded. Are you really this scared? People spend a lifetime trying to find their passion, and here you are, knowing full well what you want to do, but you’re too much of a coward to give it a try.*

*Leave. Me. Alone.*

“I think it’s a really good opportunity,” I said slowly.

“It is. But plenty of people have said no to great opportunities because they weren’t right for them.”

“Well, I’m not one of them.” Draining the last of my tea, I forced a yawn. “You okay if I crash a bit early? I’m tired as hell.”

“Yeah. Let me pull out the air mattress.”

That night, I twisted and turned on Piper’s floor as moonlight streamed through her small window. It reminded me of the last time I’d studied the moon with Kaz and Mason wrapped around me. Tears choked my throat.

I’d made the right decision. For all of us.

*You keep telling yourself that.*



## KAZ

MASE and I paced the living room. It'd been nearly an hour since Molly left, and my jaw was clenched so tightly I was probably moments away from snapping my teeth.

I didn't give a fuck. I wanted to tear this room apart. Everything here reminded me of the woman who had walked out on us.

Her sweater was on the couch. I wanted to stick my nose in it and burn it at the same time.

Mason pivoted on his heel and stalked to the back of the house, letting the door to the patio slam shut behind him.

I took a deep breath. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Then I followed after him.

He was sitting on the bench, staring out to the overgrown backyard.

"She has to come back," I said with more confidence than I really felt. After what had just happened, I didn't feel very confident about anything. I'd thought she wanted to be with us, but how could that be true if it was this easy for her to walk away? "I still don't get it. Why wouldn't she at least consider quitting Hyperion to come with us?"

Mason parked his elbows on his knees. "Because she doesn't want to hold us back. She thinks that's what she did with her sister, that Adeline had to put her life on hold to take care of her. She's always worried about being a burden."

"That's nonsense." I moved to stand before him. "We wouldn't even be here if it weren't for her."

"She probably doesn't see it that way."

Molly texted us that she was staying with a friend tonight. I wanted to demand she give us the name and address of this friend so that I could go and collect her from there. But even I knew that would only make matters worse. "So what, you agree with her?"

“Of course not. I’m just trying to figure out what we should do here.”

“By staring out into the backyard?”

He became irritated. “You have a better idea?”

“No, but I can’t sit still like you. I’m going for a drive.”

“Suit yourself,” Mason said tiredly.

I didn’t fucking like how defeated he sounded. Walking through the house, I grabbed my car keys from the hook by the front door and got into my Nissan. I started driving along my usual Wednesday morning route, even though it was Friday. For the past few weeks, I’d missed my usual stakeout. I’d been too consumed with work and...Molly. Having her in my life made reaching out to my father seem less urgent. I still didn’t even know what I wanted from him. Maybe it was better to leave my ghosts alone instead of inviting them back into my life.

I needed a beer. I drove, searching for a low-key dive bar where I could polish off a bottle of Stella without anyone talking to me.

Five minutes later, my eyes landed on a flickering neon sign. *Hops & Barley*.

I pulled into the parking lot of the bar and got out of the car. There were three other vehicles parked out front, which meant the place was probably pretty empty.

Inside, the scene was as expected. Sticky floors, a dartboard in the far corner, and a single bearded bartender pouring a pint of Guinness. He nodded at me when I walked through the door before serving the pint to a patron sitting at the polished wood bar. The patron had the hood of his athletic jacket pulled up, signaling he wasn’t here for conversation.

Leaving an empty stool between us, I took a seat and placed my order. The bartender cracked open a bottle of Stella for me and charged me five bucks.

How the fuck did things fall apart so quickly? Molly was gone, Mason was acting like a deflated balloon, and here I

was, hoping alcohol would show me a path out of this shitty situation.

Maybe it was pointless. Mase may think she was leaving because she didn't want to weigh us down, but it could just as well be because of me. I tended to drive people away. I thought it would be different with her, but maybe it was just the same old story again.

I took a big gulp before putting the bottle back on the coaster. The song on the sound system changed to one of my favorites, "Boilermaker" by Royal Blood.

Huh. This was on the bartender's playlist? I looked over my shoulder to see him serving a few shots to a couple sitting in a booth.

I began to tap out the song's rhythm against the thin wooden bar. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the guy in the hoodie take a sip of his beer. "Good tune," he said.

"Agreed."

"I just heard these guys for the first time a few weeks ago, and I love everything they've put out," he said, turning to me.

I turned to him and nearly dropped my beer.

It was my father's face staring at me.

For a moment, everything in my head went quiet. He had my eyes, the exact shade of green I saw whenever I looked in the mirror. I'd never been close enough to him to notice until now.

"Oh, yeah?" My voice had gone hoarse. I tipped my bottle against my lips, unable to tear my gaze away from him.

"Mm-hmm." He had a short beard growing, kind of messy, as if he hadn't bothered to shave in at least a week.

"I think they're going on tour soon," I said numbly.

He gave me a closed lip smile. "I'd love to see them live."

I could feel my pulse in my throat. This had to be some kind of a sign, right? I'd been putting off confronting him for months only to sit down beside him at a random ass bar.

Eyeing his nearly empty glass, I waved down the bartender. "I'll get the next round."

He lifted his glass in my direction. "Thanks. I wouldn't usually accept drinks from strangers, but tonight isn't a normal kind of night."

"Same here." I slid a twenty across the bar. "Celebrating something? Or mourning?"

He chuckled. "Stewing after a fight with the wife. You?"

"Trying to figure out how I can win a girl back."

"Sounds like we're in a similar boat. Flowers and chocolate didn't work?"

"It's more complicated than that."

"Don't I know it. Thanks." He sipped on the Stella before dragging his gaze back to me. "You look young though. At my age, you'd think I'd know better."

Going out on a limb, I asked, "What happened?"

He sighed and cracked his neck, as if gearing up for what he was about to tell a stranger. "You know those DNA test things you can do these days? They ship a kit to you, and you swab it in your mouth, and then they tell you about your ancestors?"

"Sure."

"Well, I did one a few years ago and uploaded it to a DNA matching site. I was looking for a cousin of mine from Italy who I'd lost contact with decades ago. When I saw all the DNA matches, I was overwhelmed. I hired someone to go through them all. A genealogist. A few months back, I got an email about a match." He ran his hand over his beard. "Only it's not my cousin. Turns out I've got a son."

I pulled at the neck of my T-shirt, feeling very hot all of the sudden. "That's wild."

"It was the biggest surprise of my life," he said. "At first, I didn't believe it. I've been with my wife for over fifteen years, and I've never fooled around outside of my marriage. I love



that woman with everything I've got. But then the genealogist told me my son is in his twenties, and it all clicked." He placed his elbows on the bar and linked his hands behind his neck. "There was a woman, a long time ago."

My mother. "Before you met your wife?"

"Yes. I didn't know a lot about her, but we had a short-lived affair for about a month. Then she went back home—to Russia—and I never heard from her again. Back then, we didn't have Facebook or any of that, so it was easy for her to disappear."

Self-consciously, I tugged the sleeves of my hoodie over my Russian tattoos. What would he do if he knew who I was? This was insane. I couldn't believe I was talking to my father over a couple beers.

"So your wife is mad about this woman?"

He straightened up in his seat and shook his head. "No. She's mad I still haven't reached out to my son. He's in the United States. His mother told me that much, along with informing me he wants nothing to do with me."

My eyes widened. He'd spoken to my mama? When? She hadn't said anything to me about it.

"Wait, but you said you lost touch with her. How did you get in contact?" I was fishing for information, desperate to get the full story.

"I looked her up on Russian Facebook when I found out about my son. It's called VKontakte. There she was, smiling beside a man in her profile picture. The caption said it was their twenty-fifth anniversary. I did the math. She cheated on him with me."

"You didn't know she was married?"

"I didn't. I remember her telling me she had a boyfriend back home, but they were going through a rough patch. I'd just broken up with my high school sweetheart, and I was looking for comfort, so I overlooked the boyfriend and didn't ask too many questions." He laughed. "Jesus. I'm telling you my life

story as if you're an old friend. Tell me to shut up if you've had enough."

"It's keeping my mind off my business." I needed him to keep going. "So what are you going to do?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The woman told me my son isn't interested in knowing me, so I'm not sure I have a right to impose myself on him."

I swallowed past the ball of anger in my throat. My mama had betrayed me many times in the past, but this betrayal felt different. She knew I wanted to find my father, and she'd lied to his face. "How sure are you that's the truth?"

"I can't be sure. I don't know her. What she said to me was that she's no longer in contact with her son. He left Russia and lives in the US now, and he has no interest in finding me. Then she hung up."

"Do you know his name?"

He nodded. "Kazimir. I googled it. It means destroyer of peace." A bitter laugh trickled out of him. "Seems fitting. I haven't felt a moment of peace since finding out about him."

I sipped on my drink to wash away the sting of his words.

"But my wife says that's my own fault," he continued. "She's been telling me for nearly a year now to just do it instead of being chicken shit. We got into another fight over it tonight." He closed his eyes and scratched his brow, as if pained by the thought of their argument. "But the longer I don't do anything, the harder it seems. How do I explain to him why I didn't reach out the moment I found out he existed?"

"It's a big decision. I'm sure he'd understand."

"Maybe." He tapped his fingers on the glass. "We have a young daughter. She's ten. Ever since she started speaking, she's been telling us how much she wants a brother. I think she'd be happy to know this boy."

Looking at the liquor bottles, I sucked in a quiet breath. I'd seen my little half sister once through the window of their

home. I'd been so overwhelmed with jealousy that I'd never allowed myself to imagine what it would be like to know her. What if we got along well? What if I could be a good brother to her?

My father drained the last of his beer. "Well, anyway. It's time for me to stop moping and head back. Thanks for listening."

"So what are you going to do?" I asked just as he hopped off the stool.

"I don't know." He smiled at me again. "I guess I'm still waiting for some kind of a sign."

Before I could talk myself out of it, I placed my hand on his arm. He looked down at it in surprise.

"If I were in your shoes, I'd reach out to him," I said. "I think sons need fathers, and you seem like you'd be a good one."

For a moment, he didn't say anything. And then he put his hand over mine and smiled. "Well then, I guess you're my sign."

Goosebumps broke out over my skin, and I dropped my hand. "Good luck."

He zipped up his jacket and started to leave before turning back to me. "Hey, this girl you're trying to get back. Is she the one?"

"I think so."

"Let me give you a piece of advice that's done well for me in my marriage. Play catch, not tennis. When someone you love pulls away, don't throw their concerns right back at them. Don't get defensive or tell them they're wrong. Instead, hold on to the new information you just got and really try to understand where they're coming from. If you're anything like me, you like to resolve problems quickly. But sometimes it takes going slow to go fast."

He lifted his palm in the air. "Night."

“Good night.” My eyes tracked him until he was out the door.

I turned back toward the bar and muttered into my drink, “Good advice, Dad.”

---

I got home long after the sun had set, and Mason was nowhere to be found inside the house. Maybe he was still out back?

When I opened the door to the back patio, my jaw dropped. “Holy shit.”

My bandmate was covered in dirt and sweat, but the backyard looked better than I’d ever seen it. The fallen twigs and branches were gone, the grass had been cut, and he was tearing out the weeds in the far corner.

I jumped off the deck and walked over to him. “So this is what it takes for you to get inspired to do some spring cleaning?”

He leveled me with a no-bullshit look and gestured at a spare pair of gloves on the ground beside him. “You going to help me or what?”

The air was buzzing with crickets and mosquitoes, and the few lights we had out here were barely sufficient to light up the space, but I took my shirt off anyway and knelt down beside him. I wanted to tell him about my chance encounter with my dad, but I didn’t want to interrupt whatever he was doing here. Maybe this was his way of coming to terms with what lay ahead of us.

We worked outside for a few hours until the bugs became too much. “I’m going inside,” I declared, peeling off the gloves. “Come on. Let’s shower and have a beer.”

Mason nodded wordlessly and followed behind me. I cleaned up, grabbed two beers out of the fridge, and made my way down to the basement. A few minutes later, Mason came down as well.

“You won’t believe what happened to me,” I said, pressing my back against the chair.

He had his elbows on his knees, the bottle loose in his hand, but at hearing my words, his pensive expression turned curious. “Oh, yeah?”

“I met my dad tonight.”

I told Mase how I walked into a grimy little watering hole and found my father sitting at the bar. He hung on to every word, his eyes wide in shock. When I finished my story, he began to laugh in disbelief.

“That’s the most insane thing I’ve ever heard,” he said, shaking his head. “Small world. Goddamn. For once, I think you made the right move not telling him who you are. He’d probably have a heart attack.”

“I didn’t want to take his choice away from him,” I said, tipping my head back to stare at the soundproof ceiling. “But I hope he contacts me. And I feel lighter now. All this time, I was afraid he wouldn’t want to know me, but now I know that’s not the case.”

Mase ran his fingers through his hair. “So you’re going to wait for him to make a move?”

“Yeah. We’ve got something else we need to focus on first.”

“Molly.”

“My dad gave me some timely advice.” I repeated the advice to Mase.

He placed his beer on the ground and stretched his feet out in front of him “I was angry and disappointed when she first left, but then I took it out on our backyard. I think I understand why she did what she did. It’s actually pretty simple. She thinks she’ll hold us back, and if we disagree, we need to prove her wrong.

“There’s only one way to do it.”

“Yeah. With our actions, not our words.”

I grinned at him as hope and certainty filled my chest.  
“Then that’s exactly what we’ll do.”



## **MOLLY**

ON SATURDAY MORNING, I said goodbye to Piper and drove over to my sister's home.

The house she and her partners owned was wedged between a Tudor-like mansion on the left and a Spanish-style hacienda on the right. In comparison, their modern two-story mansion lacked a certain flair, but I knew that was intentional. They may live in one of the nicest neighborhoods in LA, but it wasn't in their natures to be showy or extravagant. With the exception of Abel on occasion.

Apparently, today was that occasion.

I walked into the house to the sound of something detonating. Yelping, I flung myself on to the ground and covered my head with my arms. The overnight bag I'd packed with a few extra shirts Piper lent me went flying across the shiny marble floor.

"Oh, fuck. I didn't mean to scare you that bad," Abel said after snorting with laughter.

I peeked out from under my arms and saw the long-haired man walking toward me, an enormous bottle of champagne overflowing with fizzy liquid in one hand and a saber in the other.

I groaned. "Dude, what the hell!"

He grinned, put the bottle and the saber down on the round table in their lobby, and came over to help me up. "Didn't think you'd be this jumpy." He tugged me into his arms and gave me a tight hug. I sighed and returned it, feeling the heaviness in my heart lift by an inch from being back with my family.

Out of the four guys, I was closest with Abel. He could be grumpy and unreadable at times, but we've gotten along well from the moment we first met, and that connection has only grown stronger over the years.



When we broke apart, I eyed the enormous bottle that was still leaking some liquid. “What are you celebrating with that thing?”

“You staying with us.” He leaned down to pick up my bag off the floor. “Ade was really happy when you messaged.” His gaze softened. “Are you okay? When Ade told me about your neighbor, I was ready to get everyone organized and go nuclear on his ass.”

“It is what it is,” I said with a shrug. “Could have been way worse. But I do need to find a new place ASAP.” In my message to my sister, I didn’t get into the details of what happened last night, but I told her I couldn’t stay at Kaz and Mason’s anymore. She must suspect something had happened.

I followed Abel into the massive kitchen, where Silas sat hunched over an iPad.

“Hey, Mol.” He grinned at me from under his beard and hopped off the stool to come give me a hug. Silas’s hugs were an experience. I felt like a little girl when the giant man enveloped me with his tree-trunk-sized arms.

“I missed you guys,” I told him when he released me. “Feels like it’s been ages.”

“It’s been a while,” he agreed. “I hear from your sister that we have a lot to catch up on.”

I winced. “I guess so.”

Silas frowned lightly as Abel returned to the island with three champagne glasses in hand.

“Where’s Ade?” I asked, looking around the place. “And everyone else?”

“Ade, Ezra, and Cole went out to pick up some groceries,” Abel explained. “Should be back soon.”

“Don’t you have someone to do that kind of stuff for you?” I joked, poking Silas’s rock slab of a stomach.

“They wanted to go,” he said, slapping my hand away. “Something about missing doing normal people stuff. It’s

always a bit hard adjusting to real life after a long tour like the one we were just on.”

I became occupied with my nails. “I feel bad intruding on you all. You must be exhausted.”

Silas barked a laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous. We’re all thrilled you’re here.”

“Here.” Abel handed me a glass filled with sparkling liquid before giving another one to Silas. “To reuniting with family.” He raised his own glass and smiled at me, easing some of my discomfort.

When my sister and the others got back to the house, she ran at me and pulled me into a crushing hug. “I’m so happy to see you,” she said, rocking me from side to side. There was something about finally being back with my sister that shattered my tenuous control over my emotions. A ball lodged inside my throat.

When I didn’t say anything, she pulled away, her brows furrowed in alarm. “Mol?”

I could feel her partners’ presence around us, worried and watchful, as tears pooled in my eyes. I sucked in a shuddery breath and pressed my face into her shoulder. “It’s over. Everything between us is over.”

---

We were in the bedroom Ade had prepared for me, a generously sized space with a bay window looking out to the backyard, a fluffy carpet, and walls painted a deep shade of green. My sister shooed the guys away and told them we’d come out when we were ready, but not before asking Cole to bring us something to snack on.

We sat on the queen-sized bed, nibbling on some fruit and taking tentative sips of champagne. The mood was far from celebratory, but the alcohol made my words flow more easily.

I told her everything from the very beginning. The college party, the shock of discovering the identity of Last Rites, the

arrangement with Kaz, and the short-lived relationship between the three of us.

“I did the right thing leaving,” I said in conclusion. “One day, they’ll thank me.”

Adeline winced. “Oh, Mol. I sincerely hope you’re right, but I doubt they’ll see it that way.”

“Do you really see a scenario where our relationship could work?”

She looked down at her glass, as if buying herself a moment to formulate her response. “I think the three of you could have figured something out.”

Frustration surged inside of me, burning in my chest. “Stop making me feel like I’ve made a mistake. I would have done it for you too, you know?”

Her eyes narrowed in confusion. “Done what?”

I guess we were going there today. “When our parents died. If there had been a simple way to unburden you from me, I would have done it. But I was too young then, and I didn’t know how to navigate life without you. Now, I have a choice, and I’m choosing to let them live out their dream without being oppressed by me.”

The color drained out of my sister’s face so quickly it was as if someone had flicked a switch. “What are you talking about? You were never a burden.”

“You’ve always refused to admit it.”

“Because it’s nonsense,” she said, a frown unfurling across her expression. “You’re my sister, and back then, you were my only family. If you’d ‘unburdened’ me, as you say it, I don’t know what I’d have done.”

“You’d have kept trying to get into Julliard. Or taken your music more seriously than you did with *Through Azure Skies*. You’d have focused on your dream instead of sacrificing everything for me.”

“You’re absolutely wrong. I would have been heartbroken and miserable. I’d have gone out of my mind trying to get you

back, no matter where you went. My dreams would have become dust.” She placed her glass on the ground. “Sometimes, when I’m having a bad night and I’m nervous about going on stage, do you know who I think of? You. I think about how badly I want to set a good example for you and make you proud. Without you, none of this success would mean anything.” She looked away, her jaw tightening, and that’s how I knew I’d managed to piss her off. It took a lot to piss off my sister. “I can’t believe you think you’ve held me back at any point in my life. It makes me feel fucking awful, because it couldn’t be further from the truth.”

I refused to believe it. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

She scoffed and pinned me with her gaze. “I don’t know what I can say to make you believe me. I’m telling you the truth.” When she reached over and grabbed my hand, I stayed still. If she was lying, I couldn’t tell, and I could *always* tell with her.

A shard dislodged itself inside my chest.

“Maybe you need to look inside and figure out why you refuse to accept it,” she said softly.

I glanced down at where we were linked together, her cool hand wrapped around my clammy one. How many times have those hands held me when I needed to be held? Did she resent having to do it? Having to be my mother and my sister at the same time?

Or had I spent most of my life projecting my fears onto her?

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “Growing up, I saw you wanting something really badly. And when they died, you stopped. I felt bad for you, Ade. I was fifteen, but I was old enough to know you weren’t dealt a fair hand. No nineteen-year-old should have to do what you did for me.”

She squeezed my hand. “I was lost even before they died. My confidence was shredded when Julliard rejected me, and when they died, my dream became even more out of reach. I

had things to work through before I could believe in myself again. I won't lie to you, there were moments when I did feel overwhelmed about being responsible for you. But those moments allowed me to build character, and I'm grateful for them. It all worked out for me, didn't it? I'd be an ungrateful idiot to look for problems in my past when I have this amazing life now."

I brought my eyes up to hers. "I felt so helpless during those years. Powerless to do anything to make your life easier or to be in charge of my own life. I'm afraid that if I go with them on tour and things go wrong, I'll be powerless again. Did you feel like that at all before deciding to join Bleeding Moonlight?"

Adeline chuckled. "Of course I did. I remember thinking about what I'd do if they got bored of me after a few months and kicked my ass out on the road? How humiliating would that be? I was really scared. Don't you remember? You encouraged me to take a leap of faith."

"Yeah, I remember. In retrospect, there had definitely been some childish optimism involved on my part. I also didn't know you were dating all of them, remember? I just wanted the best for you, and I'm really glad everything worked out."

Some color finally returned to her cheeks. "It took me a while to work up to telling you I'm with all of them. I thought you'd judge me. That was another thing I spent a lot of time worrying about, but you took the news like a champ."

I smiled. "Well, by then I was already thinking of the guys like family. Your reveal just made it even more real. If there was ever anyone who could handle those four, it's you."

She released me and placed her hands on the floor behind her. "They're a handful, but they're my handful now. Anyway, we're getting off topic. Let's come back to you. You need to stop thinking you're some kind of an affliction, Molly. Really, I hope I'm getting across how ridiculous that is."

It would take more than one conversation for me to let go of the deep-seated beliefs I'd held about myself. Still, I was starting to see how I may have misinterpreted my past. Maybe

I'd form a new perspective on it with time. One that would stick.

"You know that even now that we're adults, I'll always be here for you. Right?"

I chewed on my lip. "It feels really uncomfortable to ask you for help. I feel like I should be able to figure out my problems on my own."

"Hey." Ade leaned over and took my face in her palms. "You *can*, but you don't have to. Supporting you makes me happy. I wish I had more opportunities to do so."

Leaning into her touch, I closed my eyes. What if I accepted her help and let myself dream for just a moment?

I spent the rest of the day with that question on my mind, and when evening rolled around, I emailed Trinity to ask for a week off before I started working with The Mycophiles. My excuse was having Adeline back in town, but that was only half the truth.

The other half was that I was finally ready to imagine a future bigger than the one I'd told myself I deserved.

I wished I could say I spent my days off having fun with Ade and the guys, but in reality, I spent a lot of time alone in my room. I moped. I thought about Mase and Kaz. I refused to check my phone in fear I'd see their messages or read a news article about their deal. I cried a lot. I slept even more. And during rare moments of clarity between all those other things, I jotted down a bunch of notes in a notebook Abel let me borrow.

The first was a list of things I enjoyed.

*Polaroids. Strong coffee. Family. Good friends. Golden hour. Noticing the small things.*

The second was a list of things I wanted.

*Work that feels meaningful. My own safe place to live. Travel somewhere cool. Be free.*

My pen hovered above the next blank line. The wild thing chanted two names on repeat.

When fighting her became too difficult, I chose to nap instead. Abel brought me lunch. Ade joined me for dinner and Netflix. Afterwards, she fell asleep with me, both of us curled up under the blanket, just like when we were kids.





## **MOLLY**

I KNEW it was only a matter of time before my sister's men got tired of me stealing her from them in the evenings.

On Wednesday morning, Cole charged into the room and pulled back the curtains. I mumbled some angry gibberish, my mind foggy with sleep, but he ignored my protests. "Enough of this." He tugged the blanket off Ade and I, earning a pillow to the face courtesy of my sister. "This pity party has gone on for far too long." He pointed at me. "You're going to get out of bed, get dressed, and we're going to have a fun day all together."

"You're a bully," I told him, but he was already walking out, apparently satisfied with his work.

Ade yawned beside me. "You up for finally leaving the house?"

"I guess," I said as I rubbed at my eyes. "I should probably check my phone. The last time I'd looked at it was the day I got here."

"Sounds good," Ade said. "I'm going to go clean up. I'll see you at breakfast, deal?"

"Deal." I trudged into the shower and sighed when the hot water hit my face.

Cole and Ezra appeared to be on breakfast duty when I finally emerged from my room. "Ade said you wanted your phone back. It's on the island," Cole called out over his shoulder while flipping a hotcake.

I grabbed the device only to discover it was dead. When the thing finally charged enough to turn on, my screen exploded with notifications.

Gnawing on my lip, I decided to ignore the messages from Kaz and Mason. My work email seemed a safer place to start.

A dozen or so unread emails. Not too bad. My attention caught on a message from Jenny. She rarely emailed me. What

could she want? I opened it and began to read.

*Hi Molly,*

*Thanks so much for talking to Mason about the dyslexia awareness initiative! We managed to turn his interview around super quick and get it into the video. It just went up on our YouTube. Here's the link!*

I tapped my index finger on the URL, ignoring how my heart sped up inside my chest.

The video opened to a montage of images with a voiceover talking about dyslexia. Impatiently, I dragged the dial at the bottom until the thumbnail flashed with a familiar face.

Mason and the interviewer, a dark-haired man I recognized from our PR team, sat in one of Hyperion's conference rooms.

"Mason Fletcher is the drummer for Last Rites, a brilliant rock band that's been making waves this summer," the interviewer said. "You recently joined the Hyperion family, isn't that right?"

"Yeah, just a few weeks ago, but it feels like it's been much longer."

There was a hint of nervousness in Mason's voice, but I doubted anyone would notice it. He looked incredible. His chiseled face was framed perfectly with dirty-blond locks, and his muscular body was obvious beneath the white T-shirt.

"I have to say I'm honored you chose this as your first public interview."

"It's for a good cause that's deeply personal to me."

The interviewer smiled. "When did you find out you were dyslexic?"

The question stunned me. I planted myself on one of the kitchen stools. Mason told the label about his learning disability? He'd been so scared to do it the last time I brought it up.

"My official diagnosis came when I was in my first year of college, but I knew I had problems with reading from when I

was much younger.”

“Did it help you to get it professionally diagnosed?”

“It did. I wish I’d done it sooner, but unfortunately—” he adjusted his position, “—in my family, there was a stigma around it.”

My mouth parted. Oh my God, he was really opening up about it.

“It’s something a lot of young kids struggle with,” the interviewer replied. “But clearly, neither the stigma, nor your relatively late diagnosis held you back.”

“The key for me was decoupling my personal definition of success with what society insists success means. I’ve always loved drumming, and it’s a lot easier to get really good at something you love. So, I left college and decided to pursue my true passion, which was music.”

“Do you have any advice for the younger people listening to this interview who are worried dyslexia might make a career in music a challenge?”

“I don’t think there’s anyone in the music industry who can honestly tell you it will be easy,” Mason said, a charming smile pulling on his lips. The interviewer laughed. “It’s true that for folks with learning disabilities, people like myself, some things will be harder than for the average person. I struggle with reading and writing to this day. If I have a melody or beat in my head, I need to get it down right away or I lose it. But all of this just motivates me to work harder, and at the end of the day, that passion has been far more important for my career than anything else.”

“Thank you very much, Mason. Is there anything else you’d like to share with our viewers?”

At this, Mason turned to face the camera directly. “I want to thank someone very important to me.”

A shiver ran down my spine.

“For most of my life, I was very scared to share this part of myself with the people around me, but this individual made

me realize I have nothing to be ashamed of. Their support and acceptance means everything to me.”

“Is he talking about you?” Cole asked, coming to stand by me.

I nodded, unable to speak past the ball in my throat.

“Sounds like a special person,” the interviewer said.

“They are.”

“Well, thanks again for your time.”

I turned off my phone and stared blankly at the darkened screen. “He went public.”

“Brave of him,” Cole said, squeezing my shoulder before going back to the stove.

The urge to call Mason right this second was nearly overwhelming. How did he feel now that the interview was live? Was he happy about it? Relieved? I wanted to be there for him, because I knew it had to have been a difficult decision to make. My fingers curled around my phone.

*You walked out on them, remember? the wild thing murmured. Are you ready to admit you were wrong?*

Wrong? No, I wasn’t ready to admit that. Maybe I did help Mason come to terms with his dyslexia in some small way, but that didn’t mean I had more to give.

A question came to mind. Had they signed the deal? I’d know when I returned to work on Monday, but my curiosity wanted to be sated now.

Pulling up a search engine, I typed in “Last Rites WMI.”

Nothing.

Worry swirled inside my gut. Why hadn’t they signed yet?

I began to pace the kitchen. I could call Trinity and ask. But I wasn’t ready to talk to her yet. Over the past twenty-four hours, an idea had formed inside my head, and I was now trying to figure out how to bring it up with my boss. I needed more time to think.

“Food’s ready,” Ezra called out. “Molly, you get to sit at the head of the table.”

It was over breakfast that I finally found the courage to tell my family what I was considering. “I’m thinking of taking a sabbatical.”

Ade brought her gaze up from her plate. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Six months to explore something else that interests me. Photography.”

Abel washed down his croissant with a big gulp of coffee. “That sounds fun.”

“I doubt it will come to anything,” I said quickly. “But I think I’ll regret it if I don’t give it a try.”

Silas grunted in approval. “In the beginning, none of us thought Bleeding Moonlight would amount to anything either.”

“Speak for yourself,” Abel replied.

The table collectively eye rolled. “It’s good to keep your expectations low,” Cole said. “Otherwise, you risk becoming an arrogant bastard like this guy.”

Abel flipped him the bird before moving his eyes back to me. “You got any pictures we can see?”

It took me a second to realize I’d never showed any of them any of my pictures. Why?

I guess it felt strange. Even now, as I disappeared in the guest bedroom to grab my laptop, my stomach moved in weird pirouettes. I didn’t want them to say nice things only because they cared for me. False hope was a dangerous thing I wanted to avoid.

But my worry turned out to be for nothing.

“This is good,” Abel said, clicking through my pictures of Last Rites while the rest of the gang huddled behind him. “But you’ve got a ways to go.”

Adeline punched him in the shoulder just in time for my cheeks to heat. “Don’t listen to him, Mol. These are gorgeous.

I can't believe you didn't send me any."

"No, no. I appreciate the honesty," I said to Abel. "I want to use the sabbatical to improve my craft."

"I can feel your passion in these," Silas said, his eyes focused on the screen. "Maybe you can take some photos of us while you're here."

"Sure," I agreed with a smile. "Musicians make for good models."

Ade glanced up at me. "This is exciting, Mol."

"Yeah, but there's a but."

Five pairs of waiting eyes landed on my face. "What is it?" Ezra asked.

"Well, I was wondering..." I cleared my throat. God, this was even harder to get out. But over the past few days, I'd come to the conclusion that sometimes we all needed help, and I was lucky enough to have people who offered it freely. "I was wondering if I could impose on your hospitality for a bit longer. Like, six months longer."

Ade's features lit up with excitement, and to my surprise, her partners' expressions looked similar.

"Of course," my sister said, rounding the kitchen island to pull me into a hug. "It's about time you learned you're always welcome here."

Silas came over to rub the top of my head, messing up my hair in the process. "Just be ready for Abel asking you to photograph him all the time. He's vain like that."

The singer huffed indignantly. "Whatever. You're all just jealous of this perfection."

Our laughter filled the room, and I felt lighter. A bit less dead inside. As long as I didn't allow my thoughts to wonder back to Kaz and Mason, I could pretend that everything was okay, and that my heart wasn't a sad pile of shattered pieces.

We spent the rest of the day at the park, throwing a Frisbee around, day drinking, and soaking up the sun. The outing did

me good. When we came back home for dinner, and while Cole figured out our order, I decided I was finally ready to read the messages from Kaz and Mason.

It surprised me that aside from some texts the night I left them, there was only one other.

*Maybe they're moving on quicker than you expected, the wild thing taunted.*

It annoyed me how the thought hurt. That's what I wanted, wasn't it?

Mason's message wasn't very long. It was from yesterday evening.

*"Make sure to check your email tomorrow."*

He had to be referring to the interview. He'd wanted me to see it. A smile tugged at my lips. I typed out a response. *"Loved the interview. You did good. I'm proud of you."*

After I sent it, I pulled up Kaz's contact. I wanted to say something, but what was there to say?

With a sigh, I tucked my phone in the back pocket of my jeans and went to rejoin the others. Cole ordered his favorite, Thai food, and we filled our plates before making our way to the couch for a *Lord of The Rings* marathon.

But my thoughts kept coming back to Mase and Kaz. I tried and failed to not be irrationally disappointed that they weren't still trying to get in touch.

When the first movie ended, Silas carefully carried my sleeping sister to their bedroom, and I trudged back to my own room, alone for the first time.

I lay in bed and tracked the shadows moving across the ceiling. Eventually, even ruminating on my misery wasn't enough to keep me awake.



The next morning, there was a text from Kaz.

I scrambled up the bed, rubbing sleep out of my eyes so I could make out the message. Excitement thrummed beneath my skin. I was too groggy to analyze how wrong that was.

*“Can we meet?”*

The wild thing was up and shouting at me to say yes, but rational thought was slowly returning to my brain.

*“Why?”* I typed back.

*“Want to talk about the contract. There’s one last thing to hash out before we can sign.”*

I ran my nails up and down my arm. *“And you need me? Not Trinity?”*

*“Yes. She told us to message you.”*

Well, then. If I wanted to have a chance at getting that sabbatical, I definitely couldn’t risk unintentionally blowing up Trinity’s big deal.

And maybe, just maybe, it wouldn’t be so bad to see their faces one more time.

*“Okay. I’ll come over.”*

*“See you.”*

I threw back the covers and climbed out of bed. There weren’t many choices for me in the wardrobe department, given I was still mostly wearing clothes I’d borrowed from Piper and a few pieces from Ade. Going over to the guys’ house would allow me to take my stuff back.

Good. This was good.

At least that’s what I insisted to myself, even as I felt my stomach churning by the time I got into my car.

Could I do this? Meet with them only to say goodbye one more time?

It wouldn’t be the final goodbye. After all, they were still managed by Trinity, so I was bound to see them at the office every now and then. I imagined giving them an impersonal greeting, maybe a wave through the glass of the conference



room. They wouldn't look at me the way they had just a few days ago—with need and care and love in their eyes.

This wasn't a good time to cry. God, what was wrong with me? There was an awful pain in my chest that spread with every mile closer to the house I drove. I got to my destination just in time for it to become unbearable.

Five minutes later, I was still gasping for breath in my car. The sobs wrecked my chest, contracted my diaphragm. I dug out a box of Kleenex from under the seat and dabbed the tissue beneath my eyes.

*Why do you do this to yourself?* the wild thing asked, shaking her head at me.

I didn't know. I didn't know how to get rid of this pain.

When my face had dried, I got out of the car, crossed the street, and walked up a familiar driveway. Kaz's car was parked in its usual spot.

I knocked twice.

A moment later, the door swung open, and there they were. Both of them were standing on the other side, gorgeous and breathtaking, looking back at me.

"Hi," I said, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

Mase smiled. "Come on in."

Kaz stepped aside to let me in, and my arm brushed against his chest as I entered the house. Fire licked at my skin. My gaze found his, and inside I saw such longing it almost knocked me off my feet.

"What's up with the contract?" I asked once we made it to their living room. I had about five minutes in me, maybe ten, before I lost it. Asking Ade for help yesterday had been a walk in the park compared to this.

Kaz picked up a stack of papers from the dining table and handed them to me. "Page five, clause twelve. Read it."

Noisily, I flipped to the page in question.

*Clause 12. The Company grants to the Artist the right to hire their own additional staff for the duration of the contract. The Company agrees to pay the staff's salary as long as their role falls within the conditions specified in Exhibit B.*

My brows furrowed.

“Adeline told us you’re embarking on a new venture,” Kaz said, his voice softer than usual. “We’d like to be your first client.”

My stomach fluttered uncontrollably.

“Our fans adore your photos,” Mason said, taking a step closer. “And they want more. We want *you* to be the one documenting all of this. We trust you, Mol.”

I handed the papers to him with trembling hands.

“We need your help,” Kaz spoke. “We can’t imagine doing any of this without you by our side.”

I knew what they were doing, but it didn’t make the tactic any less effective. By hiring me to do what I loved, what I thought I could be good at, they were freeing me. I would be aiding them. Propelling them forward.

There was nothing burdensome about that, was there?

The tears were back. I sucked in a breath, my gaze flittering from one perfect man to the other.

A hand curled around the back of my neck, and Mason’s blue gaze bore into mine. “Don’t be scared,” he murmured. “There are many scary things in this world, but this—*us*—isn’t one of them. Do you want to know what I feel when I look at you?” He brushed my hair behind my ear. “I feel like I can do anything in the entire world, like I’m omnipotent. You give me strength I never thought I’d have. You make me the man I’ve always meant to be, Molly. Powerful, caring, determined. Alone, I’d never be enough for you, but together—” he looked to Kaz, “—together, we can give you everything you deserve. And you deserve the world.”

His words stole all the air out of my lungs. How did one respond to something as immense as that?

“He’s right,” Kaz said, tearing my attention to him. “Look at us, Mol. We’re not normal. We’d tried to fit in with the world— Well, maybe I didn’t try too hard,” he said with a wry smirk. “But it didn’t work. The status quo never was and never will be for us. We’re different, and the best barometer we have for how we should live our lives isn’t here—” he touched his index finger to my temple, “—but here.” He moved his palm to my chest, placing it above my racing heart. “Who does your heart beat for?”

Something shifted inside my chest, like an old trunk getting moved after a long time. Or a cage. Its outline remained on the ground, a reminder, but it was gone.

*The wild thing!*

Everything was quiet until a soft voice caressed me from the inside. *At last, we’re one now.*

Strength surged inside my veins, making my blood run warm. I reached for my lovers’ hands and took them into mine.

“You. It beats for you. For both of you.”

# **EPILOGUE**

**TWO MONTHS LATER**

## MOLLY

THE SUN WAS WINKING over the long horizon of the desert when the crew finished unloading the trailer. I got Kaz's phone out of my brand spanking new Jeep Wrangler and walked it over to the singer. The car had been the guys' gift to me once they got their first check from WMI, and no matter how much I protested, they insisted I accept it. Audrey had been honorably discharged from my life.

"It's crazy they're going to be streaming the entire festival live," Kaz said to Mase and I. We took in the empty stage and the enormous field that would be teeming with people in just a few hours. "Trinity said they expect to have hundreds of thousands of people watching."

Mason let out a whistle. "Better not mess it up, dude."

Kaz scoffed. "Please. This is going to be the best show the audience has ever seen."

A smile tugged at my lips. *This guy*. His confidence was a true force of nature. Today was Last Rite's second ever concert, which just happened to be during a massive festival in Palm Springs, and here he was, as unperturbed as ever.

If the reporters that waited for them in the backstage area were hoping to get a glimpse of nervousness, they'd be disappointed. For the past month and a half, I'd watched Mase and Kaz rehearse the shit out of every single song they'd written, and now, not even an earthquake could shake the performance they planned to put on.

This was a big deal. The first show had been intimate—relatively speaking. We'd put it on for the first two thousand fans who'd managed to nab a ticket. But today, they'd be playing for an audience *ten times* that size.

Sound check was uneventful. I snapped a few shots of them up on stage anyway, because I was taking my duties as seriously as they took theirs. We'd gotten creative with the photos in the past few weeks, releasing them a series at a time

to tell a story about a new song or some behind-the-scenes moment, and the fans were eating them up. Our engagement was through the roof. Other bands were taking notes.

In the afternoon, our guests began arriving at the VIP area where we were hanging out until the guys' set.

Bleeding Moonlight's arrival was always easy to spot because Silas towered over everyone wherever he went. I waved everyone over, and Adeline pulled me into a hug. I gasped in delight when I felt the roundness of her belly for the first time. "Oh my God, you're starting to show!"

She grinned. "It's the weirdest thing. I can't believe I'm in the second trimester now."

Turned out, my sister, being the boss that she is, had managed to finish the last half of Bleeding Moonlight's tour while pregnant. I was ecstatic when she shared the news with me in the days after I accepted Last Rites' offer to become their official photographer. Her and her partners had decided they wouldn't do a test to determine the father, because all four of them would play that role. I was sure this kid would be the most loved little thing in the entire world, and I couldn't wait to become an aunt.

Mason enveloped Ade in an enthusiastic hug. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss this for the world," she said before extending her hand for a fist bump with Kaz. "This is really exciting."

Mase and Ade were well on their way to rebuilding their old friendship, and it made me happy I'd played a part in that. Kaz was also warming up to my family, although slowly, as was his nature. He squeezed my waist before letting go to say hello to the rest of Bleeding Moonlight.

Ade came over to my side and lowered her voice. "Is Kaz's dad still coming today?"

I nodded, pulling out my phone to check for any new messages. "He's driving up from LA. I think he should be here soon."

Lance, Kaz's father, had turned out to be a pretty cool guy. Apparently, Kaz had bumped into him at a bar during our short-lived separation, and they'd had a conversation without Lance knowing who he was speaking to. When Lance showed up at our house a few weeks later and saw the guy from the bar opening the door, he'd nearly passed out.

And then he'd passed out for real when he found out his long-lost son was the lead singer and guitarist for Last Rites. Apparently, he was a fan.

"Him and Kaz are doing well?" Ade asked.

"They're making progress. I think Kaz is still figuring out how to relate to him, but the fact that his dad is into his music helps a lot. It gives them something to talk about."

"Is he thinking of meeting his half sister?"

The photo Lance showed us of his ten-year-old daughter flashed in my mind. She was adorable, with two pig tails and a pair of jean overalls. Her smile reminded me a lot of Kaz. "Eventually. Baby steps," I said.

We sat on the grass for a while, enjoying the sun and sharing a couple of beers. Ade eyed us enviously while sipping on her sparkling water. When Lance arrived, Kaz got up to greet him, and my heart melted a bit when he planted a kiss on Kaz's cheek. For all the challenges Kaz had endured in his early life, I was determined to make sure his future continued to shine brightly.

Mase wrapped his arm around my shoulders and tugged me in for a kiss. I was about to protest the PDA but then I remembered our discussion from last night. They'd finally pestered me enough to agree our relationship didn't need to stay hidden.

*"We're rock stars, sweetheart," Mase had said. "If this is the most scandalous thing about us, we're doing pretty damn well."*

In truth, I knew if we kept trying to hide it, we'd slip eventually. At least this way, we were able to control the narrative.

I pressed my cheek against his shoulder. “We should get you into wardrobe soon.” He smelled so good. I was tempted to bury my nose into his chest and do some deep breathing, but that would probably be far weirder than the kiss.

“C’mon,” he said, rising from the ground before helping me up. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

We collected Kaz and headed into the backstage area, where the wardrobe tents were set up. It was bustling with roadies and musicians, some of who stopped to say hello to Mason and Kaz, but we eventually made it to our destination.

As I waited for them to get into their stage clothes, I stepped outside and observed the chaotic scene. It was crazy to think that just a few months ago, no one knew what Last Rites looked like. Now, they were getting brand deals and sponsorship offers emailed daily to their inbox. It was exciting to be an observer of it all.

A participant, actually.

While the guys got their well-deserved acclaim, I was also getting some attention. Or at the very least, my work was. Last week, I did a photoshoot with a small indie band I loved called Burial. It was a great day, and I came home with a giant smile on my face. Even though I was only two months into my sabbatical, I had a feeling I wouldn’t be walking through Hyperion’s doors again. When I’d asked Trinity for time off and told her my plan to work as a photographer, she gave me a knowing smile and told me to go for it. I think she’d be happy to know my gamble with photography was paying off. I was getting better and better every day.

I popped back in just in time. Kaz and Mason stood in front of the mirror adjusting their clothes.

My heart pattered out a joyous rhythm. They were *mine*.

I walked up behind them and wrapped my arms around their waists. “I love you.” The words tasted sweet as they spilled out of my mouth.

Mason smiled at me in the mirror and then bent down to claim my lips. I kissed him, memorizing his taste for the



thousandth time before he pulled away and his mouth was replaced by Kaz's.

When we broke the kiss, I gripped them by the backs of their heads, bringing our foreheads together. The moment was charged with energy, lifting us higher and higher until we were somewhere where only the three of us existed. "Go out there and show the world Last Rites has arrived."

Kaz and Mason walked on stage to the deafening applause of thousands of people ready for a good time.

"Holy fuck, there's a lot of you," Kaz said into the mic.

The sea of people seemed to respond as one, a cacophony of cheering blending into one voice. The entire field below the stage undulated with pent-up energy.

Kaz grinned. "We're really happy to be here. This is our second live show ever. Mase told me not to fuck it up."

Laughter carried all the way to the stage.

"Let's get on it, then! We're Last Rites."

He strummed out the first notes of "Mahogany" on his guitar, and the crowd roared with excitement. Behind him, Mason pounded out the rhythm to the song.

Kaz walked up all the way to the edge of the podium and started to sing. He cut an arresting figure in his leather jacket, torn-up black jeans, and leather boots. I got down on my haunches and began to photograph him and Mase from the side of the stage, knowing that none of us would ever forget this day.

Mason's impromptu drum solo was a hit with the audience. He was mesmerizing—completely in his element and utterly absorbed with his craft. Just watching him made the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight. He was born for this.

Between songs, Kaz tore off his jacket in one smooth movement, revealing a wealth of tattoos beneath. The crowd shrieked and edged closer to the stage.

This was fucking iconic. Kaz's sex appeal was a palpable force, spreading through the audience like fire. Behind him,

Mase pounded on the drums, relentless and perfect.

Kaz moved across the stage like it didn't exist, like he could reach beyond it and sing directly to every person staring at him in awe and admiration.

By now, I'd seen them rehearse all of their songs countless times, but I'd never seen them this *electric*. They sizzled and sparked and won hearts with every song they played. Together, they were unstoppable. As I watched the performance, my sense of awe only grew until it culminated in a knowledge as sure as anything I'd ever felt.

Last Rites was going to rule the world.

And I'd be there with them, capturing every single moment.

**The End**

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### **BONUS SCENE**

Things get spicy after Molly's first photography exhibit. Want to find out what happens?

Check out this **exclusive** bonus scene!

Sign up [here](#) to receive it by email:

<https://BookHip.com/CBSQDSR>

You made it to the end! I hope you enjoyed the ride ;)

Before you go, I have a request. Could you take a minute to leave an honest review for *Bold Rhythm*? Reviews help little authors like me get noticed and it would mean the world to me if you wrote a few words.

[Leave a GoodReads review](#)

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Want to meet like-minded readers, chat about Molly, Mason, and Kaz, and get access to exclusive giveaways? Join my reader group on Facebook!

[Join the Backstage Crew](#)

## ALSO BY GABRIELLE SANDS



### [READ TAUT STRINGS](#)

*Taut Strings* is the first book in the River Valley Rebels Series, and it tells Adeline's (Molly's sister) story. It's a reverse-harem romance with a badass female lead and four sexy-as-hell rock stars.

### BLURB

**My name is Adeline and I've learned a hard lesson in my twenty-one years of life. Dreams are fragile things, easily broken.**

I used to think I'd become a professional musician, and look how that turned out. Rejected by Julliard. Orphaned at nineteen. Now, my dreams extend as far as putting my little sister through college.

I shouldn't be disappointed. Nothing truly great has ever come out of River Valley.

Nothing other than *them*.

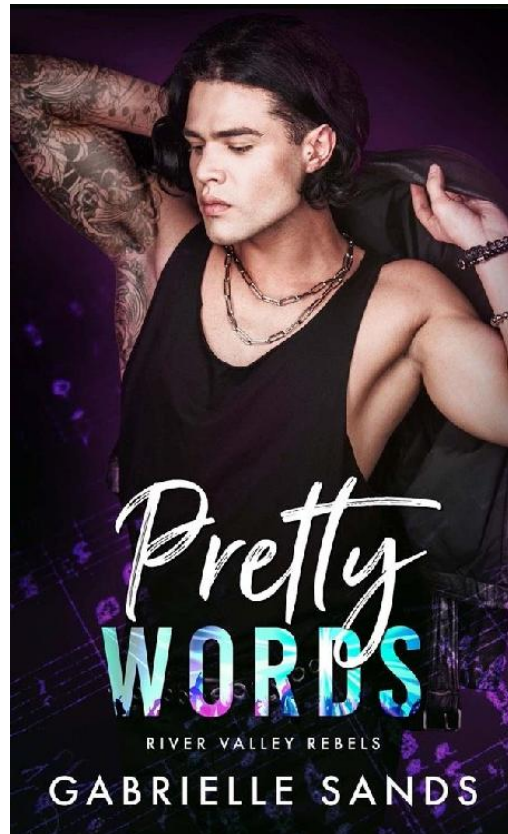
When Bleeding Moonlight left this town ten years ago, they were a promising local band. Now, they're gorgeous heavy metal legends. Talented, successful, fearless. Everything I'll never be.

They've come back to town to bury their bandmate, and they're staying until they record the last album he ever wrote. The kicker? They've asked me to be his temporary replacement.

Four weeks to earn the money I desperately need.

I'll be fine as long as I don't get tangled up in old dreams again.

As long as I don't get tangled up in *them*.



### READ PRETTY WORDS

*Pretty Words* is the second book in the *River Valley Rebels* series. It's a forbidden, enemies-to-lovers, rockstar romance, with a shy heroine, and a reformed-bad-boy hero.

### BLURB

**Ivy Abbott was seventeen when I stole a kiss never meant to be mine.**

But that kiss began a sequence of events that made me who I am now. Former debauched rock star. Recovering addict. Still alive.

It's been two years since I last saw her. I've fought my addictions and my demons, and I'm not the man I was back then. So when I get a chance to make amends to her, I'm determined not to blow it.

Too bad the mere mention of my name makes her see red. She thinks I'm a liar who tore her away from the guy of her dreams. I know all my sins, and that isn't one of them.

It's time to set the record straight. And if that means I'll have to ignore the pull I feel whenever I see a flash of her hazel eyes or the full lips I've once claimed, then so be it.

My days as a sinner are over. Or so I tell myself.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Wow, I can't believe this book marks the end of my first ever published series. It's been a wild year of authoring. There was a time when I thought I wouldn't finish this book. The characters wouldn't behave, the plot was muddy, and I couldn't see how the story would end. I'm lucky to have some amazing people in my life who helped me push through the challenges and come out on the other side of it all.

First and foremost, thank you to my husband. You continue to be my biggest cheerleader and hype-man. Every time I overhear you talking up my books to people who most definitely don't read romance my heart warms. Thanks for believing in me, always.

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And last but not least, thank you SO MUCH to all of my readers who have waited so patiently for this book. More than anything, I hope it lived up to your expectations.

Love,

Gabrielle



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